

directly in your fiction. While this may seem self-evident advice, something about the exercise Meredith devised helped me realize you have to 'trick yourself' into 'going there.'

"Dorothy Allison advises writing 'toward where the fear is.' I often think of Steinbach's exercise plus Allison's quote when I seek out my most charged material, imagining as I go that I am holding a divining rod which quivers as it nears the source."

**PATRICIA SMITH** was nominated for the National Book Award in poetry for *Blood Dazzler*, and she is also the author of *Teahouse of the Almighty*;



Peter Dresel

*Close to Death; Big Towns, Big Talk; Life According to Motown; and other works.*

"Grizzled and slight, flasher of a marquee gold tooth,

my father, Otis Douglas Smith, was part of the great migration of blacks from the South to Northern cities in the early 1950s. He found himself not in the urban mecca he'd imagined, but in a roach-riddled tenement apartment on Chicago's West Side. There he attempted to craft a life alongside the bag boys, day laborers, housekeepers and cooks who dreamed the city's wide, unreachable dream.

"Many of those urban refugees struggled to fit, but my father never really adopted the no-nonsense-now rhythm of the city. There was too much of the front-porch tale-spinner in him, too much unleashed Southern song searching for the open air.

"From the earliest days I can recall, my place was on his lap, listening to his growled narrative, mysterious whispers and wide-open laughter. He turned people we knew into characters. There was always a new twist to be added to stories we knew by heart. The boundaries of our tiny part of Chicago moved farther and farther apart. Magic abounded. There were tales everywhere, and my own personal griot knew just how to infuse them with life.

"My father taught me to think of the world in terms of the stories it could tell. From my father's moonlit tales of steam-

ing Delta magic to the sweet slow songs of Smokey Robinson, I became addicted to unfolding drama, winding dramatic threads, the lyricism of simple words. I believed that we all lived in the midst of an ongoing adventure that begged for voice.

"There are a thousand ways to weave a tale—and although we rush to categorize and 'claim' a genre, I am first and foremost a storyteller. I learned from a master that I am merely a conduit, that the best stories will show us how they wish to be told."

**SUSAN VREELAND** is internationally known for her art-related historical fiction. Her works include *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, about Renoir; *Life Studies*, stories of Impressionists; *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, about a Vermeer painting; and *The Passion of Artemisia*, about Artemisia Gentileschi. Three of her titles have been



*New York Times* bestsellers. Her next book, *Clara and Mr. Tiffany*, is due out in January.

"During a discussion on revision at a Montana writers conference, Bill Kitredge said, 'It's not a footrace, Susan.' This had the immediate effect to slow me down, to stop rushing toward publication before a work was as fine as its potential promised. It encouraged me to play a little mind trick on myself if I was having trouble getting a sentence or a paragraph just right. I convinced myself that I had all eternity to get it right, so that I could try various options.

"All other advice I've received fell into place within this, and I could address suggestions from various sources in a more measured fashion. In discussing a work in progress, Julie Brickman, an instructor at Spalding University, spoke to me about developing the 'interiority' of my main character. Interiority was a new term for me, and I liked it. She defined it as the conscious rendering of experience into understanding and insight, and she cautioned me against thinking that a character's thought had to be an abstraction or a result of intellect. Interiority could be

everyday things, what passes through the mind. They might be recorded only as images. That opened up new possibilities of showing a character trying to find his or her identity.

"She spoke of mulling over experience, and over other characters, examining himself or herself in the process, and thereby undergoing a conscious transformation. This released the fear I'd held about what to narrate when there is little outward plot action.

"Two pointers from Robert Olen Butler have improved my writing enormously. One is his suggestion that moment-by-moment sensual flow of experience is the way to show emotions. He claims that emotions, another way of saying interiority, are experienced through the senses—physical reactions inside one's body; physical reactions, even minute ones, outside one's body and therefore observable to other characters; flashes of the past rendered as sense impressions; and anticipation of the future, either good or bad, also delivered as sense impressions. What a character selects to note of the sensual data surrounding him or her can reveal that character's interior life.

"And finally, his other blockbuster suggestion is yearning. ... I can hear him say it: Show your characters in the throes of yearning. I've come to love that word as much as I love interiority. They go hand in hand, and when I ignore the footrace and slow down enough to explore yearning and interiority in relation to my characters, my writing is infinitely better."

We'll give the last word to **SUE GRAFTON**, the bestselling author of a long-running alphabet series of stories featuring private investigator Kinsey Millhone, including "A" *Is for Alibi*,

"S" *Is for Silence* and "U" *Is for Undertow*.

The useful advice she received:

"Park your butt at your desk and get on with it."



Laurie Roberts

**Sarah Anne Johnson**

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