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### **On Writing, On Running and On the Body**

Writing is war. Writing is a game. Writing is work against the ephemerality of life. Writing is a pilgrimage to the past. Writing is the echo of knowledge. Writing is justice. Writing is restoration. Writing is archiving. Writing is damasking. Writing is deception. Writing is neurotic compulsion. Writing is inspiration. Writing is calculation. Writing is exhilaration. Writing is technique. Or: writing is self-assertion, catharsis, self-definition, meditation, necromancy, exorcism, declaration of love, shaping of reality, politics, theater for the ego. Writing is cleansing, putting things in order, structuring the self. Writing is archaeology, writing is the cultivation of ornamental plants. Writing is a cloud, Writing is agricultural. Writing is the gardening of herbs. Writing is window cleaning and seeing more clearly, writing is a well-paying hobby. I did not invent these explanations. To define and describe their writing, writers tend to use the wildest comparisons, metaphors and theoretical considerations. Many of these descriptions and explanations may be true, but they have nothing to do with the reality of my writing. This may be because many writers tend to make their arguments detached from everyday life and with a certain generality. They very often do not consider quotidian questions of motivation, time-management, deadlines, the quarrels with the non-writing environment and the economic pressure. They almost always leave questions about the connection between body and writing unanswered. These are important issues in my daily life as a writer, which is why I want to take a rather pragmatic approach to explaining my writing and *how* I do it.

It is always difficult for me to say precisely *what* my writing is about, but for this panel I will try to, because I want to talk about *how* I do it: off the top of my head I would say that I tell stories about real people—about their self-perception, about sex, about pain, about euphoria, emotion and intellect, about the conflicts between the inner and outer life, about memory, about the physical realities of my characters' lives. I try not to stop on the surface of clothes or buildings or words or language. I try not to be artificial and superficial. I want the characters in my stories to be real, graspable and physical. I want my language to serve my content. Writing—to me—means to be physical. My words are only stand-ins for real characters, my language represents them. My characters must have a body—at least in the reader's imagination—and I have to use mine to get theirs on paper.

**Semi-Pro Basketball.** I have to start with a very concrete and tangible example. At age fourteen I stopped reading literature and spent the next five years in a gym, playing basketball, lifting weights, running, practicing techniques and tactics twelve times a week. I learned statistics by heart, I read and re-read the autobiographies of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson. I made it to semi-pro-status in the first German league. More than half of my teammates from those days still play professionally in Germany, Italy, Greece and Finland – but I was too small, not ruthless enough, not brave and not cold-blooded enough. At some point I picked up reading again and soon after I started to write poems and stories. I like to see it this way: I was too interested in literature to become a professional basketball player. I stopped playing ball and went off to university. I read Max Frisch and Günter Grass, but also Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Raymond Carver, John Updike and John Irving (who also considers sports important for his writing). I went to hear lectures, I went out to

drink beer, I became interested in movies and theater. Because I could not sleep without exhausting my body I started running around the lake in Hamburg. After two years I ran around the lake twice every day and ran my first marathon—a semi-professional basketball-player turned culturally interested long distance runner. I read, I ran, I still lifted weights and from time to time I wrote a poem. You can see that sports has always been a big part of my everyday life and remains so to this day. I would like to explain the analogy between sports and writing and my writing's direct dependency on physicality. I write well when I train well; I write like I run; my writing only has the desired physical quality when I do physical work as well; in a way my body is my pen.

**Training, Discipline, Ritual.** The alarm-clock is set to six a.m. This is a regular weekday morning, it is April, it is raining, it is two degrees Celsius and a cold wind is blowing. I run first across the city, then into the forest and then along the river. I can watch my body torture itself: belly aches, my feet get wet and cold very quickly, they are not even warm after seven miles, my knees and leg muscles hurt and I have to will myself along the river and back home. I run the slowest time in weeks. I am exhausted, I have to hop up the stairs to my apartment on the fourth floor on my right leg because the left refuses service. Running is painful. Discipline is painful, too. I shower, I have a cup of coffee and then—because I have already run ten miles at 7:30 in the morning, because I have not given up and stopped, the whole day is spread out on the desk before me. And because I am wide awake after running, because I am finally warm after showering, because the run distracted me, loosened up my thinking and lets me re-focus, I take a pen and start writing. The ritual of getting up early, the discipline and the training are essential for running—at the desk they are, too.

**Writing is Working Out.** When you write every day, you expand your repertoire. You shape and polish your style. You become better at it. Like a slow run, a tired and weak text for me is better than no text at all. If you have at least a little bit of talent, you can mechanically provoke good writing once you understand the ritual and the mechanics of it. Thus the development of a good text is not 100% predictable but it is more likely to happen.

**Writing and Discipline.** You only come across good ideas when you go straight at them. You cannot run a marathon when you are afraid of running ten miles on rainy and cold April mornings. You have to walk up to creativity. You cannot write a decent text when you are not sitting at your desk. When you know your ritual, you know a short cut to inspiration: the muse kisses the disciplined. Walter Mosley writes: “For authors, fragile ideas need loving every day.” He continues: “If you want to be a writer, you have to write every day.” And: “You don't go to a well once but daily, you don't skip a child's breakfast or forget to wake up in the morning, sleep comes to you each day and so does the muse.”

