

A Bread Loaf

Contemporary

A

David Huddle

R E A D E R

SELECTED PROSE AND POETRY



DAVID HUDDLE

A David Huddle

R E A D E R

S E L E C T E D

P R O S E A N D

P O E T R Y



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A David Huddle Reader

The Bread Loaf Series of Contemporary Writers

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FOR MY MOTHER

who read to me

A Bread Loaf Contemporary

A T A T I M E when the literary world is increasingly dominated by commercial formulas and concentrated financial power, there is a clear need to restore the simple pleasures of reading: the experience of opening a book by an author you know and being delighted by a completely new dimension of her or his art, the joy of seeing an author break free of any formula to reveal the power of the well written word. The best writing, many authors affirm, comes as a gift; the best reading comes when the author passes that gift to the reader, a gift the author could imagine only by taking risks in a variety of genres including short stories, poetry, and essays.

As editors of The Bread Loaf Series of Contemporary Writers we subscribe to no single viewpoint. Our singular goal is to publish writing that moves the reader: by the beauty and lucidity of its language, by its underlying argument, by its force of vision. These values are celebrated each summer at the Writers' Conference on Bread Loaf Mountain in Vermont and in each of these books.

We offer you the Bread Loaf Contemporary series and the treasures with which these authors have surprised us.

Robert Pack
Jay Parini

A David Huddle Reader

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Introduction: Confessions of a Multi-Genre Writer

What It Feels Like from the Inside

AMONG MY POEMS, stories, and essays, there are many more similarities than differences; finally my various works are “all of a piece.” For me, writing an essay has always felt a lot like writing a story, which has always felt a lot like writing a poem. Adding the poetic line to the other elements of composition raises my blood pressure a notch—as might occur when I drive from a two-lane highway onto an interstate—but from the inside, writing in all three genres feels essentially the same. The destination is an arrangement of words that yields something true and interesting about human experience.

Though I’ve been seriously trying to write for half my fifty years of life, I’ve only recently begun to comprehend what now seems to me the most basic and obvious artistic principle: *Works of art are the mere by-product of an artist’s work.*

My mother had a saying that she recited to me on various occasions of my childhood that contains the same notion: *Do the best you can, and angels can do no better.*

The basic task of an artist is to receive, understand, and attempt to realize the instruction of his or her inner life. The muscle an artist works to develop most is that of intuition. The most purely creative aspect of esthetic activity involves trying to discover the integrity of the thing-being-made—trying in the making of a thing to determine what its ideal form is to be.

Brenda Ueland, in *If You Want to Write*, puts it this way: *But we must try to find our True Conscience, our True Self, the very Center, for this is the only first-rate choice-making center. Here lies all originality, talent, honor, truthfulness, courage and cheerfulness. Here only lies the ability to choose the good and the grand, the true and the beautiful.*

In attempting to journey toward “the very Center,” I produce poems, stories, and essays. Or I produce failed pieces of writing. One morning I write a poem that goes far beyond any level of achievement I could have imagined for myself. Another morning I produce drivel unworthy of the cheapest greeting card. *What* I produce is beside the point. The journey is the point.

I may even begin working with the hope of becoming famous and making a lot of money but then find myself lost in the work, pursuing a minor character into a subplot of extremely dense language, imagery, and psychology, and devote a year to producing an obscure novel that no publisher on the planet would dream of publishing. I’ve begun writing with a bad idea, become absorbed in the project, and produced work that surprised and pleased me. I’ve begun writing with the very highest esthetic principles firmly in mind but never managed to reach my deepest level of concentration, and therefore produced writing of very low quality.

Because when I begin, I can’t anticipate how it’s going to turn out, I must simply try to give myself wholly to the task, do the best I can to carry it out with sustained and intense attention, and hope that what I write will turn out to be valuable. If it doesn’t turn out well, then I have to resist being discouraged.

One ruthlessly basic principle can be located in such an unpredictable endeavor: the *only* chance I have of producing art proceeds from my attempting “to find . . . the very Center.”

There is no other way.

I think of Picasso, struck by inspiration at the end of an excellent lunch, brilliantly arranging the fishbones on his plate.

I think of Gulley Jimson, the impoverished genius of Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth*, conniving—against common sense and his own well-being as well as the well-being of the woman he loves—to paint the crazy stuff he needs to paint.

I think of my daughter, a college sophomore with a paper on Milton to write for class the next day, spending the night writing a poem about the perfidiousness of the male gender.

And I think of myself writing a 500-page novel about a middle-aged professor of English who incidentally writes poems: When I finished it, I saw clearly that the novel was a failure, but I liked my protagonist’s poems. I stole the good ones and published them in my book *The Nature of Yearning*.

Recently I set forth to write a short poem because I’d had a re-

quest from a literary festival that wanted to do a letter-press printing of a poem of mine for a broadside. The former owner of the press had sold off most of the print, and so my poem had to be no longer than 18 lines. Over the course of a couple of weeks of attempting to write an 18-line poem, I wrote four poems, of 37, 38, 34, and 32 lines.

