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How I Write

Abstract

What I need to write is the voice but I never find an entire voice at once. Because I have to start somewhere, I'll settle: for a sound, a single sentence, an utterance in the dark, anything that has a little bit of spark or sizzle, that lights me up. This is sentence as light-bringer: there was a blank and now there is a single mote floating in the void, all potential, waiting for the bang.

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How I Write

by Matt Bell

What I need to write is the voice but I never find an entire voice at once. Because I have to start somewhere, I'll settle: for a sound, a single sentence, an utterance in the dark, anything that has a little bit of spark or sizzle, that lights me up. This is sentence as light-bringer: there was a blank and now there is a single mote floating in the void, all potential, waiting for the bang. Huh, I think. What's next?

Next the voice speaks again. Sometimes it speaks on its own but more often I have to prod it, have to drag from that sentence a next one that somehow continues whatever power the first one contained. I get this part wrong a lot. Maybe most of the time. If I can see how it's wrong right away then I try again. It's okay to be wrong a lot of the time while drafting, while I'm still alone in the little room where I do my work. Plus, I can always return and revise and rewrite. I can and I will. This is how we hide our failings.

Now the voice speaks again, speaks directly or at a slant or else it reverses itself completely, and wherever it goes I need to follow its path. Then there are three sentences and then there are four and then five, six, seven, on and on. And from this

process everything else I need appears, not planned but discovered, emergent: character, motivation, conflict, tension, plot, a world.

I believe that it's possible to do this from one end of a book to the other without break or fail, but that does not mean I believe it will happen for me. I'm afflicted with various kinds of personal weaknesses, lacks, and distractions that probably make this an impossible ideal. But I sometimes get a couple good sentences in a row and if I can't figure out how to keep going then I start a new thread, build a new fragment, eventually creating a pile of these similar-voiced fragments, scenes and parts of scenes and runs of images or actions. When it feels like I have enough I start arranging the fragments, looking for patterns and possibilities—and then I write into the spaces between, trying to take advantages of juxtapositions, connections, surprises and seeming inevitabilities, places to start from again.

If this works out long enough I might get a story drafted. If it works out for a very long time, then I might be writing a novel. Whatever it turns out to be it'll be something I never could have planned—discovered one sentence at a time, arranged toward completeness, ready to be revised and rewritten mercilessly—hopefully on its way to at last becoming a manifestation of that possible world I sensed, way back on the first day, when all I had to work with was the microcosm of the whole hidden within the very first words.

Matt Bell's debut novel *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods* was published by Soho Press in June 2013. He is also the author of *Cataclysm Baby*, a novella, and *How They Were Found*, a collection of fiction. He teaches creative writing at Northern Michigan University.