# Writing on a Slant

We editors and publishers are constantly in the position of choosing. We choose among fresh manuscripts, among rewritten manuscripts, sometimes even among finished books when we buy abroad. Over the years—and perhaps in part because I was a writer first—I have been increasingly fascinated by what makes a good book. And I have become certain that what makes the best of books is a beating heart.

Fiction, nonfiction, picture books, easy read . . . the great books come alive. They breathe. They lament. They stand up and cheer. And, whether I had intended or not, they pull me as editor, as reader, into their living world, allowing me to breathe and lament and stand up with them. The heart of a really good book beats.

Okay then, you might ask, what makes a good book's heart beat? There are more answers to the question than anyone can give in one morning, but I believe you give yourself a leg up in discovering the heartbeat, if as a writer you dare to look at life on a slant.

What I am talking about is a whole attitude. Gerard Hopkins wrote in his poem "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things— For skies of couple colour as a brinded cow; For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finch's wings; Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;

And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim. All things counter, original, spare, strange; Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) With swift, slow; sweet, sour; dazzle, dim He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise him.

Hopkins has it right. He is praising life itself for giving us what is counter, original, spare, strange. He is praising life on a slant.

As a writer, teacher, and editor, I am praising it as a crucial part of writing an original story. I believe Hopkins and I are not alone. Readers do not want what is straightforward, understandable, four square, typical, sturdy, easy, predictable. No, I believe character and plot and setting and language—on a slant—is what readers thirst for. They are intrigued with what is odd, aberrant, off beat, strange . . . pied, for goodness' sake. And praise be!

That being said, let's break that down. Let's look at the parts of a book—on a slant.

# Character on a Slant

We all agree that we need a great character to drive a book. A lot of writers begin with an interesting character and earnestly put that interesting character under the stress of mounting circumstances. I am suggesting that the best stories, stories whose hearts beat, have at their center characters that are more than interesting. They are dappled, speckled, pied, and, in their very strangeness, intriguing.

Richard Peck loves the dappled and pied. He wallows in them. Take his Newbery winner, *A Year Down Yonder*, where Peck, rather than making the teenage narrator his hero, makes Grandma Dowdel, a snappy ninety-year-old woman, his hero. A ninety-year-old woman, the heroine of a young-adult book! That is strange.

Playing against type, Peck turns stereotype upside down and looks straight in the face of a Grandma who is as sassy as they come, not afraid to face anyone down who is on the wrong side of right, and not afraid to walk the line when someone has stepped off the line. The book comes alive, page after page, with Grandma at the steering wheel! Peck has attitude. He loves writing on the slant.

Writing on the slant is not just for characters in novels. Look at Lilly of *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. Kevin Henkes is a master at looking at character at a slant. Lilly, perky little Lilly, is a pied beauty—self-centered, thoughtless, pushing the buttons of authority, not perfect. We like her because we know her so well—isn't she us, after all? Isn't that why we so love pied beauties? They are us.

We love our characters on the slant; but in our narratives, we also like for them to do the right thing—to exceed their limitations, their piedness. To believe that, despite their aberrations, they will find their way. They give hope to us all.

One of my all-time favorite characters on a slant is Maniac Magee. Maniac is so pied, so offbeat, so not run-of-the-mill that he has become a legend in Spinelli's own time. You will probably remember the first unforgettable words of this book:

They say Maniac Magee was born in a dump. They say his stomach was a cereal box and his heart a sofa spring. They say he kept an eight- inch cockroach on a leash and that rats stood guard over him while he slept. They say if you knew he was coming and you sprinkled salt on the ground and he ran over it, within two or three blocks he would be as slow as everybody else. They say.

What a beginning. You get the slant right off. You may recall those words, and if you do, you know that the author draws a line in the sand with them. The rest of the book plays against those words—that line in the sand.

