

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

2 final,
please

*Adapted
into a new column
of May 1967*

X

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

by

Robert Traver

I am working on a new book--every writer is in some way always working on a new book--and I find this the most baffling and annoying question I am ever asked. To a man the few other writers I know mournfully agree with me. Why is this so?

~~A writer may be defined as a person who possesses the ego of a Napoleon, the stamina of a water buffalo, and a smidgin of talent. He needs the ego to delude himself that anyone would give the slightest damn to read anything he might ever write; the stamina to get it written; and the wee dash of talent to get it read.~~

~~Ego, stamina, talent--these are the three basic ingredients which every writer must have; if he lacks any one of them he is probably no writer--though heaven knows he may be an egocentric bore--of which, alas, there is no shortage--or an ink-stained collector of rejection slips, or an artistic dilettante of awesome sensitivity. But he is no real writer. Most simply put, a writer is a tough, hard-working, self-centered bastard who can occasionally sometimes spell some of the words he uses.~~

Writing a book--especially a novel--of even the slightest merit is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world. First of all there must be the dream--what most nonwriters persistently miscall the "plot"--the idea, the germ, the gnawing gnat that clamors out. Without this vision there can be no book worth publishing. Never. So the writer nurses and clings to and feeds on this evanescent dream throughout the dreadful exhilarating

transfer from his mind to
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months of trying to impale it on paper. He almost never does--
the full pure original dream, that is--and most of his books
are monuments to his failure to ~~capture the elusive~~ thing he
once dreamed. But ^{first} ~~first~~ he must dream it and cling to it
through hell or high water to come anywhere near overtaking
it at all. Sounds all very arty doesn't it? It also happens
to be the ~~bitter~~ solemn truth.

So when somebody sidles up to him at a cocktail party and
archly inquires, "What are you working on now?" the writer is
immediately alerted, hostile, wary, on guard. Who is this
brash character that dares invade and destroy my dream?
Doesn't he (or she) know that if a book or even the dream of
a book can be summed up in a sentence it ~~is~~ will ~~be~~ quite
probably a very bad book? ^{bl} / Don't these people know that if a
writer tries to define his dream, to ^{and impale} catch it on the wing, he
by the very act risks destroying it forever? No, alas, he or
she doesn't ever realize it--they never do. That's why they
keep asking "The Question."

The Question is most often asked by people on the periphery
of the writer's life: glib or sadistic literary interviewers,
or on radio or TV, or by the same people trying bravely to save
a sagging interview and keep the show on the road; perspiring
autograph seekers ("No, Madam, I only initial paperbacks," I
swear I am one day going to say); casual acquaintances; total
strangers; and always, of course, the fluttering migratory
butterflies one encounters at cocktail parties. "What are you
working on now?" they coo. The question is almost invariably
asked--and to the writer this is the final corroding thing--by
people who couldn't care less.

J

"Don't race your motor," my wife warned me at a recent party, finding me sulking in a corner and wanting to ~~leave~~ *get hence* X
after being asked The Question. "People see you little enough-- you rarely take me anywhere--and when suddenly they do they remember you are supposed to be a writer."

"What do you mean 'supposed'?"

X
X
X
"Don't interrupt! So naturally, since writing is your work, they ask ^{you} what you ^{are} working on. They only ask it to be civil and sort of ~~to~~ ^{to} pass the time of day. They don't mean anything by it."

"That's precisely it," I fight back, "they don't mean anything by it, they couldn't care less." I agitate the ~~melting~~ ^{empty} ice in my glass. "Naturally they ask you about your work," I repeat caustically, glaring around the room. "See that dame over there--the one with the green hair--she's ~~slapt~~ ^{made love to} with virtually every man in this room--but me."

X
"Yes, ~~is~~ your insomnia, I know."

"Don't interrupt! She's a real professional ~~sleeper~~ ^{love-maker} ~~around~~ ^{making love to} it's her work. Why don't you slip over real friendly-like and ask her who she's ~~sleeping with~~ ^{sleeping with} lately? Just to sort of pass the time of day. It's a natural question."

"But that isn't the same thing and you know it."

