The Sentence Thief [1]

March 17, 2014   Writer's Life [2]

Essay by Christine Grimaldi

Does the “One True Sentence” Have to Be Your Own?

A good sentence can stop me from being a reader and turn me into a writer.

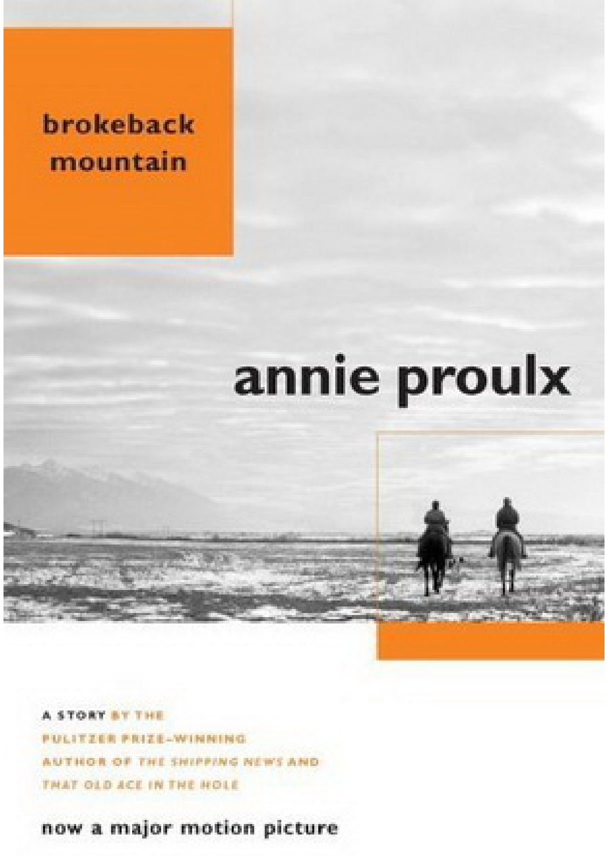
Let me explain. I have a tendency to disappear inside the stories I love. The scenes become as real as anything I've ever witnessed, the dialogue as sharp as anything I've heard. I read faster and faster to find out what’s going to happen next.

A good sentence breaks the rhythm of that smooth whisper of page upon page, the crisp snap as each recedes into the past, crackling through the air like a sheet on a clothesline. A good sentence warrants closer examination.

Annie Proulx stopped me from hurtling through “Brokeback Mountain” with a single sentence nearly two-thirds through her short story:

> One thing never changed: the brilliant charge of their infrequent coupling was darkened by the sense of time flying, never enough time, never enough.

For me, the scene dissolved. The hills stopped whistling, the grasses stopped blowing. The fire sputtered into the dust.


brokeback mountain
annie proulx
A STORY BY THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE SHIPPING NEWS AND THAT OLD ACE IN THE HOLE
now a major motion picture

I filed a note in the email folder I keep for writing ideas—dialogue I've just overheard, moments I've witnessed—that would otherwise dissolve as quickly as a sugar cube on the tongue: *Annie Proulx BB mountain quote pg. 39.* Had anyone ever so sparsely, so vividly, expressed the nature of condemned love? Could I ever hope to?

I still haven't found the words for my own condemned love, three years after I discovered the real reason why he would never spend the night at my apartment.

As I endeavor to bare my feelings in an honest way that honors their former intensity and reflects my present perspective, I always return to that quote. I don't quite know what my final draft will look like, whether it will unfold as a personal essay, a short story, or both, but I have a feeling it will include Proulx's perfect sentence.

Far from plagiarism, the original sin, I would never pass it off as my own. Sometimes, a sentence merely informs my work; other times, it sneaks its way in with full attribution. But without it, I couldn't capture "the sense of time flying, never enough time, never enough." Without it, I could not have written this:

> I didn't know that the last time we kissed, he had already been married for a month. I didn't know that when he said not to leave any marks on his neck, he had a fiancée waiting for him at home. I longed for bite-sized traces of him to remain on my skin, a talisman, a testament to what had happened between us.

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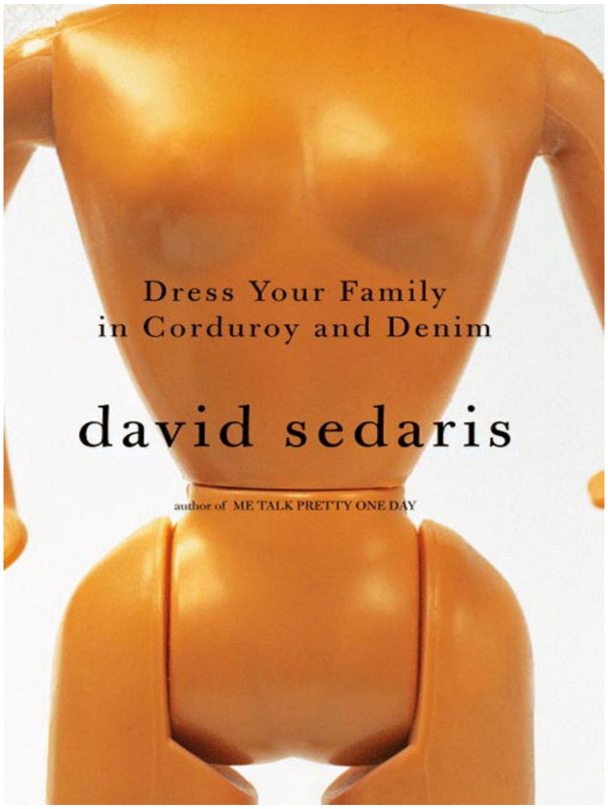
When I fall in love with sentences in the literature I read, I want to recreate them in my own voice, with my own content. Such desire goes against all my training. I started my career in journalism—not in the narrative tradition that inspires independent thinking, but in the beat reporting grunt work of racing between House and Senate votes for the defining quote of the minute, the hour, the day.