Where did that character come from? From Jerry Spinelli's brain, is where it came from. On the slant. He isn't looking for what IS, as much as he is looking for what ISN'T. He isn't imitating life as it IS, as much as he is imitating life as it MIGHT be. Could be. I one time played with the idea that characters that are the liveliest are frequently just plain sassy. Sassy is good. Sassy is Alice and Harriet and Holden and Tom. But maybe it doesn't go far enough. Maybe it limits the kind of human beings who can become heroes. And who are determined to survive. There needs to be room for Charlotte, too, and Sarah, and Summer. (Do you recognize all of those characters?) Looking at things on a slant can take you to sassy and beyond.

### Place on a Slant

That look goes for discovering and fastening on "place," too. It was D. H. Lawrence who recognized the spirit of place in a 1920s essay. That out of the woodwork or wood or waves of a place, well chosen, comes spirit. And, if we pick a place that can strike the reader as odd, dappled, counter, spare, strange, it becomes almost a character in itself.

It is looking at it on a slant that makes it live because the edgy writer of slant looks at place and demands that it, too, breathe.

In the book *Hunter* by Joy Cowley, it is possible that Joy came to the "place" even before character. Joy goes to the wilds of New Zealand, which she knows so well, to set her narrative stage. She puts an 1800s Maori boy's story in partnership with a contemporary story of a girl and her two brothers who are trying to get home for the holidays when their small plane crashes in those same wilds. The two stories veer and finally collide right across time, when Cowley's wild New Zealand jungle becomes an enemy to the contemporary children when the Maori boy who knows how to survive in the wilderness elects to risk his own 1800s life for the contemporary girl with white hair, Marama he calls her, who senses his presence and listens to him from her 2005 now.

A lot of people like time warps. Few can pull them off. Writing on the slant can be intriguing, but it isn't always easy. In fact it may be the most demanding kind of writing because it is always attacking new and not level ground.

How different from Hunter, though, is that old bone *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*—where the author chooses the Metropolitan Museum of Art as her "place." And Konigsburg wallows in it, savors it, rejoices in it, as she allows her two young heroes to find a way to stay in the museum after closing hours. I hate the word "delicious" used to describe literature, but this idea, so attached to "place," is "delicious."

I am sure you have talked among yourselves about applying the "What if" to person or place in order to come up with an original, off-the-beaten-path story.

Can't you just imagine Konigsburg saying to herself: "Let me think. What if two kids wanted to run away to the Metropolitan Museum of Art? What if they found a puzzle there that they could actually solve, maybe a puzzle about someone like, well like, Leonardo da Vinci, and redeem themselves by exploring room after room of the museum? What if?"

If you look at life on a slant, your brain might take you to that incredibly imaginative spot where museums can be discovered as home, at least for twenty-four hours. And where you can encounter the real power of "place."

That much-sought spot is surely where Gennifer Choldenko thought up Alcatraz, the infamous island prison, as her "place." In *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, the young boy is the son of an electrician assigned to the prison in the 1930s, but listen: With "place" as a powerful framework and powerful ground, listen to what this book promises in these early words.

Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with bird turd and surrounded by water.

I'm not the only kid who lives here. There's my sister, Natalie, except she doesn't count. And there are twenty-three other kids who live on the island because their dads work as guards or cooks or doctors or electricians for the prison, like my dad does. Plus, there are a ton of murderers, rapists, hit men, con men, stickup men, embezzlers, connivers, burglars, kidnapers, and maybe even an innocent man or two, though I doubt it.

Writing at a slant. Discovering Place at a slant.

But, and you know this, "place" sometimes goes beyond backdrop. There is no question that "place" actually becomes a major character in many fantasies. Always at a slant. Don't you have to look at life cockeyed to come up with what J. K. Rowling comes up with? Just consider the "place" of the Harry Potter books, those tomes that allowed even adults to discover fantasy, where Harry goes to the Hogwarts School, where owls deliver mail, and trains run through walls, and where for intramural sports boys and girls play Quiddich on broomsticks.

"Place" in Potter and most fantasy is the stuff of dream and nightmare, if the truth be told. It is letting it happen in words that is the challenging part for the writer. And it is making the strange, spare, in this case fantastic, real, authentic, that is the incredible challenge for the writer.

