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Draft

The Right to Write

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Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

I sat on a panel once with another novelist and a distinguished African-American critic, to discuss Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The critic said, "Of course, as a white woman, Stowe had no right to write the black experience." The other novelist said lightly, "No, of course not. And I had no right to write about 14th-century Scandinavians. Which I did."

The exchange made me wonder: who has the right to our stories?

For centuries, African-Americans couldn't fully participate in the literary conversation, since for many of them literacy was forbidden. Why wouldn't they resent the fact that their stories were told by whites? But does this mean that, as novelists, we can write stories only of our own race, our own gender, our own subcultural niche?

Stowe used other people's stories as sources, but what drove her to write was her own outraged response to slavery. She has the right to that response. Isn't it better that Stowe wrote her book, instead of staying respectfully mute because the stories were not hers to tell? It was the narrative strands about the black experience that gave the book such

emotional potency, and made it such a powerful abolitionist force.

Who owns the story, the person who lives it or the person who writes it?

My novel “Sparta” is about a young male Marine, a member of a closely guarded and tribal culture. The military is famously proprietary about war writing: they’ve earned the right to their experience, just as African-Americans have, and everyone else, for that matter. But does that mean only the members of a group can tell its stories? How far does ownership go?

Most comments I’ve received from veterans have been positive, but during a radio interview someone wrote in by email: *This woman has never been in combat and knows nothing about it.* He was both right and wrong: I’ve never been in combat, but, actually, I do know something about it. I’ve learned about it, not by being there, but in another way that writers learn: by paying attention.

Doing research for “Sparta” I talked to vets. I asked them what had happened and how they felt. I listened as they talked and laughed and faltered and wept, and I wove their stories and feelings into my book. A few appear in my novel just as they were told; most appear only through the feelings the story invoked.

But do I have the right to write about a firefight in Falluja, if I wasn’t there? Does it demonstrate respect and admiration for the soldiers, and show evidence of their importance in our culture? Or does it insult those who risked their lives, if I take literary possession of that experience? Am I exploiting other people’s experience for my own ends? What are my own ends, anyway?

Fiction writers aren’t in this for the money, since most of us don’t make any money. So what are we doing, messing about in other people’s

lives?

We're doing what fiction writers have always done: trying to investigate the world, explore human experience, render precisely what it means to be alive. We're trying to give voice to everyone on the planet. And who has the right to do that? Do I have the right to write my version of your story? And how does exploitation get into this discussion? Because the word suggests ignorance and deception, an imbalance of power.

When Leo Tolstoy wrote "Anna Karenina," he was drawing on a local real-life tragedy: a young woman, jilted by her lover, threw herself under a train in despair. But he also drew on something more personal: His married sister had an adulterous affair and an illegitimate child. She was abandoned by her lover, who left her to marry another woman. She grew desperate and suicidal and wrote anguished letters to her brother. Did Tolstoy have the right to tell her story? He changed it to suit his literary needs, and used her desperation for his own purposes. But what were those purposes?

I don't think Tolstoy was exploiting his sister, quite the reverse. I think he was voicing his own pain and desperation. He was driven, not by a narcissistic urge for literary gain, but by deep empathy for his sister. His response was not, "I can use this," but "I can't bear this." Writing was a way to relieve his own pain. This was a deeply compassionate response.

Empathy is the opposite of exploitation. It's empathy that allows a writer to feel her way into someone else's experience. A great writer like Tolstoy will feel a character's life as his own; he'll enter fully into that consciousness, and his responses will reverberate through his work. A great writer will use a narrative because she finds it moving, or compelling, troubling or heartbreaking or exhilarating. What drives her is empathy, not voyeurism.

Some of the greatest war writers were not soldiers: Ernest Hemingway, Stephen Crane, the blind Homer. They entered the world of war through compassion, not combat. We judge them by their work, not their military service. And we benefit from that work; they have widened our understanding of war.

Writers are trying to reach some understanding of the world, and we do this by setting down stories. We draw on our own experience, but, since that includes everything we encounter, this means drawing on others' stories as well. Shakespeare didn't limit himself to writing about the life of an uneducated actor from Stratford-on-Avon. He felt he had the right to write about anyone – kings, queens, fools, servants, any age and any gender, any background, any race. Many of his stories came from other sources, but he imagined the lives and the minds of these characters so completely that he earned the right to tell their stories.

A writer is like a tuning fork: We respond when we're struck by something. The thing is to pay attention, to be ready for radical empathy. If we empty ourselves of ourselves we'll be able to vibrate in synchrony with something deep and powerful. If we're lucky we'll transmit a strong pure note, one that isn't ours, but which passes through us. If we're lucky, it will be a note that reverberates and expands, one that other people will hear and understand.

Roxana Robinson, a novelist and biographer, is the author, most recently, of "Sparta."

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