^{Oh} "The hell it isn't, ^{isn't it?} See old Goudge over there slopping up martinis? Guess I'll pop over and ask him who he's been embalming lately--besides himself. It's his work, you know. Then we'll get in the car and run out and kind of casual-like ask old Doc Parsons who he's ^{depregnating} ~~aborting~~ this evening. After all, it's his work. Then we'll--"

NORTHWEST
Bond

/

"You're utterly impossible--let's get out of here."

And so it goes.

The writer hates The Question then for many reasons: because he's afraid of it--afraid he might try to answer--; because he is bothered by its impertinence and boundlessly annoyed by this bold, if usually thoughtless, invasion of his inmost privacy *and* of the fragile dream that enables him to write at all. Moreover ^o ~~fr~~ long exposure to The Question he knows that it reveals far [^] more about the questioner than it ever elicits from him about his work. He knows that the very few people with whom he might ever feel inclined to discuss his work are precisely the ones who never ask him; that that is probably why ~~he~~ and they became friends in the first place. X

But occasionally the writer is fairly trapped, maybe by a former ^{teachers} professor's [^] wife or again by some dear old soul who once knew his mother--someone he wouldn't gratuitously hurt for the world. "Ha, ha, ha," he may chortle ^{with false} delightedly. "It--let me see--it's just a little historical thing all about Indians, iron ore and injustice." ^{at the time} (I happened to have been working

XX But airy evasion is no use; one foolish question inspires ~~still~~ another. "How perfectly adorable--I simply can't wait to read it," she runs on. "Er--um--does anyone get raped?--seriously, I mean?"

The writer glances wildly around for an escape hatch but finds none. He smiles fatuously, wagging his finger at his questioner. "You'll see," he says, the charming old tease. "I wouldn't spoil it for you for anything."

on my novel Laughing Whitefish.

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"I simply can't wait," she says, gaily fluttering on her way.

Neither can the writer--to get ~~the ball~~ out of there, that is.

(Robert Traver has written eight books, including three novels, the first being ANATOMY OF A MURDER and the latest LAUGHING WHITEFISH, "just a little historical thing all about Indians, iron ore and injustice," he cryptically explains.)

NORTHWEST

Dona

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2 final, please

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But airy evasion is no use; one foolish question inspires another. "How perfectly adorable--I simply can't wait to read it," she runs on. "Er--um--does anyone get raped?--seriously, I mean?" *Like in your Academy of a Murder?*

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~~questioner.~~ "You'll see," he says, the charming old tease.

"I wouldn't spoil it for you for anything."

"I simply can't wait," she says, gaily fluttering on her way.

Neither can the writer--to get ^{the hell} out of there, that is.

It "Anatomy of a Murder," he corrects her gently, glancing wildly around for an escape hatch but finding none. So he smiles fatuously, and wags his finger at his questioner.

[Danna:

I changed ^{the} "insomnia" thing. Thanks. pro]

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

2 final

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

by

Robert Traver

I am working on a new book--every writer is in some way always working on a new book--and I find this the most baffling and annoying question I am ever asked. To a man the few other writers I know mournfully agree with me. Why is this so?

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Ego, stamina, talent--these are the three basic ingredients which every writer must have; if he lacks any one of them he is probably no writer--though heaven knows he may be an egocentric bore--of which, alas, there is no shortage--or ~~a scribbling~~ ^{collector of} an ink-stained ~~slave who collects~~ rejection slips, or an artistic ^{dilettante} ~~dillitante~~ of awesome sensitivity. But he is no real writer. ^{Most simply put,}
A writer is a tough, hard-working, self-centered bastard who ^{can sometimes} ~~can~~ spell ^{the words he uses!}

Writing a book--especially a novel--of even the slightest merit is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world. First of all there must be the dream--what most nonwriters persistently miscall the "plot"--the idea, the germ, the gnawing gnat that clamors out. Without this ^{vision} ~~dream~~ there can be no book worth publishing. Never. So the writer nurses and clings to and feeds on this evanescent dream throughout the dreadful exhilarating

NORTHWEST

Dond

June 29, 1966

Mr. Francis Brown, Editor
New York Times Book Review
Times Square
New York, New York 10036

Dear Mr. Brown:

I enclose a piece called "What Are You Working On Now?" which I hope you can use should it happen to amuse you. If not you can return it in the accompanying envelope.