How can this happen? Because, despite the nightmarish elements, the impossible elements, the author absolutely believes in its authenticity. Ursula Le Guin believed in Earthsea. Tolkien believed in the hobbit hole and all of Middle Earth. Rowling believes in Hogwarts. When you write on the slant, you are not writing behind a mask, you have cut yourself into the story, becoming as Tolkien wrote: using substantial elements of the primary world to become subcreator of a very complete and other world.

And yet I hasten to add that this not only true of fantasies. Slants come to every genre. Certainly the author who can look at a slant can turn what might be an ordinary environment into an extraordinary one in any form. Think of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. Her suburban high school is an ordinary haunt of teenagers, but under her pen, the high school becomes almost an animal in itself.

Raped by a classmate, she runs to call the police, not realizing that in doing this, she has also tipped off the police that there is a party at her friend's home—so she may have saved herself, but she ruins the party for everyone else. They, of course, have no idea she was raped and she doesn't tell them. Her friends are unforgiving.

But in the story itself, where she encounters hallways, classrooms, stairwells, courses, unknowing faculty, and unforgiving students, the environment is alive: an animal, breathing down the heroine's neck, until it feels as if the very halls themselves will pounce on her. And they finally do.

Laurie Halse Anderson, by thinking out of the box, on the slant, looks at what could have been a typical school in a way no one else ever has.

## Motivation on a Slant

Perhaps it was Aristotle who first understood the engine of character: motivation. People attributed the idea of the tragic flaw to Aristotle as well. Certainly, he said that the very attribute of a character, in excess, can be its flaw. There is more humanity in Hopkins. In Hopkins a character—pied, strange, original, spare, counter (flawed?) doesn't have to suffer for its difference. The character with difference can exalt in it. Overcome it. Survive because of it.

Maybe Hopkins is more appropriate for children's and young-adult literature where cynicism does not rank as the only and major line in its forests of the imagination. A pied character might have to travel a different road. A pied character might have to stand up in innovative ways, but there is a beauty and a remarkable courage to pied—aberrant, strange, flawed—when he or she does stand up. Oh, and we do like it, as readers, when the pied character stands up.

I believe that in a book both the tragic and the courageous begin with that kernel of life called human action, or motivation. So every book moves because of a character's motivation. On a slant, that motivation turns to obsession. I still love the story of *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant where who the main character Summer is and what she is informs every word that comes out of Rylant's pen. She is truly a writer's writer.

When May, Summer's aunt, dies, leaving her and her Uncle Ob alone, their obsession to find May even in the afterlife forms the life-on-a-slant framework for this story, allowing us to know just how fearful Summer is that she is losing Ob not only to Ob's departed May who in death has deprived Summer of a surrogate mother but also to the young interloper Cletus, a kind of renaissance country boy, who is making Ob's eyes light up for the first time since May died. It is all just obsessive. So odd. And touching. And compelling.

Obsession is a wonderful word for the writer, because the writer understands obsession having been obsessed. And finally understands that to get obsession, a writer has to go far enough, to care enough, to focus enough, to give moment enough time, to understand the swell and slant of obsession.

Obsession is so out of balance that the ground beneath the hero's feet is definitely shaky. There is that slant again.

# Walking Unfamiliar Ground

Let me use an adult story as an example of a motivation, character, and place on a slant. In a short story called "Dante" by N. Nye, the launderer of the Pope's surplices writes notes to the pope on the hem of the pope's surplices, unbeknownst to the pope. The surplice launderer argues with him, overstates him—he is obsessed with this secretive writing on the hem. And the pope has no idea, until one day, when he discovers the writing. Then, feeling both curious and violated, the story erupts. That is motivation on a slant.

My husband and I one time hiked a small mountain called Red Pike in the Lake District. I suddenly found myself on a forty-five-degree angle, high, high above Lake Buttermere, a jewellike lake, rubble rolling with every step I took. Finally, I was on all fours. And separated from my husband—my savior—by a ravine. On my own. At risk.