I don't mean to say that all art—or even all of my art—is quirky in its origins. Sometimes I sit down to write a short poem, and that's exactly what I do, I write a short poem, and maybe it's a keeper. But I've certainly had the experience of trying to write a poem and after a number of attempts, seeing that it's actually a story I need to write. At least half of the various pieces I've written were conceived of in drastically different forms than what they actually turned out to be.

What I produce is usually not what I have in mind when I begin. Along the way, I pass through a phase of work, in which genre, length, tone, theme, almost all identifiable aspects of the piece are *in-process*, or *as yet to be determined*. I think that phase of the work must be the fiery matrix of art-making. It's what feels good—or dangerous or scary or satisfying—about writing. It's when all extraneous concerns drop away, when my concentration becomes absolute, and when I am wholly given over to the thing I am trying to make. It's what I imagine Brenda Ueland means by “the very Center.” It is the purest kind of writing. If you sneaked up behind me when I was in this “state” and asked me what I was working on, I would have to journey back to you through the whole history of civilization before I would be able to give you an answer: “Oh, I guess it's an essay,” I'd say. “I'm not yet sure what it is.”

Even when I've finished them, some of the pieces I've written can't make up their minds about their identities. “A Dream with No Stump Roots In It,” the title story of my first book, was composed in lines of poetry, and for a long while I kept it that way in a poetry manuscript I was sending out. I was also sending out, at the same time, a manuscript of a collection of stories that included the prose version of the same piece. The latter was what was accepted for publication; thus, “Stump Roots” achieved its definition as a story.

When I sent “Do You Wanna Dance?” to Dave Smith at *The Southern Review*, he wrote back to say that if it was a story, he had some problems with it, but if it was an essay, he liked it and wanted to publish it. That was when I decided “Do You Wanna Dance?” was most likely an essay.

I've always been charmed by that famous question someone al-

legedly asked Robert Creeley during a poetry reading: *Is that a real poem, or did you just make that up?* Like most poets, I appreciate the question because it so nakedly reveals the kind of bafflement many people feel when they are confronted with a work of art. But I like the metaphysical dimension of the question: Just what the hell are these things that come out of my computer, my typewriter, my pen, my brain, my heart? Looks like a poem? Well, let's call it a poem. Looks like a story? Well . . . And so on. But that thing-made-out-of-language that proceeded from my inner life—or passed through my inner life on its way—onto the page has its own integrity aside and apart from whatever name we give it. Whether we call it poem, story, essay, truck, rutabaga, or ocarina finally matters only to the extent its being named diminishes our anxiety about living with it. Is that a real *Langsamherzbaumgeschuz* or did you just make it up?

Though it is of considerably less importance to me, I've pursued tennis for just about as long as I have writing. In my early years, I was a racquet-flinger, a bigtime cusser, and a tantrum-thrower of the first rank. Nowadays I'll unleash the occasional *phooey* or *darn*, but for the most part I play serenely—and just about as well as a person of my ability might play. My principle is a variation of the one I've discovered about writing: *Tennis points [or games or sets or matches or lifetime records] are the mere by-product of a tennis player's play.* On every point, I try to run hard, watch the ball, take strong strokes, anticipate, read the shots that are coming back at me, and make smart decisions. I try to go all out, and I try to concentrate and completely give myself over to the play. I win some points, I lose some, it doesn't matter which; what matters is that I'm *there*—as completely as I possibly can be—in the flow of the game, trying to play the best I can.

I feel the same way about my writing—or I'm learning to feel that way: Whether I write a poem, a story, an essay, or a novel matters only incidentally. Whether it's short or long, lofty or vulgar, funny or sad, whether I make a lot of money or none at all, whether my writing brings me love, hatred, admiration, or contempt—all these things matter only slightly compared with that first principle: Am I trying as hard as I can in my art to reach the truth? Am I journeying toward "the very Center"?

ESSAYS

Let's Say You Wrote Badly This Morning

*... don't feel bad, Ramos
What's done is did
That's all right, son
Ya git another chance tomorrer.*

—MICHAEL CASEY, "The Company Physical
Combat Proficiency Test Average," *Obscenities*

IN SEPTEMBER 1986, I had a novel rejected. In October of the same year, I had that rejection on my mind as I watched the American and National League baseball playoffs. A new television set allowed me to see what I had never really noticed before, the facial expressions of the players. What particularly intrigued me was how batters look when they strike out and how pitchers look when they give up a home run.

In that incredible American League fifth game, just after the Red Sox substitute center fielder Dave Henderson, with two strikes and two balls on him, had hit that ninth inning homer, the camera switched to a close-up of Angels relief pitcher Donnie Moore. I have never seen such visible anguish. Moore is a veteran, a man who gives the appearance of being quiet, proud, and possessed of a great deal of hard-earned skill. There was in his face at that moment the sign of a crushed spirit. I wondered how Donnie Moore could ever make himself pitch to another batter.

Getting my novel rejected was not at all similar to what I imagine was Donnie Moore's experience of pitching a ninth-inning, game-winning home-run ball to Dave Henderson. My publisher, David Godine, gave me the bad news in straightforward fashion as he and