All good wishes.

Sincerely,

Saturday Review



June 20, 1966

Dear Mr. Voelker:

Your humorous essay filtered down to
the Phoenix Nest, its natural home.

But its tone is too leisurely for a one
page feature like mine, which uses shorter
(500 wds), more pointed casuals. WHAT ARE YOU
WORKING ON, an intriguing piece, sounds more
like something the Atlantic's "Accent On
Living" department might like. Might you have
something else around, that would suit the
Nest?

With all good wishes

from: MARTIN LEVIN

THE PHOENIX NEST

June 14, 1966

Mr. Martin Levin
Editorial Office
Saturday Review
380 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Sir:

It is now nearly two months since I sent you a thing called "What Are You Working On Now?" This is too long to wait, even for an acceptance, so I'll resolve the issue by withdrawing it from your consideration. Please send the thing back.

Sincerely,

May 23, 1966

Mr. Martin Levin
Editorial Office
Saturday Review
380 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Sir:

On April 27th I sent your magazine a piece
called "What Are You Working On Now?" On April 29th
Alfred Balk wrote me he was passing it to you.

The purpose of this letter is not to rush your
decision but to tell you I have some corrections to
make and to make sure you don't run the thing with-
out them.

Regards,

Saturday Review

380 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017



Alfred W. Balk

Feature Editor

April 29, 1966

Mr. John D. Voelker
P.O. Box 385
Ishpeming, Michigan

Dear Mr. Voelker:

Many thanks for your short, "What Are You Working on Now?" I have passed it along to Martin Levin, who edits our column the Phoenix Nest, and you will hear from him direct when he has reached a decision about using it.

Sincerely,

Alfred Balk

AB/g

April 22, 1966

Editorial Office
Saturday Review
380 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Gentlemen:

I enclose a sort of literary essay called "What Are You Working On Now?"—which pretty well sums up what it is all about. If it should have been directed to some special editor or department, please refer it there.

I used to review books for your magazine before, and in a bind, I simply had to decline one, and that alas was that. (I am not trying to get back at it; simply giving you some background.) Back in the late forties I also had a lead article and an atomic fable in your magazine. I write under the pen name of Robert Traver, ANATOMY OF A MURDER being my best-known book.

Sincerely,

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

NORTHWEST

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

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Robert Traver

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Ego, stamina, talent—these are the three basic ingredients which every writer must have; if he lacks any one of them he is probably no writer—though heaven knows he may be an egocentric bore—of which, alas, there is no shortage—or a scribbling ink-stained slave who collects rejection slips, or an artistic ^{dilettante} dillitante of awesome sensitivity. But he is no real writer. *Most simply put,*
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Yona

2 final, please
(Apr. 21, 1966.)

+

Written by:
John D. Walker
Oshtemo, Michigan

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

by

Robert Traver

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Ego, stamina, talent--these are the three basic ingredients of the writer, ^{which every must have; if of them} If he lacks any one, ~~of the three~~ he is probably no writer, ^{-- heaven knows} though he may be an egocentric

bore--of which, alas, there is no shortage--or ^{an unimpaired} ~~a~~ daily ^{slave} scribbling ink-stained ^{who collects rejection slips,} slave chained to his cluttered desk, or an artistic

dillitante of awesome sensitivity. But he is no real writer. A writer is a tough, hard-working, self-centered bastard who can spell.

20008
NORTHWEST

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proof
NORTHWEST

Writing a book--especially a novel--of ^{any} merit

even the slightest

~~it~~ is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world.