**Writing is Ritual.** When I sit down at my desk, I start to make notes. First, these notes are diary entries, work schedules, ideas, dialogues. I repeat plans like mantras; I need two hours of straight writing to get into a flow. I need this ritual to get ideas and language running. For me, there is no substitute. I am not at a loss for ideas, I only lack consequence in their realization. I never start with flowing ideas and fluid language—the moment of actual writing is always at the end of a chain of rituals.

**Body and Writing.** Practice, discipline and ritual are essential for athletes—they are preparation and goal at the same time. The athlete's body needs preparation to become

better. Moves have to be trained. When you practice regularly, the feeling for the body changes. You start your morning run with confidence that you will easily finish it. When I am in good shape, I know that my mind will free itself from monitoring my body after a few hundred meters. At basketball, a player does not think about the individual moves—he just executes them. When you run, the monotonous movements have an even stronger impact on the mind—thoughts separate from the conscious supervision of the body and ideas and associations start flowing freely. The same thing is true for writing. For me, disciplined running and writing both result in a strengthening of your skills and abilities, your physicality and your mind are at once freed from one another and then tied together strongly. It is exactly this process that I like to see as an analogy and as a direct influence on writing.

**Running as Stimulus.** First, there is the direct influence of running on my writing: running supports the metabolism, the blood circulation. Eyes, ears and body-perception are challenged, the necessary chemical processes are initiated by running itself. After a run one most likely feels the adrenaline and the endorphins flowing; you are in an euphoric state. Writing becomes easier. Thereby, every run is a *tabula rasa*-situation for the mind, it erases stuck thoughts and concepts and enables the writer to see things from a new angle – especially projects you are working on. This possibility to stimulate inspiration purposefully is of great importance to my work. Once you find out how sports can stimulate thoughts you can easily use this as a stimulus for your writing.

**Writing is like Running.** This is the above-mentioned analogy. The goal in both running and writing is to get rid of the nerve-wrecking awareness of what you are doing. You want to forget the act of running as well as the act of writing. I do not think about putting one foot in front of the other when I run. During a basketball game you should not be aware of the exact movements you are taking and the way you are throwing or passing the ball. These things should be automatic. You just do them and you can concentrate on the intangibles: your opponent, tactics and variations. I write better the less I think about the fact that I am writing. To lose awareness of the act results in the easier usage of all the techniques and knowledge that you have gathered over the years. Ideally, writing resembles a perfect run or a perfect game. At my desk I want to work on imagination, stylistic improvisation and formal variation—less on Word 2000, my pen or merely correct grammar. With discipline, ritual and practice you can achieve this both on the running track and at the desk.

The body is important to athletes—they try to develop an improved corporeality. Physicality is important for success, at least for the ease with which the sports is played or executed and the confidence in the moves. In sports, corporeality means an equally conscious and subconscious understanding of one's skills and possibilities. This is also true for writers. Writers aim to develop a literary corporeality. Like the athlete, the writer has to have confidence in automated moves and writing processes. He has to know—consciously and subconsciously—what he can do and what he cannot do. He has to accumulate theoretical and practical knowledge about literature and his own writing, he also has to use it subconsciously. While I am writing I need to temporarily detach my ideas and thoughts from the actual act of writing—from the keyboard, the pen, the paper, the clock, from deadlines. Categories of style, literary history and theory, role models have to be used without too much awareness of using them. Ideally, I write without monitoring all these aspects deliberately. I just write, and all these categories, this knowledge, are at work below the

surface. Thus, writing as well as running, are mechanical and ritual acts. “You have to start moving your literary feet,” says Joyce Carol Oates.

**Euphoria.** Running and writing can both evoke a euphoric state. When you run long enough, your body produces beta-endorphin, an endogenous opioid that is responsible for heightened alertness and mobility in life-threatening situations. It has a similar chemical structure as morphine. It is produced during long runs as well as during exposure to sunlight, sexual stimulation, praise and nervous tension. It sets free hidden energies, makes pain disappear and creates happiness. I believe that writing can have a similar effect as running, praise or sunlight. The results of having written something that you consider to be good are very similar – including nervousness before deadlines, time pressure and praise. At least it feels like endorphins are poured.

**Writing about the body.** Writing about the body, about all its functions and malfunctions, about sex, sickness & sweat—things some of us would surely consider too obscene to be written about—to me is a necessity. In it lies the individual experience of the world and of our times. How we perceive our own and others corporeality is significant and important. Our bodies carry meaning and it is my task as a writer—among others, of course, I am simplifying here to be true in this area and not disguise anything, not to stop where everyday communication about the body stops. And since physicality is so important to the writing process as I know it, it is also important to the writing itself.

It need not be said that writing for me has many more functions; writing is work against the ephemerality of life, it is archived memory, shaping and structuring of reality, placement of the self in the world. Why I write and what I write surely resemble many other writer’s ideas—my writing is filled with references to books, writers, music, history and the spirit of the times like many writers’ work, too. *How* I write can be explained the easiest with the metaphor of sports. I cannot imagine any other way to write and, maybe even, that is a sign of an athlete’s approach. I write for the sake of writing, like I run for the sake of running. I hope to increase the quality of my writing, to polish and shape it. I want it to be more secure, more intense, more disciplined and even more professional. Maybe then writing can become a full-time job and maybe—even if I am too small, not fast, not ruthless, not brave and not cold-blooded enough—maybe then I can become a full-time-pro writer.