

My Advice to Young Writers

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One. Make sure the person or persons you share your bed with read books. Lots of them. After a while, you *might* consider getting married, especially if you're both broke and horny.

Two. On your first date with that person, insist on going to a library or bookstore. See how your partner reacts; you don't actually have to go in. In fact, it would be better *not* to. It might be too soon to let them know how *you* behave around books.

Three. Whatever your sex or preference, do not — I repeat, DO NOT — allow your partner to ever read your work. They'll want to know which character they are.

Fourteen. I dislike stories about writers, but since I'm fictional, it's not so bad. When interviewed and asked the inane question, "Where do you get your ideas?" respond with, "They're in the air all around us in the air all around us in the air . . . Wait. Where was I?" They'll keep their distance after that, especially if you wear jeans and workboots and have an intense gaze like Rasputin or Salvador Dali on speed.

Yeah, life's fairly strange. I never dreamed I'd actually wind up married to that racist slut editor from Sugarland, Texas. Her family wasn't even Texan, it turned out. They were German. Her great-grandmother had been married to a top officer in the Prussian cavalry. She had a tiny scar on her cheek to prove it.

I'd met her at a dozen different gatherings. At some point during the evening, usually after a trayful of tiny aperitifs, I found myself in a dim corner talking to a couple other male writers who had similarly harsh opinions of Constanze Hauptmann. We each thought the others secretly lusted after her. Don't ask me how I know this. As a writer, I see many things. I get inside people's heads. It's not always pleasant.

My buddies and I — we all wore blue jeans and workboots and stared a lot — got rowdy. On at least one occasion — the one I can recall, anyway — we were asked to leave by a hulking, thick-necked Neanderthal who quoted Nancy Reagan too often to be coincidence.

I knew our filthy-minded, loudmouthed opinions of Connie turned heads. I knew whatever we said reached her.

Fifteen. Even in a whisper, never say anything at a gathering of writers that you don't want reaching the object of your calumny embellished by underemployed imaginations who've never learned to distinguish between telling stories and telling lies. That fits every writer I know.

Connie was sophisticated enough to discount 90 percent of any rumor. The remainder was probably sufficiently credible to splash everything with the gray hues of possibility.

She must have realized — even before I knew it myself — that I was interested in her. My buddies and I lavished attention on her which, while hardly favorable, acknowledged her status in the publishing world of corporate suites and sweet delights for those who played along. I read somewhere that Connie got her start in publishing as a telegram stripper for the more important corporate clients. They all do. The male strippers get to suck dick or lick pussy, too.

Sixteen. A writer's got to screw three-and-a-half editors/publishers for each article or short story published. Novels slightly higher. See your agent for complete details.

Seventeen. There's no telling how many times a writer *gets* screwed.

No doubt my *ad feminam* homilies reached her ears as a sort of music — discordant perhaps, but presented in live performance in *her* honor. She heard a serenade beneath the alabaster balustrades of her lofty balcony by a guy who'll still be a toad even after she kisses him, but at least he's not a two-tongued snake who says one thing and means another.

Eighteen. Don't believe everything you read in fairy tales.

Nineteen. Don't believe anything you read whose first purpose is to support the literary canon. Wheel out your own cannon and blow 'em to hell.

Twenty. When in doubt, shoot first.

Approaching Connie was like outlining a Wagnerian opera using Post-it notes. You think you've got it, when more of Woden's progeny turn up. In this case it was two Nigerian female bodyguards who directed traffic around Connie's aura. They carried her luggage in and out of airports, and cooked and cleaned for her, too. She treated them like dirt. She had special crates made so that when her maidservants accompanied her, they could ride in the jet's baggage hold at a reduced rate and keep an eye on her poodle, Maximilian, while they were at it.

One evening I realized I'd been observing how people — particularly men — got close to Connie. Their intentions to win a favor were so transparent one expected to hear the tinkling of shattered glass as they scampered across the room to fill a vacancy at her left elbow. It disgusted me. I watched a prominent academic writer who penned tearoom mysteries on the sly from the Deans of Cacademia who'd wither if they found out he attended a Hauptmann party. They think money impoverishes artistic endeavor. They're poor *and* full of shit.

