

Princeton Local Author Day

Sung J. Woo

Topic

Finishing Your First Novel: A Four-Pronged Attack

Major Points

Starting a novel is relatively simple. The first twenty or thirty pages may come quite easily, in fact. But once you reach fifty or sixty, this is when it hits you: how the heck am I going to do this for another two-hundred and fifty pages?

Here are four techniques that helped me complete my novels.

- 1) Rewrite your life.
- 2) Link up short stories.
- 3) Constrain Yourself.
- 4) Get up an hour earlier: Writing 1 hour a day X 2 years = a book.

In Detail

- 1) **Rewrite your life.** We've all heard the saying, "Write what you know." What do we know better than our own lives? My first novel, *Everything Asian*, is the story of my own life. Like the protagonist David Kim, at 10, I immigrated to the U.S. from South Korea with almost no knowledge of the English language to reunite with my father. I spent most of my adolescence working in a similar gift shop. But at the same time, I never let the facts get in way of fiction. One of the key elements of *Everything Asian* is the relationship between David and his father, and if someone were to compare the facts of my life to the novel, they would find a great disparity. In the novel, the father is a chummy, annoyingly friendly character; in reality, my dad was an austere, distant man. By turning the events and people of my past upside down, I ended up creating an entirely different character, one that ended up driving a significant portion of the novel. Don't forget that what you're writing is fiction, not a memoir; your characters exist to serve the story, and your story is there to serve the reader.
 - a. Concrete example: p. 17 – the pagoda music box scene vs. NYT essay
 - b. *group discussion/exercise*: What significant event or person in your life would you like to change? The more emotionally charged the event or person, the better.
- 2) **Link up short stories.** Writing a sustained work of fiction has its challenges. Like bringing back the Uncle Ned in chapter 11, when you killed him off in chapter 2. And we're not even talking about the bigger stuff, like keeping themes and emotional arcs in harmony. Although my first novel isn't exactly a novel-in-stories, half of it is, and those parts, when linked up together, form a greater whole. This is the power of the novel-in-stories – by having a leading character in one story play the supporting part, a novel-like feeling is generated. By

integrating these relationships even tighter, you actually may, in the end, have yourself a novel.

- a. *In discussion: Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio*
 - i. Even though the first chapter, "Hands," concerns Wing Biddlebaum, George Willard makes an appearance almost immediately (p. 27).
 - ii. Second chapter is about Elizabeth Willard, George's mother, but again, he is brought into the story quickly (p. 40).
 - iii. Third chapter, about Dr. Parcival – again, George is there on the first page (p. 49).
- b. *In discussion: Stewart O'Nan's Everyday People*
 - i. From the New York Times review:

With his latest novel, "Everyday People," O'Nan invents and enters the poor African-American Pittsburgh neighborhood of East Liberty in the fall of 1998. Cutting back and forth among various points of view over the course of an ordinary week, O'Nan is a tender witness to the quotidian struggles of his creations. He gives us Chris (a k a Crest), who has lost the use of his legs after falling off a walkway while trying to write graffiti on a roadside wall; his best friend, Bean, fell too, and died. Linked to Chris is Vanessa, his former girlfriend and the mother of their child, Rashaan, as well as Chris's mother, Jackie, and father, Harold, who is having a clandestine affair with Andre, who lives upstairs from Miss Fisk, an elderly woman who looks after Rashaan sometimes, the way she used to look after Bean. Meanwhile, Chris's brother, Eugene, just out of jail and now a born-again Christian, tries every day to stay straight.

Put this way, it seems that Chris is at the center of the novel, but it is part of O'Nan's graceful strategy that there is no central character in "Everyday People." Instead, the novel is like a neighborhood, with chapters about various characters set side by side like so many doors on the same street.

- c. *In discussion: Everything Asian*
 - i. From the Christian Science Monitor review:

The storytelling format, with its rapid switch between narrators, may initially jar those of us who prefer novels to stories, but a reader soon settles in to the down-market, hard-working world of Peddlers Town.

Woo [fills] the book with the way customers' and neighboring storeowners' lives touch – sometimes only glancingly – on the three Kims' first year in America. At first the non-Kim stories

seem only connected by geography, but Woo has cleverly constructed a central narrative that runs like a Venn diagram through the tour of Peddlers Town.

- 3) **Constrain yourself.** Oulipo comes from the French, and it is a group of writers and artists who practice the art of constrained writing. The next time you run into a difficult part of your novel, try taking something away. It could be something literal – like not using the letter “e” like in the example I read you. It’s like the garter belt that Tim Robbins uses in *Bull Durham* – effectiveness by way of distraction. Or how about if you take away a character? If you had three characters in a scene, try it with just two. Or maybe even one. In *Love Love*, I didn’t quite know how to handle a particularly difficult part, where Kevin finds out his dad was a porn actor. I couldn’t quite see this scene, so I constrained Norman, the father, to a voiceover on a DVD he creates for Kevin. By limiting him to a first-person disembodied voice, I was able to delve much deeper into his past. What I want to convey here is that sometimes less is more.
- 4) **Get up an hour earlier: Writing 1 hour a day X 2 years = a book.** Although I started writing my first novel in 1998, I didn’t get serious until 2000, when a friend suggested that I get up an hour earlier and write for an hour. It didn’t seem possible that I could accomplish anything significant in such a short amount of time, but in a couple of months, I found myself in a rhythm. Each day I wrote anywhere between 0 and 500 words, and by 2002, I had a book. I found that writing every day for an hour was more productive than spending 5-6 hours during the weekends. Doing it the first thing in the morning also helped, because my mind was in its least cluttered state, and throughout the day, I often found myself thinking about whatever I had been writing. It kept me close to the story; it kept me writing in my head. To help with this, we’ll take a look at a short article by Stewart O’Nan and some valuable quotes from Carol Shields and Chuck Close.
 - a. Finding Time to Write – O’Nan
 - b. Chuck Close
 - c. Carol Shields
- 5) **Bonuses:**
 - a. tying your ankle to your chair.
 - b. business card case.
 - c. Trouble - Gwyn