

A.P.O.V. *

*Alumni Point of View

The Power of Stories

It's an interesting notion: Stories are easy; sentences are hard.

By JAMES PATTERSON, MA'70

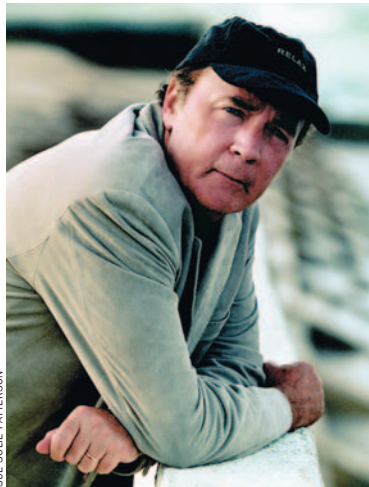
MY SO-CALLED WRITING career started like this: I'm working my way through college as a psych aide in a mental hospital outside Cambridge, Mass. James Taylor is a patient, also his brother Livingston and his sister Kate. Robert Lowell is a patient. Ray Charles is a patient. After his drug conviction, the deal was that every time Ray came to Boston he had to check in at McLean Hospital for two or three days before he could do a concert. Which was great if you worked there.

There was a story every day. One day I notice they'd just put in Plexiglass windows on the hall where I worked. A patient—John C., we'll call him—is walking down the hall and he's on double specials, which means there has to be an aide on both sides within arm's length, and all of a sudden he takes off in his bathrobe, bare feet, pajamas, and goes running down the hallway. He gets about 10 feet from the nurse's station, launches himself at the window—boom!—and clunks against the new Plexiglass windows. He knocks himself out. I run up to him and he says, "When the hell did they put those in?"

I say to myself, I've got to start writing this stuff down.

I got my first criticism as an undergraduate. I was told that I wrote OK but should stay away from fiction. It was good advice which I didn't take.

When I came to Vanderbilt to graduate school, I was a little bit hippyish. I befriended a guy named Walter Sullivan who was a very conservative professor, but he loved me and I loved him. And he said, "Write fiction." That's what I wanted to do, so I listened to him instead of the undergraduate guy.



SUE SOLIE PATTERSON

I wrote a novel, and 31 publishers turned it down with extreme prejudice. Then that same novel won the Edgar Award as the best first mystery of the year in America. If you get turned down by any New York publisher, take it as a good sign.

For the last few years, I've been the biggest-selling novelist in the United States. I have this wonderful day job—I write about 355 days a year because I love it. Somebody said you're lucky if you find something you like to do, and it's a miracle if someone will pay you to do it. That's my situation.

I write in longhand. I don't use a computer. The day it started to be fun, the day everything clicked for me, the day that it

changed for the better, was the day I stopped writing sentences and started writing stories.

Sentences are really hard. But if you write a story, it just flows out of you. It's an interesting notion: Stories are easy; sentences are hard.

I wrote a love story, a little maudlin but with some nice things in it, called *Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas*. The second day I was on tour for the book, I was on TV and the host said that the night before, he had given *Suzanne's Diary* to his wife to read, and that she was still reading it when he went off to bed. At 2 o'clock in the morning, she came in and woke him up. And she said, "I just finished that book and I'm sorry to wake you up, but I had to hug you."

I've had experiences like that thousands of times. There's really nothing like the feeling you get from something you've done—a book, a painting, a poem, a newspaper column, cooking dinner for your wife. Whatever it is, it's exhilarating.

When I was on tour in Lexington, Ky., a well-dressed lady told me, "Before I read *Along Came a Spider*, I never read. Now I've read several of your books, and reading is such a huge part of my life that I read every day."

People have told me, "My husband is reading again," "My wife is reading again," "My kids read." This past year I did a children's book for Christmas, which was fun to do. In April I have a young adult series starting.

Oprah has a different approach. She has the world reading classics like *Anna Karenina*

na. I question that, to be honest. My approach is that we'll all read something we're going to love, especially kids. Some of us are going to get Tolstoy and some of us aren't. But all of us are going to have passion for this wonderful thing called books and reading, rather than being turned off about it, which has happened to so many people.

