



RAGTAG

by Roger Deitz

Parting Shots

WRITING WRONG

There are rules that govern creativity. It's cosmic. Some you follow, others you break. And there is the potential for not only good writing, but for your writing to do some good. It's the choosing which defines who we are. Many options are black and white. Then there is the gray area, where rules go out the window. To become pros at creating prose, find a balance between the conventional and the experimental, just as writers have for years. There's that old saw about learning the rules, then breaking a few in order to display one's singular voice. If you are a photographer, painter, printmaker, storyteller, crafter or performer, the same holds: study, learn the basics, then search for what it is that will make your work – *your* work. In fact, there is a bit of art *and* of science to it all. Like a graph. The X-axis for science, and the Y-axis for art. Of course art is remuneration's abyss, so let's make that the *why*-axis as in *why the hell did I ever choose to do this for a living?*

A moving song or story may have a profound effect on readers and listeners. Although some reality is stranger than fiction, and some fiction can morph into reality, as in science fiction. A few years ago, a young man at *The New York Times* was writing "great prose," but was fired when his facts didn't add up on a feature. I knew something the editors didn't ... this writer wasn't the first. Submitted for your approval, Dr. Edward L. Yordan, my delightful college English professor. Dr. Yordan was a ringer for Mr. MaGoo, both in his appearance and the way he spoke, save for the glass of booze in his hand. Jim Backus might well have sued. Dr. Yordan would now and again loan me a volume of Hemingway, Steinbeck or Fitzgerald. He revealed secrets about writing right and writing wrong. This one was in his lesson plan, so I am not telling tales out of school.

Dr. Yordan, brandy snifter in hand, was confiding about his days at *The New York Times* as a travel correspondent. I was impressed, *The New York Times!* He laughed, and added, "Bullshit – pure bullshit!" Yordan recalled that the articles

he wrote were engrossing, detailed and awe-inspiring. They were also, he confessed, pure fiction. He MaGooed, putting down his glass and typing on the air, "The spectacular Engadine Valley of Switzerland; the lake; the resort; the village of St. Moritz Dorf; the slopes of Piz Corvatsch, Piz Nair, and Corviglia; the spa of St. Moritz Bad; the storied Winter Olympics of 1928 and 1948." Yordan explained, "The editor would send me to the most exotic places, such as St. Moritz to write about skiing. I would travel there, go to my room, unpack, pour myself a drink, open my portable typewriter case, then pound out the most moving crap about what I was supposedly experiencing. I wouldn't leave my hotel room until the piece was finished." He looked to the heavens wistfully remembering some bygone hotel room ceiling. As an example, he offered to me a lovely passage about "... schussing down the slopes, the bracing wind in my face, my goggles fogging. This all under the gentle warmth of the Alpine sun, dazzled by the classic, timeless experience of a sport where the diamond snow glistens with its rich, invigorating glow ..." Sip. "Piece of strudel. No editor

in his cozy office was going to put me on skis! I might break my leg. Golf? Surfing? Spear fishing?" He laughed. "Give me a topic and a plane ticket." His stories seemed so real, so well written no one ever questioned him. Even I felt my ankles ache. The readers hung on every line.

Let's leave the dark side. Here is a tidbit. In the writing right department, Pete Seeger once advised me that the power of a song to right a wrong, based on fact or fiction, rests in the manner of the telling. Seeger quoted F. Scott Fitzgerald, noting the novelist observed as follows: "If you try to create a type, you may end with nothing. If you do a good job at creating an individual, you may succeed at creating a type." Seeger added, "Tell a more specific story – somebody with a name and a place and a time, even if the verses stretch out over several centuries."

Honest storytelling. It's in the writing. Sharpen your pencil and get to the point. That's the difference between writing right, and righting wrong. You chose.

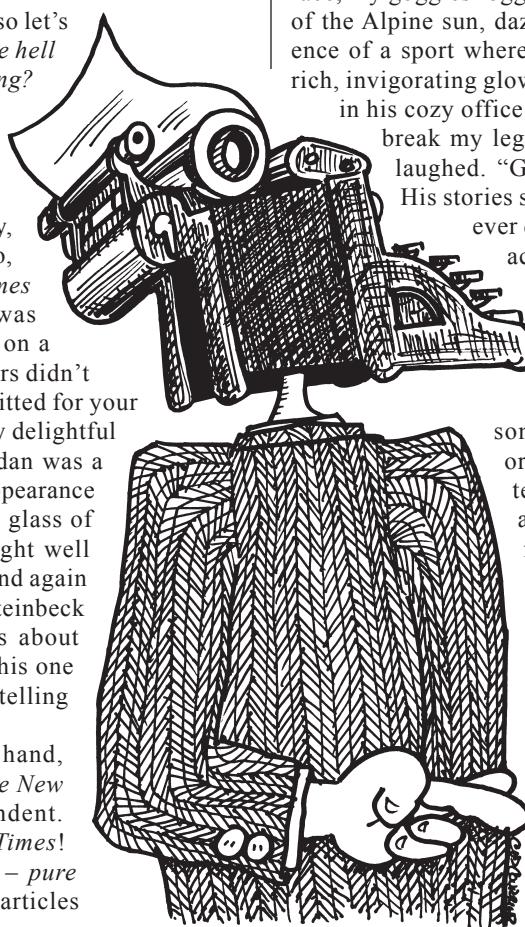


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