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One writing process: A self-reflective analysis of the creation of a young adult novel

Thomas S. Romano

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Abstract
To describe his process of creation, the author analyzes the journal he kept in conjunction with writing a young adult novel. Each day he wrote fiction, he used a journal to document his writing and thinking processes, invention strategies, and creation dilemmas. The author examined his planning techniques, his use of visualization and detail, the role that reading played in his writing, and the influence of people and autobiographical experience. He found that some of his most productive planning and thinking were done while away from his writing room, not consciously thinking about the novel-in-progress until ideas suddenly occurred to him. This impromptu planning was made accessible to him by his habit of note taking. Visual thinking played a significant role in his fiction writing, generating language, further images, and conceptualizations. The specific detail of images and language enabled him to develop characters, extend plot, discover symbols, and render the story dramatically without exposition. A particular way of reading his own fictional texts affected his revision strategies, and reading the texts of others influenced the content, figurative language, and diction of his writing. His creation of the novel was affected by people, those whom he had normal traffic with during the course of a day, and those who read and responded to his fictional text. Of particular help was a mentor, Donald M. Murray, whom he met with for an hour each week. Most influential of the mentor’s suggestions, advice, and directives was an emphasis on dramatic action and tension. Half the study is devoted to a discussion of the role that autobiographical experience played in this creation of a fictional dream. The author found that his autobiographical experience both hindered and sustained his writing of fiction, sometimes limiting its scope, but more often validating the author’s experience and providing images, emotions, and memories of people, places, and events that were crucial to writing the novel.

Keywords
Education, Language and Literature, Education, Reading, Language, General

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One writing process: A self-reflective analysis of the creation of a young adult novel

Romano, Thomas S., Ph.D.
University of New Hampshire, 1991
ONE WRITING PROCESS:
A SELF-REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS
OF THE CREATION OF A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

BY

THOMAS S. ROMANO
BS.ED., Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 1971
M.ED., Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 1975

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Reading and Writing Instruction

May, 1991
This dissertation is dedicated to Tom Newkirk, who sees many ways and encourages their travel.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With much gratitude I note the contribution of these people:

Don Murray, who gave me counsel, taught me fiction writing, and believed I could write a novel, so I did.

Tom Newkirk, whose invitation, direction, and support led me back to graduate school, through my dissertation, and on to a job.

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My daughter, Mariana Romano, whom I continue to learn through.

John Gaughan, my valued friend, who read each chapter of this dissertation and talked with me about it.
In the course of creative endeavors, artists and scientists join fragments of knowledge into a new unity of understanding. This process is demanding; it calls upon all the inner resources of the individual--active memory, openness to experience, creative intensity, and emotional courage.

Vera John-Steiner
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ABSTRACT

ONE WRITING PROCESS:
A SELF-REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS
OF THE CREATION OF A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

by

Thomas S. Romano
University of New Hampshire, May, 1991

To describe his process of creation, the author analyzes the journal he kept in conjunction with writing a young adult novel. Each day he wrote fiction, he used a journal to document his writing and thinking processes, invention strategies, and creation dilemmas. The author examined his planning techniques, his use of visualization and detail, the role that reading played in his writing, and the influence of people and autobiographical experience. He found that some of his most productive planning and thinking were done while away from his writing room, not consciously thinking about the novel-in-progress until ideas suddenly occurred to him. This impromptu planning was made accessible to him by his habit of note taking. Visual thinking played a significant role in his fiction writing, generating language, further images, and conceptualizations. The specific detail of images and language enabled him to develop characters, extend plot, discover symbols, and render the story dramatically without exposition. A
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CHAPTER ONE

A WAY OF WORKING

People have asked me what it was like to write a novel. I have told them this: I never lived better than during the time I wrote Blindside.

And these were the circumstances: I lived alone in a five by twelve foot dormitory room, taking most of my meals in a dining hall. I rarely drove my car, rarely, in fact, left Durham, New Hampshire. A thousand miles away my wife worked as a nurse in Ohio and my daughter attended college in Indiana. In four months I saw them once.

And still, without regret and without guilt, I say again that I never lived better.

"... [Y]ou feel as though you're abandoning those around you," wrote Sue Miller of the experience of writing a novel. "It may be true for investment bankers, it may be true for others, but not in such a sustained and intimate way. It is your most intimate energy--your love, your concern" (Gilbert 1990, 36).

The novel I wrote was a world unto itself, one that invited--and often demanded--total absorption. At the same time, that possible novelistic world I titled Blindside existed within the larger world of my life. The fictional characters became real, just as friends and family were.
The plot became a concern, just as the dramas and intricacies of living were. Natalie Goldberg writes about the human richness of writing a long work of fiction and the sense of loss that may accompany its completion: "While I wrote the novel, my simple world resounded: I was connected with other beings I held inside me. After the novel, it was only me again, alone in the world. A life I held dear, the life of the novel, was over" (Goldberg 1990, 218).

Writing *Blindside* was tied to an independent study I did with Don Murray, professor emeritus of the University of New Hampshire, consummate writer of many genres. He, too, had a novel to write. Every Wednesday we traded manuscripts and read. Late Thursday afternoon we met for an hour to talk. We usually wrote responses to each other's work. In fact, each week Murray wrote what he called "Romano Notes." In them he responded to my writing, discussed his own, and wrote about the craft of writing, particularly the craft of fiction writing. Our talks, stimulating and instructive, were about reading and writing fiction, our evolving novels, and teaching. I left the conferences eager to get on with my novel.

This was the schedule I fell into to get my writing done, the schedule that afforded me writing time when I was at my best: Five or six days each week I arose about seven a.m., ate breakfast, then, until fifteen or twenty minutes before noon, immersed myself in writing the latest chapter
of Nick Bassille's story. Instead of eating lunch, I went swimming most days, then returned to my room in the early afternoon to write another hour or two. Sometimes during these afternoons, I proceeded with a draft, writing new material; usually, however, I did an on-screen revision of what I'd written that morning. Depending on my other responsibilities, I worked on the novel in the evening, too, often completing clerical tasks. But sometimes that activity led to bursts of invention. Each week I spent twenty-five to thirty-five hours actively working on the novel.

The actual writing went this way: After brief planning on note cards or paper, I composed first drafts by directly typing at the computer. Once a chapter draft was completed—usually in two days—I read it on the computer screen and revised the text as much as I could, expanding dialog and detail, pinning down action more clearly, developing an idea. More than a first draft, but not quite a second draft to my mind, this manuscript in bits and bytes I called a draft-and-a-half.

I printed a double-spaced copy, which I revised by hand two or three days later, when my mental images of the chapter had begun to fade and needed language to illuminate them. The distance of days helped me see that first illuminations had dimmed considerably, were sometimes flickering. I added and altered language to amend that. I printed
another hard copy and took it through a similar revision
cycle, though alterations of the text were considerably less
this time. Before I printed this final copy of a chapter, I
spell-checked it, then scrolled through the text, reading
aloud, listening for eruptions of wording, gaps in logic or
scene or action, dialog that sounded stilted or out of
character, passages that didn't say what I intended or had
learned to intend.

Revising multiple drafts on the way to final copy is my
invention process for writing just about everything. Often,
in fact, I go through even more drafts and revisions. There
would be more tinkering with these chapters, too, but that
would come in the summer when I considered the book as a
whole, revising and editing it three times.

In the beginning weeks of the independent study I was
so worried that I would not get an entire novel drafted in
four months that I left my long time writing process
described above. Instead of composing multiple drafts, each
one more refined and on target, I drafted, revised, and
edited a chapter at the computer--my early stage draft-and-
a-half--then printed a copy for Murray's reading.

He told me that he didn't think the chapters I was
giving him were representative of my best writing. I told
him of the change in my composing process. He advised me to
go back to my old method of revising hard copies of drafts.
I happily agreed. It was a relief to slow myself down, not
press invention, leave the new process of hurried composing. When surprises of invention began emerging, I became comfortable (and addicted, really) to this slower creative process that let the plot of the novel grow and connect in my subconscious, that allowed me to take time for extensive revision, the part of writing I found most rewarding.

My usual tack was to make each chapter as clear and interesting as I could before drafting the next. By allowing myself this longer time to compose and revise, the details in my writing became more extensive, vivid, and pertinent. Characterizations deepened and gained complexity. Plot developments materialized that wouldn't have if I'd done only a draft-and-a-half of each chapter. Inventing subsequent chapters became more interesting and less difficult. The increased richness of detail, characterization, and plot gave me much more to think about—both consciously and subconsciously—as I planned future action.

I also kept a metacognitive journal about my fiction writing, the purpose of it to capture my writing processes and creative moves, my invention strategies and dilemmas, all the slick spots and sloughs of writing Blindside. I wrote about anything that touched the creation of this first novel. In journals and letters he kept while writing The Grapes of Wrath (Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath" 1989) and East of Eden (Journal of a Novel: "The East of Eden" Letters 1969), John Steinbeck used reflective
writing before he wrote his daily quota of fiction, often discussing what he would write about. The metacognitive writing about his work warmed him to the fiction writing ahead, moved his mind and pen up to speed.

Only occasionally did I write in my journal before I composed fiction. I wrote my journal entries after fiction writing, seeking to capture creative processes while they were still fresh in my mind. Although I sometimes used the journal to plan upcoming scenes or discuss problems, I usually just recapped what I had done for the day. This metacognitive writing enabled me to identify my processes of creation far more accurately than if I'd merely tried to remember how I'd done something weeks or months later.