When a reader discovers story on a slant, he or she feels the strain and risk of unfamiliarity. Not sure of his or her footing. Not sure if he or she knows what is around the next rock. Like the hiker on Red Pike, something is asked of the reader-journeyer who is finding his or her way through a story written on the slant.

You are meeting strange characters—call them pied; a plot that you cannot fully know in advance; story—strange, or only faintly familiar, that is taking you somewhere—you are uncertain where but there is a distinct emotional and narrative incline, taking you into new terrain. And the reader is thrilled to be encountering something this original, this fresh.

You may wonder why I want to go down this route with you as writers. Here is why. Because too often writers in selecting story and characters are walking ground too familiar. Paths already walked with characters already named. Too often the writing plateaus, passions go unrecognized, the voice is monotone, relying on description and action that separates from the interior life of the story.

As an editor, when I find this kind of story on the pile, I have a distinct feeling that I have been there, done that, and I put the manuscript aside, before even finishing it. In fact, when I do this, I am this moment not an editor at all. I am merely a reader, a lover of story. I want to go somewhere I haven't been, or encounter something I haven't encountered—something strange, counter, unexpected. And I have not found it.

# Idea on a Slant

I have talked about selecting characters on the slant, "place" on the slant. I have been excitedly waiting to get to "idea at a slant." Here is my contention: books that may well have begun with an idea conceived at a slant are among the most memorable. Among the most unforgettable.

*The Chocolate War* was published in 1974. I don't think Cormier started with the teenage hero, Jerry, though I like Jerry immensely; I don't even think he started with Obie or Archie, though those fellow students are strange and quirky, clearly conceived at a slant. And Father Leon, the destructive priest-teacher who inspires the mischief of the Vigils, is one of the most eerily strange characters I have met in fiction.

But I believe young people being sent out year after year to sell chocolates year after year struck some kind of chord in Cormier. And he applied some kind of slant to it; perhaps the simple "What if." What if one year a chocolate sale goes bad? What if a priest—make him a cunning priest—ran a chocolate sale year after year, eventually almost owning it, setting up his own gang of the school's teenagers to support him, and what if a new kid comes into the school and refuses to sell the chocolates, upsetting Brother Leon's applecart? What if, week after week, despite all that the Vigils do to him, ordered by Leon, the boy refuses to sell chocolates? What if?

The inversion or slant in this story is taking a harmless annual event, turning it upside down, turning it into an unscrupulous and greedy and adversarial monster of an event that threatens not only one boy, but individual thinking itself.

The slant can create dangerous territory, as the narrative stone rolls down, relentlessly, until the hero is forced either to stand up—despite all—to stand up, or, as Jerry is forced to do, become the very animal of behavior that the character hated.

What a wild idea: a chocolate sale gone bad. And what a roller coaster of a story to ride. The writer does that. What a simple thing to say: the writer does that. The twists and turns, the rolling action, the important pauses, are not inherent in laying out the facts of a story. They were created by Cormier, bringing his story to life by creating the twists and turns, the rolling action, the powerful thread of human action. And they are created by you, the author—every start, every stop, every repeat of phrase; rhythm, rhyme, ruin or victory, are all yours.

Another of my favorite books on the slant is *Holes* by Louis Sachar. Maybe it is the epitome of a book written on the slant. Sachar was the pleasantly appreciated author of a group of books for boys, well loved and read, but he was never regarded as a literary giant of children's literature until he came up with Holes!

Surely the idea came first. In the beginning Stanley Yelnats (Yelnats is Stanley spelled backward) is pretty normal, I would say. Nothing remarkable really. No real friends at school. Overweight. But vaguely normal until he is arrested. Walking home one normal day, a pair of sneakers fall on his head from an overpass. He thinks he'll keep them—his father has been working on an invention to recycle sneakers. But these sneakers

are no ordinary sneakers, they were the sneakers of a homeless man, since taken over by Clyde Livingston, who was once homeless himself, who was going to auction the sneakers off at a benefit, proceeds to benefit a homeless shelter. Stanley Yalnets is in serious trouble.

