

Writing with different forms

Guy Gunaratne

In good conversation with an interesting friend, I describe my current working week.

I'm having fun, I say. Between forms mostly. There is the play, the novel, and the film I've been asked to contribute a draft screenplay for.

No, that sounds exhausting, they say.

Not really, I say, because one thing animates another. I'm being surprised almost constantly.

When I mention that word 'surprise' to a fellow writer, they usually understand what I mean. I'm referring to the sudden turn that excites and suddenly enlivens a dead manuscript. Joyful moments that work to undo weeks of dispiriting labour. Often, it arrives as a short-lived wind that provides just enough to keep going.

Other times, during darker periods filled with self-doubt and self-flagellation, it comes as grace does from a merciful God. Either way, it keeps me at my desk.

These surprises, when working between forms, appear to me as strange lenticular arms that relate to other works. I'll be writing a difficult scene in a play, for instance, and there will be a jolt of recognition relating the play's political inferences to more personal intimacies present in the novel I'm writing. If I'm lucky, there might also be a contrast that flickers with meaning and stirs my curiosity. The pieces of writing might be far apart in form and subject matter, but there is now a new valence through which to view both.

It feels extraordinary, I say, like a gift.

Surprises in this way act like connective tissue. A line from one thing explores previously unrelated associations and elements in the other. New ideas bubble up from these connections. This is what enlivens the story, keeps me going. I am led down previously unimaginable paths and feel brave enough to explore where they might lead.

There is, of course, always the danger of following spasms of enthusiasm alone. That way leads to unfinished effort – which, frankly, terrifies me. So, I try not to flit and, instead, try to hold off for an extended period, cultivating indirect patterns as they emerge, allowing ideas to return, before pinning anything down on paper.

When I try to explain all this to my interesting friend, they muse for a moment and ask whether I ever worry that I'll never master anything. I mutter something irritably in reply, since I've always located the word 'mastery' as a vaguely eighteenth-century notion, alongside the words 'domination', 'rivalry' and 'seizure'.

Writing has never felt like work to me, I say, mostly it's a case of getting out of my own way so the writing gets done.

I say this, but I know it will obfuscate more than justify as an explanation.

Though it does feel truer now than it ever has. Working with different forms has never felt like spinning plates. Never do I feel torn, or impatient with myself – which I often do when working on a novel for years. Plus, somewhat counter-intuitively, I've found that more work gets finished, and fewer ideas are neglected.

Well, good luck with your 'prolific era', says my interesting friend as we wave goodbye.

Thanks, I say, smarting slightly from the tease.

Guy Gunaratne

Guy Gunaratne is a British novelist and playwright. Winner of the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Jhalak Prize, and longlisted for the Booker, Goldsmith's and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, Guy Gunaratne served as Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge and is the current editor of *The Review* by WritersMosaic and Jhalak Foundation.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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