Still, the self-portrait my journal reveals of a fiction writer is an incomplete one. A great deal of what I did was irretrievably lost because I simply couldn't remember how or why I'd done something, even though I wrote about matters that had taken place just hours or minutes before. I knew these blurry spots were occurring and took steps to make my journal writing more descriptive and accurate of my processes. To thoroughly capture what I was doing while creating, I sat at my desk one morning with a printed copy of a chapter, ready to go to work revising. Beside the manuscript, I had placed a clean yellow legal pad on which I planned to jot notes immediately after I'd made some revision move.
After two notations on the legal pad, I scrapped this idea. Making the notes, I found, disrupted revision, dragging me away from the rhythm of my work, making me self-conscious about what I was doing. Finishing a draft of the novel, I decided, was of ultimate importance. I stopped doing anything that interfered with that--whether it was making notes about my writing process while amid it or talking into a tape recorder as I revised (which I considered doing at one point). There was too much at stake. Once the novel started to build, writing it became a self-sustaining act. Not that the writing was easy or free of anxiety. When I had no images or bits of language in mind on which to build, the hours before I began to draft a chapter were lonely and frightening. I felt as though a film I were responsible for showing was about to run, but the frames were blank and the soundtrack empty. What would appear on the computer screen when I began to write? Nothing, I feared. My anxiety level was usually up even before I began chapters I felt prepared to draft. Beginning any chapter was psychologically difficult, but the difficulty was eased considerably when I began getting glimpses of what might occur later in the novel.

In chapter 29 of Blindside, Nick tells his mother, "I feel much better when I'm writing [something] . . . than when I'm thinking about writing it."

That bit of dialog was autobiographical to the bone.
Inventing images and dialog and action as I wrote at the computer transformed the lonely hours into ones of rewarding solitude. Anxiety faded. Keen interest and interior swells of quiet exhilaration replaced anxiety. Writing the novel became an optimal psychological experience. I got initial tastes of this early in the first week of the independent study. Below is an excerpt from my journal entry of Thursday, February 1, 1990:

[I] was going to write in this [journal] to warm up, but I got caught up rereading the four chapters that come before the one I wrote today, and started in expanding and sharpening the surreal nightmare chapter. That was good fun, then I turned to the football game. The beginning was rocky for at least two paragraphs, but then I felt good once I was amid the game.

Don Murray has discussed one of the great gifts of writing: "concentration. In the act of writing I experience a serene, quiet joy, a focus of all my energy and knowledge and craft on the task, losing myself in the job that strangely allows me to become myself" (Murray 1990, 189).

I, too, lost myself in the writing task. When scenes came alive through language and images--and I worked to enhance the drama and vividness of those scenes--nothing was more real to me, not the white New Hampshire winter outside my dormitory window, not the memory of my home in Ohio, not the cup of black coffee near my right hand. I looked at the selected detail of the fictional world of Blindside with such intensity that it swallowed me. Time ceased to exist.
Even a sense of being keenly involved in something was gone. I had fallen into total engagement, fingers moving over the keys of the computer, eyes scanning symbols, mind processing them, connecting images, generating bursts of syntactically arranged language. Nothing else mattered: not friends, minor ills, dissatisfactions, irritations, the absence of those I loved. The psychological state I achieved through writing is explained by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990):

> We have seen how people describe the common characteristics of optimal experience: a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 71).

I'd read Csikszentmihalyi's book in February of 1990 and began paying closer attention to those times in my fiction writing when—as I had written in my journal—I was having "good fun" or "felt good." I wanted to get closer to this positive feeling, this optimal experience I frequently had while writing. I'd hoped only to get a novel written during this independent study. I hadn't counted on the work of writing it to be so fulfilling.
3/5/90 Monday 9:13 Went over three previous chapters tonight, mostly typing in revisions—the generative process of revision—trying to get a chronology in order by Wednesday. Got a big surprise when I worked with this last chapter, depicting Nick's thoughts about his father's funeral. I had to rework the beginning to provide context. Not happy with that yet. But in the ending I got blissfully involved in language and emotion and meaning. I had a little of a portion with no punctuation when I'm trying to be in Nick's flying mind. I had intense pleasure with that. And then in the last paragraph, I picked up on the phrase "forever and ever." I'd repeated that just a little before, but I tried repeating those words from the Lord's Prayer with images that Nick remembers from the last moments of his father at the funeral home.

I knew what I was doing and consciously went at it. Cognition in high gear. After laying some words on the screen I found my eyes filling with tears. I had to stop typing a moment. I know I was thinking of my father's funeral, using images I remember and sensations that I think I remember, but my god, that was 26 years ago. Not passionless words by any means. Isn't this one great thing that writing can do? Experience means and then means again. The pleasurable and thrilling things the two teenagers are living, but the death of Nick's father that forever altered his life, that colored everything.

The journal excerpt above reveals that all the elements of "flow" had kicked in. The challenge was there to make this scene as effective as I could, to create the color of detail and emotion. Language stirred as I interacted with images and feelings so intensely present for me. Picking up the phrase "forever and ever" and seeing that I had something to enhance in the passage with no punctuation were clear clues that showed me I was getting somewhere. This spurred me to further invention. Any self-consciousness I felt in revealing parts of my life, any inadequacies I felt
as a writer gave way, so complete was my concentration on the images and language that overwhelmed me emotionally. The only time that mattered was the fictional time of the novel.

I experienced flow repeatedly while creating Blindside. The optimal experiences built upon one another, and I willingly entered the evolving novel each day. As the manuscript pages mounted, my confidence grew. In the weeks ahead when I encountered roadblocks, veered off course, or wrote badly, I was always able to proceed again, unflagging. An indispensable element was securely in place.

"Above all," writes novelist Susan Griffin, "the act of writing calls upon faith" (Griffin 1980, 107).

The productive routine.
The balance of challenge and accomplishment.
The surprises of thinking.
The repeated feeling of optimal experience.
The chance to write about subjects I was passionate about.

The goodwill and interest of a mentor.

These sustained the faith I needed to dig deep within, to carry on for months, to respond each day to the flash of image and stirring of language that made Blindside.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When Don Murray invited me to write fiction in his narrative writing course at the University of New Hampshire during the summer of 1987, I knew what I would write—my story as an adolescent, the autobiographical events that shaped my behavior and, to a large extent, determined the person I have become. In 1964, when I was fifteen years old, two men drag racing on a public road killed my father in a head-on automobile collision. In 1967 a girl I loved ended our relationship of a year-and-a-half.

These elemental experiences are psychologically with me to this day. Inevitably, they get into my writing. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote,

We [authors] have two or three great moving experiences in our lives—experiences so great and moving that it doesn't seem at the time that anyone else has been caught up and pounded and dazzled and astonished and beaten and broken and rescued and illuminated and rewarded and humbled in just that way ever before (quoted in Murray 1990, 84).

My topics had been gestating more than twenty years. During that time, I had taken them beyond vivid memory occasionally by putting written language to them. On Sunday, September 16, 1973, I wrote the following entry in the journal I faithfully kept:
Early one Friday evening when I was 15, I said good-bye to my father. He was leaving for a bowling tournament and later on that night I was going to a high school play. May was the month. Dad wore a brown cardigan sweater. I came up behind him as he was walking down the hallway toward the back door. Dad's right elbow had caused him sharp pain since early winter. Patting him on the back, I said, "Hit about six hundred tonight, Dad." Without turning to me, he mumbled something about trying and then was out the back door and gone.

About 9 hours later, at 2 a.m., the telephone rang and I went to the kitchen to answer it. A woman said, "Is this the residence of Philip Romano?"
"Yes," I answered.
A pause.
"Is this one of the Romano boys?" she asked.
"Yes."
Another pause, longer this time.
"Well, this is the emergency room of the Alliance City Hospital," the voice said, "and we have Philip Romano here and he's dead."

Two rooms away my mother slept, and had been sleeping for over an hour.

Nearly two years later on Saturday, July 19, 1975, I wrote,

Mom had told [my wife] about J___'s letters and about the night that J___ broke up with me. She was probably referring to the third time: three days after [J___] had come to see me after six weeks, one of the two worst nights of my life--the other being when my father died . . . The next day, I remember, I told Mom that J___ and I had split, and before I finished I was sobbing.

Novelist Robert Cormier says he launches "a book usually through an emotion" (quoted in Lloyd 1987, 44). I had experienced the strong emotions of grief and love and loss as a teenager, a volatile time when life has started to become deadly serious, when the hard-edged implications of death are often acutely perceived, when the religious
training of childhood may come into question, when
sexuality can become an overwhelming force.

Grief, love, and loss marked my life as a teenager,
and, later, during the years I taught high-school students,
they marked me again and again. Whenever any of my students
lost a parent or broke up with a long-standing boyfriend or
girlfriend, I understood their sorrow and anger and grief.
In the very marrow of my bones I understood it. The ever-
vivid memories of my experience had made me sensitive to
students' experiences. Inevitably, their losses caused me
to reexamine my own personal losses as a teenager.

In a book and in articles and poems, I'd written often
about teaching and writing, subjects I am passionate about
and readily discuss. The fiction I wanted to write someday
would also be about subjects I am passionate about—death
and sexuality, love and loss—the two elemental adolescent
experiences that shaped my life, experiences, however, that
I rarely talked about. I knew what I needed to face. I
knew what I needed to write about.

The summer I wrote in Murray's narrative writing class
I gave little concern to plot and chronology, to the making
of a possible fictional world. What I gave my concern and
allegiance to was telling my own story.

"I'm going to write only the scenes that are strong in
me," I wrote in the process journal I kept in conjunction
with my fiction writing that summer of 1987. "I'll worry
about fashioning them into a novel later."

The scenes that were strong in me were the scenes of my autobiographical history. Images of sex and death, ecstasy and grief, love and loss were vivid in me, had persisted in my consciousness more than twenty years. I could smell the heavy scent of flowers loading the tables and floor around my father's casket, could hear the voices of relatives and friends who leaned close to whisper sympathy. I could see the flash in the dark eyes of the adolescent girl I had loved, could smell her hair, taste her kiss.

