

**Book Building:  
Being A Treatise on Building, Canvassing, Sailing, and the General  
Management of Books and Other Artistic Craft in Storms and Heavy  
Weather<sup>1</sup>**

By Deborah Middleton.

**Introduction**

Sometimes in this life you may find yourself becalmed, and sometimes turned upside down in a tempest. You will be glad, then, of a book, well-built; glad of the cosy little cabin and the big sails to catch the breath of life, glad of the *boat's sole* where you can stand firm, and glad, too, of the well-scrubbed decks on which you can sunbathe or stargaze and dream your way from here to there. A book will take you around the world. All of life may be floated upon from the safe structure of a good book - seas and lakes and rivers, fjords and reservoirs and duck-ponds. Still waters and stormy.

Like a boat that can tack against or travel with the prevailing winds, currents, and undertows, writing - and other artforms - give us a vessel in which to travel through the conditions of life, and to meet those conditions with intellect, feeling, imagination, and the transformative power of image-making.<sup>2</sup>

We are very familiar with the idea that art provides a form of escapism, and indeed some does, but also, like Noah's Ark, books and paintings and performances provide a means of garnering responses to crises that need not deny the world, but might instead be a way of entering more fully into it. Art provides us with what Seamus Heaney calls '...the glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential...'<sup>3</sup> an invitation to look deeply into the conditions of the life we are living.

And this is true of the process of writing even more than it is true of the process of reading. As Ted Hughes says, 'What's writing really about? It's about trying to take fuller possession of the reality of your life'.<sup>4</sup>

In finding language, achieving aesthetic distance, turning our raw experiences into 'cooked' imagery, we process the events of our life in close-up. We bend close to the stuff of our experience and turn it around in our minds, trying it in different hands, different tongues, approaching with different tools until we find the way to say it that allows the experience to pass from us in a communicable form. Writing gives us a reason to pay close attention. As does painting, performing, any of the arts which invite us to translate experience into imagery or form. When we create, we enter into a process of construction as tangible, as crucial, and as liberating as the work of building ourselves a life raft!

Books, like boats, carry us and our little cargoes - all our baggage, memories, identities, packing crates full of coconuts, bananas, and the occasional stowaway spider. The lives we write are saved for us - we take into the ark all the pairs who will otherwise perish - our ghost selves and the lovers we lost. Two by two.

Tonight, I wish to talk less about the boat, and more about the work of the boat-yard; less about the building of a *book*, and more about the process of *book-building*. Like many of the weekend hobbyists at the boatyard, I am interested in the joy of the process, and how one makes it happen. I am convinced of the importance of talking about writing practice, performance practice, as a way of - and to - life. This lecture is about book-building for love, about keeping one's heart in the process, regardless of the outcome; it's not for those who are only in it for the big regatta, not for those with half an eye on the day trippers who will pay for pleasure cruising.

My headings take their titles from a nineteenth century manual on boat-building.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, no blue-prints here, only reflections on the process of *writing as practice*. (For 'writing' at any point feel free to read the creativity of any sort).

## Resistance & Displacement

To write is daunting. You may not want to turn up at the boat yard day after day in all weathers. You may prefer to visit the chandler's shop and buy things instead - pens, papers, filing systems. You may prefer to spend the whole day imagining the launch party, before you've even bought the wood or gone to the timber yard.

As with reluctance to talk things through in therapy, not wanting to write is *always* resistance, and it always means that there is something to be said! Better to face it now and get to work than mooch around the marina all day looking at other people's books, or to spend your life in the sail loft dreaming of the high seas.

