

The Mayborn Tribe – Continued

Holding Craig's autographed book in hand, I looked across the hall at Ms. Oates, one of the most prolific, versatile and distinguished writers of the last century. I thought of her literary pedigree, her unparalleled literary achievements. When she received the Chicago Tribune Literary Prize for Lifetime Achievement last year, the Tribune's cultural critic wrote that Joyce "chronicles the breath of the American experience as no other author ever has, striking every important national touchstone – social justice, sports, race, gender, terrorism – but not as broad categories, not as labels, but through stories about people – people and the places in which they thrive or falter, dream or don't dream, live and die."

And then I looked back at Craig, looked at the cover of "William & Rosalie – his narrative of the Polish newlyweds enduring the Holocaust by refusing to allow evil to destroy their dignity, their spirit and their love for each other. In that instant, I realized that Craig and Joyce had become kindred spirits - practitioners of literary art, storytellers of the highest order. Both share an understanding that inspiration, vision, and morality are invoked in the process of writing. And both realize that the creative effort, which transforms inchoate thoughts and ideas into art, is a mysterious undertaking that transcends our intellectual powers.

In her heartfelt book, "The Faith of a Writer," Ms. Oates speaks of our narrative craft with the sort of reverence and awe that people customarily associate with the spirit world. "I believe that art is the highest expression of the human spirit. I believe that we yearn to transcend the merely finite and ephemeral, to participate in something mysterious and communal called 'culture' – and that this yearning is as strong in our species as the yearning to reproduce the species. Through the local or regional, through our individual voices, we work to create art that will speak to others who know nothing of us. In our very obliqueness to one another, an unexpected intimacy is born. The Individual voice is the communal voice. The regional voice is the universal voice."

In giving "William & Rosalie" to the world as testimony to the indomitable human spirit, Craig Hanley's individual voice became the communal voice. His story became our story, the story of the human race, of heroism transcending terrorism, of love overcoming hatred. And now, through the power of their stories, "an unexpected intimacy" was born. Joyce and Craig are no longer strangers. They share the same creed, the same prayer, the same incantation – "to transcend the merely finite and ephemeral, to participate in something mysterious and communal called 'culture.'"

I believe that everyone who comes to the Mayborn Conference shares this yearning: journalists, academics, authors, educators, lawyers, housewives, and all the rest. We are all members of the same tribe, all working as one to create a culture of storytelling in the Southwest. There's an energy, enthusiasm and camaraderie among our tribal gathering that's palpable from the moment we assemble at the Austin Ranch on Friday night to celebrate the arrival of our confreres and presenters until the last session on Sunday afternoon.

We talk about burning nonfiction subjects seldom discussed at most literary conferences. Subjects like, "What becomes of detail when the writer squints so as to make out a story's essence the way Monet must have squinted at those haystacks." Or, "Beneath the layers of meticulously gathered information descriptions and quotations lie emotional truths that make narrative capable of transcending both its context and its medium. How far should we reach toward those emotional truths as writers?" Or, "The cruel conundrum of the travel writers: Good travel generally makes for bad stories. Bad travel, if you're very lucky, may make for a good story. And lousy, awful, please-hand-me-that-gun-so-I-can-shoot-myself-in-the-head travel – while getting you into more trouble than you ever imagined and making you wish you'd never, ever, left home – can potentially take you into the realm of potentially great adventure writing."

At this year's gathering, Paul Theroux will take us on a tour of "resting places for the imagination" that have transformed him into a travel writer extraordinaire. Julia Reed, an author and journalist who writes for Newsweek and Vogue, will discuss the importance of the hard-won detail, how to keep from sounding pompous while drawing on your own experiences (key: never take yourself too

seriously), and other successful rules of the game. And Roy Blount Jr., the nation's foremost humorists, will compare the culinary art with the literary. "As in cooking," he says, "the more we appreciate our ingredients, the more we can draw out of them. But we can't just chunk them together helter-skelter in a pot, we have to fuss with them some." (Click on "lectures" to find out about what else is on the minds of our speakers).

At our tribal gathering, it's hard to distinguish the chieftains from the rest of the tribe. After Mary Roach, who authored a book about the post-mortem life of cadavers, gave an hilarious and instructive presentation about "stalking colorful sources, priceless moments and other essential ingredients for memorable nonfiction," she took her seat among the tribe – listening to the other lectures, taking copious notes and talking about stories with our other tribesmen in the hotel bar until the beer tap shut down.

Hampton Sides, a Santa Fe author of two bestsellers – "Ghost Soldiers" and "Blood and Thunder" – returned to our conference last year just to hang out with his the Mayborn Tribe. So did Erik Calonius, who spoke at our conference in 2007 and has been an active participant ever since. He told me why in a letter he penned after attending the conference. "What Wimbledon is to the world of tennis, the Mayborn Writers Conference is to the world of narrative non-fiction. OK, George Getschow has swapped out the strawberries and pints of pale ale for Texas-style bar-b-que and beans, but the energy is the same, and so is the opportunity to rub elbows with the famous, the near-famous, and the soon-to-be famous. Where else will you find Joyce Carol Oates, floating through the crowd like a phantom, holding forth on Oprah and boxing; Burkhard Bilger, from the New Yorker, and Mary Roach, fresh from the morgue, swapping increasingly outlandish tales; Outside Magazine's Kevin Fedarko and Hampton Sides, dazzling a cluster of co-eds with their wit and rugged good looks; Nan Talese, sunglasses pushed up on her head like a tiara, making pronouncements about the glitterati literary scene (as though she were in Easthampton, New York rather than Grapevine, Texas)."

Bill Marvel, a long-time narrative writer at The Dallas Morning News, has attended every conference – as a presenter, workshop leader, jurist and conferee. Bill came to this year's conference in a funk over the status of several writing projects. But by the time he left Sunday afternoon, Bill, who is almost 70, says he was so energized by the conference that he went right to work rewriting a book proposal until 1:30 a.m. And he couldn't stop writing. The moment he woke up, Bill grabbed a cup of coffee and began working on a narrative about a childhood friend, a Mafia enforcer named Tony. "This is what the Mayborn does to you," Bill told me. "It gets you all jazzed up to go home and write." Bill credits the Mayborn for a six-figure book contract he just signed about a U.S. Marine's World War II combat experiences. Ditto to Donna Johnson, another up-and-coming writer among our tribe. Donna, our first place winner of the 2007 Mayborn manuscript competition, just signed a major book contract with Gotham for *Holy Ghost Girls*, her story about her life among Pentecostals in Texas.

Thanks to Bill Marvel, Mary Roach, Erik Calonius, Donna Johnson, Hampton Sides and all our presenters and conferees, our mission to create a community of storytellers dedicated to the narrative craft is gathering momentum. We now have an ever-growing, ever-evolving tribe of writers who believe in what we're doing, and who possess an unflinching faith in the power of narrative to transform otherwise ordinary stories into the extraordinary. And that is why I believe our tribe of storytellers will endure and flourish until kingdom come.