The experiences involving my father and that girl had wrenched my life from comfortable paths and shoved me into tangled undergrowth. Those two important people were no longer physically in my world, hadn't been for more than twenty years, yet their effect on me had not been transient. My relationships with them--both the love and the loss--had caused me to look death straight in its permanently lifeless eyes, to place high value on love and family, and, years later, to understand my students more deeply. But I felt there must be more. I knew what I had to write about in fiction, what I had to explore with written language, the best tool I had for making sense.

That summer of 1987 I wrote thirteen chapters and several fragments of scenes. More than 16,000 words. Many of those chapters were unabashedly dramatized experiences from my life. Others were barely veiled autobiography.
Some few were fiction. In all cases, however, I wrote about characters I had known. In all cases, the emotions of Nick were those I had once intimately felt, emotions that have remained glowing coals in my subconscious from distant adolescent fire.

The narrative momentum I generated that summer of 1987 carried into the first month of my high-school teaching job. I wrote on weekends and occasional week nights, completing two more chapters. In each chapter and fragment of all I'd written I did little more than get down the particulars of my teenage relationship with a girl. There was virtually no chronology to my narratives, little sense of sequence or character development. The scenes were largely isolated, episodic, and autobiographical. The characters acted in the preconceived notions I'd already formed about them.

I wrote chapters about Julie and Nick's first date, their first sexual experience, and their reunion after breaking up and subsequent final split. I wrote chapters in which Julie's father and Nick planted shrub trees on a hot, humid Saturday morning and talked about love and marriage and compatibility—the one time I broke through to fiction, writing from my experiences as father, adolescent, and sometime laborer, not simply about those experiences. Except for the 4,000 words of the shrub-tree chapters, I didn't stray far from my autobiographical history during this initial outburst of prose.
I was certain that my novel began on the late October Friday morning when Nick and Julie, off school, are nearly discovered together by Julie's father, who returns early from a hunting trip. That beginning, drafted on the first day of class when Murray had us choose a scene and write it fast, established the intimate, exhilarating, dangerous relationship of Nick and Julie. Only three of the chapters I wrote that summer followed it chronologically, but those four carried forth a narrative thread. I used them all in Blindside. Of the other nine chapters I'd written, seven were flashbacks and two were flashforwards to the end of the story, to the end of my story. I used none of those nine chapters in the final draft of the novel. The ease with which I write that belies the difficulty of making the decision to lay aside that material.

Autobiographical writing nearly sabotaged the creation of Blindside. The world I had lived as a teenager and was writing about in my first attempts at fiction had meant so much to me, had been so pivotal in shaping the adult I've become, that I would not let it give way to a world I could imagine. The more I wrote about myself, the more difficult it became to write about Nick and what he might become. My autobiography ruled with a benign tyranny. Benign, because it enabled me to write, to pour out words that explored my personal experience. But it was tyranny nonetheless, because that autobiographical writing blocked my creation of
fiction. Tucked away in folders are scores of manuscript pages that have everything to do with me, but little to do with Nick and the narrative line that eventually carried the novel.

During the second semester of the 1988/89 school year, I took a leave of absence from my high-school teaching job, my intention then to finish the novel I had started. In January of that school year I reread all I had written about Nick and Julie. Some of the words I hadn't read in a year-and-a-half. I was daunted by the task of shaping the mass of autobiographical chapters, writing new material, and blending the two into a novel. I made no plans, shaped no old chapters, wrote no new ones.

I turned from the novel and began preparing for speaking commitments I'd scheduled and working on two independent studies courses I'd enrolled in at Miami University. In early May, much to my surprise, I sat down one morning and wrote about memories of playing high-school football as a freshman and my father's feelings about my participation. I cast the memories in fictional form with Nick as the main character. I introduced the bookish and attractive Carolyn, she based upon a high-school classmate of mine. Again, the scene was episodic, autobiographical, and this time somewhat expositional. Although the chapter further complicated the problem of shaping my fragmented narrative, writing about that subject matter after it had
lain dormant for seven months was satisfying.

My time for finishing a novel those first few months of 1989 had been swallowed by commitments and graduate work. In addition, the prospect of composing alone on such a long project had not been conducive to writing. I had the independent studies courses to finish and three week-long summer consulting jobs to prepare for. In the fall I was scheduled to return to graduate school at the University of New Hampshire. When I wasn't conducting workshops that summer, I was preparing for the fall. Although excited about the challenges of graduate school, I despaired about the fragmented narrative I'd begun nearly two years earlier. Knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted I would ever finish it.

**Autobiographical Hamstringing**

In January of 1990 I worked fiction writing into my academic schedule through an independent study project with Don Murray. I returned to the writing I'd done about Nick and Julie. The opening weeks of reengagement with that material became an intense struggle. In order to really begin the task of writing a novel, I had to break free of my autobiographical history. It wasn't easy. And it wasn't done once and forever. Getting free and staying free required constant vigilance through mid May when I finished the first draft.

I dug right in that January, reading all the autobiographic...
graphical chapters and fragments I had written. On five by seven cards I wrote brief synopses of them. Although I knew there were narrative gaps between most of the chapters, I stacked the cards in chronological order, the same method I used for cataloguing, organizing, and sequencing shots in documentary films I had made during the 1970s and 1980s. The ordering process made me acutely aware of the great problem I faced in trying to weave together the largely unconnected flashback and flashforward chapters with the chapters that began the narrative line from the October morning when readers first meet a frantic Nick and Julie.

I wrote no more flashbacks for awhile, but began, instead, writing chapters that strengthened and extended the narrative line I had developed. More than an analytical act, I think, that decision was intuitive. Those four early chapters drew me. I found it easy to follow the story they began to weave. I drafted the chapters of the first football game, of Julie standing Nick up that same night and their confrontation and reconciliation later at a dance, of Nick volunteering to read the Dylan Thomas poem in English class. I had plans, too, for further chapters: a sex-talk chapter—perhaps with a teacher—a chapter when Nick cleans the bar on a Sunday morning, a chapter at an all-league sports banquet when the football season is over and Nick meets Jason, the Ridgeway linebacker whose knee is injured by a blindside block.
I described new chapters on five by seven note cards and slid them into appropriate chronological places amid the thickening stack. Again, I reread all my text, making notes about plot and possibilities. The new chapters I'd written were exhilarating tastes of creating out of my experience, not merely chronicling it. Optimism soared in me. The novel looked manageable. Flush with success, I wrote this sunny passage in my journal February 6, 1990: "Tonight I read a few more chapters and thought that the flashbacks shouldn't be as much of a problem as I had thought."

With a fool's boldness I left the narrative line that was building momentum and unity and went to one of the flashback chapters to extend it and reveal more of the background of Nick and Julie. I wrote a chapter that dramatized their first date, and before I knew it, my autobiographical history had pulled me away from the narrative line that was so promising.

My allegiance to the flashback and flashforward chapters persisted, even though early in the project I made an entry in my journal (2/4/90) that struck to the heart of the problem I was having in using my life's experiences to compose fiction. I'd written about an interview I'd read with novelist Bernard Malamud. The interviewer noted that one of the author's characters contained more than a spoonful of him. Malamud indicated that many of his characters did. "More to the point," said Malamud, "I prefer autobio-
graphical essence to autobiographical history. Events from life may creep into the narrative but it isn't necessarily my life history” (quoted in Stern 1983, 51).

The flashback and flashforward chapters were essentially my autobiographical history. The chapters that extended the narrative thread from the October Friday morning were fictional invention from my autobiographical essence. With the addition of the first-date chapter, the autobiographical material I'd written since I'd begun writing two-and-a-half years earlier comprised more than 18,000 words, a good third of many young adult novels. I couldn't bring myself to give up all that work. And I was willing to go to desperate lengths to preserve it. My journal:

2/13/90 10:27 a.m. . . . went through my mss., getting them in an order in which Murray can read them. More and more, I'm troubled about how the flashback scenes will fit in. That stuff is important to Julie and Nick's relationship, but I fear the flashbacks will be puzzling and disruptive to the movement of the present story. I wonder about alternating chapters or changing tenses, with the present story in present tense and the flashbacks in past. Too gimmicky?

Of course the idea was too gimmicky. I could add self-indulgent and preposterous, too. So close to my experience was I, so daunted by the prospect of writing hundreds of pages of narrative, so convinced was I that the only story I knew well enough to tell was my own, that my judgment was badly skewed. Even though I had acknowledged the puzzling and disruptive effect that flashback and flashforward
chapters would have on the narrative, I wasn't yet able to act upon that knowledge in order to make a novel. I clung to the words I had written, to the writing of my autobiographical history as the only way of validating it. Four days later, however, I was getting closer to breaking free.

2/14/90 ... got all the mss. in the best order I could and ran Murray copies this afternoon. I need to figure out where I'm going, what I need to put aside. Some of the flashback scenes I just love. They reveal a lot about Julie and Nick, but maybe it's just stuff I, as the writer, need to know.

Two days later I was certain about what I needed to do if I were going to get a novel written.

2/16/90 8:35 a.m. Meeting with Don yesterday. He'd read all the mss. I gave him. He suggested that I sketch out an outline to see what shakes loose. I'll try that today after I arrange the chapters, setting aside those that are full blown chapter flashbacks. I had the strong feeling that most of them weren't going to fit. Don felt that too. [He] said that you have to put your own story aside and devote attention to the novel, the story I'm making. That's where autobiographical history was dominating me in the flashbacks instead of autobiographical essence. I like what I've created anew out of that essence.

That last sentence is the key that unlocked the bonds holding me fast to my autobiographical history. The exhilarating taste I'd experienced of truly creating fiction had combined with Malamud's distinction between autobiographical history and essence, Murray's urging, and my intuition to enable me to begin inventing one scene upon another.

