

A Short History of Everything

AT TWENTY I wrote my first novel. Titled “Everything,” it lived up to its name. A rambling, anarchic outpouring typed on a Remington Noiseless (which, far from living up to *its* name, sounded like antiaircraft artillery), filling seventeen-hundred-plus sheets of erasable onionskin, it stood six inches tall: a towering testimony not only to my absurdly grandiose literary ambitions, but to Antonin Artaud’s famous dictum, “Anything is the enemy of art.”

At the time I lived in a railroad flat in lower Manhattan, between Tribeca and SoHo. We called the neighborhood “So What.” My bedroom overlooked the Holland Tunnel, whose flashing lights, car horns, and jackhammers kept me up late at night, which is when I did most of my writing. My friend and roommate, Mark, had his own novel going at the other end of the apartment, where greasy smells rose up the airshaft from a diner on the ground floor. We were in competition.

Mark’s novel took place at the Benton County Renaissance Fair in Corvallis, Oregon, where he and I had spend some time writing and performing songs together, and featured a P. T. Barnum–like narrator who treats readers to a circus sideshow of New Age freaks. Under two hundred pages, Mark’s slim novel took him a week to finish.

Mine took a bit longer. All fall, winter, and summer long I worked to the bleeping and blaring of that tunnel outside my window, the pages of slippery onionskin piling up on my dresser. I had no idea what I was doing, but that didn’t matter. This wad of words had sprung from my brain. This fact gave each page the glow of inevitability.

By day I worked as a typesetter at an ad agency, and in my office I kept a second typewriter, a portable manual, so I could bang away at my masterpiece during slow periods. I remember the morning I finally typed the words, “The End.” Finished manuscript in a box, I ran out to Fred, my supervisor, a short, bald, chain-smoking, anxiety-ridden workaholic. “It’s done!” I announced gleefully. “My novel’s finished!”

“So what?” said Fred. “It’s not published yet, is it?”

My heart did a *Titanic*. Fred was an aspiring writer himself, a surrogate father to me. I took my box and crawled

IT’S A THIN LINE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE



PETER SELGIN has published dozens of stories and essays in literary magazines. His short fiction manuscript, “nothing but water,” was short-listed for the Iowa Fiction Award, and his novel “Life Goes to the Movies” was a finalist for this year’s James Jones First Novel Fellowship. He reads for several literary journals and is coeditor of the magazine *Alimentum: The Literature of Food* (www.alimentumjournal.com). He teaches fiction writing at Gotham Writers’ Workshop.

back into my typesetting cubbyhole.

But that wasn't the end of *Everything*. I showed it to some friends, who told me the book "needed, um, some cutting." I went further, and did more or less what D. H. Lawrence did thrice with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—wrote a fresh version, from scratch, without looking at the previous draft.

Meanwhile I'd started a second novel, this one about a disturbed young man who passes himself off as a Vietnam vet in order to impress a twelve-year-old boy. The disturbed young man having been a hockey champ, I called the novel "The Point Man."

By then I was working for a literary agent, reading manuscripts and typing rejection letters—an irony that escaped me then but does not now. Working with me was a woman named Sally, a very bright Columbia graduate whose literary opinion I valued. I had Sally read "The Point Man." She did and said, "Write the next one."

So I wrote the next one. "The Sidewalk Artist" was about an advertising man who chucks his career to become a screever, someone who draws on sidewalks with colored chalk. The story featured a "colorful" cast of street urchins and climaxed with a fire in the secret tunnels under Grand Central Station. Meanwhile I was fired by the literary agent for taking Sally's side when she refused to clean up after a bum who'd shat in the agency vestibule. I shopped "The Sidewalk Artist" to other agents, but found no takers, so I shelved it.

But I didn't give up. How could I? I fell back on my typesetting skills, finagling a three-day workweek with another ad agency. Here I had my own office, overlooking Lincoln Center, and an assistant who did pretty much all of the work, freeing me up to revise "Everything" yet again.

This time, rather than taking the universe as my subject, I focused my narrative on Patrick, a fellow I'd met in art school, a real Vietnam vet, turned filmmaker, whose adventurous and highly unorthodox view of reality I

had, for a brief time, shared. A large chunk of "Everything" had been devoted to our adventures. I extracted these, gave them narrative drive and shape, and built a backstory for my protagonist out of his real-life model's past—no mean feat, considering that Patrick rarely talked about his past, and all I had to go on came from a few illicit peeks into his journals—his "black books"—and scattered tales he'd told me that had him doing everything from walking sail beams on a junk owned by Thai pirates to planning terrorist bombings for a super-violent faction of the Irish Republican Army.

So "Everything" became "Walking Wounded." At a mere 629 pages, this was a far more modest and shapely work, though the prose maintained its feverishness as the two main characters underwent their adventures. Convinced that I'd retooled *Don Quixote* for the junk-bond '80s, with my knight errant and his trusty squire tilting at artistic windmills (as Ronald Reagan and Ivan Boesky grin in the shadows), I sent the manuscript off to two dozen agents.

