



“Planning to write is not writing. Writing is writing.”
— E.L. Doctorow*

Dear Faithful Reader,

A few people in my writing program had a breakthrough recently.

They’d been struggling with their book projects. They had great ideas and had done a ton of work thinking about them, but other stuff (family, day job — you know, *life*) kept interfering, and the writing was just not getting off the ground. It was like watching an airplane taxiing on the runway but never achieving liftoff.

So one day I told them this:

The first rule of writing is the same as the first rule of sales: *Make the appointment.*

Put it in the calendar. Block the time. Then *keep* the appointment.

In writing, planning is important. Developing ideas. Playing with possibilities. Unhurried pondering. I spent an entire year thinking about the character of Chief Finn before writing the first Finn book, STEEL FEAR. I’m doing it again right now for a brand new main character for a new series I’m starting.

But it’s easy to plan a book to death. It happens all the time. In fact, this is such a common experience for writers, both novice and pro, that it led the novelist Edgar Lawrence (“E.L.”) Doctorow to say, in [a 1985 New York Times interview](#):

“The most important lesson I’ve learned is that planning to write is not writing. Outlining a book is not writing. Researching a book is not writing. Talking to people about what you’re doing, none of that is writing. Writing is writing.”

Thinking about hiking the Camino de Santiago isn’t putting on your walking shoes and flying to Spain. Thinking about taking tango lessons isn’t getting out on the dance floor. Thinking about how you’re going to propose is not the same thing as getting down on one knee and blurting out, “Will you marry me?”

These folks in my coaching program were *thinking about* writing their books. What they needed to do was get down on one knee and pop the question. (Or, depending on your metaphor, get out onto the dance floor.)

Hence: “Make the appointment.”

And they did! And within no more than a week or two their books were suddenly in momentum, like birds bursting into song at the ebb of night. It’s been a joy to witness.

A question: What have you been thinking about doing, but not allowing yourself to actually do? (Let me know, if so moved — I can’t wait to read your answer!)

So, what was holding these folks back all that time? Because it was, frankly, more than the simple lack of an appointment block on a calendar. And it wasn’t about “will power” or “discipline,” either.

It was, I think, about the fear of doing it wrong, making a hash of it.

We’ve got sayings in our language that reinforce this kind of crippling caution. “If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.” Look before you leap, because a stitch in time saves nine. Failure is not an option. So measure twice, cut once.

But when you’re a writer you can’t “cut once,” no matter many times you measure. You’re going to cut twice, thrice, perhaps a dozen times. You cut it wrong, and keep on cutting it wrong, again and again, as you gradually feel your way toward right. That’s how writing works.

Elsewhere in that same interview Doctorow also said this:

“Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.”

I think the same is true for most of what we do that’s worth doing.

Yoda the Jedi famously said, “Do or do not. There is no try.” He was right, of course — but not completely right. Because there has to be that thing we call “try” which is really “do,” but doing badly.

Too often we shy away from doing things for fear of doing them badly, of making that first cut wrong. And yet, as obvious as this may sound:

The secret to doing anything well is, first, to *do* it.

So if you happen to be someone who wants to write something, and you’re worried about doing it wrong or doing it badly, let me set your mind at rest: *You will*. We do. It’s how writing works. It’s how life works. We put our feelings into words badly. We do relationship badly. We do apology badly. We do parenting badly. We do our health

badly. We do being kind to others badly. We do being kind to ourselves badly. We forgive badly, let go of grudges badly.

We do all these things badly so that, in time, we'll feel our way to doing them quite well.

Perhaps even beautifully.

My September wish for you: that you identify something you've been thinking about doing for a long time — and start doing it.



*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

The writers I profile for this monthly letter often have highly colorful life stories, sometimes shot through with trauma, difficulty, and long struggles before (and sometimes after) their breakthrough successes.

Not this time. Writing about E.L. Doctorow is a different sort of undertaking, because the man led such a sanguine, undramatic life. As he told one biographer:

“My life is very quiet, dull, bourgeois. A wife and three terrific children. We have a close family life. I tend not to get in fights in bars. I don't go hunting for big game in Africa. I don't box. I love tennis.”

His granddaughter, novelist Alison Fairbrother, put it this way:

“Papa wasn't like many other white male writers of his generation. [John] Cheever drank. [Philip] Roth womanized. My grandfather wrote quietly in his office for sixty years.”

Born in the Bronx in 1931 into a poor but happy family of second-generation Russian Jewish immigrants, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow grew up playing ball in the streets, listening to stories from his grandparents, frequently attending concerts and other events in the rich culture of mid-century New York City — and reading books. Lots of books. His entire family were dedicated readers; the boy himself was named after Edgar Allen Poe, his father's favorite.

