

ZERO READERS

ISSUE 7

Fall 2024

greater than ourselves

WAIT. maybe this is how we end. maybe we do this over & over & over again, trying to chase down the high of winning. maybe we pretend that we're not losing ourselves every saturday. maybe we do lines & take shots & pretend we're good enough to be considered CHAMPION. maybe HIGH SCHOOL SPEECH & DEBATE rots us whole. maybe this time, we let it.

Some Notes on my Writing

Matias Travieso-Diaz

My Writing History

Early in life I developed a passion for the written word and started devouring every printed thing that came into my hands. Later, I became editor of the student newspaper of my Havana high school and wrote editorials, articles and even gossip columns. I thought non-academic writing was enjoyable but did not take it seriously.

Many years passed. I left Cuba and came to the United States, pursued careers in Engineering and Law, and had fifty years of fulfilling professional life until I retired in 2015. Upon retirement, I did little for a couple of years and became increasingly bored.

Then, one night I had a vivid dream. In it, human life on Earth was being threatened by extra-terrestrials who were planning to extinguish humanity by poisoning the water supplies with a substance that, when ingested by pregnant women, prevented them from conceiving females. I thought it was an interesting idea and turned this odd dream into my first short story, "*Something in the Water*."

After completing and editing the story, I sent it to a good friend, a literature professor, for his comments. He concluded: "Your writing shows promise. Keep at it and do not be discouraged if you get negative responses. Writing is a difficult field to get into."

The bug had bitten me and I began writing short stories and sending them out, hoping to get them published. After many rejections, I scored my first hit when another story, "*The Blue Pearls*," was accepted and published; "*Something in the Water*" was published later. One thing led to another and by now, after seven years, over a hundred and thirty of my short stories and essays have been published.

I have completed two novels. The first, *The Taino Women*, is based on the first century of colonization of Cuba by the Spanish

Conquistadores; the second, *The Travels of Lázaro Serrano*, takes place in Cuba and Jamaica two centuries later. I am writing a third novel, which occurs in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, during Cuba's wars to gain independence from Spain. Progress on this third novel is slow and I expect to be working on it for much of the rest of 2024, with frequent detours to write short stories as new ideas crop up.

My Vision as a Creative Writer

I took up creative writing a few years after my retirement from a career as an engineer and lawyer. The transition was demanding, for it forced me to call upon my experience in objective, fact-based writing and refocus it to generate work in which reality must join hands with (and often be replaced by) alternative perceptions of the world. As I started generating works of fiction, I came to realize that there is room in the creative tent for both utterly fantastic narratives and more credible, though distorted, views of reality. The first type of writing results in horror, fantasy, romance, science fiction, and other "genre" works whose main purpose is to shock, amuse, or uplift. Such works serve to provide entertainment and are valuable in their own way. The second type of writing is intended to stimulate consideration of controversial ideas, world views, and philosophies. Works like *Fahrenheit 451* and *Brave New World* are leading examples of this second type. I find the second type of stories often difficult to create but always satisfying, for they elicit in the reader the consideration of new or alternative concepts of human history and future society.

Sources of My Fiction Writings

I keep getting asked, "How do you get the ideas for your short stories?" The answer is "they come from everywhere." Many arise from dreams. Others are prompted by items in the news, real-life incidents, my personal life experiences, historical events, and so on. As a result, my stories tend to be very different from each other. I take pride in not repeating myself and have not needed to do so because

the world is like an immense summer meadow, full of colorful flowers in the form of stories ready to be plucked.

My Writing Rules

The first thing I decide when I get an idea for a new story is how much research will be necessary to complete the project. Virtually all works of fiction require some factual research, if nothing else to provide minor details that will add depth and color to the narrative. Others, like historical fiction, will require considerable research to lend credibility to the plot and the personalities of the characters. The amount of research required will usually be the main factor that dictates the duration of a writing project. For example, a story I just wrote and got accepted for publication, "Stepping on a Cicada", consumed less than half a day of my time from start to finish. On the other hand, I have been working on for several weeks on a historical tale set in Germany during the Thirty Years' War, and am still not finished with it.

As I start writing, I agonize over the most effective way to open the story. The first sentences of a story set the tone and often dictate whether the story will be a success. The same is true for the ending: a story ending may surprise the reader, but never disappoint.

I have three writing rules that I try to apply as much as possible: (1) use few adjectives, and choose them well; (2) avoid adverbs like the plague; and (3) review and revise your work time and again, not only to catch typos or correct poor choices of words, but also to pare down the text as much as possible. I learned in my years as a lawyer that clear and concise language is the key to conveying and "selling" your message.

Once the manuscript of one of my stories is finished, I send it to two or three people to read before making it public. These readers will help me correct errors and poor word choices, and address areas where the story needs to be clearer or more credible.

Once I am ready to go public with a story, I submit it to as many potential outlets as possible. For a number of reasons, I despise

those publishers that prohibit simultaneous submissions and never send work to them.

I have a piece of advice for all writers: do not be discouraged by rejections of your work. Rejections are the daily bread of writers, regardless of talent. The list of rejections of my stories runs for over forty single space pages.

Future Plans

Some have asked: "You are over eighty years old and have proved to yourself and the world that you are a reasonably competent writer. Why do you keep doing this work?"

The answer is that I write because I cannot help it. I enjoy taking an idea and turning it into a story that may have little literary merit but will (hopefully) be appealing to readers now and in the future. To paraphrase Mick Jagger, "It's only fiction, but I like it." And I will keep writing it as long as my fingers can tap on the keys of my laptop.

September 2024

Azra's Kaangir and the Apricot Mystery

Sabahat Ali Wani

*For the children of my village who can't help but steal apricots from our garden.
Go ahead, you little thugs, take them.*

(1)

A little girl pulled at her *pheran*,¹ dragged it over her knees, and secured it under her numb feet. She brought her cold hands before her lips and started blowing warm air on them, but nothing seemed to ward off *Chilai Kalan's*² piercing cold from her body. Defeated, she looked at her mother and asked for a *kaangir*.³

Nargis, her mother, stood before the kitchen sink, and upon hearing her daughter's request, she turned around. Assessing her daughter's shivering form, she placed a hand on her left hip and scolded, "This is what happens when you roam and play all day in *Chilai Kalan*, Azra ji. Just wait, soon you will get *shooh*⁴ too!"

Shooh. The single word circled Azra's mind and in fright, she nuzzled her head into her *pheran's* collar and wished for it to swallow her. To come and save her from the clutches of Kashmir's winter and the notorious *shooh*. But her desperate pleas were cut short by her father's voice, calling her. She raised her head and beamed after she saw what her father's hands held.

A little *kaangir*. For little Azra.

Her father placed the *kaangir* on the carpet, and as she approached it, her heart began to beat like a *tumbakhaer*⁵ and warmth spread all over her body. Before her wide brown eyes stood her *kaangir*. Not Father's, not Mother's, but hers. The one that would perfectly fit within the woolen embrace of her *pheran*; the one that

1 A Kashmiri traditional robe-length garment, typically worn in winters.

2 A forty-day period (21 December to 29 January) of harsh winters in Kashmir.

3 An earthen pot, held in a wicker-woven body, filled with ignited coal to keep one-self warm during Kashmir's winters.

4 Chilblains.

5 A Kashmiri elongated drum-like musical instrument.