Notwithstanding a huge traffic jam on the AYE, Edmund Wee makes it just in time for our appointment over coffee before his scheduled appearance later that evening for our Writers’ Centre’s Reading Series. He is thoughtfully wearing a name tag but it isn’t necessary, as I recognize him immediately from his signature black attire, black glasses, and red blanket.

We don’t have much time so I ask him straightaway:

**How does a former designer of the year (2008) decide to drop everything and form an independent publishing company? Not exactly renowned as a lucrative business.**

**EW:** I realized there was an entire generation of young Singaporean writers who could not get their books published. And an entire generation of readers who weren’t getting access to Singaporean stories. My design background served me well, as we pride ourselves for taking care of the whole package. Each book is a bespoke product. We don’t publish a manuscript and cross our fingers. There are many important details that can make or break a new book: good design, paper stock, catchy title, cover blurbs…everything matters.

**JG:** Are things different now from when you were growing up?

**EW:** Of course! When I was young, a life in the arts was frowned upon. Poetry was declared to be a luxury and there fore careers in medicine and engineering were encouraged instead. But nowadays, if you tell your parents you want to be a writer, an artist, a poet, or a screenwriter, they will say: ‘Follow your dreams.’

**FIRST DRAFT:**
*Dino the chihuahua became frightened and whined during a storm. This caused Laurel to be late for class. It showed the responsibility of pet owners to these things dogs go through.***

**SECOND DRAFT:**
*Dino the chihuahua became frightened and whined during a storm. The verbalized manifestation of his terror caused Laurel to be late for class. Laurel’s choice to interrupt her own day in response to Dino’s show of fear shows the responsibility pet owners feel toward dogs’ performances of need.***

In your revision process, make sure your terms are as precise as possible, so that your reader has the clearest possible access to your ideas. **WC**

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**WHAT’S INSIDE:**

**DEAR LARRY LETTER**
**RANTER: SHOULD WE USE Clichés?**
**FROM THE NIGHTSTAND**
**CONSULTATION CORNER**
**AND MORE!**

**WRITERS’ CENTRE**
**READING SERIES:**

**EDMUND WEE**

*a interview by Jennifer Gargiulo*

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**THIS, THESE, IT, THINGS**

*a faculty tip from Laurel Fantauzzo*

At some point in your academic career, you may read these frustrating (and frustrated!) comments from your professor: “Vague. Too general. Unclear. Be specific.” One practical way to reach specificity in your writing is to flag your paper for the following words: This, These, It, Things, and their variations. This what? These what? What better, more direct terms and ideas are you skipping over by using the relatively empty “it” and “things?” You may protest that you don’t want to be repetitive. We don’t want you to be repetitive either! So instead of using vague pronouns, reach for a thesaurus. Re-examine your sentence structures. What exactly do you want to say? An example:

**FIRST DRAFT:**
*Dino the chihuahua became frightened and whined during a storm. This caused Laurel to be late for class. It showed the responsibility of pet owners to these things dogs go through.***

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*Dino the chihuahua became frightened and whined during a storm. The verbalized manifestation of his terror caused Laurel to be late for class. Laurel’s choice to interrupt her own day in response to Dino’s show of fear shows the responsibility pet owners feel toward dogs’ performances of need.***

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Come sign up for a consultation at yalenus.mywconline.com today!
It’s Here
Like A Dewdrop,
Sparkle-sun,
Evanescence’s Merry Messenger.
Zealous like a zephyr
Mellow, and mellifluous
That croon, a crying cocoon:
Wisp-like, a velvet whisper…
Dreams! And awake and I –
Alas, elusive escape!
Illusionary and it’s
Forever mine.

Mirage
by Vasudha Kataruka

Books & Banter
by Jennifer Gargiulo, featuring Christopher Anthony
(Deputy Director Human Resources)

What is your image of a writer?
Someone in tune with life.

Your favourite author?
I don’t have any…everything and anything.

Last great book that you would recommend?
The Enthusiastic Employee by David Sirota

Best writing tip you ever received?
Clarity.

First book you remember enjoying as a child?
The Hardy Boys series.

What is on your night table?
Cultural Intelligence by David Livermore

Have you been to the writers’ centre?
No, I haven’t. But I am happy to hear that it is available for staff and faculty as well as students.

Would you recommend going there?
Definitely. They can help with structure, developing stories, guidance.

Best thing about Yale-NUS?
It’s people friendly. Everyone here is very approachable.

And finally, your life in one sentence?
Live life to its fullest.

Edmund Wee gave a talk about publishing, at Yale-NUS on September 16th, 2016.
“You should say any last words you have to him now.”

