

From Fugitive to Fiction Writer: Reflections on a Strange Intellectual Odyssey

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On November 8, 2002, I was driving my son home from cricket practice in Cape Town, South Africa where we'd lived for five years. On the way, I stopped to buy a six pack of beer. Since traffic law enforcement was rather lax in Cape Town, I decided I couldn't wait. I popped the can and downed what would be my last beer for nearly seven years. When we arrived at our house, the South African Police were waiting with an arrest warrant on a possession of explosives charge in California from which I'd been on the run for 27 years. A phase of my life had come to a close. I'd been living in Southern Africa for nearly two decades, working as an educator in Zimbabwe and South Africa, parenting two children with my wife, and building a network of friends amidst the non-governmental organizations, trade unions, and social movements of the region.

Within six weeks, U.S. Marshals had extradited me back to California where ultimately I would serve six and a half years in various Federal and state prisons. Though I'd never written much fiction up to that time, during those years of incarceration I completed drafts of eight novels. My evolution as a fiction writer was a somewhat complicated journey which I will attempt to describe here.

Starting Points: Writing to Transcend

Many incarcerated people use writing as an attempt to transcend their circumstances. My friend Patrick Berry has written impressively on this process in his unpublished piece based on the experience of running writing groups at Danville State Prison in Illinois.¹

Patrick's observations about transcendence certainly applied to my initial urges to write. By the time of my arrest, I'd lived most of my adult life in southern Africa. Nothing felt much farther away from my adoptive home than the inside of a prison cell in the United States. My impetus to write was a way to connect with the reality of southern Africa, to maintain emotional

¹ Berry, Patrick. (2011, April.) *Time and doing time with literacy narratives*. Paper presented for a panel on Prison Writing: Pedagogy, Representation, Research and Action at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, GA.

links to all the people I valued in the world. Through writing somehow I thought I could keep up with the life I was missing - my sons' cricket successes and failures, my wife's intellectual work as an historian, the battles of impoverished South African communities to electrify their two-roomed houses.

The obvious choice would have been to write an historical or political analysis. My previous experience as a researcher of southern African history and current events qualified me to take on this task. But I lacked the essential resources. Prison offered no access to the Internet, no library and most importantly, no connection to a community of scholars to assist in conceptualizing such a work. As a researcher, I couldn't just make it all up. I opted for fiction.

However, tackling fiction presented a different obstacle altogether- I had no idea how to do it. I hadn't attempted a novel since a feeble unpublished 100 page manuscript I completed as a senior in college.

I began my task sitting in front of a forty year old manual typewriter in the day room of the Dublin Federal Detention Center. Day after day I plunked away on this machine that felt remarkably like the same Royal I'd used in my high school typing class some 40 years earlier. Gradually an ambitious plan emerged. I would follow in the path of B. Traven, an idol of my younger days. Traven was the alias of a German fugitive named Otto Feige aka Ret Marut, who fled authorities after an uprising in Bavaria in 1919 and re-settled in Mexico. There he wrote a series of books, often called the Jungle Novels, which chronicled the rise and fall of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. I had lived through an equally exciting set of historical events, the coming of independence to Zimbabwe in the 1980s (where I lived from 1982 to 1991) and the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa (my country of residence from 1991 to 2002). I put together a vague plan to write a series of fiction works which would encompass the breadth and complexity of this historical panorama. As I would soon find out, my ambitions far outstripped my talents.

After a couple of months and a few technical glitches I completed a 150 page draft of a story about a young white U.S. grad student who traveled to Zimbabwe right after independence.

With great expectation I sent the draft off to Judy Kendall, a British friend who I'd taught with in Harare, Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Judy had just finished a doctorate in Literature and had been a writing instructor in a British prison. I was confident she'd see the genius in my work. After several weeks, her comments arrived in the daily mail delivery. It wasn't what I expected.

In carefully chosen language, she explained that my novel contained none of the essential elements of a work of fiction: a compelling plot, tension-filled characters, authentic-sounding dialog. Then she provided what I took to be somewhat patronizing advice: read some more novels.

I fussed and fumed at her for a few days. Judy had not only rejected my creative endeavor but had severed my connection to the people and places that I loved. While composing the novel had provided some temporary transcendence, her response left me back in the reality of cells, chow halls, and the jingle of prison guard belts.

My depression was only temporary, as was my rejection of Judy. After a few days, I started reading more novels. I also went back to the typewriter. Not long after, I gained a transfer to the U.S. Penitentiary in Lompoc, California. Lompoc opened new doors. First of all, my access to technology improved. From the outset I had the free use of an electric typewriter with correcting ribbons. Then after a few months, I got a job which gave me access to a computer with a hard drive and a printer. I had apparently re-arrived in the Information Age.

