

Preface

Shapes and Shifting Shapes



"The instinct to create remains as long as one breathes," Isaac Bashevis Singer.

This book is devoted to nurturing that instinct and to the passionate, lively, knowing and caring writers who are now making their mark for the first time. They choose to do so, because they cannot help *not* doing so, because they are searching for answers, and have faith that they will make — not only a permanent record of at least a part of their history—but at least one vital discovery.

From that discovery, we “construct reality,” as Alain Robbe-Grillet said. We don’t just write *about* a radish, for example. In our minds, and on the page (depending upon how much detail we want to include at any particular point), we plant it and sow it and water it and it grows under our fingertips and only then do we see it completely — and taste it. Surely, we don’t savor the full flavor of that spicy orb at first, just as we don’t have the answers when we begin to reclaim our memories — our story.

We discover our story in bits and pieces as we write, and particularly, as we

rewrite, revise, organize.

“Stories are places to live, inside the imagination. We know a lot of them, and we’re in trouble when we don’t know which one is ours. Or when the one we inhabit does not work anymore, and we stick with it anyway.” So said William Kittredge, polymath, writer of fiction, film scripts, and poems, and judge for *Nimrod’s* 1995 Writers’ Workshop and Symposium. More of *Nimrod*, much more, later. *But for now, let’s get at your story and find out how I finally unearthed and wrote mine!*

We all have a story or several to tell, just as we all have a characteristic way of telling that story, which identifies that telling, that style, as ours, our voice, our breath-note. Mine is fairly long-winded, as you may have noticed. Oh, I do write simple sentences, short independent statements, even sentence fragments — but rarely, and then for effect. For some reason, I’m always trying to see things in a new perspective. I seem to comment on a memory or thought even as it first surfaces, trying to fit in all the multiplicity of life on the outside and the inside, like a Mobius strip twisting so that surface and sub-surface move smoothly from one to the other. Therefore, within the text of “my story” I’ve taken the liberty of *using italics* for inner thoughts, **or bold face** for emphasis and commentary. Poems are allowed. Photographs reveal a great deal and are therefore a boon for writer and reader. Letters, those we have sent to others and received, and those we have written to ourselves and never sent — all may be part of the rich mix.

In this inclusive spirit, it is not surprising that I want to make this memoir an example, a teaching device, as well as a story. I decided, after much confusion and struggle, to place the more instructive passages, the “prompts,” in between the narrative that is my response to these very same prompts. *Those who want to just follow my story can skip the prompt pages and just go on with the story. Or the reader/writer may prefer to skip my story entirely, and concentrate on responding to the prompts, thereby writing the fragments of his or her story.*

It is each response, each paragraph, section, chapter of the story that must be fulfilled in order to hold the reader’s attention and completely say what you have to say. And that also means going back, revising, often many times, and then arranging and rearranging the fragments.

Ultimately, after I wrote fragments responding to the prompts, and arranged, shifted, rearranged until I finally came up with a satisfactory order, I attempted to provide transitions between sections of the narrative now organized as “story,” and to discover the shape that emerges. ***Be assured that my fragments were not written in the order in which you now find them. Discovering the ultimate arrangement was the hardest part.*** Yes, writing is not easy. Organizing the pieces or fragments, written at different times and without a prescribed outline or order, more difficult still. *But it is fun!*

Since writing is such a sedentary art, I enjoy and actually need to move

around whenever possible. Moreover, I like to touch my world. *Even paper seems to spring to life under my fingertips as I spread out the fragments, sections, responses — call them what you will — on a large table and begin moving these parts, shifting, ordering and re-ordering until the pattern emerges.* You may juggle the pieces on the computer, but I prefer the tactile approach. It is easier for me to cut and paste by hand with good old scissors and tape and then make those revisions on the computer or typewriter.

To my amazement, the organization I discovered was fairly ordinary, usually chronological, though, at first, I was unable to write the narrative in that orderly fashion. Moreover, I still take pleasure in breaking the chronological flow from time to time, so that despite the fairly smooth chronology, another pattern began to emerge that was more jagged, more out-of-the-box (as they say). *A straight unbending line is easy to break in life and art — not so the resilient peaks and exploratory valleys.*

I have no doubt that you will discover your organizing principle as you re-discover your own memories. Moreover, since I did not write my responses to the various prompts in the order in which they are now placed, *I suggest that you pick and choose from the prompts in any order that seems appealing to you.*

The following might be known as an “outline” though all my life I have had an antagonistic relationship to “outlines.” Could they help? Yes, but, as we know, *the best outlines are written after you’ve written the first draft of the text from which that outline emerges.* This one did.