In high school, Edgar responded to a journalism class assignment by writing a profile of Carl, the stage doorman at Carnegie Hall, filling it with such poignant, moving details that his teacher wanted to have it printed in the school newspaper. When it came time for a photographer to take the man's picture, however, Edgar had to confess: there was no Carl the doorman. He'd invented the whole thing.

After a stint in the Army he planned to support himself and his own young family as a novelist, but economic demands forced him to find some paying work. From a starter job at La Guardia as a reservations clerk, he landed a gig as a reader for CBS Television and Columbia Pictures, where he was soon reading scripts and books, mostly terrible ones, at the rate of one a day and writing synopses. As he later recalled:

“It’s ... good for young writers to see how much bad stuff is published. It’s very encouraging.”

It was during those early years that he wrote his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, a violent, darkly comic Western that poked lethal fun at the scripts and books he was grinding through in his day job. It was well reviewed but not exceptionally popular.

His second book, *Big as Life* (1966), was a sort of dig at fantasy/sci-fi: as it opens, two gigantic humanoids, taller than the city’s tallest skyscrapers, appear suddenly in the New York Harbor. (Though written years before the original Twin Towers were built, the book’s central image and the panic that ensues makes this an eerily prescient sort of 9/11 novel.) It was poorly reviewed, and Doctorow subsequently disowned the book, refusing to allow it to be reprinted. (If you’re interested in reading a copy today, you’ll need to shell out well over \$100 for a rare used copy of the hardcover.)

By this time he had long moved on from reviewing bad TV and movie scripts to a job on the editorial staff of the New American Library, and from there to a post as editor in chief and eventually publisher at Dial Press, where he worked with such writers as Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, and had established himself as a highly respected figure in the literary world — but not especially regarded as a novelist.

He left his post at Dial to work full-time on his third novel, *The Book of Daniel* (1971), a “memoir” of a fictional man whose parents closely mirror the real-life Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 as Soviet spies.

The Book of Daniel was quite well received (*The Guardian* called it a “masterpiece”) — but it was his fourth novel, *Ragtime* (1975), that made Doctorow famous.

Ragtime is a wild, rollicking ride through New York City in early 1900s that touches on the roots of the American labor movement, women’s rights, tabloid journalism, racial oppression and violence. It also firmly established what had by now become a signature Doctorow approach: taking real-life historical figures, plunking them down in entirely fictional situations, and having them do outrageously unlikely things. (At one point in the novel Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung visit Coney Island and take a ride together in the Tunnel of Love.)

The novel was an overnight sensation and earned the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, as well as a Nebula Award nomination. He went on to pen eight more acclaimed novels and win award after award, including two PEN/Faulkner awards, a PEN/Saul Bellow award, an American

Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal, and a Library of Congress prize. The *New York Times* called him “one of contemporary fiction’s most restless experimenters ... widely praised for the originality, audacity, and versatility of his imagination.”

A fiercely private person, the author himself viewed the very idea of writing about an author as not only ludicrous but injurious. “The minute you ask about a writer’s life,” he once said, “you’re not dealing with the book. We deify authors by wanting to know about them” — and in so doing, he added, we ignore their actual work.

So it feels almost heretical to poke too much into the man’s private life. Yet I cannot resist sharing this rare glimpse of the writer from his granddaughter, Alison Fairbrother, in [a piece she wrote for the online magazine LitHub](#).

Doctorow was known for his diligent, methodical work ethic, “getting up for work in the morning like anybody else” (as one writer put it), writing for hours till lunch and then another stretch of hours in the afternoon. He was meticulous in his work, and famous for turning in manuscripts that were virtually error-free and ready for production. His editor, Jason Epstein, reported:

“When you’d read Edgar’s manuscripts, it was done. That’s just the kind of writer he was; he got everything right the first time. I can’t think of any editorial problem we had. Even remotely. Nothing.”

Fairbrother both adored and worshipped her grandfather and grew up under the spell of his remarkable output. A few months after his death, she was talking with her uncle about how easy the old man made writing look:

He went into his study for eight or nine hours a day and emerged after a few years with haunting, incomparable literary novels that were dazzlingly inventive in style and form, and virtuosic in their prose. My uncle interrupted me.

“He actually played a lot of solitaire. And he finally got himself to write around four pm, and then stopped at five or six.”

“He was playing Solitaire in there?” I shrieked.

“Oh, definitely,” my uncle said. “Tons.”

“I never saw the struggle,” Fairbrother concludes. “I saw only the perfection.”

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