First of all there must be the ~~elusive~~ dream--what most

nonwriters ^{*persistently*} miscall the "plot"--the idea, the germ,

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can be no book worth publishing. Never. So the writer

nurses and clings to and feeds on this evanescent dream

throughout the dreadful exhilarating ^{*months*} of trying

to impale it on paper. He almost never does--the full

pure original dream, that is--and most of his books are

monuments to his failure to capture the ^{*elusive*} beautiful thing

he once dreamed. But he must ^{*first*} ~~first~~ dream it and cling

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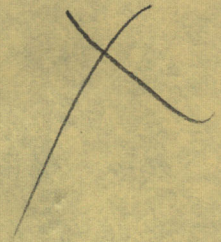
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NORTHWEST

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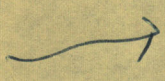
So when somebody sidles up to him at a cocktail party and ^{archly} brightly inquires, "What are you working on now?" the writer is immediately alerted, hostile, ^{wary} and ~~warily~~ on guard. Who is this brash character that dares invade and destroy my dream? Doesn't he (or she) know that if a book or even the dream of a book can be summed up in a sentence it is ^{or will be} ~~going to be~~ quite probably a ~~fairly~~ ^{very} bad book? Don't these people know that if a writer tries to define his ~~elusive~~ dream, to catch it on the wing, he by the very act risks destroying it forever? No, alas, he ^{or} she ~~or it~~ doesn't ever realize it—they never do. That's why they keep asking "The Question."

NORTHWEST

Journal



Cap



The ^aquestion is most often asked by people on the

periphery of the writer's life: glib or sadistic

literary interviewers or on radio or TV, or by the

same people ~~simply~~ ^{manipulatively} trying ^{bravely} to save a sagging interview

and keep the show on the road; perspiring autograph

seekers ("No, Madam, I only initial paperbacks," I am ^{swear} ^{one day going} ~~some days~~ tempted to say); casual acquaintances; total

strangers; and always, of course, the fluttering

^{migratory}

butterflies one ~~always~~ ^{to the writer} encounters at cocktail parties.

"What are you working on now?" they coo. In other

^{thing --} ~~words~~ ^{almost} and this is the ^{invariably} ~~corroding~~ ^{asked --} knowledge ~~to the~~ ^{to the writer}

~~written~~ by people who couldn't care less.

NORTHWEST

Journal

proof

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NORTHWEST

"Don't race your motor," my wife warned me at a recent party, finding me ^{*sulking*} ~~peering~~ in a corner and wanting to ~~go~~ ^{*leave*} after ^{*just*} being asked The Question. "People see you little enough--you rarely take my anywhere--and when suddenly they do they remember you are supposed to be a writer."

"What do you mean 'supposed?'"

"Don't interrupt! So naturally, since writing is ^{*only*} your work, they ask ~~you~~ what you're working on, to be ^{*They ask it*} civil and sort of to pass the time of day. They don't mean anything by it."

"That's precisely it," I fight back, "they don't mean anything by it, they couldn't care less." I ~~stare~~ ^{*and agitate*} at the melting ice in my ~~empty~~ glass. "'Naturally they ask you about your work,'" I repeat caustically, glaring around the room. "See that dame over there--the one with the green hair--she's slept with virtually every man in this room--but me."

proof

NORTHWEST

"Yes, it's your insomnia, I know."

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"Don't interrupt! She's a real professional sleeper —
arounder--it's her work. Why don't you slip over real
friendly-like and ask her who she's sleeping with lately?
Just to sort of ~~pass~~ pass the time of day. It's a natural
~~friendly~~ question."

"But that isn't the same ^{thing} and you know it."

"The hell it isn't. See old Goudge ~~is~~ over there
slopping up martinis? Guess I'll ~~go~~ ^{pop over and} ask him who he's
been embalming lately--besides himself. It's his work,
you know. Then we'll get ⁱⁿ the car and run out and kind
of ~~friendly-like~~ ^{casual-like} ask old Doc Parson's who he's aborting
this evening. After all, it's his work. Then we'll--"

"You're utterly impossible--let's get out of here."

And so it goes.

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The writer hates The Question then for many reasons:

because he's afraid of it, ⁻⁻ afraid he might try to answer --;

~~because~~ because he is bothered by its impertinence and bound-

lessly annoyed by this bold, if usually thoughtless,

invasion of his inmost privacy, ^{of the fragile dream} ~~the thing~~ that enables

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The Question he knows that it ^{will} reveals ⁵ far more about ~~it~~

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work. He knows that the ^{very} few people with whom he might ^{ever}

feel inclined to discuss his work are precisely the ones

who never ask him; that that is probably why he and they

became friends in the first place.

