

the **Writer**

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INTENSIFY YOUR WRITING

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“The woods were deadly still, more forbidding than I had ever seen them—green and black and stagnant, dark with smells of mud and rot. ... The ravine lay to the left—raw, treacherous, a deep plunge to the rocks below.”

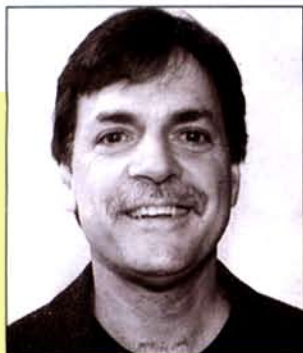
—Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*

Which TYPE of writer are you?

A writing coach describes the 4 main personalities and what you can learn from them Page 28



The Dictator



ROBERT McBREARTY Connecting with your audience

“I picture my readers picking up one of my stories and starting to chuckle. Or maybe they even feel touched. Like there’s a long-lost friend speaking to them.” Page 58

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#

How I Write

Robert McBrearty

Robert Garner McBrearty's resumé reads like a *Who's Who* of topflight literary small-press publications. Early in his writing career, one of his stories was selected for the prestigious Pushcart Prize anthology. His collection of short stories, *A Night at the Y*, received glowing reviews from such literary quarters as *Publishers Weekly* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The strong dramatic quality of McBrearty's work, his compassionate treatment of troubled characters, and his penchant for the comic and the absurd have made his work suitable for large public readings at the notable Stories on Stage in Denver and the Dallas Museum of Art. He currently teaches writing at the University of Colorado-Boulder and is an editor at *StoryQuarterly*.

Credits: His work has appeared in such high-profile literary magazines as *Narrative Magazine*, *North American Review*, *Missouri Review*, *New England Review*, *Confrontation*, *StoryQuarterly* and *Mississippi Review*.

Why: Characters form in my mind and seem to speak to me, and I've got to write down what they're saying. I've absolutely got to. No, I'm not crazy! I know they're not real, but when I'm writing I feel like they're my flesh and blood, and I'm eager to share their visions, their dreams, their hopes and fears and longings. I picture my readers picking up one of my stories and starting to chuckle. Or maybe they even feel touched. Like there's a long-lost friend speaking to them.

Routine: There's the "ideal" situation and the "practical reality." Ideally, I'd have hours of free time. Alas, I usually don't, so my writing routine is flexible and adaptable. Sometimes I get up at 5 in the morning. Other times I set a timer and for an hour I block off everything else and totally concentrate on a story. Throughout the day, I write a little here or there. With two sons, I've learned to work with distractions and noise in the background, though often I take my laptop to coffee shops so I won't get sidetracked. I write nearly every day, even if it's only a little. That

way, when I have more time, I get revved up more easily.

Process: I often draw from actual events, something I've witnessed or experienced, though in the telling the experience gets dramatically changed. I write fast, pumping out several pages in a couple hours. Of course, much rewriting takes place afterward, but I like to get the whole story out from start to finish in one or two writing sessions. When it's going well, I feel like I'm inside the story, as if I'm taking part. The story is just happening and I'm getting it down as fast as I can. Images form, characters speak. I'm on a roll.

Writing comedy: I tend to find the bizarre, the quirky in everyday life. My early efforts were no great shakes, but I kept at it until comedy helped make my writing distinct. One way I create comedy is by doing a "reversal." When I wrote "The Dishwasher," which won a Pushcart, I'd just finished a grubby night of work, but I turned "dishwashing" into some glorious pursuit. Sometimes I create a distinct, ironic voice

right off the bat, as when my narrator in "The Hellraiser" begins: "It's New Year's Eve and I'm raising hell." I like comic dialogue, a kind of off-kilter banter where the responses seem a little surprising, as in "Transformations," when a host asks an unexpected guest, "You mind old coffee?" and the guest replies, "No, I like old coffee." Will drink old coffee, sure, but like it?

Advice: Find out what makes your writing come alive. For me it's comedy, but for others it might be something serious, grim even. But keep this in mind: Whatever you write, don't be dreary. In a "dreary" story we often have characters surrendering, instead of battling. Who wants to read this? We're more interested in courage. Apply the same courage to your own writing life. It's easy to get demoralized with a fiercely competitive market, but don't let rejections crush you. Some of my stories were rejected over 20 times. Celebrate each victory; learn from the turndowns.

Interview by Jack Smith, co-editor of The Green Hills Literary Lantern.



Mary Ellen Melke