I was in Marrakesh once, the location of the summer palace of the sultan. According to Koranic law, the sultan has to meet with his subjects every day to hear their complaints. Because of this custom they have built a public square outside the palace, and every night this square fills with people.

One night I was there sipping a pastis and watching all this amazing stuff, bartering for monkeys and perfumes and all sorts of things. Suddenly, the crowd parted and a very large guy in indigo and saffron robes showed up. Some of the dye had

actually tinted his skin. He opened a large wicker basket, and people started throwing money into it.

I asked the waiter at our table, "Who is this guy?" and he said, "He's the greatest storyteller. When he gets a sufficient number of coins, he begins to tell his stories."

This guy was a magnificent dancer and a great gesticulator. He shouted to the heavens at times, and then he would whisper lovingly to the women and to the men. I must have watched him for an hour and a half. I was mesmerized. I couldn't turn away. I didn't understand a single word he said, but I loved his stories.

The power of stories in our lives is incredible. We don't think about it as much as we should. We all have stories—just a couple of lines—and that's how we're seen in our fam-

ilies. Our parents have a story about us, and it's never going to change no matter what we do. We have stories that were known at school and stories at work.

Cities have stories. Neighborhoods have stories. Vanderbilt has a story. When I came

which at the time had a very bad story. Ford had become known for its acronyms: Found On Road Dead. Fix Or Repair Daily. But Ford started improving its car lines. They redid the Thunderbird and came out with the Taurus, which at the time was moderately revolutionary. With Ford's help we changed their story, and for a while they were known as the highest-quality American car maker. It was a new story.

The power of stories is unbelievable. During the 1992 primary, Bill Clinton's story was: A slick Southern yuppie, educated in silver-spoon schools, a draft dodger who smoked pot and cheated on his wife.

Not a good story.

Research by a group in New York called the Manhattan Project uncovered another story: Bill Clinton is the middle-class son of a single mother who worked his way up to the Arkansas governorship, where he made remarkable progress in his poor state by focusing on job

creation and education.

A much better story, and it helped elect him president.

My own opinion of Bill Clinton shifted radically the day he was to be questioned about Monica Lewinsky by House prosecutors. On that Monday a photograph of Clinton appeared in thousands of newspapers. In that photograph he was saluting a Marine as he stepped off a helicopter from Camp David. And under his other arm, plainly visible, was a copy of my latest book.

My respect for the president, his intelligence, his taste in literature, soared.

I got out of advertising. I've been clean for about 10 years now. And I'm lucky enough to write fiction—not great fiction but good escapism. I don't like this "guilty pleasure"

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here they used to talk about Vanderbilt as the "Harvard of the South." At the time it was probably an effective story. Now it may be condescending to say that.

These stories about us can either push us forward or hold us back. Sometimes people have to leave a job because they need to change their stories, especially young people. Sometimes people have to move away from their families just because they need to change their stories.

Storytelling has been a part of my life for a long time. In the beginning I made a good living telling stories to and for business people. What are frequently called brands or corporate images are really just stories.

I worked for J. Walter Thompson, which was the world's largest advertising agency. One of our clients was the Ford Motor Co.,

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thing—I wish everyone would stop that. It’s OK to read an escapist book. It’s OK to go to the movies.

Earlier this year I came across something Flaubert said that captured the way I feel when I sit down to write stories. It’s part of the reason I get so excited to do this so many days of the year:

“It is a delicious thing to write . . . to be no longer yourself, but to move an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as both man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the wind, the words my people uttered, even the red sun that almost made them close their love-drowned eyes.”

Go write a book. It’s fun.

On the other hand, sportswriter Red Smith once said, “Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at the blank piece of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.”

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Here’s a great sports story: When I was at Vanderbilt as a graduate student, Vanderbilt beat Alabama in football.

...