You might think this was destiny. Stanley didn't. He blamed his no-good, dirty-rotten, pig-stealing grandfather. Either way, nothing helped. A judge judges him guilty and sends him to Camp Green Lake, a tough-love camp where he will be straightened out by digging a hole, three feet by three feet, every day. Or else.

Talk about a slant. Talk about walking a path the reader could not possibly imagine. Talk about walking into a strange world. It is as if we are walking through a narrative house of mirrors.

All the boys lose their names: Stanley becomes Caveman, then there is Zig Zag, Barf Bag, Zero. But here is that wonderful twist of irony of books on a slant. At climax, or forcing climax, it is Zero who is regarded as so "nothing" by the counselors that he gets the nihilistic name Zero, but it is Zero who becomes something. It is Zero who learns to read despite everyone's ridicule, Zero who after a fracas in the barracks is handed a shovel by Mr. Pedanski who says, "Here, take it, Zero, it is all you'll ever be good for." And Zero who swings the shovel like a baseball bat, right across Pendanski's face, then walks away. And doesn't stop walking, even as the unscrupulous counselors snidely agree he won't get far. How can he—he doesn't have water.

Ironically, he does get far. And his walking finally gives Stanley Yelnatz the push he needs to finally stop blaming his no-good, pigheaded grandfather and take the world on himself. I believe it, all of it. I forget the ridiculousness of it because it just reads so true.

The author did that. The author has to dig those holes, suffer the press of gang, gun the truck across the desert—and decide—yes decide, to go after Zero. The author can not be a Greek chorus, observing the action; the author has to climb in and feel the grit, the jibes, the fears. All of it. Writing on a slant opens a crack into fictional experience that at some emotional level matches the real thing. Or exceed it.

I call this writing on the slant because of the excess. It is so excessive, so exaggerated, that the situation needs redress. Like a balloon that the writer blows up, the writer blows and blows and blows. You blow and blow and blow—an excessive amount of air—which brings the writer and reader to a point where the narrative will explode or be relieved.

#### The Books We Remember

It is interesting to me that the books we remember, the ones we talk about as best, are frequently the wackiest, off the wall, most original, or most obsessive. The ones on a slant.

But, as writers, how do you get there? A writer friend and I were talking about getting to these thoroughly original ideas and agreeing that the writer who sets out to write an

original idea, an idea on the slant, may not get there. If being original becomes one more rule, one more exterior demand, it may become exactly what you don't want. An idea squeezed into existence.

I am inclined to think that ideas for book like *The Giver* by Lois Lowry or *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle or What Jamie Saw by Carolyn Coman come from simply giving yourself enough emotional and intellectual space as a writer. Giving yourself the "what if" permissions that you need to sample and to experiment with characters and place and, of course, ideas.

I know for a fact that Cristina Kessler, Chautauqua graduate of some ten years back, didn't go after a book on a slant. The truth is Cris Kessler lives life on a slant. She is terrorized by New York City, but her blood races when she is out in the African bush. Out there she has faced a mother elephant, faced down a mother lion; she has canoed the I,000-mile Niger River and spent the night in a tree circled by giraffes. She loves the dance of Africa, the beat of it, the noise of it.

She needed to tell this story because, living in Africa for nearly twenty years, she hurt for the Masai, those proud Africans who are being threatened by Western incursions of one kind and another, and the book, *Our Secret, Sri Aang* is a book written on the slant, because Cris Kessler lives life on a slant! I don't know where she is going, because I haven't been to Masai country. I don't understand the Masai respect for animals, or their vulnerability of Western encroachment. I don't know their sadness as their way of life is threatened. But I understand a child's love for a wild rhinoceros, and a child's fervor at saving it. And the slant intrigues me.

I am wondering if I have made your heart beat. Because if I did, I was merely the spokesperson, the reader of words that writers wrote from their wonderfully pied, odd, strange points in the world. If I made your heart beat, that is what you want as well. The ordinary will not do. The four square and plenty good enough won't do. Pull out your "what if" and have an adventure with idea and place and character that takes you—and your readers—on a journey that one could only hope for. Let it be an editor's dream. Let it be your dream, certainly, to climb out of the box. Let it be your goal.