Paige Turner, the writer in question, cowered at her feet in the attitude of a servile suck-up boot-licking, ass-kissing, tongue-lolling dog about to be tossed a treat. Even the mangy author knew the tidbit was bound to be three days beyond rancid, but he fawned like a cringeling nevertheless and fidgeted with his garish, saliva-soaked necktie. Her sentinels, bronzed guardians at the sacred portal, gave the nod. The author fainted. Thinking he'd found a playmate, Connie's poodle licked the mystery writer's hand and then peed on him.

It was then I realized what a departure from the master-slave etiquette observed in her presence my bad-boy attitude must have suggested. It hadn't occurred to me it was Connie herself who taught me to perform those anti-tricks. By the time I caught on, it was too late.

Worse still, for me anyway, and of greater significance to our eventual relationship, was my own ignorance about how much Connie turned me on. No doubt the booze helped. It's every man's dream to fuck power, to leave behind him an entire clan of lesser powers who will carry on the Venerable Tradition. It's also the first step toward voting Republican.

Besides the booze and inertial boredom, I was prone to the dissociative aspects of a writer's temperament which incline him to the sort of schizophrenia which not only permits but encourages

lusting after someone he finds despicable. “It might help flesh out a character some day if I knew his or her real-life counterpart intimately. You never know.”

Twenty-One. Don’t ever try this stunt at home. While it may be of some advantage in the fictional realm, the practice easily turns real life into a bizarre fantasy. Even herbalist basement publishers who wear canvas shoes in winter will gleefully feed such incredible nonsense to their recycling bins.

Twenty-one-and-a-half. If you find yourself looking forward to unpleasant situations for their story potential, seek help immediately.

There were no secrets I kept from myself. I knew exactly what I hoped to gain from getting my editor into bed. Interludes of passion will keep the reader going even after the plot has crumbled.

Connie’s interest in me, however, was puzzling. Our attitudes were antipodal. We spoke and thought and dressed as though from cultures a world apart. I wondered whether she pitied me or was just too horny to care.

One night, as I flopped back on her rose-scented pillows, too drained to speak or even think coherently, she turned to me. She propped herself up on one elbow and peered down into my sweaty face.

“Maybe I can ask you for something now,” Connie whispered.

“I gave you everything I’ve got.”

“Just a little souvenir, a keepsake to remember you by.”

“What?” I asked, rather dubious.

“Your hair.”

I sat up. I was going to laugh, but her expression was earnest. It had taken me two years to grow my pony tail. She tickled my spine with my sweat-soaked hair. “Can I?” she pleaded, producing a pair of long Krupp shears from the night table.

“Maybe I should wash it first.”

She stopped abruptly. “No. I want your smell, to remember you by.”

For a little flattery, I would surrender anything, even my self-respect. I turned and sat on the edge of the bed, giving her my neck. The steel shears cut through the layers of my hair. She held each clump in her fingers. The raspy, slicing sound made me wince, lodging like shivers at the base of my skull.

I opened my eyes. She dangled the memento, tied with a purple ribbon, before me.

“I’m going to shower now,” she said, dropping my severed pony tail in a drawer of her dresser.

I stood up, unable to avoid the many mirrors in Connie’s bedroom. The rush of water from the shower murmured like the wind in my hair, the hair I used to have.

Connie had shut the bathroom door. I wanted to touch my hair one last time, before it became Connie’s souvenir for ever. I slid the drawer open slowly. Her hearing was acute.

The drawer was filled with pony tails — long and short, blond, curly, straight, black, greasy, shaggy, auburn, tangled, sleek, thick and slender. I located my own hair only because it was still damp. The sight of the trophies made me queasy, and I slammed my finger in the drawer. I jumped back into bed and pulled the covers over my head.

For the wedding, I wore my tight white jeans and a loose white shirt. I was barefoot. Connie towered above me in her spiked heels and low-cut red sequined dress. She looked like a bratwurst ready to bust its casing. She stepped on my foot and I limped to the altar. The cool marble steps numbed the pain in my toes.

I came out of the bathroom on our wedding night worrying I'd used too much mouthwash.

All I saw was Connie's face. A flutter of manuscript pages covered the bed and night table like debris scattered on the pavement after a street fair.