I was silent. Maybe I was shy, or I didn’t know what to do except trace the rise and fall of that bright green line with my swollen eyes. Each peak lower than the last, then a continuous flatline. A constant loud beep.

I was still silent.

* 

“You need to take care of your mom and brother now, you know?”
All I could think was, who’s going to fetch me to school tomorrow?

* 

“Teck Long was a great husband, father, and friend that always had my back…” Damn it, how was I supposed to stand here in front of everyone, listening to all this without crying.

I musn’t, couldn’t let them see me cry.

* 

The hard part was figuring out a response to well-intentioned “are you okay’s.” The harder part was maintaining steady eye contact through soon-to-be-watery eyes.

But the hardest part was showing the right balance of sadness and strength, so they wouldn’t think I was either heartless or needing a shrink.

* 

Each time your death anniversary rolls around, I marvel that yet another year has passed. Has it been thirteen already?

In those thirteen years, I learnt to nonchalantly switch radio channels when Father’s Day ads played while mom was in the car. I learnt to forge mom’s signature on school forms, so she wouldn’t see the blank next to where she had to sign.

I learnt to answer “so what does your father do?” in the least awkward way possible.

“He actually passed on when I was nine.”
“Oh… I’m sorry.”
“It’s okay, it’s been a long time.”

–reassuring smile to ease tension–

I still haven’t figured out if it is appropriate for me to smile there.

* 

I don’t miss you most days, but some days I do. When I see other dads with their children, when I’m tired or broken, when I write things like this and the memories return.

But I miss you only with fondness, not sadness; you’ve left me with too much to be thankful for and happy about.

* 

My only regret is letting you go without saying anything to you in those last seconds. Did you wonder why your daughter didn’t speak after your son finished? Did you want for a familiar voice to interrupt the slowing beeping?

* 

I’m sorry you never got to hear everything I had to say.

So if you’re looking over my shoulder right now in some ghostly incarnation, these are my last words that you never heard.

I wish you could’ve been around to see for yourself how I took control of my own life so your brothers (my uncles) never needed to step in; how I may not be the most talented or intelligent, but tried to be the most driven; how I work hard when it counts but still have fun most of the time, because you taught me to work hard and play harder; how I try every day to be optimistic, easy-going, loyal, generous, capable, and all the many good things that you were.

I think I became the strong and mature daughter you would have wanted me to be. I think, I hope you would have been proud of me.

* 

But those aren’t really my last words. I will continue saying new words in the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth year, and many more to come, through everything I do and how I live.

Stick around to watch, will you?
We often dislike what is boring. The predictable cannot capture, engage, much less inspire or provoke the mind. But the unknown is unsafe and many of us turn to the page, the artist's page (whether it's a canvas, the photograph, the scene in a movie, the theatre stage, etc.) to be unsettled. Safe, then, is, well, it's the known, the often repeated, the cliché. As readers we are not enticed by clichés; to us, perhaps, they signal only the writer's laziness; the explorer who doesn't leave the ship to embark on new land. Like a calculator degenerates our capacity to compute, so does the cliché lull the imagination. It asphyxiates our need for new expression by "stuffing down our throats" the phrasing which already communicates directly what we, generally, not specifically, want to say. Language becomes about efficiency; the cliché it's most trusted tool. Clichés do not denote a lack of originality as much as they stand in for a sort of complacency, both on the part of the writer as well as the reader. Our understanding of clichés is retrospective to an extent. Having two lovers rendezvous over a balcony would have seemed original to Shakespeare while composing Romeo and Juliet. It seems original to us too, irrespective of the number of times we read the play. And yet when we encounter similar scenes in contemporary stories, we are disappointed. All clichés were original once; and an original idea – or phrase – deteriorates less through repetition, and more due to an utter failure of renewal. We may be disappointed, so to speak, not because two lovers are meeting again over a balcony, but because the new scene seems devoid of what was compelling about it in the first place: a distinct imaginative force.

Clichés are a kind of resonance. They click; echo; reverberate. Each word, phrase harks back to a preceding voice, a well-told story, a graven image. It is a nod to the stock form; simple agreement. Nolo Contendere.

No shit Sherlock. Achilles's heel. Avoid _____ like a plague.

Somewhere in the first is the legacy of Doyle. The second resurrects bits and bobs of the Trojan War, of Paris, Achilles, and Helen. And the last is portentous—be it the plagues of Egypt, the Black Death, Mad Cow Disease, AIDS, or Zika.