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But occasionally the writer is fairly trapped,
maybe by a former professor's wife or again by some
dear old soul who once knew his mother--someone he
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The writer glances wildly around for escape ^{on} ^{(but finds} ~~that there~~
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^{As it is good as Cott St North Country?"}

Neither can the writer—to get the hell out of
 there, ~~I mean:~~ ^{that is.}

NORTHWEST
 Bend

(Robert Traver has written eight books, including
 three novels, the first being ANATOMY OF A MURDER and the
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 all about Indians, iron ore and injustice," he cryptically
 explains.)

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4/11/66

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WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

by Robert Traver

1 more draft please,
cleaning up worst.

I am working on a new book—every writer is in some way always working on a new book—and for some reason I find ~~this~~ ^{about it} question the most baffling and annoying I am ever ~~ask~~ ^{asked}. To a ~~man~~ ^{And to a man the} few other writers I know ~~will~~ ^{will} agree with me. Why is this so?

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9 Ego, stamina, talent—these are the three basic ingredients

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^{can spell.} bastard who ^{occasionally} ~~can spell~~ ^{occasionally} ~~to be able to spell.~~

7

-- especially a novel --

Writing a book of any merit at all is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world. First ^{of all} there must be the elusive dream--what most nonwriters miscall the "plot"--

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Without ^{this} ~~that~~ there can be no ~~decent~~ ^{worth publishing} book. Never. So

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throughout the dreadful exhilarating months of trying

to impale ^{it} his dream on paper. He almost never does--the

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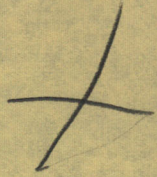
But he must first dream it to come anywhere near to

catching it at all. ^{seconds} All ~~my~~ very arty ^{spending} ~~about~~ it? ^{It also happens to be the solemn truth.}

NORTHWEST
Bond

NORTHWEST

Journal



So when somebody sidles up to him at a cocktail party
and ^{brightly inquires,} asks, "What are you working on now?" the writer is

[^] immediately alerted, ~~hostile~~ hostile and ^{warily} on guard. Who

is this ^{brash} character that dares invade and destroy my

dream? Doesn't he (or she) know that if a book ^{is} can be

summed up in a sentence it is ^{going to be} quite probably a very

~~bad~~ ^{these people} [^] ~~book?~~ Don't ~~they~~ [^] know that if ~~A~~ [^] ~~try~~ [^] to define ~~me~~ [^] ~~his~~ [^] ~~elusive~~ [^] ~~dream,~~ [^] to catch it on the wing, ~~is thereby~~ [^] ~~so~~ [^]

~~impale~~ [^] and destroy ~~it~~ [^] ~~No,~~ [^] alas, he, she or it doesn't [^] ~~realize~~ [^] it --

~~they~~ [^] never do. [^] ~~That's~~ [^] why ~~they~~ [^] ~~ask~~ [^] the question.

The Question.

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"Don't race your motor," my wife ~~has~~ warned me at a recent party, ^{finding me pointing in a corner} ~~parties, seeing me sulking~~ and wanting to go after being

asked The Question. "People see you little enough--you

rarely take me anywhere--and when they do ^{suddenly} ~~suddenly they~~

^{then} remember you are supposed to be a writer."

"What do you mean 'supposed?'"

"Don't interrupt! So they ask you what you're ^{naturally, since writing is your work} ~~to be civil and~~ working on, sort of to pass the time of day. They don't

mean anything by it."

"That's precisely it," I fight back, "they don't

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^{"naturally they ask you about your work"}

"Just a natural question," I repeat caustically,

glaring around the room. ^{radiant} "See that dame with the ~~the~~ ^{-- the one with the green hair --} green hair over there--she's slept with virtually every

man in this room--but me."

"Yes, ~~it's~~ it's your insomnia, I know."

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"Don't interrupt! ^{She's} The dame's a real professional
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 of pass the time of day? ^{It's a natural friendly question.}"

^{That}
 "But ~~it~~ isn't the same and you know it."

