

Bourbon and Milk: Profitable Forgetting



Bourbon and Milk features lessons, observations, and conversations by and with writers living out there in one of the most perplexing outposts of the human condition – parenthood. In this monthly series, Contributing Editor Giuseppe Taurino will dive into the dark spaces where parenting sometimes pushes us, and explore the unexpected ways writers may grow in them. If you're interested in joining the conversation or contributing a *Bourbon and Milk* post, query Giuseppe Taurino at giuseppe@americanshortfiction.org

There were no new ways to understand the world,
Only new days to set our understandings against.
-- from David Berman's "Governors on Sominex"

For the first eighteen months of parenthood, even the most ridiculously simple daily routines—changing Z's diaper, feeding her a bottle, putting her down for a nap—carried a weighty significance. This is my daughter, I often found myself repeating beneath my breath as I brought a wet wipe to her skin, or burped her, or rocked her through the house. And each time, the words felt different, like I'd stumbled on some fundamental truth that had been eluding me.

Looking back, it's easy to see why those days are so vivid. I was so far out of my element everything was novel, something to be treasured. My life had been so void of routines, the honest to goodness kinds that actually exist in service of the bigger picture, that the simple act of establishing them felt original.

Which isn't to say in the eyes of others I wasn't a cliché. After all, following years of dedication to my own self-interests, of coming and going as I pleased, of traveling and exploring and consistently staying up well past my infant daughter's wake-up time, I was now a dad. I shook my fist at drivers who cranked it up to 20 mph in a 15 mph zone. I started photo albums on my

computer with earnest titles like Z eats food. I grew concerned when her Elmo was out of sight, and anxious when I thought he was missing. And I talked about my daughter's shits and giggles and drooly teething to anyone who didn't have the heart to ask me not to. I was guilty of all these trivial behaviors, and if you'd told me before Z's birth that I would accept this reality in stride—much less in a state of wonder—I'd have either laughed or punched you in the face. But being on the inside looking out? My existence was as interesting and unpredictable as I could handle. Somewhere between self-indulgence and the night my daughter was born, the parameters of cliché had shifted. Or so I imagined.

It's now September 2013. Our daughter is nearly two and a half. I've been at this parenting thing long enough to be bored with it on certain days, to get testy when there isn't a babysitter to take my wife and me away from it, to sometimes wish, ever so fleetingly, that I didn't have to do it any more. I don't know when the shift occurred. I'm sure it was gradual but, in my mind, it's all about the tantrums.

They were infrequent at first, born, I believed, from the direct tension between Z's rapid intellectual growth, and her less developed communication skills. In that light they were interesting, worthy of empathy, something to chuckle at off to the side. But—and here's the friggin' kicker—the more developed her communication and, thus, her reasoning skills have become, the more frequent and irrational the tantrums. Which baffles and frustrates me to no end. Being woken up too quickly or too slowly? Not wanting to sleep despite an inability to keep her eyes open? Wanting to eat sweets for breakfast, lunch and dinner? You name it, there's been a tantrum thrown in its honor. And my patience has shrunk with each one. As too has the novelty of routine and practiced patience and spending Saturday night on the couch in a perpetual sleepy-eyed stupor. Suddenly, this whole parenting experience feels one-dimensional and way too familiar. And so do I. And if I can't avoid my own life becoming cliché, how can I expect to steer my writing clear of a similar fate?

Charles Baxter's got this great book of essays, *Burning Down the House*. The book is loaded with gems, but I often find myself gravitating back to the essay, "On Defamiliarization," wherein, among other things, Baxter delves into the ways clichés infect the writer's attempt to create art. It's a calming agent, really. A reflective walk through just how difficult it is to sculpt dramatic and emotional truth from the basic lumps of clay we're all working with. While the essay weaves too many intelligent threads to do it justice here, the crux of it, for me, hinges on a question halfway through. Discussing artists' collective worry—beginning in the mid-19th century—that "it was not enough to tell any story in a dramatic medium because its truth might have become too familiar," Baxter asks, "What is the real relation between familiarity and contempt?" Familiarity is a power, Baxter posits. "It replaces the pleasure of the unknown with the pleasures of security," but "the truth that writers are after may be dramatic only if it has been forgotten first: if the story, in other words, pulls something contradictory and concealed out of its hiding place." And while an initial response to this call for forgetting might lead a writer to seek out novelty or thrust herself into experimentation, this too runs the risk of edging into cliché. After all, "the supply of new ideas is not endless." Instead, Baxter introduces Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization, which means to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, as a solution to the problem of familiarity:

The process of defamiliarization is a technique for finding a certain kind of detail that resists the fitting of the object into a silhouette, that is, into a ready made symbolization. Shklovsky advises a search for elements that don't fit—misfit details. He begins by arguing that if you have a familiar object or action to describe, you would do well not to name it, or to give it a new name, or to write as if you're seeing it for the first time, in a state of what might be called profitable forgetting.

None of this, of course, offers any ready-made solutions to avoiding the pitfalls of cliché in your work. But it does, I believe, offer some barriers—or guard rails, if you will—to erect as you attempt to avoid plunging to your own (unique) artistic death. I've always come away from reading "On Defamiliarization" with a renewed appreciation for just how difficult it is to write. And, well, I suppose I've now also gleaned some parenting perspective from it as well. I can't dictate my kid's behavior, and I can't reclaim the life I once had, or the novelty parenting once offered, but I can, with some profitable forgetting, at least make an attempt to find those misfit details that make my daughter's tantrums and parenthood less familiar and, instead, something worthy of their own unique truths. Because, as much as I hate to admit it, when my daughter argues against putting on her Sesame Street patterned diapers because she doesn't want to pee on Elmo's face, she's got a point.

And because the more I share, the more I need to know I ain't alone, here's what a couple of other writers checked in with:



My daughter turned two on Monday, and this past weekend we had a small party at my dad's house. Wrapping paper was madly shredded. Cake was smeared in hair. Everyone had a good time, and Aloma was happy and exhausted by the end of the afternoon. While I tried to be as present as possible, to absorb and record every moment, my attention drifted to my work. I've been working on a novel for half of my daughter's life, and it occurred to me that morning, as we drove up the coast to my childhood home, that the book I'm working on, a book which was supposed to be pushing towards something aesthetically and thematically new for me, isn't all that different from the stories I've already written. You fool, I thought. You're doing that again.

As writers a lot of us tell the same story repeatedly, explore the same wounds, render the same regions and landscapes. The danger perhaps isn't in telling a too-similar story, but in becoming clichéd with our own work, allowing our fictional towns and cities to slide into rural or urban tropes, our characters into caricature.

I know in the first two years of my daughter's life I made the same mistakes repeatedly—on multiple occasions at daycare she's been the kid who's inappropriately dressed for the weather with old dirt under her fingernails and a burned tongue from the scalding-hot macaroni and cheese her father served the night before—but we keep coming back, as writers and parents. We keep trying to be better, when being better might mean paying closer attention to what matters to us. I don't plan on suddenly abandoning this manuscript. I understand why I'm drawn to the subject matter I am. Perhaps the real mistake was trying to force myself into something different simply to avoid repeating the past—a pretty terrible impetus for writing anything.

Next year more cake will be masticated. More wrapping paper dispatched. I may or may not be repeating myself on the page, and Aloma may or may not be appropriately dressed on the playground.

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These days my attention is almost entirely devoted to my eleven-month-old son. In the fleeting moments when my focus shifts from worrying about if he's warm enough, or cool enough, or if his eating/sleeping/breathing is satisfactory, I worry about becoming a cliché. As a writer, this is one of the worst fates I can imagine: to sink to the level of cliché is to succumb to laziness, a lack of originality, a tired imagination. But as a first-time Mom, I am by definition unoriginal (everything I'm doing—diaper-changing, lullaby-singing, even the act of giving birth—has been done before), and I am tired, too, of course. Not as tired as during those psychedelic first few

months, when it was hard enough to remember my own phone number or why I had gone to Rite-Aid, let alone come up with a striking image—but tired, nonetheless. Parenthood is rife with clichés—from the familiar imagery (soccer Moms driving minivans, a toddler’s first steps) to overused maxims like “Enjoy every moment—it goes so fast.” Add to this the fact that babies thrive on predictable routines, and on your hundredth read-through of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, to the strains of the same Putomayo lullaby CD you’ve played each night at bedtime for the past eleven months, it’s hard not to feel you are sinking into a well-worn rut.

