
RED HOOK JOURNAL

Shumon Basar Is Alone

Shumon Basar

Frequently Asked Annoying Questions about Writing a Novel: N^o.1

Q: “What is your book about?”

A: “Had I known the answer ... I would never have needed to write a novel.” (Joan Didion)

You’re living the same nightmare. Every day. It stops only when you fall aslumber.

You’re at the starting blocks of a race. You’re all geared up; adrenalin’s pumping like you’ve swallowed a crate of cut-price Viagra. *On your marks. Get set*—and the gun fires. You great-leap forward. This is *your* moment, the next beautiful lap. But then—WEIRD—you’re at the starting blocks. The race hasn’t started. Odd.

So you take your place. Concentrate ... *GO!* And ... it’s the same. You’re at the starting blocks. WTF.

This happens ad infinitum. Everyone else has gone home and rewritten *Ulysses* ten times since. You? You’re not pumping. You’re crushed.

If and when I would escape my own *Groundhog Day*, I’d fast discover what’s going wrong: I was trying to run a marathon despite my whole life having been dedicated to the sprint. Writing short pieces (journalism, criticism, short stories) harnesses sprint muscles, sprint focus. A sprinter’s psychology regarding starts and finish lines. Writing a novel is a marathon. It needs a different body. Someone else’s mind. Because, after years of writing only short pieces (between 300 and 2,000 words) I decided one morning that I would write A Novel. Unlike Kafka’s self-loathing insect, however, I did not transform overnight into another being, one fit for the task at hand.

You then listen to other writers. To the privileged position they place the novel in the moral hierarchy of writing. To the downright nutty inventions of will and ritual they have to exact to get a novel done. Or, not done.

Roland Barthes’ last book was *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*. Completed just weeks before his death, it intimated his deeply felt intention to finally write a novel—entitled *Vita Nova*. Over two years, he enacted a trial novel-writing experiment that illustrated the causal steps needed to do so. *Vita Nova* never got written, unless one reads the elaborate preparation, its public performance, as the novel itself. Either the laundry cart that precipitated Barthes’ death is to blame, or, his life’s work was always oriented to never writing the novel. This unrequited teleology: his rocket fuel.[1]

In Benoît Peeters’ biography of Jacques Derrida is a parallel suggestion that Derrida, too, had always wanted to be a novelist, to write a novel, but couldn’t, *temperamentally*, and what we came to know as

his oeuvre is haunted by this unrealized, frustrated literary mission.

“If you are this way, just temperamentally, metabolically—not by choice—a novelist and not a short story writer, you’re prepared for the long haul,” said John Barth.^[2] “Donald Barthelme, who basically was a short story writer,^[3] used to say [to me], ‘How can you write novels? You have to wait years before you know how the story’s going to come out.’ And I would say to him, ‘Donald, how can you write short stories? The idea of once every few weeks or months starting from *scratch*?’ So, these are the differences in temperament.”

Barthelme was known to have embarked on the journey of writing a novel. Then he’d get stuck. Abort the novel. Then alchemically, or opportunistically, reconstitute the failed effort into a short story. He wrote over a 100 of these stories for the *New Yorker*. That’s a lot of abandoned novels.^[4]

David Foster Wallace continued Barth and Barthelme’s “metafiction” experiments from the ’60s into the ’80s and ’90s. Wallace’s non-fiction collections—*A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do*, *Consider the Lobster*, and the recently released *Both Flesh and Not*—enamoured a wider readership than his “difficult” fiction does. What’s not to like? The religious transcendence of Roger Federer; epiphanies at a State Fair; throwing up on a cruise ship. He embodied that Mailer tradition of a novelist invited to describe the world quasi-journalistically. Yet, he saw something existentially inferior in this pursuit: “the pleasure of writing non-fiction,” Wallace wrote,^[5] “always confirms my intuition that fiction is What I’m Supposed to Do.”

We’re told that “the Bad Thing,”—Wallace’s term for his depression—was roused only when he wrote fiction. *The Pale King*, his third novel, haunted him, ghost story-like, until his death. It remained prodigiously unfinished.

A novel’s scale isn’t only more gargantuan in size than nonfiction; a novel is, with respect to the writer’s inner life, massively more invasive. It demands a stark declaration to be made about the correspondence between the inside of a person and the outside world they’re in. Its slowness to form is in part due to this high-frequency, incessant self-diagnosing, like a demonic body scanner.

Or, if you asked Zadie Smith what’s so special about fiction, she’d say: “There are little sparks of something like actual life. And I don’t think an essay could ever create that friction, that feeling of being alive.” The paradox is that this form that most closely evokes “the feeling of being alive” requires its author to push against the temptation to self-immolate. Daily.

The marathon isn’t an issue only for the novelist. The composer Morton Feldman said that “my whole generation was hung up on the 20- to 25-minute piece. It was our clock. We all got to know it, how to handle it. As soon as you leave the 20-to 25-minute piece behind, in a one-movement work, different problems arise. Up to one hour, you think about form; but after an hour-and-a-half, it’s scale. Form is easy: just the division of things into parts. But scale is another matter.”

Yes. It’s another matter. A big matter to me, to those of us—you—who pursue the “loneliness” of long-distance running despite the traps, the terrain, and the self-induced trauma. Then again, what one loses in real life socializing is made up for with the sheer clatter of voices in one’s head. Lonely out there, party in here. Moreover, the good thing about my nightmare, repeated so vengefully, is that I was *never naked*. It saved me spending a whole load of money I didn’t have on a psychoanalyst I couldn’t afford.

Frequently Asked Annoying Questions about Writing a Novel: N^o.2

Q: "Has it already come out?"

A: "No."

Shumon Basar is a writer working on his first novel, entitled *World! World! World!*

Notes:

1. Gore Vidal, in his 1976 essay, "[American Plastic: A Matter of Fiction](#)," is thankful this was the case: "Unlike Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, and Butor, Professor Barthes is much too clever actually to write novels himself, assuming that such things exist, new or old, full of signs or not, with or without sequential narratives." [return to text](#)
2. John Barth in conversation with Michael Silverblatt, April 25, 2001. Lannan Foundation video. [return to text](#)
3. There were four Barthelme novels: *Snow White* (1967), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Paradise* (1986) and posthumously *The King* (1990). [return to text](#)
4. According to Elif Batuman in her book *The Possessed*, Thomas Mann had the opposite problem: "[he] set out to write a short story but ended up with 1200 pages of *The Magic Mountain*." [return to text](#)
5. From *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* by D. T. Max. [return to text](#)

Posted December 3, 2012. © Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

<http://www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/shumon-basar-is-alone/>

CCS BARD