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 car and run out and ask old Doc Parson's who ~~hixx~~ he's
 aborting this evening. ^{After all → it's his work.} Then we'll--"

"You're utterly impossible--let's get out of here."

And so it goes.

NORTHWEST
 Bonds

the thing that enables him to write at all. —

for many reasons:

The writer hates The Questioner then, because he is afraid of it, afraid he might ^{try to} answer it, because he is bothered by its impertinence and boundlessly annoyed by this bold, if usually thoughtless, invasion of his privacy. Moreover from long exposure to The Questioner he knows that it reveals far more about the questioner than it ~~will~~ ~~could~~ ~~about~~ elicits from ~~the~~ him ~~writer~~ about his work. He knows that the few people with whom he might feel inclined to discuss his work are precisely the ones who never ask him; that that is probably why ^{he and} they become prominent in the first place.

summary

But it's no use; one foolish
question impairs another.

+

But occasionally the writer is fairly trapped,
it might be by a professor's wife or ^{maybe former} some dear old ^{again by}
soul who once knew his mother--someone he wouldn't
gratuitously hurt for the world. "Ha, ha, ha," he ^{may}
chortles delightedly. "It--let me see--it's just
a little historical thing all about Indians, iron
ore and injustice."

*Why to
the husband one question prompts another*

"How adorable--I simply can't wait to read it. Er--um--"

Does anyone get raped? ^{seriously, I mean?}

NORTHWEST

X

But it isn't only that. ^{He is bothered by} ~~It is~~ the essential
the bold invasion of privacy,
impertinence of the question, ~~as though one is suddenly~~

asked, "Who are you sleeping with these days?" The

writer is irritated and annoyed ^{and bored} because ~~he knows that~~ ^{from long exposure to}

^{it he knows} the question ~~reveals~~ ^{can elicit from} far more about the questioner than

it ever ~~does~~ ^{about} the writer ^{or} his work. The few

people ~~when~~ he might feel inclined to tell a little

about his new book ^{are} almost never ~~are~~ the ones who ask

him. ^{it of him.} They know; that's ^{probably} why he and they ^{would have} ~~are~~ friends ^{became} in the
first place.

NORTHWEST
Bond

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I am ^{working on} writing a new book -- every writer is in ^{for some reason} always working on a new book -- and I find this ^{question} ~~at times~~ the most baffling and annoying ^{I am ever asked.} I can get. So it must be the few other writers I know ^{well} agree with me. Why is this so?

A writer may be defined as a person who possesses the ego of a Napoleon, the stamina of a water buffalo, and a smidgin of talent. He needs the ego to ^{delude himself that} anyone would give the slightest good goddam ^{to read anything he might} write; the stamina to get it written; the smidgin of talent to get it ^{read} read. Ego, stamina, talent -- these are the three basic ingredients of the writer. If he lacks ^{one of the three} any ~~one~~ he is no writer. He may be a ^{cluttered} ~~ego-centric~~ bore -- of which ^{also} there is ^{no shortage} -- a ^{daily} slave to his desk, or an artistic dilettante ^{of awesome reputation,} but he is no writer. The writer ^{is} a tough hard-working ego-centric bastard who can spell ^{at all} ~~at all~~.

Writing a book of any merit ^{at all} is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world. First there must be the elusive dream -- what most non-writers miscall the "plot" -- the idea, the germ, the ^{gnarling} ~~gnarling~~ that clamors out. Without that there can be no ^{book}. The writer ^{never} ~~the~~ ^{So} ~~the~~ writer clings to this ^{evanescent} dream throughout the dreadful exhilarating months of trying to ^{impale his dream} get it down on paper. He almost never does -- the full ^{of his} ~~full~~ dream, that is -- and most ^{of his} books are monuments to this failure ^{incl} of to catch his dream as he ^{incl} dreamed it. But he must first dream it to come anywhere near ^{to catching it} at all. All very artsy, isn't it?