Clichés iterate rather than invent. They almost always remind us of the existent with little intention for reform. The revisionary impulse—if we must demand from them—is to recite. The expertise of the common platitude is repetition, not repartee. But to repeat, like a broken record, isn't just to do or say the same thing again. We pay homage to the backstory; to that which has been said; to the one who first said Everything will be OK.

We use clichés because they have been given to us. Like a flapjack, they fill us when we're starved and lazy. Sometimes the humble works for the hungry. They are meant to be convenient, not creative. A vanilla ice cream at a Walls' cart isn't supposed to be fancy like Heston Blumenthal's frozen bacon and eggs. It is what it is; and we take it as it is given.

Yes, clichés are easy; but easy doesn't mean cheap. Think of them as something borrowed, and one pays back by passing them on to another. One gives because she has been given. Also, she would like to receive again. Perhaps—as ecclesiastical as this is cliché—she does unto others as she would have them do unto her. So tell her that there is a silver lining somewhere; that this is the time of her life; that there is a happily-ever-after. WC

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RANTER: SHOULD WE USE CLICHÉS...?

by Doc Car

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by Dini Parayitam

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Dear Larry,

My life is the story I know by far the best, so how do I write someone else’s story? Whenever I sit down to write a piece of fiction, I find myself writing my observations, my experiences, and my lessons learned. I draw characters from the people I know, spin ideas from my academic interests, and run the plotline along the track of my life.

Stories like this are productive as a means of self-reflection, but not necessarily as a means of communication. For my writing to effectively communicate, it cannot only speak to the story of my life, but also to common experiences and feelings. I do not know, however, how to distinguish what is common from what is specific to my own story.

How do I draw out the common aspects of my story to shape new stories that will speak to people with experiences both like and unlike my own?

Thank you.

A storyteller

The impulse to write a short story is always, I suspect, the impulse to revisit the story of one’s life via the lens of someone else’s: real or imagined. It is to suggest that by, here, looking at the story of a woman on the street, a man in his room, who both live in a city that is similar to but also different from mine, I am ironically made to bring to the fore all that I know, by experience, to be true: what I know of anger, what I understand of love, what I am sceptical about when it comes to the world’s notion of justice, what it means, ultimately, to live deeply, intimately, in the world.

When I talk to writers of fiction who are afraid that no one can relate to their story, I tell them to trust that readers (good readers, at least) are looking for a kind of specificity in the rendering of that world. It’s what draws us to fiction, anyway: not that we see reflected on the page something that perfectly matches our own experience, but that we are brought into a world that is rendered so concretely, so truthfully, that we cannot help but be reminded of what it means to be engaged in the world.

Not just the “table in the corner” but the table whose rough edges remind us of the texture of stems in our father’s garden. Not just the “light on a landscape” but the exact shade at 5 in the afternoon when day knows it is about to end but then takes this last ditch attempt to make its presence known on a busy side street. It is this intent gaze, this unrelenting attempt to capture these moments, that in the end, make a story “relatable”.

So look not too far, or worry too much, about what a stranger may or may not be able to relate to. Instead, I suggest, look deeply at what is at hand. Bring your sense of dusk into the story you are writing. Allow the serrated feeling of that particular kind of guilt infuse the character you are inventing. Remind the reader what it feels like to live in the world, and fully.

Dear Larry,

How important is it to be aware of one’s writing process? And how do you know when that process needs to change? Does it change?

With thanks.

A poet

To write by hand, or on a laptop. To wake up early in the morning or to write in the middle of the night. To write everyday. To write when “inspiration hits”. I love this question.

This quick and easy answer would be, well, if no writing is happening then the process needs to be changed. Just a few weeks ago, I was stuck in a block in my present writing project, looking desperately for a place around campus where I could sit and “plant my thoughts in”. Nothing worked. Not the library close to midnight. Not the table against the wall near Cafe Agora in the middle of the afternoon. It took me a few restless hours, a sleepless night, and the next morning, to figure out that I needed to head off campus and write in what for me has always been one of the most productive writing places in Singapore: hawker centres. The project I’m working on now has to do with cities and it shouldn’t have been a surprise for me to realise that I needed the buzz of crowded streets, the background noise of strangers getting a meal, to activate the part of me that was thinking of urban spaces. Duh, I should have known this from the start!

The thing with processes though is that sometimes we think it’s a matter of “finding the one that fits our style”, when perhaps the real challenge is finding the ritual, the mode, that will fit perfectly with the subject matter that we’re working on. I find that perfectly ordered quite spaces are perfect when I’m editing. When I’m generating material, I need the bustle and recklessness of crowds. Just recently, I’ve found out that bus 33 is perfect for rumination— at least for now. Find your bus. Find that street or room or corner of the Saga Lecture Hall. If you don’t feel that wonderful tingle of “inspiration”, maybe it’s time to take a walk.

