

Like a good Christmas cake

Richard Smyth

A writer's brain is like a compost heap. It doesn't sound like the most complimentary comparison. The US poet Gary Snyder developed the analogy in his poem 'On Top': 'All this new stuff goes on top / turn it over, turn it over / wait and water down / from the dark bottom / turn it inside out / let it spread through / Sift down even. / Watch it sprout.'

Is the creative process nothing but a lot of rot? Well, in a way, maybe it is – but as any gardener knows, good composting is about not just decomposition but transformation. How on earth does the mouldering potpourri of potato peelings, grass clippings and coffee grounds become the fertile shovelful of rich garden goodness, dark, crumbly and pleasant smelling – 'like a good Christmas cake', as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has put it?

My creative process is like that. All kinds of things go in, a little time passes, and when I look at what has come out, very often my first response is *where the hell did that come from?*

If you want to unravel this mystery, perhaps the first thing you have to look at is what Snyder calls 'all this new stuff' – what goes in. Every writer must at one time or another have struggled with what Harold Bloom termed 'the anxiety of influence' – the ambiguous and sometimes tortured relationship you have with the books you've read.

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The novelist Jonathan Lethem has sought to rehabilitate the ogre of influence. 'I've come to believe that there is something innate in my method ... that transforms these influences even when I'm not conscious of it', he said in a 2008 interview with the literary magazine *AGNI*. 'I understand that a lot of other people are much more deflective or diffident or uncertain or unconscious about these processes,' he added, 'but [...] I don't see being open to influence as some kind of radical or postmodern or experimental or unorthodox proposition, I see it as a way of talking about what simply is the case, and always has been for writers of all kinds.'

But what is that 'something innate' in the writer's method that breaks down the source materials – all the books you've read – into something you can use, something that's *yours*? Books aren't just research materials; they're experiences, and that means they're memories.

The advance of information science has enabled a

significant shift in the way we think about memory. A conventional view regards one's memories as records, and the part of the brain that holds them as an archive. With the development of the internet, it might seem perfectly possible – desirable, even – to outsource the brain's record-keeping functions to Google and Wikipedia. 'I've almost given up making an effort to remember anything,' says Clive Thompson, a writer for *Wired* quoted in Jim Holt's 2011 review of Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, 'because I can instantly retrieve the information online.'

For all of the hi-tech trappings associated with this position, it closely echoes the advice of Sherlock Holmes, issued in 1891: 'A man should keep his little brain attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, and the rest he can put away in the lumber-room of his library where he can get it if he wants.'

But an alternative view insists that memory is not a dry drawer in a filing cabinet. Memories are alive. When you read a book, when you internalise a story and a bunch of characters and a prose style and all the rest of it, *it keeps on working*. What's more, it mixes with all the other books – and all the other experiences – you've allowed in over the years (much as the grass clippings mulch down to become one with the potato peelings). It's this kind of interaction that makes memory a creative function.

'Conscious manipulation of externally stored information is not enough to yield the deepest of creative breakthroughs,' argues Holt in his review. 'Human memory, unlike machine memory, is dynamic. Through some process we only crudely understand, novel patterns are unconsciously detected, novel analogies discovered.' We make connections, break connections, reconfigure and re-cast. Memory, as sleep researcher Rosalind Cartwright wrote in her 2010 book *The Twenty-four Hour Mind*, is a continuing act of creation. Every time we revisit a memory we in fact make it anew.

Such is the nature of the act of transformation that the position we find ourselves in might seem paradoxical: we can unabashedly acknowledge influence, as Jonathan Lethem does, while at the same time puzzling over what *that* (the Hardy novel, the short-story anthology, the comic book and the crime thriller you read) had to do with *this* (the allegorical sci-fi novella you seem to have just written).

Somewhere along the line the ideas we've found in other people's books come loose from their moorings. We lose sight of the golden thread connecting notion *x* with writer *b*. Ideas become ownerless – and then we feel free to make them ours.



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The late psychologist Oliver Sacks proposed an explanation for this sleight-of-mind appropriation in a 2013 essay in the *New York Review Of Books*:

‘We, as human beings, are landed with memory systems that have fallibilities, frailties, and imperfections – but also great flexibility and creativity,’ Sacks writes. ‘Confusion over sources or indifference to them can be a paradoxical strength: if we could tag the sources of all our knowledge, we would be overwhelmed with often irrelevant information.’

Our ability to forget where an idea originated, Sacks argues, ‘allows us to assimilate what we read, what we are told, what others say and think and write and paint, as intensely and richly as if they were primary experiences... This sort of sharing and participation, this communion, would not be possible if all our knowledge, our memories, were tagged and identified, seen as private, exclusively ours.’

I think of Snyder’s compost, now, every time I pick up a new book: *I wonder what this will turn into?* Like Lethem, I don’t worry about my influences. I accept that, in a lot of ways, it’s really out of my hands. I don’t feel that I can decide which books or which writers will influence me; influence is a slippery thing, and it feels as though so much of the work – the churn and mill of the creative process – happens, so to speak, behind the scenes, and out of sight.

The main thing, I think, is just to get the stuff in there. Turn it over, turn it over, let it spread through. Then see what sprouts. ●