

Musings on a Writer's Musings

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Is there a creative writer who hasn't at times wondered what it is that impels thousands of people to spend thousands of hours thinking about and writing made-up stories, that at best will be read by thousands of people who have got nothing better to do than read made-up stories! Is there some evolutionary imperative that has moulded our minds to seek stories? Even Steven Pinker, the cognitive scientist and author of *How The Mind Works* (such a wonderful title) who controversially suggests that music confers no survival advantage and describes it as "auditory cheesecake" (p. 534), submits that fiction can, like gossip, be biologically adaptive. "Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcome of strategies we could deploy in them." (p. 543.) Perhaps for *writers* of fiction the truth of this is even greater. But what does this mean for the mind? Does it suggest we have special systems in our brains that have evolved for the purpose of creating stories that might some day be useful in our real lives? And why is it that some people are better at making up stories than others, and if they are, are they therefore better prepared for whatever life throws at them?

In her book, *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: A writer looks at creativity and neuroscience*, novelist and creative writing teacher, Sue Woolfe, explores these questions in such an honest and personal way that I almost felt as if I were sitting in the room listening to her deepest thoughts. As a neuropsychologist, I often find myself cringing when I read fiction involving, for example, a character who has suffered a stroke, where some of the neurology facts are blatantly wrong. But this didn't happen with Sue's book, and I quickly became engrossed, finding myself reading it as a fledgling fiction writer, not as a neuroscientist.

Sue began writing the book as part of her doctoral thesis in creative writing, but this is no dry treatise. She takes her reader through her long, often tortuous process of completing her 2003 novel, *The Secret Cure*, in itself a novel about the wonders of the creative human mind, all the while weaving in and out of neuroscience findings and theories that might explain some of her creative processes and how they can so often become blocked. In *The Secret Cure* Sue put herself inside the head of an unusual young man who had been isolated from the real world for almost 20 years because of his severe stutter (a cruel disability that used to be much more common, and was recently brought into the spotlight by the phenomenal success of the latest Oscar-winning film, *The King's Speech*.) The reader of *The Secret Cure* would be excused for thinking that Sue Woolfe must herself have worked in a research laboratory and have an inside knowledge of autistic disorders, so real was her writing. In her non-fiction writing memoir, *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady*, she takes us back there, showing us how her creative process soared and stumbled and soared again as she immersed herself in the imaginary world of her laboratory cleaning lady by spending time in a real laboratory and listening and observing and taking notes. When she found she could not write, she asked herself "what does a fiction writer do to her mind to create fiction, and was I doing something wrong that jeopardised my own work?"(p. 44.)

I, like most contemporary neuroscientists, tend to assume that everyone understands that the mind is a product of the brain. As Sue discovered, some neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio explain this further by pointing out that the brain, by itself, would have no mind. It requires the cooperation of the body in order to think and feel. It is this interaction between the brain and the

body that causes the mind. In return, our feelings may seem to come from the body, and the body is modified by our thoughts and the brain by our actions. Sue gives many examples of writers who, like her, feel that their creative thoughts are somatic, and come from the belly, or the fingers, rather than from the brain (which in fact has no sensations of its own). As she tells us about her everyday, often painful, journey of creating her novel, she muses, comments, and analyses her creative process. Delving into neuroscience research on creativity, she reports and explains her discoveries in ways that made sense to me as a neuroscientist, but also made sense to me as a creative writer.

Sue begins a novel by writing numerous seemingly unrelated fragments, a process most productive when she is in an almost trancelike state she refers to as “loose construing” where attention is defocused rather than focused, logical thought is slowed, judgement and anticipation put on hold, and new elements can be allowed in without seeming incongruent, almost reminiscent of the dream state. Shaping the story from these fragments comes much later, probably involving more “tight construing” where logic and structure have a place. Only at the end do themes finally emerge. Another interesting idea Sue discusses is Damasio’s hypothesis that we have body reactions or “somatic markers” that imbue certain thoughts with emotional states, making them repugnant, and focuses us on thoughts that are more acceptable. This got her thinking about the constraints an avoidance of unacceptable thoughts can place on a writer. She decided that in order to enter the psyche of a character whose values and experiences were far removed from her own, she must allow herself through “loose construing” to think like her character, however unthinkable those thoughts might be. She learned that she must free her mind to work in its mysterious way to create a rich story; rich with more meanings than she ever consciously thought up.

In the end, Sue came to the conclusion that neuroscience does not yet know how the mind works when it comes to creating complex and rich stories that, from the writer’s point of view -- at least during those precious peak times of creation -- almost seem to write themselves. Rather like the process of writing a novel, the theme or deeper truth – how the mind works to create a story -- may only appear after a much longer journey as we pull together the many fragments that neuroscience research throws up. For her readers, Sue has translated her discoveries of fragments of the mystery of creating stories into a writing book that is different, and a far cry from a writing manual. It is a pleasure to read and provides much food for thought and new strategies to try in those times when writing that book seems the worst idea you ever had.

For myself as a baby boomer neuropsychologist, and a writer of narrative non-fiction as well as fiction, I am convinced that creative writing is one of the best exercises we can do for the aging brain. The folklore, somewhat supported by research data, is that in most right-handed people, right brain (called the right hemisphere) thinking is more creative and holistic, and left hemisphere thinking more logical and linear. The right hemisphere is better at seeing the world from a broader perspective and may be better at visual imagery, and the left hemisphere is definitely dominant for language. But to believe the rhetoric of folk psychologists who claim that they can teach you how to draw or become more creative by using your right hemisphere is probably unwise. The brain is more like a great symphony orchestra where every part works in concert with the whole. Sure, occasionally the violins might soar above the rest, but even then they rely on the background of the orchestra as a beautifully coordinated entity to give them their full meaning. In the healthy brain, everything we do involves the right and left hemispheres of the brain working together, and creative writing must be one of the clearest examples of this. Our language comes primarily from the left hemisphere and perhaps our images – the visual ones at

least -- come more from the right hemisphere. Very likely the “loose construing” Sue discusses is more a right hemisphere activity and the “tight construing” later needed to put the story together is more of a left hemisphere activity. But in both types of thinking and in all stages of writing that story, my guess is that both hemispheres are fully on-line. *Reading* fiction and narrative non-fiction also indisputably engages both sides of the brain, at least if the reader is engaged in the story.

The joy of this for a “baby boomer” writer or reader is that these pleasurable activities could almost certainly be added to the intellectual and physical exercises that slow down the brain’s aging process most often experienced by the forgetting of names and words and where you put the car keys – or the car! Neuroscience research is only at the beginning of proving the importance of ongoing intellectual activity for the brain – the “use it or lose it” idea -- but there is already some good evidence for this. From my personal experience, an entirely uncontrolled experiment, it seems that although I frequently can’t remember a word when in casual conversation, when I am writing this happens far less often. Perhaps this is because the brain is so fired up or *primed* for finding words when a writer is deeply focused on writing. Multiple word and image connections are firing, and thus the right word is more likely to pop up when it is needed. There is certainly evidence for this type of priming in memory studies.

A cynic may point out that for baby boomers who are way past their child-bearing years, getting your imagination working and activating your understanding of language by writing or reading fiction or creative non-fiction cannot be directly biologically adaptive. But if grandparents are important in the upbringing of their grandchildren – and we share 25% of our genes with each of our grandchildren, so their survival is biologically of utmost importance to us -- then remaining switched on for as long as possible can certainly be viewed as socially adaptive. And for all of us who love stories, who cares anyway? The pleasure is enough for us.

Reference

Pinker, Steven. 1998. *How The Mind Works*. Penguin Books: London.