Two days later I was done with a second draft of
chapter 4, the scene in which Mrs. Kelly gives a sex talk to Nick and Julie, an incident far removed from anything I had ever lived as an adolescent or adult. My exhilaration comes through clearly in my journal:

2/18/90 Went swimming again today, then came back here and worked for a couple hours, fleshing out the scene. I like it. I like Julie's mother. She's not the stereotyped, out-of-touch mother. She's hip, speaks kindly but very bluntly to the kids. I'm a little concerned that no parent I've ever heard of did anything like Mrs. Kelly has. But they should have. It's a possible world.

Also . . . [understanding] that even the preconceived idea I had about the ending [of the novel] is going to have to be scrapped. The novel is taking off under my fingers and that's disconcerting, scary, and exciting.

Autobiographical Life Support

A novel lay ahead to be written. To write it, I had to defeat my autobiographical history. But in another sense, a profound one that travels to the core of my need to write Blindside, the autobiographical writing I'd done for two-and-a-half years sustained the long gestation of the novel. That writing, that dramatization on the page of subject matter that so consumed me, had kept Nick's story alive, had begun the process of transforming my experiences into language. Alone, my experiences did not make art, but writing those experiences made them more than memory. Written language gave the respectability of voice to my memories of ecstasy and grief, love and loss. The act of writing had made my experience vivid, important, and lasting.
"You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment," writes Annie Dillard (Dillard 1989, 68).

The chapters and fragments of Nick's story had lain more than two years before I could get back to them in a concentrated way. In late September of 1987 my narrative had ground to a halt under the crush of teaching responsibilities and professional concerns. I had kept the pulse of the story beating, however, through further autobiographical writing. Nick Bassille and Tom Romano had not yet split. But for more than two years that stubborn union had been necessary for Blindside to be written.

Although teaching took up much of my time and made long stints of uninterrupted writing scarce, I had many opportunities of short duration to write. My high-school students frequently composed ten or fifteen minute focused writings. Occasionally, I led workshops with teachers and had them write, too. Twice a month I met with three of my colleagues after school for a strict hour of writing and response. Whenever I could, I used these occasions with students and colleagues to write parts of my story.

Here is a fragment--complete with first-draft errors and excesses--I wrote during a meeting of my collegial writing group on November 4, 1987:

Nick moved through the living room as though he were floating. All around him bobbed anguished, disembodied faces, each of which he knew. His blood. His uncles and aunts and cousins. And Father Justus kneeling. All these faces he saw through tear-drained eyes, bloodshot,
the skin around them puffy white. He floated through the living room, leaving his mother's side where she sat alone now on the couch.

An arm supported him and guided his floating and he let it guide him into the kitchen, past more of those silent disconnected faces of regret and horror and genuine pain that did not begin to penetrate as deeply as the pain that burrowed into Nick's heart.

He floated now in the kitchen and heard behind him the inconsolable sob of his mother, the bitter weeping of his father's sisters.

From the faces one suddenly loomed close to Nick, his uncle Mike, his father's older brother. Nick stopped floating; he felt arms around his shoulders and pressure at the side of his head.

"Be brave," he heard and then the arms released him and he was floating again toward his bedroom door and through and onto his bed where he sat heavily. He felt a touch on his shoulder and he gave to its pressure, let it push him to his back. His head sank into the pillow. He felt the air move as a light blanket was thrown over him.

Nick pressed the crook of his arm against his eyes. The salt-sting made him squint. Colors red and yellow exploded in the blackness. The blackness, where his father was now, where his father would always be, forever and ever and nothing could change that, nothing could help, not his aunts nor his uncles nor Father Justus praying in the room of the living, the weeping, dying. Nothing. Forever ever.

And when the blackness subsided and sleep finally came, Nick dreamed his father sat on the edge of a cot in a jail cell. He sat forward, his forearms resting on his knees, wringing his hands in helpless regret, saying over and over, "If there was only more time. If there was only more time."

This memory of the night my father died is full of indelible images and sensory experiences that have stayed with me for years: the support of an arm--my sister-in-law's, the faces of relatives who had gathered at our apartment, my mother weeping, the dream about my newly dead father sitting on a cot in a prison cell, repeating, "If
there was only more time."

A memory, forever vivid, made and made again, rising to
my consciousness a thousand times since 1964. An elemental
part of my life, an elemental part of Nick's. A fragment of
367 words. Not a chapter. More than two
years later when I wrote chapter 9, I used the content and
much of the language of this fragment as Nick lies in his
bed and rests after the football game with Ridgeway.

On another occasion more than a year after I wrote the
previous fragment, I used the back of a school absentee
report dated 11/30/88 to write for ten or fifteen minutes
with students in one of my high-school classes. My leave of
absence was approaching, and the possibility of writing a
novel was heavily on my mind. In the writing that follows,
I planned my way directly into a scene:

Who will write the great books. Forget great.
How about good? How about interesting? How about
real. I'd like to make those two kids and the
others that move in and out of their lives live.
Live on the page and in a reader's mind. I'd like
it to make sense all the way through and end in a
way satisfying for me and the reader. I guess I'm
concerned about plot and whether my mind can be
big enough, sharp enough to do the weaving neces­
sary to provide those satisfactions that I find so
enjoyable in a piece of writing. I want Nick and
Julie to be real. I want to communicate both the
exhilaration and ecstasy and the psychological
turmoil--how about a stream of consciousness later
in the book when Nick goes about his work in . . .
[the bar] and anxiety of the possibility of Julie
being pregnant constantly entering his mind. Nick
grabbed for beer bottles in both hands. Pregnant,
he thought. His mother's face would fall apart.
Another blow after his father's death. How much
could she take. Nick shoved the case of beer
aside, hauled in another. Pregnant, he thought.
His heart seemed squeezed. He loved Julie, wanted to spend all the time he could with [her]. She was on his mind every hour. In every class he thought of her, even on the football field. Pregnant, he thought. Her father would sizzle. He might hit someone. Her mother would grow angry, burst into tears, and become bitter. Pregnant. He didn't want that scene, but if he was sure of anything in his life, it was this. He couldn't ever stop making love to Julie.

Although I didn't use any of the actual text of that quick writing in the novel, in chapter 13 I used the idea of Nick cleaning the bar, his mind racing with thoughts about the possibility of Julie being pregnant and the reactions of various characters to that possibility. Giving voice to my own astonishment raised my experiences from mere memory and enriched them. The dramatic structure I imposed on the material—the third person narrator, the action, the exploration of the images and language of Nick's thinking—caused me to walk a different gait with my experiences than I had in 1973 and 1975 when I wrote those crucial, expressive journal entries. The transformation of experience into fiction was occurring, but slowly, slowly.

Autobiographical History/Autobiographical Essence 
Each in Its Place

John Gardner writes about "frigidity" in an author, when it becomes apparent that he doesn't care about his characters as much as he should (Gardner 1985, 117). My autobiographical history both perpetuated and thawed such frigidity in my writing. It's a paradox I'm grateful for.
In the beginning of writing what came to be Blindside, I cared only about myself and my alter ego, Nick Bassille. We were one. Although the autobiographical writing helped me understand myself better, it didn't cut loose a novel.

Art "tends toward morality," Bernard Malamud has said (quoted in Stern 1983, 48).

Until I valued all human life in my narrative, until I developed a moral warming for all my characters, there was little chance I'd make a novel.

"Morality begins with an awareness of the sanctity of one's life," said Malamud, "hence the lives of others ... the sheer privilege of being, in this miraculous cosmos, and trying to figure out why" (quoted in Stern 1983, 48).

My autobiographical writing had deepened my awareness of that sanctity, had kept the once-raging experiences of my adolescence banked and alive more than two years. Sometime during the writing, my main character became less me and more Nick Bassille. He contained a good spoonful of me, to be sure, maybe two or three, but not the gallons that had nearly doused the creation of the novel. By mid February of 1990, after experiencing invention from the essence of my autobiographical history, after putting aside the thousands and thousands of words that were simply my personal story, after following the narrative line that had emerged, I began to develop deep regard for all my characters.

Certainly, Nick's fictional life--so close to mine--
held sanctity for me. And soon—as the world of Pennington and Medville became real—the lives of Danny, Jack, and Julie; Spence, Angel, and Carolyn; Coach Raymond, Ms. Hennigan, and Nick's mother assumed sanctity, too. In creating their imagined world, I came to understand them. In understanding them, I came to care about them.

In his book *On Writing*, novelist George V. Higgins writes,

... [T]he answer to "Where do you get the idea for a story?" depends completely on what the questioner means by "idea" and by "story." I get the first idea that causes me to sit down and write. And when I see what I have written, I get the idea for the story I send out (Higgins 1990, 143).

Process and product. I forgot about process when product began turning out so well. In late winter and early spring of 1990, my novel growing by twenty pages each week, I thought only of how crucial it had been to escape the spell of my autobiographical history. Product was my new lover. My old lover, process, I disdained, even though it had taught me over two years, indeed, had led me to my new lover. Whenever I spoke of writing *Blindside*, I maligned the ill effects of my autobiographical history. I shuddered to think of being entangled in the arms of those flashback chapters. Not until months later when I read my journals did I understand how essential was all my autobiographical writing in sustaining the creation of *Blindside*. The early chapters and later fragments had nurtured the incipient novel, had retaught me the importance of the two elemental
passions that have ever been with me.

Make no mistake--in order to write fiction I had to learn infidelity to the actual detail and events of my life. I had to learn to use the essence of my experience to weave elegant lies. These lies, I learned, would tell truths.
KINDS OF EXPERIENCE

The creation of Blindside was a thoroughly autobiographical act. It couldn't have been otherwise. The novel was born of my experiences, my perceptions, my ability with language, my notion of fiction, my imagination, and my interactions with a few readers. My. My. My.