The letters I got back were disappointing to say the least, with nods of faint praise for my prose followed by the usual "buts" and the occasional "not quite right for us at this time." No indication that I'd created a work to rival Kerouac and Wolfe at their best, if not Mr. Joyce.

1985 arrived. I was twenty-six, a year older than Norman Mailer when he published *The Naked and the Dead*. Counting both versions of "Everything," I'd written four novels, all failures, so I decided to turn to playwriting for a while. I even managed to get a couple of plays produced and published. But my heart wasn't in the theater; I longed for full control—if not of my life then at least over the words I put on paper. So back I went to "Walking Wounded" and revised again, this time giving more weight to a thematic thread that dealt with the conflation of movies with real life. I watched hundreds of films and

immersed myself in the great critics: Seldes, Kael, Sarris, Barthes, Godard. I read Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*. I boned up on the language of cinema, on lap dissolves and swish pans and *mise-en-scène*. I tried to become as obsessed with movies as my hero, whose name I changed from Patrick to Mickey, and then to Dwaine. At the same time I further emphasized the theme of hero worship, making Nigel DePoli (the novel's narrator) even more of a Sancho to Dwaine's Quixote.

I titled this version "Life Goes to the Movies," and gave the manuscript to Paulette, a playwright with whom I'd shared a double bill at a Manhattan theater. I won't forget her initial response. We were on a train headed back from Long Island, where her parents lived. As she turned over the last page a tear slid down her face. I thought: *This is why I write*. She thought the novel "terrific"—her word.

Had Paulette known that she would end up reading six more versions, some against her will, might she have changed her mind? Perhaps, but allow me—please—to bask in this moment of glory! After all, Paulette's no igno-

ramus, nor is she soft when it comes to doling out praise. Others shed no tears, but responded positively. Thus fortified, I set out in search of an agent.

This time the rejection letters were more upbeat. One called "Life" a funny, lively novel; another said that it would "make a terrific movie," a third found it "extremely entertaining." The phrase "tour de force" was repeatedly invoked, which pleased me until I realized it was code for "hard to sell." In the end, every agent I sent it to turned "Life" down, many with referrals to other agents. Hot potato.

Only one agent—I'll call him Brad—expressed genuine interest in the form of a three-page, single-spaced letter in which he elaborated his reservations, and ended by saying that, should I revise it, he'd like to see the book again.

JUMP-CUT to 1992. I'm thirty-four years old, three years older than Saul Bellow when he published *Dangling Man*, eight years older than Styron when he published *Lie Down in Darkness*. Sharp panic has been blunted to dull depression. I earn my living drawing caricatures at parties, entertaining

kids at bar and bat mitzvahs, sucking in the cigar fumes, bad jokes, and booze breath of Wall Street workers yelling, "Give me more hair!" and "Don't make my nose too big!" For this mild torture I rake in a hundred dollars an hour, more during the holidays. But the combination of bad food, free liquor, deafening DJs, and Magic Marker fumes earns me a peptic ulcer and epic headaches.

Still, there are fringe benefits, like the time an elderly gentleman comes up to me as I sketch and asks, "What do you do when you're not doing this?" I tell him I'm a writer, and he shakes his head and says, "So was I. What misery! Do yourself a favor, son, and quit now, while you still have a chance!"

But later, near the end of the party, he returns. "I take it back," he says. "Years from now, when you're my age, what would you rather say to your grandchildren? That you tried to write novels and failed, or that you were a stockbroker?" And he walks away as quietly as he'd come.

BUT still I was not through with "Life." Far from it! Using Brad's elaborate rejection letter as my guide, I set to work on revision number nine, focusing even more on Nigel's obsession, making the book more about him—realizing, as I hadn't until then—that any book with a "colorful" character at its center *can't* be about that character, but must be about his effect on those around him, since "colorful" or "charismatic" characters are, by nature, predictable in their unpredictability. I did a fair amount of cutting, but also added material, and though I still ended up with four hundred pages they were four hundred *better* pages.

By then I had written and published a dozen short stories in various literary journals, and drafted a new novel, about a mysterious, Pied Piper-like man who, during the Vietnam era, radicalizes the youth of a small, conservative, New England hat factory town. Because he's a fanatic swim-

mer, and since a big part of the plot revolves around a missing boy whose corpse is discovered at the shallow end of the lake where the protagonist and his acolytes skinny-dip, I titled this one “The Water Master,” after a shape-shifting aquatic creature of Nordic myth.