WC
I’ve just finished Stigmata — “Bathsheba” and “Love of the Wolf” are my favourites. The Newly Born Woman sits on my table. Like The Book of Prometheus, it is waiting for me. A dog-eared copy of “The Laugh of the Medusa” is somewhere in my folder. Every piece needs re-reading, especially the ones I have not read.

[I can’t keep up with Hélène Cixous #storyofmylife]

Hélène Cixous is, quite undoubtedly, one of the most prolific writers of our time. Her œuvre, which comprises some fifty books and over a hundred essays (and still counting), spans a myriad of subject matters and genres—including novel, poetry, drama, essay, critical theory, philosophy. Cixous produces in abundance, almost excessively, because why not? Because writing is the only way one can be sure that something has happened. That, for better or worse, one is alive because it did happen.

Still writing is more than that. It assures us that something (as beautiful, or bleak, as love) can happen, so we respire in the meantime. Thus, writing is the breath, Cixous writes in White Ink: “When I do not write, it is as if I had died.”

What is at stake is life. So we write in order to live—to not be shocked by the lemons thrown at us, nor to be sour afterward. One might consider writing as a kind of perseverance: “Of never becoming resigned, consoled,” to quote Cixous.

But I think of it as perseveration. That is, a psychiatric diagnosis for the repetition of a certain word, thought, or an action long after the stimulus has ceased to exist. Most writers—the good ones, I think—suffer from this condition of the mind. They return to some detail: a hotel room, the yellow wallpaper, a madeleine, a pair of silk stockings, the tree on her back, the way he said “I prefer not to...” They ruminate on it obsessively, and repeat it to us. That detail is their baby, their albatross, their cross. They perseverate so there is no death. So that we do not forget Sethe, we do not forget Bartleby.

The difference between perseverance and perseveration is the crux to understanding the Cixousian sense of writing. We don’t push on in life; we stay on. The only persevering act is that of remaining in the moment, of stretching out what has already happened. I think this is what Cixous means when she says writing is a way of “pushing back forgetfulness.” It isn’t so much to remember as it is to not forget.

life. WC
We hear that all the time, and often ourselves consider it valid for a film we watch. We may have read the book as children and built up an image of its characters and an attachment to its plot (don't get me started on The Secrets of Moonacre), or we might read it later and notice omissions (if you can bear it, read We Need to Talk About Kevin). And yet even when we love a book, even when we may anticipate being disappointed by a film, we still buy the ticket. Production companies are banking on this, because book titles sell. We enter the cinema excited to rediscover our favourite characters, hopeful that this film may reveal something new, and denying that we'll walk out with that little (or loud) voice murmuring that the book was better.

Walking home, that thought affects the way we talk about the film with our date/friend/babysitting kid/mother about it. Perhaps we'll talk about the scene they skipped that was vital to the plot, or about how they made the female protagonist a deco-

ervative love-interest, perhaps even rage about changes to the ending. On a rare occasion the screenwriting team may have completely overhauled the original novel (see V for Vendetta), changing characters, plot, and even setting. Conversations like these are entertaining, but like a simple ‘compare and contrast’ assignment they need more of a push to get into a real analysis, lingering on differences rather than implications.

Consider what a conversation about an adaptation could look like if the viewer were to step beyond juxtaposition. Looking at the film in its own right raises questions about the shots, character development, plot, cinematography, sound effects or CGI, or about set design and colour palette. There are innumerable details that go into creating one image, one scene, and one movie, each worth analysis. Adding the literary dimension to that conversation, outside of adaptation forces the viewer to abandon a fidelity discourse, pushes the analysis towards the impact of changes. Why is V suddenly a freedom fighter rather than an anarchist? What is the effect of losing the epistolary structure in Lionel Shriver's novel? How does the emphasis on Yorkshire in Cary Fukunaga's Jane Eyre place it in conversation with the book and previous adaptations?