But what of the stuff of Blindside? What of its content: the plot, characters, and setting? That, too, arose from autobiographical history. Not that fiction, as Bernard Malamud warned, is the story of the writer's life. It's more complicated than that. And because fiction is more complicated than a writer merely recounting her life story, writing a novel is a most rewarding experience.

The Material of Fiction

Novelist Vance Bourjaily maintains that the "material of fiction is experience" (Bourjaily 1988, 181). He lists four kinds: learned experience, invented experience, fantasized experience, recollected experience.

To describe the autobiographical roots of my fiction I used all of Bourjaily's categories and an additional one which I call "transformed experience."
"Learned experience," writes Bourjaily, "is what we hear about from others, or get from research, and try to fit to our characters. It happened historically" (Bourjaily 1988, 181).

Although formal, methodical research played no role in writing Blindside, "learned experience" was still invaluable to me as a source of invention. The story in chapter 12 which Nick's mother tells of Gordy, her grandson, giving her a shiny black stone so she won't weep anymore when visiting the cemetery, I learned several years ago when my mother told me that my nephew had given her such a stone to keep her from crying more than twenty years earlier when she took him to the cemetery each day to visit my father's grave.

Nick's girlfriend, Julie, is a cheerleader. As a high-school teacher my view of cheerleaders had been a dim one, until one of my students responded to my kidding by telling me her reasons for cheerleading. Bright and articulate, Tari was well aware of the cheerleader stereotype: gum-chewing, air-headed, all-sacrificing to male athletes. Tari was a cheerleader during the football season, she said, because it was fun. She liked planning events for the school, and she liked being outside on crisp, Fall Friday nights, moving and dancing in front of all the people. Julie speaks Tari's ideas in chapter 20 when she and Nick talk while parked in a car above "the lights" of the town (a
place I'd never seen, but learned about from someone twenty-seven years ago).

When I wrote the description of the deer emerging from the trees in chapter 5, I remembered a piece of writing one of my students had written ten years earlier. She had described a singular moment at dawn when she gazed through sleepy eyes out the window of a school bus and saw a doe standing in a harvested cornfield, sunlight golden against its fur. The picture the student created has remained vivid to me over the years, by far one of the dominant images I possess of deer. The student's writing has been learned experience ever with me, learned experience that arose in my consciousness when I started working with the deer in the dream sequence.

**Invented Experience**

"Invented experience" sounds the most romantic of Bourjaily's four categories: a solitary, autonomous author, creating characters and plot. Readers often believe that a novel is the author's autobiographical history. If they don't believe that, they may think the opposite—that the author has created fiction from nothing. And such ability is something beyond them because they, they believe, are not creative.

"Invented experience is what we imagine for our characters with no reference to similar events in our own lives. It could happen" (Bourjaily 1988, 181).
A good example of invented experience in *Blindside* occurs in chapter 4, when Mrs. Kelly unexpectedly talks to Nick and Julie about sexuality and birth control. Neither as parent nor adolescent was I ever involved in a discussion quite like that. The occasional sex talks I received—always from my mother—were brief, furtive, and awkward. As a parent, I engaged in sex talks with my daughter that were conversations, really, proceeding from her manifold questions starting when she was four-years-old.

I invented the scene of Mrs. Kelly talking frankly and responsibly to Nick and Julie about sexuality. Although nothing like that had taken place in my life, I knew the characters. I knew the setting. And I knew significant details of the scene: hot chocolate laced with vanilla flavoring, warm fluffy slippers, a white shirt collar sticking up from a sweater. I knew what it was like to be interrupted while reading a book, as Mrs. Kelly was. I knew anxiety as both parent and teenager when discussing delicate matters. Even when inventing action I had not lived, I was indebted to my autobiographical experience. My perceptions of the world generated my imagination.

**Fantasized Experience**

"Fantasized experience," Bourjaily writes, "does start with an actual event but, for our characters, we give it a different outcome. It might well have happened, given a change or two of factors" (Bourjaily 1988, 181).
I used fantasized experience in significant spots in the novel. Chapter 14, for example, in which Nick is moved by Dylan Thomas' villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," is based on an actual occurrence during my senior year of high school. Like Nick, I, too, had been moved by the poem. Unlike Nick, however, I did not volunteer to read it aloud. And, unlike the discussion in Ms. Hennigan's class, ours was not a dialectic among peers full of probing, disputation, and rebuttal. Our teacher lectured. And as she did, it became clear that she hadn't read any symbolic significance into night. She talked at length about the poem's persona who didn't want his father to let nighttime arrive. I was sure there was more to the poem than night and day, but kept my mouth shut amid the teacher's confident monologue. In the back of the room, though, one student (who is now a playwright) interrupted the teacher's lecture. "This poem's not about the nighttime," he said, disdainfully. "It's about death. Night symbolizes death." Our teacher looked down at the poem. "Yes," she said, "I see how that could fit." And then she went on to lecture about the next poem.

For a year or more, I had considered writing a chapter about this incident. In the summer of 1989 I typed the text of "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" onto a floppy disk. Sometime in the future, I thought, I would dramatize the events of that day in class. The scene, I believed,
would work just as I remembered it.

But as the novel evolved in February of 1990 and the chapter idea percolated in me, I realized I would change actuality, must, in fact, change it. I didn’t want a stereotypical, insensitive teacher in the novel. Such a stock character has been all too common in young adult fiction. I wanted a teacher with a ready sense of humor, an understanding of teenagers, and a working knowledge of response-based reading theory and the generative power of language. My experience as a high-school teacher of reading and writing shaped my characterization of Ms. Hennigan.

In this chapter I also wanted to show Nick’s impulsive behavior, his wont to dive in occasionally and take a risk, in this instance, by volunteering to read aloud the poem that had struck him so deeply. I wanted him participating in class discussion despite his self-consciousness. I wanted him to reveal a passionate and vulnerable part of himself when talking about death.

My autobiographical history—the way things had really happened in that classroom in 1967—gave way to the larger needs of the evolving novel. I was able to take an actual occurrence—the moving encounter with a poem—and fantasize action from it that deepened readers’ understanding of Nick, more fully characterized Ms. Hennigan, and dramatized the dynamics of teenagers in a classroom. The fantasizing became even more productive, too, as I discovered the dis-
senting voice of James, a character who goes on then to play an important role in a later chapter.

**Recollected Experience**

Bourjaily indicates that "recollected experience" is the lowest, the least artful of the four categories that make the material of fiction. "Recollected experience sounds simplest: it happened personally," he writes. "For my first 310,000 words of fiction--three published novels and one not published--I managed to avoid it" (Bourjaily 1988, 181).

To be sure, I had to escape the hamstringing effect of rendering only my personal experiences. Had I not done so, I would have produced only autobiographical fragments, not a novel. Once I could see how to use my experience to help me invent action, instead of merely chronicling that experience, I found recollected experience and the detail it retrieved from memory to be a boon to writing a novel.

"Memory," writes Vera John-Steiner, "... is an ever present resource, a potential source of raw materials that are reworked in art and science" (John-Steiner 1985, 72).

Nearly all of the settings in *Blindside*, for example, are actual places I remember. As I thought and planned and wrote, I saw the tavern my father owned, the apartment above it where my family lived, the cramped, locker room where I dressed for high-school athletics, the house of a girl I had known, the hallways and English classroom of the high school
I attended. The availability of these settings in memory was like having the scenes of a theatre production constructed, painted, and moved into place. I brought in my characters and let them act on these familiar sets. The ready-made settings removed some of the burden of imagining.

I also found that recollected memory of real people I had known enabled me to invent characters from them. In the same way that Nick Bassille started out as me, but became his own character, so, too, did nearly all my characters begin as real people, then develop individual identities. Once characters began talking and acting, I felt no fidelity to draw them only as I remembered.

Characters changed, and I delighted in their metamorphosis. I chose details not in order to accurately portray anyone I'd known, but rather to make a particular character more interesting and complex. Julie is feistier, more forthright, and less tolerant of male chauvinism than any girl I dated in high school during the 1960s. Danny is outspoken and a victim of his volatile temper, quite different from the easy-going Danny who snapped footballs to me. Employing the reality I recollected so vividly let me get on with the business of synthesizing it with my understanding of human behavior, my thoughts about teenage relationships, and my ideas about coping with the death of a parent. Such synthesizing drove creation.
I also found that as I interacted with the evolving novel, my memory produced useful details for the narrative. When describing the dead deer in chapter 5, I drew upon the memory of a dead deer sprawled in the bed of a pickup truck parked on the street in front of my father's bar, a memory complete with the deer's protruding tongue, blank staring eyes, and nostrils stained with blood. Mr. Francini in chapter 15 was invented from a real person—Lorenzo Faccini, a family friend and old man when I knew him. Just before my father died in the car accident, Lorenzo Faccini had flown to California to visit his son. He returned immediately for the funeral. I remember the dignity of this slight Italian immigrant, the respect he showed by interrupting his long-planned trip. I remember him genuflecting over my father's body. The Mr. Francini I invented had moved permanently to California and was far more articulate in English than the Italian immigrant I knew twenty-five years ago. But the dignity and respect, the reverent act of genuflection—these I remember from Lorenzo Faccini, and these actualities I used in the novel.

My daughter read chapter 21 in which Nick becomes so self-conscious when he speaks of his broken relationship with Julie that he rises abruptly from his desk and leaves the classroom. In the rest room he drops his class ring that Julie had given back to him the night before. The stone in the ring cracks upon striking the floor. After
reading this chapter, my daughter came into the living room holding my high-school class ring she’d fished out of a jewelry box. Her eyes were wide, for the green stone in the ring was cracked.