On the basis of my published stories and my modest success as a playwright I was hired to teach writing at a Manhattan school known for the yellow plastic sidewalk boxes by which it distributes its catalogues. At the same time, and to my surprise, I wrote and illustrated a children’s book, which was published, did well, and won an award. The agent for that book turned out to be Brad’s assistant, whom I’ll call Meghan. She asked for a look at “Life.” That weekend she phoned to say she’d like to represent it. Days later Meghan made her sentiments known in writing, saying, among other things, “Your novel says that life is a movie the way Hamlet says all the world’s a stage. I like the fact that the chapters are written like scenes from different types of movies (war, western, pornography, etc.). I especially loved the book’s humor, which keeps the story enjoyable in spite of some heavy elements, like the war flashbacks and Dwaine’s alcoholism and bad temper.”

Meghan had some criticisms, too, which I addressed in the *next* round of revisions; there were no fewer than three more before the book, spit shined, made the rounds to seventeen editors, each of whom rejected it. “Too dark.” “Too edgy.” “Too insular.” “Didn’t like the main character.” “Didn’t like Nigel.” “Too breezy.” “Too manic.” Not to mention that perennial favorite, “Not quite right for our list at this time.” All found the book ambitious, innovative, and “extremely well written”—a compliment I would come to equate with failure.

Only one editor—Carla Riccio at Dial—showed genuine enthusiasm, though she felt that much of the tension dropped out of the story following Dwaine’s descent into madness.

Still, she promised she’d gladly look at a revision. And so I went back to work, revamping the novel’s last third while further developing Dwaine as a character.

It took two months. Meghan was about to send the result to Dial when she learned that Ms. Riccio had retired.

IT’S the new millennium. I’ve been married (to Paulette) for seven years. Frank Sinatra is dead and I’m forty-two years old, seven years older than Kerouac when he published *On the Road*, two years older than Nelson Algren when he published *The Man with the Golden Arm*. The novel keeps getting better; the rejections keep getting worse. It’s like trying to hit a moving target.

I wouldn’t give up; I couldn’t give up—it would have meant throwing all those years away. I published more stories and spent a few months as an artist-in-residence on an island in Maine redrafting “The Water Master.” Now and then I’d take “Life” down off the shelf and look at it, riffling through its pages, trying to unlock the mystery of its failure.

Three years would pass before I’d again approach the book in earnest, this time with the help of an accomplished poet and editor who, chapter by chapter, word for word, went through the revision with me, making sure I left no stone unturned in a process I’d come to believe had to be done perfectly, or not at all. I re-keyboarded from scratch, and let scarcely a sentence stand as written.

The result, my editor and I both agreed, was close to prose poetry, but with a narrative engine that hummed along at full throttle. It had taken me all of these years to realize what I was really writing, the love story of two straight men: a dark devil of a Vietnam vet turned filmmaker (in Irish the name Dwaine, I learned, means “the dark, mysterious one”) and the naive Italian American innocent who follows him to the edge of madness and beyond. Nothing like it had ever

been written before, of that much I was sure.

By then, however, Meghan had lost her enthusiasm, and I had to seek representation elsewhere, a bleak undertaking with a novel that had already made the rounds. Still, I found one agent willing to take a look. He promised to get back to me in less than a week.

Six weeks later, I'd still heard nothing. Then one day, arriving home from my teaching job, as I'm waiting for the elevator, Wing, my doorman, hands me a package.

YOU hear the stories. How, before it won the Pulitzer Prize, William Kennedy's *Ironweed* was rejected by thirteen publishers, including the house that eventually published it; how John Kennedy Toole's mother famously pestered Walker Percy into reading her son's manuscript after he'd killed himself in despair of finding a publisher (*A Confederacy of Dunces* like-

wise nabbed a Pulitzer and became a best-seller). Given such stories you'd think rejection a prerequisite to fortune and fame.

In fact these are among the very few such tales, rare exceptions to the unwritten law stating that when a book gets rejected it *stays* that way. The truth notwithstanding, we failed authors, eternal dreamers, pin our hopes on these stories, while keeping at it, novel after novel, revision after revision. Surely recognition awaits us, if nowhere else then beyond the grave. It waited there for Melville, and for Poe. To write for posterity isn't such a bad thing, we tell ourselves. Especially when you have no choice.

WERE this a successful essay, with a satisfying conclusion, it would end with my novel accepted and its author succeeding against all odds. But, despite having been short-listed for several

awards, "Life" remains unpublished. And so, like the novel that is its subject, this essay, too, is a failure.

Or is it? I set out to document my Sisyphean undertaking, and have done so. Though Camus, in his reading, concludes that Sisyphus should be happy, for Sisyphus himself there is no happy ending; there's no ending at all. He keeps rolling his stone to the top of the hill, and it keeps rolling down. Yet there is the victory of endurance, the triumph of tenacity, the prize of persistence.

In his terrifyingly beautiful essay, "The Crack-Up," F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still maintain the ability to function." For me, now, those two ideas are as follows:

(1) After many years, countless revisions and dozens of submissions, my novel has failed to find a publisher.

(2) It is a success. ∞