The foot-worn marble floors of the Capitol were surprisingly slick in spots, I learned, as I ran back to the press gallery, a room where reporters pound their keyboards and curse their editors. I pressed my Scotch-taped digital recorder to my ear and fast-forwarded through the talking points until I found the sentence I needed. *Play. Stop. Rewind. Play.* Got it? Good.

At the time, I had a grand notion of writers who were not chained to mere reporting. They showed me the kind of writer I could be. I clung to their words. When I left journalism and ventured into more literary writing, I was sure I would find my own. Instead, it's been a struggle without hard deadlines and an endless supply of sentences that are mine for the taking.

Since I'm still developing my craft, I often turn old tricks from my days as a reporter. I'm a sentence thief adrift in an ocean of short stories and feature stories, novels and essays. On occasions when my words fail, I steal from other writers who are rich in precision, rhythm, or tone—in whatever quality I'm lacking at a particular moment in a particular piece. Just call me Robin Hood. My thievery serves a purpose, helping me express what I'm trying to say when I'm scraping by.



Take the sentences that I pulled from a David Sedaris essay into a still-untitled piece about my father, whom I call "Brooklyn Tommy"—a nod to his hometown and the attitude he derived from its untamed streets. With Sedaris's help, I've cut through the many layers of a man who looks and sounds like a wiseguy but is just your average, law-abiding *goombah* working hard to make a better life for his only daughter.

In my work-in-progress, which I began writing a few years ago, I try to explain the rough edges of my father's love. In one scene, I'd just returned to my parents' house for a brief getaway after my previously mentioned cameo in what felt like a made-for-television movie ("Secret Life, Secret Wife"). Walking through my parents' bedroom to the shower after another day of lounging morosely by the pool, I discovered my father’s latest copy of *American Rifleman*, a monthly publication of the National Rifle Association. If it had been *Playboy* on his nightstand, at least that would have been “a vice I could *understand,*” I write:

> Go ahead and arm yourself, I suppose. Did *he* really need to? I thought of David Sedaris’s 2002 essay ‘Six to Eight Black Men,’ in which he notes that it’s legal for the blind to hunt in Texas and Michigan. ‘They must be accompanied by a sighted companion, but still, it seems a bit risky,’ Sedaris writes. ‘You wouldn't want a blind person driving a car or piloting a plane, so why hand him a rifle? What sense does that make?’
>
> Perfect sense to the NRA.
>
> ‘You need to de-join!’ I sputtered.
>
> Brooklyn Tommy refused.
>
> ‘I love it. I’m a pistol-packing daddy,’ he said, sauntering away like a cowboy.

“Six to Eight Black Men,” which focuses on the Dutch version of Santa Claus, is a story about pride in where you come from no matter what differences there may be from country to country or from state to state. Or in my case, from father to daughter. For all my father’s talk about being a “pistol-packing daddy,” he stocked the fridge with Corona Lights for me. He collected the empty bottles without a word. He held me when I cried. Gleaning those three sentences from Sedaris—especially that wry phrase “it seems a bit risky”—allowed me to ground my father’s contradictions in all their hard-edged, softhearted glory.

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With all this talk of good sentences, you'd think it would be easy to write a bad one. But apparently, that takes just as much work.

Scott Rice, a retired San Jose State University professor, runs the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which takes its name from Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the original author of the sentence that begins, “It was a dark and stormy night.” Rice’s contest rewards bottom-of-the-barrel sentences—ostensibly, at least.

“By implication, the deliberately bad conjures its opposite,” Rice told me last September in an email response to my questions about sentences, good and bad. Consider the 2013 contest winner:

> She strutted into my office wearing a dress that clung to her like Saran Wrap to a sloppily butchered pork knuckle, bone and sinew jutting and lurching asymmetrically beneath its folds, the tightness exaggerating the granularity of the suet and causing what little palatable meat there was to sweat, its transparency the thief of imagination.

It’s easy to dismiss the winning sentence as overwrought. Read it again. Admire the way it swells with imagery. The verbs are assertive, the simile complex. It clearly took a lot of revision to create something so brilliantly awful. Like an ace reporter, I’m copying it here for a reason.

I've come to realize we’re all part of the deep well that informs each other’s work. In *A Moveable Feast,* Ernest Hemingway, who also started as a journalist, famously described his early writing days in Paris. When discouraged, he told himself:

> 'All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.' So finally I would write

> one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say.

I continue to work on the heft of my sentences. It's slow going. For me, that means examining the "true" sentences I've collected over the years. I used to feel self-conscious that I relied on the words of others to supplement mine, convinced I was the only writer who couldn't find her own way forward. I shouldn't have.

We are all sentence thieves.

Publishing Information

- *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx (Scribner, 2005); originally published as a short story in the *New Yorker*, October 13, 1997.
- "Six to Eight Black Men" by David Sedaris, *Esquire*, December 2002; later reprinted in revised form in Sedaris's essay collection *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (Little, Brown and Company, 2004).
- *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway (Scribner, 1964).

Art Information

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[4]Christine Grimaldi is a writer in Washington, D.C. In the year since *Talking Writing* featured her first published essay, she has contributed work to *Washingtonian, The Atlantic Cities*, and other outlets. She is *this close* to completing her MA in nonfiction writing at Johns Hopkins University. Her thesis, a series of essays and an errant short story, includes a number of appearances by Brooklyn Tommy. "You talkin' to me?" he says at one point. Indeed.

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