It was no big deal, I told myself. We'd been screwing our brains out for months before getting married. But I wanted her to observe wedding night custom so we'd have something to remember after we split up.

The manuscript she was editing was my own. I hadn't given it to her.

"You need a good editor," she said. "We'd better get right down to it. I see a lot of problems with your elemental synthesis."

My erection deflated and slipped down a leg of my shorts with the red hearts and kisses on them. I'd hoped she'd be turned on. She was, at the prospect of editing my life. I spent the rest of our wedding night talking myself out of calling my buddy up and getting ourselves smashed. But I wasn't successful.

After grabbing my jeans and sweater, I stomped around the bedroom getting my boots on. I wanted Connie to stop me. She didn't look up once.

Kevin and I got good and blitzed. I awoke in his bed next morning with my arms wrapped around him. We were naked. My hearts-and-kisses shorts hung on the bathroom doorknob.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Couldn’t have been too great if neither of us remembers.”

That’s why he’s my best friend. He could rationalize anything I did as one of the “odd behaviors that make human beings so lovable.” I forgot to mention Kevin claims he sailed the galaxies in his previous life as a priest-scribe aboard an Andromedan starship. He says friendships are never coincidences.

Connie never asked me where I’d been. She was more interested in why I maintained my protagonist’s anonymity throughout the first half of the story only to let a minor character reveal the secret in the second. When I explained it to her, she tossed the manuscript in the air and hissed, “You can’t do that, Tommy.”

I spent a lot of time at Kevin’s. We flipped for the sofa. I always awoke drenched in sweat. I dreamed I’d married Constanze Hauptmann and she’d been personally appointed my editor by Bill Gates, whose company digested my publisher. The novel I’d worked on the last three years, *Citizen Gates*, based loosely on a similar Orson Welles script with a similar title, would undoubtedly require a couple of revisions, especially the part where William Randolph Gates, my protagonist, acquires the rights to everything ever written, sketched, composed, sculpted or thought about and stores them all in the basement of his gloomy mansion. I tell my story from the point of view of a *Wall Street Journal* investigative reporter looking into reports Mr. Gates’ pet project, code-named “Rosebud,”

was just a smokescreen to put analysts off the scent of his actual endeavor: to translate the world's literature into a software manual. I thought it a pretty novel idea — a six-figure techno-thriller.

For our first anniversary, Connie got me a hand-painted German beer stein it'd take two Barvarian barmaids to lift to my lips. She said she liked the motto inscribed on it, sported on banners toted by Teutons in lederhosen and dirndls: *Erst mach dein Sach, dann trink und lach*. Loosely translated, it means *First do your thing, then drink and laugh*. How depressingly Prussian. She told me it sounds better in German — it rhymes. She pointed out the stein came from *Bavaria*, correcting my pronunciation. I stand by it. It implies the inhabitants of Barvaria are a pack of Barvarians.

Kevin had warned me a rootin-tootin Texas Teuton was a fatal combination: those who think they're the best at everything at home in the place that claims the biggest of everything. He told me it was no wonder I felt inadequate; I probably was.

My wife and my best friend locked themselves in combat for the rescue of my soul. I found myself sleeping on park benches, and hadn't changed clothes in days. I ate leftover McDonald's Happy Meals scrounged from trash dumpsters. I got a street nickname, "Two-bit Tommy," owing to my great luck at spotting quarters in the gutter.

One night my luck ran out.

Twenty-two. Never assume you deserve a break, especially from a policeman. They have their own assumptions, namely, that everyone in the world is guilty of a crime. Their favorite occupational euphemism for "police officer" is "behavior editor."

Twenty-two-and-a-half. Don't give "writer" as your occupation to any government officials, especially IRS agents and policemen.

Since I was by then visually and aromatically unappealing, and since the officer who came around to rouse everybody off the park benches for the eleven o'clock curfew didn't consider writing to be gainful employment, he locked me up. They put me in with a wino who insisted his confession as Lee Harvey Oswald's accomplice warranted tighter security and greater deference than dumping him in a cell with a fiction writer implied.

The lockup sergeant told him to fuck himself. I think he gave it some thought.