So when somebody sidles up to him at a cocktail party and asks, "What are you working on now?" the writer is immediately alerted, hostile and on guard. Who is this character that dares invade and disturb my dream? Doesn't he (or she) know that if a book can be summed up in a sentence it is quite probably a very bad book? Don't they know that if I try to define my ^{elusive} dream, to

the ^{bold-} ~~amorous~~ ^{of primary}

+

catch it on the wing, is thereby to snuff and destroy it?
No, alas, he, she or it doesn't -- they never do.

But it isn't only that. It is the ^{essential} ~~importance~~ ^{of the question}, as though ^{and so} suddenly ~~be~~ asked, "Who are you sleeping with these days?" ~~It is the~~ The writer is irritated and annoyed because he knows that the question reveals far more about the questioner than it ever ~~does~~ ^{will} about the writer or his work. The few people who ^{he} might feel inclined to tell a little about his new work book almost never are the ones who ask him. They know; that's why he and they are friends.

The question is most often asked by people on the periphery of the writer's life: glib or sadistic ^{literary} interviewers or on radio or TV, or by the same people simply trying to ^{save} ~~give~~ a sagging interview and keep the show on the road; perspiring autograph seekers ("no, madam, I only initial paperbacks," I am some days tempted to say); casual acquaintances; total strangers; and always, of course, the ^{fluttering} ~~butterfly~~ ^{always} ~~one~~ ^{encounters} at cocktail parties. "What are you working on now?" they coo. In other words -- and this is the corroding knowledge to the writer -- by people who couldn't care less.

But occasionally the writer is fairly trapped. It might be ^{his} a professor's wife or some dear ^{old} ~~soul~~ ^{one} who knew his mother -- someone he wouldn't grudgingly hunt for the world. "Ha, ha, ha," he chortles delightedly. "It -- let me see -- it's just a little historical thing all about Indians, iron ore and injustice."

"How adorable -- I simply can't wait to read it."
Does anyone get raped?"

The writer glances wildly around for escape. There is none. He smiles fatuously, wagging his tongue. "You'll see," he says, the perfect old tease. "I wouldn't want to spoil it for you."

" I simply can't wait."

Neither can the writer -- to get the hell out
of there, I mean.

eight books, including three novels, the first being
(Robert Graves has written Anatomy of a Murder being the first
the second
and Laughing Whitefish the latest, "just a little historical
thing all about Indians, man one and woman, I be explainin'")
"of cryptically")

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

by

Robert Traver

I am working on a new book--every writer is in some way always working on a new book--and I find this the most baffling and annoying question I am ever asked. To a man the few other writers I know mournfully agree with me. Why is this so?

A writer may be defined as a person who possesses the ego of a Napoleon, the stamina of a water buffalo, and a smidgin of talent. He needs the ego to delude himself that anyone would give the slightest damn to read anything he might ever write; the stamina to get it written; and the wee dash of talent to get it read.

Ego, stamina, talent--these are the three basic ingredients ~~which~~ every writer must have; if he lacks any one of them he is probably no writer--though heaven knows he may be an egocentric bore--of which, alas, there is no shortage--or an ink-stained collector of rejection slips, or an artistic dilettante of awesome sensitivity. But he is no real writer. Most simply put, a writer is a tough, hard-working, self-centered ^{character} ~~bastard~~ ^{occasionally} ~~who can sometimes~~ ^{some of} spell the words he uses.

Writing a book--especially a novel--of even the slightest merit is probably one of the hardest tasks in the world. First of all there must be the dream--what most nonwriters persistently miscall the "plot"--the idea, the germ, the gnawing gnat that clamors out. Without this vision there can be no book worth publishing. Never. So the writer nurses and clings to and feeds on this evanescent dream throughout the dreadful exhilarating

transfer from his mind to
paper the luminous incandescent
quality of the

months of trying to impale it on paper. He almost never does--
the full pure original dream, that is--and most of his books
are monuments to his failure to ~~capture the elusive~~ thing he
once dreamed. But first he must dream it and cling to it
through hell or high water to come anywhere near overtaking
it at all. Sounds all very arty doesn't it? It also happens
to be the bitter solemn truth.