There are so many ways in which one text can be adapted to the screen (pick any Hamlet), and so much goes into one film, that to limit discussion and analysis to comparison without implications discredits both iterations of the narrative. The recently screened Adaptation is a key illustration of the limits of fidelity discourse (based on The Orchid Thief). Charlie Kaufman's radical re-interpretation forces the viewer to abandon a conversation about fidelity, because there's too much going on around the plot of the 'original' novel. Extrapolate this to adaptation as a whole, and you'll realise that even if you feel the book was better, the film has more to say than that. WC

FROM THE NIGHTSTAND

of Dini Parayitam

SONS AND LOVERS, D.H. Lawrence – I have been with the Morels all semester. First, with Gertrude, of course, and the disillusionment of her marriage with Walter, and through the births of her four children. Then, with her eldest son, William's engagement—to the humorously demanding Louisa, a.k.a. Gipsy—and subsequent death. Now, on the long walks with Paul and Miriam; on Thursdays, the algebra lessons. And Paul's increasingly agitated attitude toward his mother. At the core of the novel, there is no real plot; perhaps, only a vague bildungsroman if one had to fit the book into a category. I read the novel on the page, on my phone, in the elevator, walking to work, in the dining halls, on the MRT or a cab ride somewhere around Singapore. Sometimes, I reread the same scenes. The reader is just eavesdropping and watching the members of the family closely, like an unacknowledged but welcome guest.

KNOWN AND STRANGE THINGS, Teju Cole – a collection of essays on photographers, musicians, and writers admired by the author (James Baldwin, V.S. Naipaul, W.G. Sebald, Derek Walcott, and Aleksander Hemon, to name a few of the writers). It's a luxury to read how carefully and precisely writers describe the subjects which inspire and engage them; the observations are intimate. The book echoes Roland Barthes's MYTHOLOGIES, which I'm reading simultaneously; topics range from how integrity is portrayed by characters in old Roman films to wrestling to French toys to the nature of literary criticism, etc. The French writer's wit and sharpness is unmatched. This brought me back to Barthes's CAMERA LUCIDA, an autobiographical investigation of photography. After reading Cole's essay on Peter Sculthorpe, and while listening to the Australian composer's "Kakadu" online, I might scroll through Stiegitz's photographs of Georgia O'Keefe. These books are reminders not to be inert, and to seek and immerse myself in all mediums of art—both intellectually and emotionally—to find that which will indirectly inspire me. A sensuous curiosity of art cannot be overlooked as fuel for life, and more importantly, the sentence. WC
Over the past two years of giving consultations at the Writers’ Centre, I have grown accustomed to mixed responses from students when I introduce them to free-writing. For some students, free-writing is immediately gratifying. They get so many thoughts on the paper in what feels like no time at all. For others, writing quickly and imperfectly is stressful, and I imagine it leaves some wondering—what’s the point? It seems right to dedicate a bit of space in The Hawker to answering that question.

In Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow describes free-writing as “an exercise in bringing together [the] process of producing words and putting them on the page” (Elbow 6). Most of us, especially perfectionists, edit at the same time as we write. We think of a sentence, think about how we might edit it, evaluate and edit it again, and only then type the ‘finished’ product. Free-writing cuts out the middle steps—you think of something and you put it down immediately. Editing comes later.

So for instance, when I sit down to write an essay, my process without free-writing would look like this:

**WRITER IN MY HEAD:** Here’s an idea for a topic sentence! Starts to type

**EDITOR IN MY HEAD:** Ugh no that sounds bad.

**WRITER:** Backspace—backspace—backspace

**EDITOR:** No, no, no think harder.

-Repeat for 10 minutes—

**EDITOR:** Hmmmmm. I don’t know if you really understood this reading.

**WRITER:** Yeah. Okay, maybe I need to think more about this. Opens up Facebook and takes a Buzzfeed quiz.

But things go differently when I incorporate free-writing into my process:

**WRITER** writes, writes, writes for 5 minutes. Editor is silent.

**EDITOR:** Okay, some of this is junk, but these two sentences looks pretty good. Try expanding that idea for 5 more minutes.

**WRITER** writes more for 5 minutes

**EDITOR:** Okay, there’s something like an idea coming out. This is a pretty focused idea you can take to office hours.

I am not suggesting that in ten minutes of free-writing, I can produce a first draft with anything resembling a structure. But whereas I might be sitting anxiously in front of a blank Word document for quite a long time, timed free-writing guarantees that I’ll churn out enough sentences, words, and new thoughts to build on and revise.


**COMING UP IN THE WRITERS’ CENTRE**

**READING:**

**VUJAY SESHAADRI & NICOLE WALKER**
11 November, 12pm
Elm Rector’s Commons

**READING: WRITING STUDENTS**
14 November, 6pm
Cendana Common Lounge

**LATE NIGHT WRITE**
14 November, 9pm-2am
The Writers’ Centre

**JOURNALING WITH WELLNESS**
21 November, 7.30-9.30pm
The Writers’ Centre

**KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR NEXT SEMESTER’S VISITING WRITERS:**

- **GERONIMO JOHNSON**
- **COLLIER NOGUES**
- **NICHOLAS WONG**
- **LISA ZEIDNER**