

How to Make a Cream Sauce

“Damn the rules, it's the feeling that counts.” —John Coltrane

In my twenties I was known among my friends as a good cook. I loved trying out new ingredients, enjoyed sharing my creations, and was not afraid to experiment. After I met my boyfriend, he leaned over my shoulder in the kitchen one day and said, “This is not how you make a cream sauce.”

“I know how to make it,” I said, chopping my parsley with a little more vigour than necessary. “I’ve been making it for years.”

My boyfriend explained that a properly made cream sauce had to be simmered and constantly stirred, that flour couldn’t be just tossed into it at any time, that you must use unsalted butter. As our relationship developed, we got into a few more quarrels in the kitchen. My boyfriend, it turned out, was a pro: he owned measuring cups; he knew the difference between mincing and dicing; he followed recipes while I considered them a loose guideline, relied on instinct and intuition. The more I listened to him, the less I wanted to cook. My confidence was shaken, which became evident in my meals. When I tried following recipes in this precise manner, the results were often dull. Something was missing. Eventually, I stopped cooking altogether.

About three years ago, I came across an article titled ‘Ten Rules for Writing Fiction’ on *The Guardian*’s website: a compilation of rules offered by established authors on what to do, and more importantly, what not to do when writing fiction. I had heard most of these rules before in writing classes or books, and found many of them helpful at some point or another. But this

time the list presented me with a detailed catalogue of my failings as a writer: times when I used adverbs (a mortal sin! according to Elmore Leonard), or ‘then’ as a conjunction, (inexcusable, says Jonathan Franzen), let slip an exclamation point (Elmore Leonard again) or a cliché (Geoff Dyer). The list was like my boyfriend’s cream sauce recipe: it made me want to quit.

As a kid and a teenager, I wrote daily—in class, on buses and on street benches. Later, as a reluctant soldier in the Israeli army, I secretly typed my fiction on the army’s computer, using the fax machine (meant for top-secret army documents) to circulate my short stories amongst my friends in other bases. Fiction was my refuge, the ‘Happy Place’ I escaped to when things sucked at home/at school/ in the army, which (given my age) was often.

At twenty-five I moved to Canada. I lived in Vancouver, worked as a waitress, and spent most of my days stoned, contemplating my two languages: my adopted English, too new and clunky and unfamiliar to write in, and my native Hebrew, now too obscure; no longer useful. I sank into a textbook Generation-X-quarter-life-crisis and ended up not writing at all, spending the following years mourning the loss of my craft (a wordsmith stripped of her tools!) and being a big baby about it.

By the time I found my way back to writing and enrolled in some community college writing classes, it had been years since I’d had a regular writing practice. This, paired with the challenge of writing in a new language, led to bouts of anxiety and insecurity. Still, I stuck it out: I signed up for more classes, joined writing groups, eventually workshopping my fiction with other emerging writers. Soon, I began to notice a recurring theme in the feedback I was receiving. I was often told that my sentences were ‘too long,’ my dialogue ‘too direct,’ my sex scenes ‘too graphic,’ my images ‘too sentimental.’ Some students simply scribbled ‘too much!’ in the margins of my stories.

Determined to become a better writer I began studying Canadian texts and tried to emulate their style, changing the way I wrote to fit what I thought to be CanLit standards. I read books about craft, adopting their principles as gospel: show, don't tell; never introduce a new character in the last third of a story; be sparse when writing sex scenes (or better yet: avoid them altogether). Every teacher with whom I studied had different rules they lived by, all of which I added to my list; some preached against flashbacks and back stories, others against using the present tense. The idea of guidelines that I could follow comforted me, made me feel as though the art of fiction was more tangible, a skill I could acquire and perfect. As Carol Shields says in her essay 'Arriving Late, Starting Over,' these rules offered "the short story as boxed kit, as scientific demonstration, and furthermore it was teachable."

I was a good student, and I succeeded in forcing my fiction into submission. I told less, added in subtext, obliterated all adverbs. I wrote polished, sparkly short stories with punchy dialogues and perfectly structured plotlines. The responses to my new fiction were mostly positive, though not overly enthusiastic. I was short-listed to a couple contests but hadn't managed to publish any of my stories. Moreover, I began to feel a growing void in my life, a longing for the way I wrote as a child. Something felt wrong. Something was missing.

In her essay, 'Fail Better,' Zadie Smith describes a fictional writer named Clive who publishes a novel he knows, in his deepest of hearts, is 'not true.' I felt that way about much of the fiction I'd produced during this time. My writing was stiff, calculated, constrained. My paragraphs were overwrought, my sentences neat and tight. My stories may have followed the rules, but they were stripped of a personality, a soul, a heart. What's worst: I was no longer having any fun.

Carol Shields describes how she became disillusioned with what she calls “the phantom set of rules about what a story should be and how it must be shaped.” As a teacher, she had passed on these inscribed truths to students until a case of writer’s block led her to question the traditional short story, this “fixed phenomena governed by established definition.” She decided to let herself experiment with other narrative possibilities. The result was the short story collection *Various Miracles*, published in 1985.

A lot of Shield’s experimentations had to do with form. Unlike Shields, I have always been fond of the traditional story arc; I naturally write stories with conflicts, with climaxes, with resolution; this is often the way stories present themselves to me. Still, I could relate to Shields’ disillusionment. I wondered what it was about my fiction that my peers had found ‘too much.’ What was it about my writing that didn’t translate? And why was it that following rules didn’t lead me to better fiction, but rather to a strange feeling of falsehood and self-betrayal?