That recollected detail from my life fit nicely into the novel. Cracks were appearing in Nick’s life, too. His relationship with Julie had cracked and come apart. His public composure showed cracks. The increasing flashbacks to his father’s death and funeral were cracks in the facade he had erected to hide the Nick who needed to face that trauma.

It is only now as I write that I see the symbolic significance of these details. I remembered, of course, that the stone in my high-school class ring was cracked. What I never knew was how it had happened. A significant, recollected detail—a cracked stone in a class ring—mentioned, then written about further. Within the context of the novel, a symbol appears.

Scores of details from my recollected experience found their way into the novel. But memory served me in another way, too. Occasionally, I found I was able to use the memory of one thing to describe another.

For example, in chapter 23 when Nick suffers a severe blow to the head during the final football game of the season, I sought to describe the stunned quality of his perception. When I participated in competitive athletics,
was never hit in the way Nick was, but I called upon memory nonetheless. In the spring of 1989 I suffered bouts of nauseating, double-vision migraine aura. The memory of my disorienting affliction enabled me to enter Nick’s experience at the time of the violent head blow in the fictional football game. I didn’t ascribe my migraine symptoms to Nick, but the memory of them allowed me to empathize with him. My perceptions had been blasted during the migraine aura. I’d felt light-headed, one step removed from reality, my coordination that of a reeling drunk. This memory helped me imagine Nick’s blunted perception and partial consciousness so that I could seek language to describe it.

**Transformed Experience**

Another way I used my experience to make the material of fiction was through what I call “transformed experience.” This involved using extended incidents from my past which I actively participated in or witnessed. I made this “recollected experience” part of *Blindside* by transforming and altering it slightly to advance the dramatic purposes of the novel. Such transformation might be categorized under Bourjaily’s “fantasized experience,” but I’ve made a distinction between it and “transformed experience.” In “fantasized experience” I exercised little fidelity to the original event. But in “transformed experience” the bulk of the scene is recollected, not just conceptually, but also concretely. Most of the scene plays as I’ve learned to
remember it. A few significant changes, however, transform
the experience beyond my recollection, making it suitable
for my fiction. An example best illustrates transformed
experience.

In late September of 1989, four months before I began
concentrated work on the novel again, I learned that an
uncle of mine had passed away unexpectedly, he but fifty-
eight. After composing letters of sympathy, I found that I
needed to write further about my uncle for my own psycho-
logical well-being. I needed to get down on paper what he
had meant to me. I wrote the following personal remembrance
October 1, 1989.

Just last week my wife called to tell me my
Uncle Ralph had died in his sleep. He was really
my first cousin, not my uncle, but we were a
generation apart, and I always knew him as uncle
Ralph. Next to my grandmother, my father was
closest to this nephew.

Uncle Ralph was with my father the night he
died in a horrible car crash. I was fifteen.
Dad, Uncle Ralph, and three other men were re-
turning from a night out. They had planned to go
to a bowling tournament, but the form they had
been sent listed the wrong night for their match.
They went to the horse races for awhile, then left
before the last race so they could get home around
midnight.

My father was driving his new heavy cadillac.
Not far from the race track, they were hit head-on
by two drag racers. The four men with my father
were beat up badly. The two drag racers lived.
My father was killed.

After the four longest days I'd ever spent,
after the intense grief, after the solicitude of
hundreds and hundreds of friends who knew and
liked my father from his 25 years in the bar
business, after the heavy scent of flowers I still
cannot reconcile myself with today, after the
images of my father in a casket, the crucifix hung
above him, a rosary wrapped in his right hand--my
father whom I'd never seen go to church, never heard talk of God or a hereafter--after all that, one of my relatives took me to the hospital, where the four men were who had been in the car with my father, four men I'd known for years and genuinely liked.

The four were in one large room. My heart beat wildly as we walked down the hallway. My throat constricted, and I hoped I would not have to speak much. When we hit the doorway, I saw they were all sitting up in beds, banged up for sure, some ribs broken, facial lacerations, maybe a broken arm.

The room was bright and their spirits seemed to be up. I instinctively looked to Uncle Ralph. He looked hollow, as empty and lost as a human soul could look. The skin around his eyes was black and yellow. His arms that I always thought were like steel from his work in the brickyard were now quiet at his side. When he caught a glimpse of me, he looked away, turned his battered face toward the window.

I entered the room, walking past the beds to Uncle Ralph. All the men grew self-conscious. They made small talk gamely to ease the tension and anguish my arrival caused. "Hi, Uncle Ralph." He continued to look out the window toward the mid May sunshine. He muttered a hello. I was never more speechless. What could I say? I couldn't speak of the anguish of the funeral. I couldn't speak of my bewilderment, outrage, and grief that my father had been killed by two drag racers.

The other men continued to do their part, making more small talk, kidding one of the men who'd had an orderly buy him a Playboy. Uncle Ralph continued to look away from me, and I continued to sit quietly by his bed, secure for the first time in a while, not haunted by the purpose of the last few days, the coffin, the grave, the rosaries, the well-meaning friends and relatives, the dreadful nights alone in bed.

I was with Uncle Ralph, the man who had spoken to me from the time I could remember, the man with the steel arms, the man who taught me irony by kidding me and telling me stories. "You can't make your mother clean and pluck a pheasant," he told me. "What do you think dressed means, anyway? You're dressed right now, aren't you? Well, think about pheasants. What do they have on when they're dressed?"

"Feathers," I said.

It was years later that I began to suspect
Uncle Ralph’s kidding and began to probe what he told me. But I’ve always loved irony, and I’ve got to think that Uncle Ralph showed me ways that language could be used for pleasurable interaction.

As I sat beside his bed in the hospital, as he looked out the window, keeping control as best he could in the presence of the teenage son of his closest uncle, I stared at the bed sheets and turned my attention now and then to the other three men, to smile, to answer something as cheerfully as I could. As we sat there, we spoke no irony. We didn’t—couldn’t—tease each other with words. The devastating irony that caused me to be at his side in the hospital was too overwhelming. So we sat silently. And Uncle Ralph couldn’t look at me. In my heart I thanked him for that, because neither one of us could have held up had he turned his broken eyes upon me.

I sent copies of this to my wife, daughter, mother, and cousin. I included a copy in the portfolio of my writing I kept for another class. I also placed a copy in the satchel that contained all the notes, chapters, and fragmentary scenes I’d written about Nick and Julie. I felt deep significance in reflecting upon my uncle and the hospital visit. I thought I might use the material some day, if I ever got a chance to write fiction again. That personal reflection was part of the material I reread in January of 1990 as I prepared to work on the novel again.

When I was nearly seven weeks into composing the first draft of *Blindside*, I wrote the following entry in my journal on Thursday morning, March 15, 1990:

Got into the scene when Skid and Nick go see [Jack] at the hospital where he has broken his ribs and suffered a gash above the eye when an old man hit his car broadside. The scene came about from the phone call [from] Skid the night that Nick and Julie tried to be alone together. The
scene has been on my mind for some time. I thought I would tie in the memory of when Nick goes to visit his uncle after the accident that killed his father. As a base I’m using an incident that happened in my life.

Here is the excerpt from the final draft of chapter 19, after Nick abruptly leaves Jack’s hospital room—experience recollected extensively, then transformed for the purposes of fiction:

Nick slouched down on the plastic couch. He thought of the last time he had been in a hospital. Two days after his father’s funeral he had gone to see his uncle Pete and the other three men who had been in the car with his father. Nick had known the men well, had known them as customers who came into the bar. And his uncle Pete, his father’s youngest, closest brother, had always been Nick’s favorite uncle. Nick remembered how his uncle would sometimes come into the bar after working all day at the brickyard. Nick was a little boy then. He would clasp his arm, and Uncle Pete lifted him off the floor, Nick holding tight to the biceps that were hardened like iron from handling bricks. Uncle Pete always talked to Nick, always used words to kid him and make him laugh.

After the accident, Uncle Pete and the other three men had been taken to the hospital and put into one big room. Nick remembered walking down the hallway of the hospital, his heart beating wildly. He walked between his aunt and uncle. It was all he could do to keep from crying. He seemed to float down the hallway, not wanting to arrive at the room but moving closer and closer anyway. Suddenly, he was at the doorway of the large hospital room. Nick heard the men talking inside. He saw them in their beds. Mac’s arm was in a sling. Don’s face was covered with small lacerations. Tony sat on his bed with his legs crossed, paging through a magazine. Nick spotted his uncle Pete in the farthest bed by the window, silent.

Someone touched Nick’s arm, and he moved through the doorway. The men looked up at his entrance and fell silent. Tony closed his magazine and flopped it cover down on the bed.

“Hey,” he said. "Good to see you, Nick."
The other men greeted him, too. Nick said hello and smiled faintly. He moved across the room to his uncle Pete. Their eyes met. His uncle looked hollow, empty, lost. The skin around his eyes was black and yellow and blue, as though he'd been beaten with a hammer. One eye was badly bloodshot. The strong arms rested at his side. He turned his battered face from Nick and looked out the window again.

Nick could feel the uneasiness in the room, strung like taut rope. Self-consciousness raised the hair on his neck. His ears burned. "Nick, it's good to see you," said Don. "Yes, Nick." Mac extended his left, unslung arm.

Nick walked to the side of his bed and took his hand. "You gonna talk, Tony?" said Don. "Put that Playboy away and talk?"

Tony patted the magazine on his bed and smiled. "It's put away," he said. "I'm talk, just so you guys promise not to fight over who gets it next."

Nick smiled and moved to the side of his uncle's bed. "Hello, Uncle Pete."

Pete glanced at Nick, muttered hello, then quickly turned his gaze out the window again. Mid May sunshine poured onto the floor. "Sit down, Nick," said Don. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Nick sat down in a chair beside his uncle's bed. Uncle Pete's arms bulged from the sleeves of his hospital gown. The hair on them was black and tangled. He kept his face turned to the window. "So, Nick," said Mac from across the room, "you playing baseball this spring?"