When I was in my early 30s, I was very much in love with a woman in New York City. One Saturday morning we went out to get breakfast and stopped in the post office on Broadway, and she fell over in the post office. We both thought she was dying. It turned out that she was having a seizure. And it ultimately turned out that she had a brain tumor and a very limited amount of time to live.

People react to situations like this in a lot of different ways. Some people will spend the rest of their time together shaking their fists at the sky and saying, “Why us?” Some people will weep and weep and weep.

What we did was to tell each other a story. The story and the point of view we took was: Isn’t it lucky that we have this time? Isn’t it lucky that you didn’t die in the post office and we have this day to take this walk? Isn’t it lucky that you didn’t die in the post office and we have today to spend with our friends? That story, that point of view, made that year and a half the most precious of my life.

...

One last story: When I was a boy, I grew up in a farm town on the Hudson River. In the summer my grandfather used to take me on his truck route once a week. He delivered ice

cream and frozen food. At 4 o’clock in the morning, we would get up and pack up his truck. By around 5 o’clock we’d be going over Storm King Mountain in the direction of West Point. That’s not the most glamorous thing to be doing six days a week—packing the truck at 4 in the morning, getting home at 6:30 at night, delivering frozen food.

My grandfather was a joyful guy who’d lived through the Depression, and virtually every day I was with him he would go over Storm King Mountain singing at the top of his lungs. He had a terrible voice. He’d sing all those old songs—“Oh! Susanna,” “Put Another Nickel In,” “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain”—and he said to me, “Jim, I don’t care what you do when you grow up. I don’t care if you become a truck driver or a surgeon or the president. Just remember, when you go over the mountain to work in the morning, you have to be singing.”

And I do. I hope you do, too.

Best-selling author James Patterson, MA’70, has nearly 30 books in print encompassing the mystery, suspense, science fiction, romance and children’s genres. This essay was adapted from his address as part of the Chancellor’s Lecture Series.

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a stick and it scattered in a hunnert pieces. Later on, they’d come back together.

Well, when we come back to the river it come up a cloud, and me and Will run and got in a hollow oak tree there by the river. Biggest tree I ever did see. So big in there I took a 16-foot fence-rail and held it out level and I could turn plum around in there. And if you don’t believe it, you can ask your Uncle Will.

HAMPTON

I jes’ barely remember Ol’ Ebb Hampton. He was a old, old man when I was a little girl. Him and his daughter Rosey and his daughter Lindie used to go around, sing at churches. They was awful religious folks. Old Ebb died with a cancer on his face. They had put him up in a screen-wire cage to keep the flies from a-blowing him, ’fore he died.

Lim and Abe was his boys—they was

both of them so ’fraid of women, woman was to come to their house, they’d fight each other to see who could get up the chimbley first. Well, after Lim married, Abe bought him a house there in Buena Vista; place was hainted. One day he was out in the stable and he heard the ghost a-mumblin something—mumblin and mumblin. Well, Abe said to it, “In the name of Jesus, speak to me,” and he said that three times and the ghost had to answer him—told him to go over there in the south corner of the stable and dig there—and sure ’nough there was a iron dinner kettle full of gold money.

LILLIE LOREEN

We named her Lillie Loreen—Lillie after Pa’s sister, but we called her Digs ’cause of the way she walked, her toes diggin’ in the ground.

We thought she was going to die that first winter. The deathwatches ticked in the wall

and there was a mourning noise under the house; we thought it was a sign, but come to look, it was just dogs fightin’.

Then spring come and Digs got well. One day she run in the house with mud on her hands and left a handprint on the screen door there. That summer we put her out in the sunshine with Little Roy and had her picture made. Digs pulled up the blanket in her mouth just as they made the picture—that’s the only picture we have of her.

When Christmas come, Opp give us a hoop of cheese out of the store. Little Digs never had had any before and she ate so much it give her the colic. They called Dr. Massey from Buena, but he couldn’t do nothing.

When we moved away from there, we throwed the broom back in the house because it’s bad luck to move a broom. But we took down the screen door and moved it with us—there’s the print of her hand on it in mud.