So when somebody sidles up to him at a cocktail party and
archly inquires, "What are you working on now?" the writer is
immediately alerted, hostile, wary, on guard. Who is this
brash character that dares invade and destroy my dream?
Doesn't he (or she) know that if a book or even the dream of
a book can be summed up in a sentence it ~~is or~~ will ~~be~~ quite
probably ^{be} a very bad book? Don't these people know that if a
writer tries to define his dream, to catch it on the wing, he
by the very act risks destroying it forever? No, alas, he or
she doesn't ever realize it--they never do. That's why they
keep asking "The Question."

The Question is most often asked by people on the periphery
of the writer's life: glib or sadistic literary interviewers
or on radio or TV, or by the same people trying bravely to save
a sagging interview and keep the show on the road; perspiring
autograph seekers ("No, Madam, I only initial paperbacks," I
swear I am one day going to say); casual acquaintances; total
strangers; and always, of course, the fluttering migratory
butterflies one encounters at cocktail parties. "What are you
working on now?" they coo. The question is almost invariably
asked--and to the writer this is the final corroding thing--by
people who couldn't care less.

NORTHWEST

Land

"Don't race your motor," my wife warned me at a recent party, finding me sulking in a corner and wanting to ~~leave~~ *get hence* after being asked The Question. "People see you little enough-- you rarely take me anywhere--and when suddenly they do they remember you are supposed to be a writer."

"What do you mean 'supposed?'"

"Don't interrupt! So naturally, since writing is your work *J* they ask ^{you} what you're working on. They only ask it to be civil and sort of ~~to~~ ^{to} pass the time of day. They don't mean anything by it."

"That's precisely it," I fight back, "they don't mean anything by it, they couldn't care less." I agitate the ~~melting~~ ^{empty} ice in my glass. "Naturally they ask you about your work," I repeat caustically, glaring around the room. "See that dame over there--the one with the green hair--she's slept with virtually every man in this room--but me."

"Yes, ~~it's~~ your insomnia, I know."

"Don't interrupt! She's a real professional sleeper-*J* arounder--it's her work. Why don't you slip over real friendly-like and ask her who she's sleeping with lately? Just to sort of pass the time of day. It's a natural question."

"But that isn't the same thing and you know it."

"The hell it isn't. See old Goudge over there slopping up martinis? Guess I'll pop over and ask him who he's been embalming lately--besides himself. It's his work, you know. Then we'll get in the car and run out and kind of casual-like ask old Doc Parsons who he's aborting this evening. After all, it's his work. Then we'll--"

"You're utterly impossible--let's get out of here."

And so it goes.

The writer hates The Question then for many reasons: because he's afraid of it--afraid he might try to answer--; because he is bothered by its impertinence and boundlessly annoyed by this bold, if usually thoughtless, invasion of his inmost privacy, of the fragile dream that enables him to write at all. Moreover ^o ~~fr~~ long exposure to The Question he knows that it reveals far [^] more about the questioner than it ever elicits from him about his work. He knows that the very few people with whom he might ever feel inclined to discuss his work are precisely the ones who never ask him; that that is probably why ~~he~~ and they became friends in the first place.

But occasionally the writer is fairly trapped, maybe by a former ^{teacher's} ~~professor's~~ wife or again by some dear old soul who once knew his mother--someone he wouldn't gratuitously hurt for the world. "Ha, ha, ha," he may chortle ^{with false} ~~delightedly~~. "It--let me see--it's just a little historical thing all about Indians, iron ore and injustice."

But airy evasion is no use; one foolish question inspires ~~still~~ another. "How perfectly adorable--I simply can't wait to read it," she runs on. "Er--um--does anyone get raped?--seriously, I mean?"

The writer glances wildly around for an escape hatch but finds none. He smiles fatuously, wagging his finger at his questioner. "You'll see," he says, the charming old tease. "I wouldn't spoil it for you for anything."

"I simply can't wait," she says, gaily fluttering on her way.

Neither can the writer--to get the hell out of there, that is.

(Robert Traver has written eight books, including three novels, the first being ANATOMY OF A MURDER and the latest LAUGHING WHITEFISH, "just a little historical thing all about Indians, iron ore and injustice," he ~~cryptically~~ ^{reluctantly} explains.)

NORTHWEST

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