Pete itched his ear and kept his eyes to the window. "How you feeling, Uncle Pete?"

"Ok," he murmured. "You don't look ok."

"Just bruised," he said. "The skin around my eyes is tender."

"You look like you've been in a fight," said Tony. Nick swiveled his head to him. "What?"

"Playing time," Tony repeated. "You getting
much playing time since you're only a freshman?"
"Not much," said Nick. "Not much on varsity."
"You know, Nick," said Pete in a voice so quiet that Nick leaned closer. "This is the worst." Without looking from the window, Pete reached over and placed his hand on Nick's. Nick looked out the window to the green lawns and blossoming trees on the hospital grounds.
"You get through this, Nick. It can't get much worse." He squeezed Nick's hand. They both looked out the window, and then, as if on a signal, Pete turned his head to Nick. His eyes brimmed with tears, some spilling onto the bruised skin. Nick's own eyes filled. His nose stung. He tried to keep the tears at bay. He felt he wasn't supposed to cry, and he hadn't since the funeral. And in this hospital room with the men who had last been with his father, Nick had held up fine until his uncle had spoken and turned his broken eyes upon him.

What I remember most vividly from the real hospital visit is my uncle apart from the other three men, his inability to look at me, the uncomfortable tension in the room, one of the men flipping the Playboy onto its cover so neither my aunt nor I would see it.

In transforming that experience to fiction, I dramatized what I'd emotionally felt in the hospital room. I appealed to the senses by raising the hair on the back of Nick's neck and making his ears burn. I gave voice to the characters who engaged Nick in small talk. The action surrounding the Playboy I developed because the reckless sex it represented created tension for me when coupled with the specter of death that asserts itself anew when the son of the dead man enters the room.

Besides the deletions, the enhancements, and the
imagined dialog, the major change of this recollected experience, the change that pushes it into transformed experience is the turn in the final two paragraphs. Nick's uncle Pete does not remain silent about death and grief and living, as my poor uncle had, his gaze out the window unwavering.

I felt the need for a man to make a compassionate move, a tender gesture. My own uncle had been unable to make such a move that afternoon in 1964. He had concentrated his energy on the task of holding himself together. In the milieu in which I grew up, we lived under a tacit code of manhood that made tears and tenderness and expressed compassion a rarity. When my sister and her husband lost a three-month-old son to sudden infant death syndrome, I was seventeen-years-old. A few hours after the infant's body had been taken away, I stood in my sister's kitchen, my brother-in-law sitting disconsolately at the kitchen table. He leaned forward, rested his head in his arms, and wept. Never had I seen him more vulnerable. I had the impulse to comfort him, to place my hand on his shoulder. But I made no move. The men I knew then rarely did.

As I worked with the flashback hospital scene of Blindside when pain and loss converge on Nick and his uncle Pete amid the game small talk of the other men, I came to understand that what had happened between my uncle Ralph and me had not been enough in my recollected experience.
would not be enough in the fictional world of the novel, either. I wanted Uncle Pete and Nick to share a moment of acknowledged grief and human compassion, one male to another. I wanted that model of behavior to exist in Nick's world. It's part of what enables him to mature, to weep outwardly in front of his mother, to accept his father's death.

**Actuality in Fiction**

Now I come to an anomaly. I noted in the previous chapter that my autobiographical history sustained me throughout the long process of creating the story of Nick Bassille. At the same time, that very history nearly sabotaged the novel by insisting that the story of Tom Romano be written with full chapter flashbacks, episodic scenes, and fragmented narrative. After brief, intense struggle in February of 1990, art won. Autobiographical essence gained supremacy over autobiographical history. My sputtering narrative no longer served recollected experience; instead, recollected experience served the evolving novel. In this subordinate but crucial role, recollected experience offered scenes for inclusion in the narrative and rendered detail that added texture and spurred invention. Recollected experience also gave way to fantasized experience and transformed experience, all for the sake of the evolving novel. My autobiographical essence drove the creation of *Blindside* from its inception, first glimpsed in
my journal entries of 1973 and 1975; autobiographical history--my recollected experience--became my chief ally in shaping the scenes and characters of the novel.

In late April of 1990 I wrote chapter 26, the crucial scene when Nick comes into the apartment on Saturday night after his confrontations with Spence and Angel. I'd figured for some time that there must be a scene in which Nick and his mother talk about Nick's deceased father, in which Nick starts to come to terms with his father's death and the incomplete relationship they shared. What follows is an excerpt from the chapter I submitted to Murray:

Nick's mother sat at the kitchen table, a picture album open before her. She looked up. "You'll die when you see some of these pictures."
"That bad."
"No, that good."
Nick took off his letter jacket and draped it over the love seat."
"Look at this one."
Nick came behind his mother and looked at the picture she pointed to.
There was Nick, a child of two perhaps, asleep on the bathroom floor, leaning over a wastebasket. He wore a striped T-shirt, white socks, and no underwear.
"What happened there?" said Nick.
"You went into the bathroom to do your business. When your father came up from work, he found you like that. I got the camera and there you are fifteen years later."
"Daddy found me?"
"Yes, did he ever laugh. It was just the thing he needed from tending bar all day."
Nick sat in a chair at the table.
"The time he spent in that bar," said Nick.
"He worked like a dog to pay off the building."
"Seems like all the memories I have of Daddy are mostly connected with the bar."
"That's where he spent every day of the
week."

"I know, even on Sunday he was down there checking the books or something. He always found jobs for me to do."

"You can't blame him for believing in work, Nick. That's all he knew, even before he built the bar and this apartment, he worked in the brickyard for years."

"I don't blame Dad for believing in work, Mom."

Nick's mother flipped the photo album to the first page. There was a picture from twenty-five years earlier. His mom and dad's wedding day. Dad and all his brothers wore black tuxedos. His mother wore a white wedding gown, her black hair, long then, and piled atop her head.

"That must have been a great day," said Nick. 

"Seems just like yesterday." Nick's mother sat back in her chair. "Do I look a little mad?"

Nick looked closely again at the picture. "You know, I was going to say that you didn't look like the happiest bride."

"I wasn't."

"How come?"

"Your dad and I had a fight the night before."

"A fight? The night before your wedding? Why?"

"He'd been late to rehearsal."

"You're kidding."

"No, he had worked overtime at the brickyard. He said he still thought he could make it on time, but he didn't."

"Late for his own wedding rehearsal."

"I was foolish to be mad."

"How come, Mom?"

"I didn't realize what work meant to him. Your dad was older than me. He was thirty when we married. He lived through the Depression. I don't think his family ever went hungry, but he saw a lot of men out of work and got to know how important a job was."

"I wish I could have heard that while he was alive."

"He didn't like to talk about it much."

"Even if he had, Mom, I don't know when he would have told me about it."

"Oh, he would have told you."

"When, Mom? I don't ever remember talking with him when it didn't have to do with the bar."

Nick's cheeks burned. There was such regret in his voice.
"You miss him, Nick. I miss him too."
"Miss him?" said Nick. "I missed knowing him. That's what the most terrible thing is, Mom. I never knew him."

His mother's face was twisted in pain. "You knew him, Nick. You did."
"I didn't, Mom. And I keep thinking that when I grew up I'd have gotten to know him better. You always said it was good he died quickly, but, God, I wish he'd lived five more years. He could have died slowly of cancer, just if he would have lived five more years."

Nick's mother quick reached out her hand and covered his. "You wouldn't have wanted that, Nick. He wouldn't have wanted that."
"I never knew him, Mom. I never knew him."

Tears filled his eyes. It scared him. He wanted to be cool, calm.
"Did you love him, Nick?"

Nick nodded. He moved his hand out from under his mother's. He pressed his fingers to his eyes; they became slick and salty with tears.
"Be content with that, Nick. He lived life the way he thought he had to. I'd like to have had more years with him but that wasn't to be. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right, but it is."

Here are the notes that Murray wrote to me about the chapter:

April 25, 1990

Not enough force in Nick and his mother's scene. It's abrupt. There's no reason for her looking at album. I'm not persuaded. It's an expected situation in expected language. Should the mother, at exactly the right - or wrong - time take another romance away from Nick or relieve the pressure he feels to live up to the myth of his father by telling Nick the dark side of his father? that he would never have gotten to know his father, she didn't? that it was lucky he didn't know his father? Is your autobiography getting in the way here?

Yes, to answer Murray's last question. In this chapter, so crucial in revealing the relationship between Nick and his father, my autobiographical history did more than
dominate me. I wrote from sentimentality and idealization. There really is a picture of me at two-years-old, pantless and asleep in the bathroom. There is a picture from my parents' wedding day, my mother's visage rather grim from a disagreement with my father the night before. In the 1920s my father was employed in brickyards, and when he finally went into business for himself, he worked upwards of thirteen hours a day to pay his debts and secure his financial position. I wanted to rationalize that time away from his family. I wanted to believe that my mother understood his frequent absence. And for a long time I wished that my father had lived five more years until he was sixty-four. When I first composed chapter 26, I wrote a mix of truth, family poignancy, and futile wishes.

Two of the autobiographical truths I acknowledged were hard ones: 1) my father rarely spoke about anything beyond the details of work and customers. 2) I didn't really get to know him.

Nick's mother is pained by this last truth when Nick asserts it. She insists that Nick did know his father, that his father would have told him things had he lived longer, that they would have grown closer. Desperate longing wrote that. And the author was Tom Romano, a boy who still misses his father, not Tom Romano, a novelist.