*Displacement* refers to 'the weight of water which a ship displaces when she is floating'. As all writers know, 'displacement' also describes those activities which become suddenly urgent whilst resistance is in play. This is beautifully encapsulated in *Advice to Writers* by Billy Collins:

Even if it keeps you up all night,  
wash down the walls  
and scrub the floor of your study before composing a syllable.  
Clean the place as if the Pope were on his way.  
Spotlessness is the niece of inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Raymond Carver tells us about

[the] man who chooses to blab on the phone  
all day, or else write stupid letters  
while he lets his poems go unattended and uncared for, abandoned-  
or worse, unattempted. This man doesn't deserve poems  
and they shouldn't be given to him in any form.  
His poems, should he ever produce any more,  
ought to be eaten by mice.<sup>7</sup>

One means of sidestepping resistance is to develop, over time, a consistent and sustained writing practice - a daily (or otherwise regular) discipline of

coming to the page, even when one feels least like it, even when one has nothing to say.<sup>8</sup> As one writing teacher points out : '...we never question the feasibility of a football team practicing long hours for one game; yet in writing we rarely give ourselves the space for practice'.<sup>9</sup>

In writing practice, we give ourselves freedom to explore, to experiment, and even to write badly. Letting go, for now, of judgements and expectations, and relinquishing the habit of 'end-gaining' - focusing too soon and too hard on the outcome - we develop a more fluid and also a more disciplined approach to writing. With regular practice, '...you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance'.<sup>10</sup> Whilst *not* thinking about book-building, you grow the strength, the confidence, the stamina, the ideas, the imagery, and the skills that will eventually be ready to turn themselves into poems, stories, full-length novels, CDs and feature films!

### **Stability**

There are two important types of stability in writing - that of the book, and that of the book builder. It could be said that the stability of a particular piece of writing depends upon structure and form. We might look for the right fit, the consistent line, the watertight metaphor, a conceit that holds water - but unless you are making deliberate experiments in formal construction, I suggest letting the form and the structure arise in relation to the subject. / think that Stability comes out of the work finding its own feet.

To my mind, stability in the writing comes from stability in the writer - when my general condition as a human being is in good shape, my pen flies and I slice through all the waters I turn my prow to! Stability is also born of trust in the process; relinquishing our attempts at controlling the outcome, we instead focus on the present reality of daily practice. When the sails are set, they will fill and draw, so hunker down, find your seat, take your pen. Let your daily writing practice be the ballasted keel that keeps the book, and you,

afloat and alive.

## Materials

Books are built from images, words, ideas; language honed like wood, turned and cut through so that the secret etymology runs visible like a grain in the timber. To work in this wood, you will need tools - a pen, a notebook... You will also need a nice boatyard, preferably by a river. The river should be large enough for you slip and launch that book when she's ready, but quiet too. Not too much traffic up and down outside your workshop. Not too many distractions. Still, there must be trees, and light glancing and dancing on the water, and the river must sing to you, all day long, the song of the seas it runs to.

Wood. The fine wood of fine trees. Choose rose-wood, dog-wood, ponderosa pine. Season it as your life is seasoned, as life has seasoned you. Let things stand for a long time. Let the sap settle - all that anger, passion, desperate love - the sting of spring that the timber smacked of when she was first cut. Let the sap settle and the wounds that just now cry resinny tears, let them heal a little, grow quiet, and the green of it turn to rust.

Later you will slice through those timbers that were once the living limbs of a tree or a life; you will slice through with equanimity and a band-saw. And then, let your own fingers trace the grain of that wood, the stories you didn't even know were in there - a hard winter, a spurt of happiness - the cycles of growing. Wax will stop the wood drying out too fast... book building takes time, no matter what you hear about Kerouac racing through **On The Road**.

Too fast, and the imagery might be brittle, the conceits easily broken, the language dry and dusty. Wax your way through an organic process with time, patience, and candle light when you work into the night. Writing teacher, Natalie Goldberg tells us that 'It takes a while for our experience to sift through our consciousness'.<sup>11</sup>

She calls it 'composting' - the process of allowing experience to decompose into our bodies<sup>12</sup>. Another image is 'cooking' - letting things bubble and simmer a while - the liquid boils off and we get down to the saucy stuff. In book-building, sometimes we need to make size - a kind of glue for holding the spine on a book, or for making a base-coat on which the shiny colours will seize and hold. Size is made by cooking old animal bones, but for the best books, we use our own bones, the bones of our own experiences. We might not always like the smell of our old bones cooking - size doesn't make the most appetising soup, but it does make a good base.

As everyone will tell you, use local materials. The stuff of your own experience. But don't be afraid, also, to throw in a touch of the exotic. For instance, I once built a book using only a tin bath tub, my bedroom slippers, and a roll of Tibetan prayer flags brought back from Lhasa by an old boyfriend.