“Writing is the craft that defies craftsmanship:” Zadie Smith says in ‘Fail Better.’ “Craftsmanship alone will not make a novel great.” She goes on to say, “A writer’s personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner. Style is a writer’s way of telling the truth.”

In his essay ‘Rhyiming Action,’ Charles Baxter, an American, notes the difference between American writing and writing that comes from Eastern Europe or Africa, which tends to be more obsessed with patterns and rhyiming action. “If we lived in Poland or Bosnia,” Baxter suggests, “overrun for centuries by invading armies or warring fashions, we might very well believe, as Polish writers have tended to believe, in the semitragic nonprogression of large historical events.” Baxter then clarifies, “I’m not just talking about narrative technique here anymore. I’m talking about the way some writers may view the world. Technique must follow a

vision, a view of experience. No technique can ever take precedence over vision. It must be its servant.”

By strictly adhering to a set of rules and changing my style, I’d been going against my nature, and so I was no longer telling the truth. Rules had never been my strong suit to begin with: I had been an unruly soldier in the Israeli army, terrible at following orders, racking up nine trails for violating military codes and nearly ending up in jail. In high school, they invented a behaviour grade especially for me, threatening twice to expel me for breaking school regulations. And how could one set of rules be right for all stories? For all fiction writers everywhere? Perhaps my writing had stood out as different because I was different. More often than not, I was the only writer in the group with English as her second language, often the only one who wasn’t born or raised in Canada. I was definitely the only one from Israel, the only one of Jewish Yemeni descent. My heritage, my background, had shaped my personality, which in turn informed my writing, not just in terms of content, but of style as well.

Many of the rules I struggled to implement in my fiction made no sense when situated in an Israeli context. In one fiction class I had been taught that dialogue must always have subtext, that people always say one thing and mean another. I thought that to be the strangest thing; in my culture people often say precisely what they mean, whether you want to hear it or not. There were other glaring differences: Israeli literature is less conservative when it comes to sex, just as you are more likely to hear the sounds of lovemaking from apartment windows on a hot summer night in Tel Aviv than you are in Canada. Israeli writing tends to be sentimental, often verging on melodrama, because Israelis are passionate people who prefer watching Latin-American telenovelas over American soaps, seeing themselves reflected in the Latin temperament. Israeli writing often has a nostalgic, sometimes sombre tone, a sense of longing, a tendency to rhyme

images and events, because Israelis' collective history—a series of tragedies, a succession of wars—haunts their present.

My past, my cultural history, the collective memory of my people, was threaded throughout my stories, reflected in my themes, my style, even my word choices. Perhaps this is the reason I've always gravitated toward a traditional narrative arc, with its emphasis on conflict and resolution.

In 2009, I moved across the country to attend an MFA program in Toronto, while still having doubts about my choice to pursue writing. On particularly bad days, I entertained thoughts of quitting altogether. Perhaps, I thought, it was time to admit defeat, accept my limitations, embrace my shortcomings. Perhaps waitressing (I was always so good at it!) was my true calling.

One spring day, a brilliant teacher who read my floundering stories told me she wanted more, not less. It was our first meeting, our first consultation. She was sitting on the couch in my Parkdale apartment; the door to the balcony was open, perhaps for the first time that year, and the air was fragrant with rain. “Maybe you can insert a flashback here?” She pointed at my marked manuscript. “A little more back story?” I burst into tears. She stared at me. “Are you crying because I asked for more back story?”

Under my teacher's guidance I started reading fiction written by African, Latin American, and Asian writers. Reading these books, I was reminded that beyond the confined space in which I had imprisoned my writing, there was a world where other fictions existed. It gave me hope, made me believe that there was room for my fiction in that world.

The first story I wrote after that was set against the Lebanon War and written in the voice of a nine-year-old girl. It came to me in one sitting, a long exhalation, without stopping to edit or

judge. Somehow, it ended up requiring less drafting than other stories I'd laboured over. It was this story, which I had written recklessly and joyously (probably throwing in an adverb or two) that was finally accepted for publication in a literary magazine.

My fiction was receiving better responses in class workshops too. The same teacher whose lukewarm reaction to my writing had contributed to my frustration in the beginning of the year, now commended my stories for being refreshing, for having 'energy,' and everyone seemed to love the sex scenes. For the first time in years, I've felt as though I owned what I wrote. I owned my voice.

By the end of the following school year I had eleven stories I submitted as my MFA thesis. That thesis was later picked up by HarperCollins, and became my first book, *The Best Place on Earth*.

But emerging writers must learn technique!—I can hear teachers of writing protest—the same way beginners in other disciplines learn from successful practitioners of their craft. I don't mean to suggest otherwise. Nor do I blame my peers or teachers for their critique of my writing. I was a novice writer; I'm sure at times my sentences were too long; my writing *was* 'too much.' It was really my own need for control that drew me to seek rules. Fiction had felt like a labyrinth and I was desperate for a roadmap. This was the journey I had to go through, with its false starts and near defeats, in order to become a better writer. I had to learn skills, absorb the technique, practice it in those early stories I'd shelved (as many early stories should be), and then I had to let go and trust that the knowledge would remain, that these principles would emerge in my writing intuitively, organically, the same way I just know to add rock salt to the sautéing onions to keep them from burning, can sense when my hummus is done by observing its texture, smell when my Yemeni Soup is ready by the way its fragrance permeates the house.