Secondly, the library held a collection of about a dozen *Writer's Digest* books on how to write fiction. Various titles instructed on setting, plot, character development, dialog. I eagerly read all of them. Plus, the library had a copy of Books in Print, from which I compiled a list of other titles about the craft of fiction writing and asked friends and family to send me copies. Eventually I had more than twenty volumes, from Stephen King to Janet Evanovich. With advice from the professionals I gained some command over my narrative.

One valuable suggestion from those how-to books was compiling a sensory diary to help recover the details of the setting. I dutifully made a list of sights, sounds, touches, tastes, and smells that I recalled from 1980s Zimbabwe. Suddenly, the aroma of boiling sadza, the corn meal porridge that is the staple food in Zimbabwe, leaped back into my life. The ramshackle rural buses that ferried people and their families, furniture, and live chickens to distant homesteads rumbled through my mind. I resurrected further memories by reading two works of Zimbabwean fiction set in that era, *Harvest of Thorns* by Shimmer Chinodya and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. These novels not only painted more pictures but helped me recall the unique ways in which Zimbabweans used language. My dialog was coming to life.

I also re-read a few works of the history of the period to capture the political and historical context. Authenticity depended not only on the details of daily life in the setting but in

capturing the complex overarching realities of a country immersed in an epic regional struggle against racism and political repression.

Besides an increased access to resources, other conditions at Lompoc worked in my favor as well. This was one of the few prisons where good conduct could earn a person a single cell. After six months, I was, as they say, “home alone”. This meant I could bring the printouts of my drafts back to the cell at night and read them quietly out loud to myself while everyone else slept. These oral readings helped me to hear the rhythms of my work plus spot the repetitions and awkward turns of phrase.

Eventually I completed a second, third and fourth draft. But before I could get to a final version, I moved again. This time I ended up in Duell Vocational Facility, a reception center where I was locked in the cell all day except for twice weekly showers and short walks to the chow hall for meals. I had no library, no typewriter, certainly no computer.

I had only one choice – do the re-write by hand. I budgeted twenty pages a day, ending up with 570 handwritten sheets. I somewhat ashamedly sent this scribbled mess to Judy for a second look. This time her response was different. She told me I’d “cracked it”, that I now had a publishable novel.

Luckily friends and family then formed a labor pool to transform my scribbles into some 300 pages of digital manuscript which was ultimately accepted by Umuzi Publishers in Cape Town as *We Are All Zimbabweans Now*.

By finishing this novel, I had completed the first stage of my evolution and created another persona for myself beyond convict, inmate, prisoner number 09879-000. On a personal level I had transcended incarceration by producing a work of fiction that I could dedicate to all those with whom I’d worked and all of those who had supported me and my family during the years of incarceration. I had not only psychologically taken myself outside the walls, I had given something back. I dreamed of the day when I would be released and could sign copies of *We Are All Zimbabweans Now* and send them to everyone who I counted among my friends, loved ones and comrades.

But I didn’t stop there. I pushed forward with my project to write works that connected directly to southern Africa, to replicate the efforts Traven had made in regard to his adopted country of Mexico. I penned two more novels set in Southern Africa, one which, after some post-release re-writing and research became *Freedom Never Rests* and another untitled work depicting

the struggles over land and political power in Zimbabwe in the late 90s and early 2000s. The latter remains a pile of handwritten pages in my filing cabinet.

By the time I finished these manuscripts, I'd spent more than three years in prison. While I wouldn't want to say I was getting used to incarceration, time and lack of access to information was deepening the distance between me and southern Africa. While I still longed to return to Cape Town where my family had continued to live, the reality of being in prison was squeezing more stories into my psyche.

This process advanced further as a result of the reading material available at Duell. The institution prohibited the sending in of books and we had no library access. I had to rely on the collection of well-worn titles that circulated on the tier. Tom Clancy, John Grisham and James Patterson led the list of authors. Murder mysteries proliferated, typically of the more basic genre—Ross McDonald, Sue Grafton, James Hadley Chase, with only the occasional more literary title by Walter Moseley or Michael Connolly. Though I'd never read more than a handful of murder mysteries before, I devoured all of these.

One night as I sat on my bunk in Duell, a sentence came into my mind: "Prudence couldn't swim." For some reason, I decided that sentence bore a story. In my previous manuscripts, I'd begun with a plot idea, then refined it before writing. With this sentence, the only thing I knew was that Prudence would be a Zimbabwean woman, since such virtues are common first names for girls there. I just decided to see where the story would flow. I ended up with a murder mystery where Prudence was the victim and two white ex-convicts took on the task of the solving her murder.

