

## “How to Know What to Write”

by  
Frank Bergon

Here are three bits of advice I heard from others that proved helpful to me about how to know what to write. Perhaps you can take what's helpful to you and ignore the rest. The advice comes from a painter, a literary critic, and a singer, with additional support from a magician and a fiction writer.

Advice #1 - IDEAS: A few years ago the sculptor Richard Serra visited Vassar, where I was teaching, to give a talk. In the afternoon he visited a studio art class, and a question the students asked him was: Where do you get your ideas for your work? He asked them where they got theirs, and some said they went to museums, they walked on the beach, they combed through art books, they talked to their fellow students, and he said, “No, no, no, you're going about it the wrong way. You're all looking *out there*. What you need to do is look closely at your last work and you'll find some small motif, some incipient element, some beginning theme in your work that can evolve into the central idea or focus of your next work.”

I can now say that this principle helps me to choose what I'm going to do next. You might try it. You might have three or four ideas, but if you go with one that was a minor motif or setting or character or theme in your previous work, you can then proceed, I think, with some confidence that there's a proper personal evolution and exploration in your choice.

Advice#2 - CREDIBILITY: An unknown literary critic I read somewhere said, “Credibility is the ethic of fiction.” I might add that credibility is also the ethic of nonfiction. There are many reasons for writing novels but one of the best ways to think about fiction is as a way of knowing, just as writing nonfiction is a way of knowing, and the ethical premise of both is credibility.

The first question I ask when I pick up a book these days is: Is it believable? Of course, the test for credibility differs for fiction and nonfiction. For nonfiction, the burden of proof is in verification. What you say is

credible if you can properly verify it. That's why in scholarly writing you have all those footnotes, and why journalists get in trouble if they can't verify their quotations and facts.

In fiction, the burden of proof is in its verisimilitude, a word that derives from the Latin *verisimilitudo*, meaning a likeness or resemblance of truth. So verisimilitude doesn't mean actual reality or truth or life but rather the appearance or semblance of those things. In fiction it means remaining true to the reality of the genre you're writing in. In realistic fiction, which I'm interested in, verisimilitude creates the semblance of life. It's not life but like life. Everything stems from credible characters and credible events.

For me, one of the best expressions of this aesthetic is by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist George Eliot when she said: "Herein lies the chief poetic energy: to pierce or exalt the solid fact, rather than to float among cloud pictures."

Advice #3 - HONESTY: This final bit of advice comes from a singer, Frank Sinatra. Now we all know about Sinatra's rowdy life of boozing, carousing, and fighting. Here's what he had to say about the relationship of his life to his singing. Sinatra said: "Having lived a life of violent emotional contradictions, I have an over-acute capacity for sadness as well as elation. Whatever else has been said about me is unimportant. When I sing, I believe I'm honest."

Notice he didn't say he *was* honest. He said he believed he was being honest. So the advice here is that even if you're lying you need to try to be honest. That's what the magician James Randy also advocated when he called himself "An Honest Liar."

I'll add a bonus remark from a writer. When Jack Vernon and I were in college together we had tutorials with the Irish short-story writer Sean O'Faolain. I'm paraphrasing here, but what O'Faolain told us was something like this: When you're no longer whoring after fame and celebrity, you'll think of something you really care about, and you'll write it down as simply and clearly and honestly as you can, and you'll discover that you've written something good.