Because writing is inevitably an act of fiction, no matter how factual your sources, you can make imaginative leaps and bring the worlds that you have never been to, to you. Writing out of our own experience does not mean limiting ourselves to the four walls of our small, perhaps untravelled, lives. I am told that Jeanette Winterson wrote **The Passion** without ever having been to Venice. Her's is a Venice of the heart - it fits her story and her style perfectly and she gets it just right. Remember what Kafka told us?

It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet.<sup>13'</sup>

### **Assembling and Fairing the Hull**

Sail plans are sometimes called 'Dream Sheets'. Draw your own. Shop-bought dreams will never do. Best to spend a little while dreaming in the sail loft. Better yet, take a ketch on the water - a real little self-sailer - complete with star-charts for both hemispheres, follow the favourable winds to warm

waters, calm seas, and nights of sparkling stars. Have some time off work for this. Put your best effort into lying on the decks of that ketch and star-gazing until the dream-book starts to cook in your sun-stroked brain. Dream of beautiful hand-made paper, illuminated with gold-leaf and calligraphy, little miniature illustrations in oils, and a gold-clad catch on the cover. A picaresque novella; a novelesque bagatella! Consider pages, chapter headings, titles, sub-titles and dedications. Fall asleep thinking of it, wake up and write down on the dream sheets whatever you are dreaming between the bedsheets.

Write and rewrite. Sand back and repair. If it rains when the tarpaulins are off, you may have to sand again, back to the grain, paint again with long strokes of brush, little dabs of colour. Construct pieces according to the logic of the dream sheets. You may have to assemble them in many ways before they begin to resemble a poem, and then a book.

Galway Kinnell reports that the master-builder, Keats, when building 'Nightingale -

...wrote it quickly, on scraps of paper, which he then stuck in his pocket, but when he got home he couldn't figure out the order of the stanzas, and he and a friend spread the papers on a table, and they made some sense of them, but he isn't sure to this day if they got it right.<sup>14</sup>

Writing Practice encourages the consistent production of pieces of writing, out of which themes, images, and ideas for complete works will develop organically. The final product is not directly aimed for, but allowed to emerge. In this way, the writing speaks *to* us, as well as speaking through us. Often, writing can surprise the writer, as Eamon Grennan tells us in his poem, *Detail*,

I began to understand  
how a poem can happen: you have your eye on a small  
elusive detail, pursuing its music, when a terrible truth  
strikes and your heart cries out, being carried off.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, we write, not in order to tell what we know, but in order to discover for ourselves the secrets inside our own experiences, or dreams, or half-conceived imaginings.

### **Storm Management**

Since we will never escape the storms of this world, perhaps it is better that we experience them fully, all the way through the process of expression into self-knowledge. A writing practice gives us this opportunity. Writing will not protect us from the world, or from ourselves. We do not construct a gently floating home in a safe harbour, when we set out to write. The very act of book-building invites the storm. But turning up at the page, day after day, engaging with what is there, however tempestuous, we start to get our sea-legs, to know how to go about in a squall, crest big breakers, run fast down the tiniest stream of a warm wind. In the end, book-building is less about the book itself, and more about the builder. Less about constructing a glossy wooden packet to paddle the Mississippi, bedecked in bunting and peopled by dandies. Less about the launch, and more about the hours in the boat yard.

The joy and treasure of the book-building process (the performance/sculpture/story-building process) is that we discover things we did not think we knew. Creative practice takes us deeply into the experience of our lives - that which just might otherwise escape us. Writing is an antidote to the malaise of letting life pass us by. All of life, sooner or later, will come through the boatyard, and if we are there, in our overalls, chisel in hand, then we just might catch that passing moment of life and bring it into focus, turn it as wood is turned, until we see clearly; polish it as wood is polished, until we can see ourselves reflected there.

If we build well, then the books go on without us, taking other people through the storms or into the lovely waters, but first of all we don our overalls, sharpen the saw, set to work... a boat... an ark... a passenger list...



dream sheets...

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3. Seamus Heaney (2002) *Finders Keepers*. Faber & Faber.
4. Ted Hughes in Astley, *op. cit.*
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