This represented a fundamental change of direction that partially de-linked me from my pre-incarceration life. While I still had regular contact with my family, the ties were growing more tentative. I was re-becoming James Kilgore, U.S. citizen and prisoner. As an incarcerated person both my psychological orientation and daily life had greatly changed. While on the streets I was a researcher, read mostly non-fiction about the political economy of globalization. I knew the ins and outs of the various trading rounds in the World Trade Organization, could rattle off the debilitating conditions of IMF structural adjustment programs. But Duell had further diverted my intellectual path. The works of Patterson and Grisham were my run up to Prudence. Suddenly I began to internalize the elements of crime fiction - a death at the opening, a few colorful

characters, dropping hints along the way either false or otherwise, lots of internal monolog by an alienated lead detective.

The elements of this genre drove me through Prudence. Her dead body in a swimming pool at the outset directed my narrative. The two “detectives”, ex-coyote Calvin Winter and obsessive former enforcer Red Eye were amalgams of people I’d encountered in my new neighborhoods- the cell blocks at Dublin, Lompoc and Duell. At a personal level, I was melding the characters of my past with those from my present. Prudence’s profile paralleled that of dozens of young girls I’d met during my school teaching days. Anyone of them could have ended up as an undocumented worker in the U.S. What was unlikely in this story was Prudence’s connection to white ex-convicts who had past affiliations to racist groups in California prisons. This reflected my own strange bridging between continents and lives. My African past was as incomprehensible to my fellow convicts as the notion of the inside of a U.S. prison would be to the average Zimbabwean high school student. Yet, somehow, I wanted to make that connection. I had moved from political history to social chronicle, from a heart that longed to be in southern Africa, to a realization that I was a man of two continents and identities.

After Prudence I wrote two more novels in this series. While the presence of Prudence lurked around the pages of the sequels, another black woman, Mandisa from South Africa, entered the fray on the side of Cal and Red Eye, a further mixing of my worlds.

Finally, I had one more novel to produce before I went home in 2009. This was a fictional biography of my cellmate, who I’ll call Billy, a convicted murderer. He began his life as the son of a Mormon Ku Klux Klan member in Utah. When his father died while Billy was only fifteen, his stepmother threw him out of the house. From there he traced a bizarre trail as handy man, antique dealer, street hustler, skid row dweller, car collector as well as the husband of five different women and father to three children. The most interesting twist in his life was when his third wife gave birth to a black baby. He immediately traced the child to another father but in fact his wife had told him a different lie. She had a black grandmother, though she herself was light skinned-light enough in fact to pass for white. The defining moment in his life was when he looked into a crib at this black baby and had to decide whether to love the child or not. He made the right decision, renouncing the racism of his father’s world. Despite this triumphant turn, later in his life he would make a far more fateful decision, to assist in the murder of a child molester.

For that he would pay forever. He was sentenced to life and in the California system that means never getting out.

In choosing this topic, I had come full circle. My life of incarceration in California had taken over my creative flow. Zimbabwe and South Africa had receded into the distance for the moment. My final work while in prison had no link to southern Africa. My emotional ties, my familiarity with daily life, indeed my most prominent sensory experience was prison in California. After six years inside, this is what I could write about with the most passion and authenticity.

Writing and Transcendence

In the early stages of writing in prison, transcendence meant time travelling back to early 1980s Zimbabwe. My urges to escape the confines of incarceration in California inevitably focused on re-creating a reality in a distant continent, a place where all my emotional connections resided. My children, wife, friends, comrades were in Southern Africa. However, gradually the experience of prison life etched its way into my consciousness. To transcend was no longer to travel to another continent, but to re-configure my prison experience, to transform the white racists I encountered in the prison yard, with all their drug and violent habits, into individuals capable of seeing the humanity in black women from Africa. This was my way of resisting their racism, of telling these almost stereotypical individuals with their swastika tattoos and preference for throwing food in the garbage can rather than sharing it with a hungry black prisoner, that they were wrong, that they could be so much better. Not that they should become earnest Quakers or Mennonites but that they should open their minds to their fellow convicts of color, that therein lie their possibilities to become something better. My transcendence was to provide that imaginary link, the step in social consciousness that would forge unity among the incarcerated, a unity that would both transform my life as a prisoner and consolidate a political force inside the walls that the authorities could not manipulate or penetrate. Prisoners of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.

Fiction or fantasy, as always my life was changing and my writing could not evolve apart from my personal evolution and environment. Somehow my task had moved from transcendence to weaving together the various worlds in which I'd lived and discovering new ways in which the lives and struggles of the marginalized in vastly different contexts were unique, yet related. I had moved beyond the boundaries of *Writer's Digest*. From now on, I'd have to chart my own way.

There wouldn't be any set of volumes sitting on a bookshelf nor links to websites to guide me on this journey. I was on my own. How exciting.