

The labyrinth of writing a novel

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I love the indeterminacy of the novel. You have an idea, but your job is to allow the idea to play out. You have to have a frame, a glimmer of an end; but at the same time the entire seemingly well-constructed book is also a product of a very alert kind of improvisation. I love the puzzling of novel writing, the sense that there's a solution, and if you are patient, you'll find the key. The daily thinking about structure and about characters. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges goes on about labyrinths in his very short stories, and I guess I like the labyrinth of working on a very long story. You are both the maker of the labyrinth and wandering around in it. It is very satisfying. I enjoy it very much.

For instance, the labyrinth of writing *Gun Dealers' Daughter*. Its first draft was begun in 1997. But I figured out its current form only years later, in 2009. Twelve years. The first draft was around 400 pages; the current book is 259. The first draft was chronological, beginning with the back-story of the protagonist Sol's parents, the extremely wealthy gun dealers. The final draft, the one I sent to my agent, is in a circular form, but within the circle is an inverse time structure. In my mind, it is a V-form—or a chiasmus.

A chiasmus is most commonly described so: A-B-B-A. That is, it is composed of two halves, each of which is the inverse of the other. A chiasmus is a mirror structure. My novel went from being a straight, chronological line, going from A to B, to an unstable, anachronological, chiasmic circle. In my view, that instability of time and memory most clearly inscribed in

the novel's structure my notion of postcoloniality, trauma, nightmare, self, illusion—the things that make us up. For me, it solved both an ethical and existential dilemma that I struggled with in this book—what is the structure of guilt?

In short, I took a lot of things out.

The novel in first draft included tales about Sol's great-grandmother Lola Felma, a lowly rose-seller, killed by benign neglect when her provincial manners obviously diminished the gilded image of the gun dealers' newly glamorous lives—I had this long story about how Lola Felma the great-grandmother died:

...I mix up memories of the rose seller Felma Querulf-Kierulf, ancient changeling, with the concrete and sandstone of our newly built house in Makati. I conflate the Makati house's groundbreaking with the final rites for my great-grandmother. She had become as shriveled and as distractingly material as the reptile they dug a hole for, the men carefully working around the mound so that the pit became indistinct from the earth around it, while the sight of the crocodile was open to all: absurd, monstrous and pathetic—all the candidate qualities of madness.

As for Lola Felma, it was I who found her. She was bent over in the wing built for her in the new mansion. Her straw men, odd little projects of her madness, were spread on the floor, loose-limbed and looking only abstractly like humans. The mystery of her obsession remained disheveled in the room: what was this domestic derangement, the houses and men she kept cobbling? A mad carpentering old woman. I made a sound, a broken-off scream, when I saw her.

In her room she sat, legs spread out, facing an old mirror. Already, the outlines of her reflection were blurred, her body practicing its future.

My great-grandmother looked milky and scary in her mirror. I halted by the door. Her white hair was undone—grimy clumps on her scalp. The strap of her chemise was awkward on her bony shoulders. I wanted to fix her blouse, but I couldn't move. Her face was horrifying. She wore no teeth, and her face had caved into a hollow jaw.

Her mirror told me she was dead before I saw her sad grin. ...

A few days ago, I searched the name Lola Felma in the pdf I have of the novel as I had sent it in final draft to my editor at W.W. Norton. Here's what I found:

“... *Lola Felma Kierulf, rose-seller and devout believer.*”

That is the only appearance of the name in the book.

To illustrate further, here's an early version of the novel on my computer. It is how the novel starts.

“...1. When I'm homesick

When I'm homesick, I watch *Apocalypse Now*. I could care less about politics, anti-war spleen, postcolonial angst—cultural hegemonies and prehensile remorse. Crap. Who cares who trumped what in these late deluvian times: the world at this rate is already lost.

I watch the light.

A mad, indecent world is drenched in the light I know—the murky heat of a far off clime, ‘in the latitude of Palermo,’ so many degrees between Madras and Moldova: a nightmarish whorish gleam, relentless and intense. It comforts me: the far-fetched hell of the Philippine sun.

When Francis Ford Coppola was looking for the asshole of the world, he found it in my hometown. Or at least a few miles from it, inland beyond the reeky Bay. Any number of films about monsoon war games or Vietnam gore get staged in the picturesque patterns of the ricefields beyond Manila: *Platoon*, *Year of Living Dangerously*, et cetera et cetera. Humdrum holocausts, celluloid clichés. It's one of our main tourist attractions—we're the choice location shoot for stupid acts of imperial imbeciles. ...”

So I looked up the words *Apocalypse Now* in the current version. I found it on page 137: a conversation between the gun dealers' daughter and one of her fellow student radicals at the university:

... Francis Kiko Not-Coppola, a shy kid, traded a bootleg copy of his favorite movie, *Apocalypse Now*, for a copy of Conrad's ‘Secret

Sharer' (he had many bootleg Betamaxes of the film in his bedroom anyhow).

"When you are homesick,' Kiko told me helpfully, giving me his gift, 'you can watch *Apocalypse Now*. It's the best movie about our country.'

"I will,' I said. 'When I'm homesick for Manila, I'll watch *Apocalypse Now*.' ... "

Finally, here is the denouement of the earliest complete version of the novel, finished in 1998:

...Uncle Gianni met the girl at Nice airport. He held her hand as light bulbs flashed. Revise that: not hand. By the sleeve. He held her by the sleeve, gently. On closer inspection, one might note the slight discordance in her figure. Something awkward about her arms. Bandaged, gauzed lump of hands. The girl does not raise her head. ...

The paragraph above appears at the end of that draft, some 400 pages in.

And here's how the current novel begins, the one published in 2012. This is page 1.

...Uncle Gianni met the girl at Nice airport. He held her by the hand as light bulbs flashed. Revise that: not hand. By the sleeve. He held her by the sleeve, gently. On closer inspection, one might note the slight discordance in her figure. Something awkward about her arms. Bandaged, gauzed lump of hands. The girl does not raise her head. ...

A circling—an amphisbaena, in which the end is the beginning. Such it seems is another way to think about the act of writing—one is always beginning. After all, after one novel is done, here you are, back at the drawing board. With that blank sheet, that void again.

As for the content—the history, the character, the times the novel covers—I can talk about that, too, of course. Certainly, research and history and concept and character all matter to me. But it seems what occupies my time most forcefully as a writer is my work's form—form, in the end, is what engages me. Form is the labyrinth of the Minotaur—writing—that entraps and enchants.