Our toilet stood in the middle of the cell against the back wall. The floor sloped to a drain in the center of the cell. I couldn't hold it any longer.

The toilet paper was out. The cell's previous tenant had hung a paperback book over the empty spool. I picked it up. It was the novel *Connie* edited on our honeymoon. I couldn't contain myself. I had to read it.

Beyond the title, not much of it seemed familiar. The book had been torn apart for use as toilet paper. I skimmed the first and last pages of the remaining chapters for clues to the plot. The story concerned a writer who falls in love with his editor and marries her. They fall out of love. She accuses him of having an affair with the editor at a rival publishing house and arranges his arrest and imprisonment on a trumped-up charge of dangling his participles and other forms of literary abuse.

I didn't get to see how my life turned out. My cellmate needed to use the can. He wiped himself with the last chapter.

When I finally feel asleep in my bunk — nothing but a painted metal shelf secured to the wall with huge bolts — it was nearly dawn. I awoke from a dark dream in the blazing sunlight that flooded the cell. I dreamed I'd been cornered in a dank, festering alley by figures in long robes and face-shadowing cowls. They unsheathed their daggers, the honed edges glinting in the sodium vapor glare of a streetlamp at the mouth of the alley. As I reached out to save myself, they stabbed at my hands — over and over until I had no fingers left, only sputtering stumps. They pulled back their hoods. Each was an editor I'd known in wakeful nightmares. They smiled and melted into the encroaching fog. Connie was prominent among them by her absence.

Twenty-three. Figuring out what a story means is like interpreting a dream. Even the dreamer has a good chance of being wrong.

I languished in my cell for a couple of weeks. Kevin bailed me out. He cashed in a few of the little diamond disks he said are like pocket change on his home planet.

“I thought that was in your previous life,” I reminded him.

“You're right, but everything's starting to run together.”

I decided to go with him out to Arizona, but it was a mistake. He conjured up an ashram of sincere followers. They added oat bran to everything. While they awaited our messianic deliverance, the men liked to shop for provisions, and the women arm-wrestled and fixed the fenders on the Jeep. I felt like a mustang in a corral of geldings. There was no challenge. They bored me to the point that

I considered suggesting an outing to the local McDonald's or the post office and opening fire. I took up pencil and paper instead.

One night in late August, after a welcome thunderstorm, I was awakened by a young woman in pinstripes whose intense eyes glowed in the darkness like watch dials. I had no idea how she got into the men's dormitory.

"You must be looking for Kevin," I said. "His room's at the end of the hall."

"No." Her voice was musical, like wind chimes. "My name's Alice Prendergast. I represent Pan-Galactic. I'm given to understand you've been working on a book. I'm looking forward to representing a new talent from this part of the country."

"You're an agent."

Her shimmering pale green irises glowed more intensely. I took it she meant "yes."

"Who told you I was writing anything? Was it Kevin? I'll tie him to an ant hill and leave him to bake in the sun."

I gathered my clothes from the foot of the bed and slipped out the window. I got dressed and tramped up the back road into town. The diner was still open. They served real food, too.

A tall waitress in a black leather skirt and red silk blouse came to the table. "Can't you read, Sugar Pie? We're closed."

"No," I said. "I never learned how. My family was always getting thrown out of their apartments and I switched schools a lot."

It seemed the safest thing to say, under the circumstances.

Twenty-four. The safest thing to say under any circumstances is never the first thing that pops into your head. Once you've said it, you're stuck with it, unless you know a really good editor.

The waitress, whose name is Suzy, told me I could have anything I wanted — as long as it wasn't on the menu.

I relaxed. After the austere celibacy of marriage, it felt great to be around a woman with a sense of humor. At last! And, if I am any judge of character, Suzy's pet motto is probably more along the lines of *Erst trink und lach, dann mach dein Sach*. Gott sei Dank!

"How about a slice of cherry pie?" I let the word *cherry* dribble down my chin.

"We've only got apple and peach, Sugar. I used to tutor adults who can't read down at the Community Center. How about getting together? I'll help you."

OK. Maybe you better forget all that and make up your own rules. That way, when you fail to follow your own advice — as I did — you'll have nobody else to blame. Life's too short to play by somebody else's rules.