Though lacking in sleep and free time, parenthood does provide ample opportunity for self-reflection—and as such I’ve had an epiphany recently about my novel-in-progress, which is set in Sicily, and which I was in the midst of revising when my son was born. Years ago, when I was living there and doing research, I’d decided I would leave the Mafia out of the book completely. There was so much more to the place than those tired tropes made famous in *The Godfather*. I was in Palermo studying the Sicilian marionette theater, a wonderful and little-known cultural treasure. But as time passed, I realized the mafia’s insidious influence touched all of life in Sicily—from the extortion attempts I read about in the local news, to the grassroots protest urging businesses to fight the common practice of paying protection money. It would be wrong to ignore the mafia entirely, I decided, if I wanted to create a fully nuanced portrait of the world my characters would inhabit. In subsequent drafts, though, as I tried to raise the stakes by increasing my protagonist’s involvement with organized crime, I found myself bogged down by the clichéd images I’d been so determined to avoid. My recent distance from the draft has allowed me to see that I can control how much (or how little) of a role the mafia will play in my story—and it’s up to me to present what scenes I do choose to include in a fresh and unexpected light.

My dual protagonists, sixty-year-old Massimo Lo Bello and his twenty-five-year-old American niece, Rosalia, are each at a crossroads: Rosalia trying to find her life’s direction and achieve artistic fulfillment, and Massimo regretting risks he didn’t take. Both of their journeys, in some ways, are helping to shape my own. For my next revision—which I plan to embark upon when my son turns one, next month—I’m determined to work hard, tired as I may be—to dig deep and access the best of my imagination, in hopes of creating something lasting and beautiful and true. As a writer and as a parent, it’s a goal worth aspiring to.

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I suppose this is the best possible place for a Vietnamese Catholic to make a confession: I've been working on the same short story since 2010??and I'm only about two-thirds done with the first draft. In those three years, I also got married, planned a wedding (there is a difference), went back to school, moved three times, started a teaching career, buried my father, and fathered a son.

My refugee-immigrant parents literally sacrificed everything for me when they fled Vietnam in 1975. That is a debt that can only be paid forward. But it is also an impossible responsibility that leads me into a maze of parenting clichés, including the patient parent—me at Target, carrying a raging toddler who's gone into arched-back Civil Disobedience Limp position, pretending not to be pissed off—and the “love-at-all cost” dad—me at 4:30am suppressing a volcanic “Go the F to sleep!”

These trite but true parenting clichés bluntly remind me that there are also many literary pitfalls to be trapped in if we're not careful in our writing. Clichéd phrases come from rushed or lazy writing. Clichéd narratives come from a poor dramatic vocabulary, aka not having read enough. (After all, like I tell my writing students, it's only a cliché if you've read it before.) And, perhaps the worst, but least considered offense, the cliché of tone. The insufferable angst of the immigrant narrative. The irritating hope of recovery memoir. The not-as-clever-as-you-think-you-are irony of suburbia.

It's not that those tones aren't true, it's that they've been done before. (And probably better). That's what I'm struggling with in my own writing, a collection of short stories set during and after the Vietnam War. How do you make history fresh, especially when you're competing with the likes of Tim O'Brien, Denis Johnson, Nguyen Huy Thiep, and Bao Ninh? In that story I've been working on, which is based on one of the most memorable photographs taken during the war, I've switched the point-of-view of the story in hopes of seismically shifting away from all the clichés listed above.

When I'm really struggling with a story, especially beginning one, I always turn to Jimmy Breslin's seminal 1963 article “Digging JFK's Grave Was His Honor,” where Breslin interviews the cemetery worker who dug JFK's grave. I'd kill to write a line like this: “One of the last to serve John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was the thirty-fifth President of this country, was a working man who earns \$3.01 an hour and said it was an honor to dig the grave.” To paraphrase his logic: When I saw all the other reporters running in one direction, I ran the other.

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