For several days I thought a great deal about the material, thought long about my mother, father, and me. I
determined to go at the scene again and follow Murray's advice. I'd take a harder look at the father. I'd unidealize him. Here is the rewritten scene of Nick and his mother that serves as the first part of chapter 26 in the final draft:

When Nick walked into the kitchen, his mother was standing in front of the pantry, putting away canned goods. She looked over her shoulder.
"You're home early."
"Never really went anywhere," said Nick. He sat down at a kitchen table chair.
His mother came to the table, reached into the grocery bag, and withdrew two last cans of tomato sauce.
"I forgot to put these away this afternoon."
She went to the pantry and slid the cans on a shelf.
"Mom," said Nick, "did Dad like Spence?"
Nick's mother swung the pantry door shut.
"Why do you ask?" she said.
"I just wondered," said Nick. "Did he like him?"

Nick's mother folded the grocery bag and put it under the sink with the others.
"Not especially," she said.
"Then why did he hire him?"
Nick's mother sat at the kitchen table. She folded her hands. "If your sister heard the answer to that question, it would hurt her very much."
"I don't want to hurt Donna," said Nick. "She's got enough to handle. I just wondered about Spence. We've been putting up with him a lot of years now."
Nick's mother raised her eyebrows. "If you think really hard, you might guess, Nick."
"Have something to do with Donna and Spence getting married?"
"If your dad hired Spence to tend bar, he knew that Spence would always have a job."
"So it was for Donna?"
"For Donna and any grandchildren that might come. Two as it's turned out so far."
Nick nodded.
His mother looked at her fingernails.
"In one way," she said, "and as much as I hate to say it, your father and Spence we're
"I can't believe that," said Nick, quickly. "I know. It doesn't seem possible." Nick's mother spread one hand flat on the table and rubbed the backs of her fingers. "Your father and Spence wouldn't seem to have anything in common. Your father wasn't moody like Spence. And once in awhile Spence is downright mean. I never saw your father mean like that."

"Then how are they alike?" Nick's voice was curt, almost angry.

"Do you know Spence very well?"

"I know he's moody," said Nick, "like you said. And I know he can be an . . . he can be downright mean."

"But what else do you know about him?"

"He's lazy sometimes."

"Yes, lazy and self-centered, for sure, but do you know him much beyond that?"

Nick thought a moment. "No," he said. "I don't."

"I don't either," said Nick's mother. "I don't know what makes your sister's husband tick anymore now than I did eight years ago."

"I still don't see what that has to do with Dad," said Nick. "I don't see that it has anything to do with him."

"It has everything to do with him." Nick's mother touched her left hand one more time, rubbing the spot where she had worn her wedding ring. She sat back and looked directly at Nick. "Your father wasn't easy to get to know either. I don't know that I really knew him."

"How can you say that, Mom? You were married to him twenty-five years for God's sake!"

"I knew him as well as anyone did, as well as anyone could. But he kept his guard up a lot. He buried himself working in the bar, night and day to get it paid off. And he did that, way ahead of schedule. The bank wasn't happy about all the interest he slipped out of paying."

"He was proud of that."

"He was, Nick. But we paid a price for it."

"A price? Seems like he got out of paying a price."

"The price, Nick, was more than money. The price was that we rarely talked."

"In twenty-five years?"

"In twenty-five years," she said. "Oh, we talked about bills and customers and accounts. But we didn't talk about his mother's death. We didn't talk about the beatings I got as a child."
He didn't talk about his uncle's suicide. Never anything that got beyond the daily details, never anything that opened the heart."

Nick felt a release inside, both a winning and a losing. "Mom, I think that's part of why I miss him so much."

Nick's mother didn't speak. She looked at him and nodded.

"I never knew him," said Nick. "Not really. It was always business and work. I thought I'd get to know him more when I grew up, when I got older."

"I don't think so, Nick. I think you knew your father about as well as you were going to."

"I can't believe that, Mom! He was my father."

"He was, Nick, and he would have done anything for you, anything that was in his power to do."

"Then he would have let me get to know him," said Nick. "I know it. I know he would have."

Nick's mother shook her head slowly. "I don't think that was in his power."

Nick cupped his hands to his face. "He was inward, Nick. He could talk to customers and make them feel at home in the bar, something Spence will never learn to do. But your father wouldn't let anyone inside. Not me. Not you."

Nick stood suddenly. "That can't be true! It was you, Mom! It wasn't him."

Nick's mother lunged across the table and seized Nick's wrists.

"It is true, Nick!"

Nick felt the pressure of her fingers. She held fast, but Nick knew that if he moved violently, he could escape her grip.

"Sit down, Nick. Please sit down."

She released him. Nick stood gazing at the table top, then he sat down.

Nick's mother leaned forward. "I never knew of your dad to hurt anyone. He always provided for us. And he wasn't like Spence. He wasn't, as you would say, an asshole."

Nick laughed. Even though he felt like crying, he laughed. "I didn't expect that word coming from you."

"That's your word," said Nick's mother. "You have to admit that it fits Spence."

"It fits. It's a useful word--now and then."

Nick's mother reached out her hand to his.

"It wasn't right the way your father died, Nick."
Nothing has ever shaken my faith in God the way that has. I'll have nightmares for years because of it."

"You have nightmares?"
"Not as much now, but I've had them. I've dreamed of that night, Nick, of running into the kitchen and knowing that a woman was going to tell me over the telephone that my husband was dead."
"That doesn't sound like a dream," said Nick. "That sounds like the truth."
"There's more," said Nick's mother, then her eyes went to her hands again.
"What is it, Mom?"
"In my dream ... ."
Nick waited. His mother breathed deeply, then raised her eyes to him.
"In my dream you were dead, too, Nick."
Nick felt his chest tighten. He needed to breath in, and he did.
"Both my husband and my son were dead."
"Oh, God, Mom."
"I've never told anyone that until now."
Nick said nothing. He was breathing hard.
His face was hot and tingling.
"And you've had nightmares, Nick?"
"Yes," he said, "and sometimes they happen when I'm awake. My mind spins with horrible things, memories I don't want to think of. I think of Dad in the casket. I think of the telephone call."
"I wish you had told me about this, Nick."
"I couldn't, Mom."
"Your father wouldn't talk about such things either. I should have come to you and made you talk. But I wasn't in any shape to do that either."
Nick pressed his knuckle against his front teeth.
"You know what helped me, Nick?"
"Jonathan."
Nick blinked his eyes.
"I know he can act conceited," his mother said, "but we didn't date long before he asked me to talk about your father."
"Why?"
"I think Jonathan knew something. He knew that if he was ever going to develop a relationship with me, then I would have to talk about your father, the man I'd lived with for twenty-five years. So he got me to talk, Nick. And when I began, he let me talk and talk and talk, and
gradually it got better."
"I never talk about dad," said Nick.
"Whenever his name comes up, I get away or change
the subject. Even when we talked last week, I
couldn't wait to be away from you."
"It's hard to run from problems that are
inside you."
"Don't I know it."

I was much happier with this scene. The tension was
clearer. The truth about the father's inwardness coming
from the mother was surprising to me, but it made sense.
She is realistic and has done a good deal of healing. Nick
does the idealizing, not her.

When I gave the *Blindside* manuscript to my mother, I
worried about how she might take this scene. She likes to
read my writing, but I didn't want to upset her. She has
always spoken devotedly of my father. I impressed upon her
that *Blindside* was fiction, that though she might see paral­
lels between my life and Nick Bassille's, she must remember
that I used actuality to serve the purpose of fiction.

My mother stayed up until dawn one night reading my
novel. She liked it and urged me to write a sequel. She
said nothing about the scene I so worried about. Two weeks
later I wrote her a letter, explaining some of the autobi­
ographical material in the novel. Two weeks after that we
talked in person about my father, the husband she had been
married to nearly thirty years.

And my mother stunned me.

"I never got to know your daddy," she said. "He
worked most of the time and when he wasn't working, he
liked playing poker with friends. He didn't talk about anything but the business. He didn't do much that wasn't connected with the business. Everybody we did something with had to be a customer."

My mother's admission shouldn't have surprised me. I knew about my father's obsession with work and his inwardness from my own relationship with him. There was no reason to expect that her experience had been different.

I wrote autobiographical truth twice in getting to the final draft of chapter 26. Initially, I wrote the truth I believed for years, the truth of a flawless, idealized father, flawless and idealized because I never got to know him beyond the tumultuous years of my adolescence. I wrote the nostalgic truth of old photographs, the specious truth of memories constructed and retained for maximum fondness. Such truth had been essential for me to believe for a long time; such truth, however, did not work in the novel.

I wrote truth again after Murray's response. I was trying to write fiction, but deeper autobiographical truth arose from my subconscious and fit the fiction perfectly. That truth—that bit of autobiographical history about my father's inwardness and penchant for work that took him away from his family—I hadn't wanted to write about. But when I revised the scene, that truth served the needs of the novel. Not only do Nick and his mother confront the memory of the father, they also talk about their nightmares and fears,
something the father never shared with either of them. Nick and his mother have stepped onto a new level of intimacy and honesty.


And, in my case, sometimes fact redeems fiction. In this first novel, recollected experience and recollected experience barely transformed enabled me to continue weaving fiction.

"... [T]he more of yourself you're able to give your art, the stronger your art will be," writes David Huddle. "So most writers try to locate and use subject matter that brings forth their most passionate feelings, most rigorous thought, most lyric sentences and most complex vision" (Huddle 1990, 32).

I could have written this first novel in no other way than to deal with the elemental emotional experiences that shaped my adolescence and influenced my life ever since. It hadn't been difficult to locate the important subject matter that resided so deeply within me. A writer who uses such material must realize the place of autobiographical experience in making fiction. Autobiographical essence is the emotional fire for a novel. Autobiographical history is the
substance that the essence keeps white hot, the substance the artist forges through a melding of experiences--learned, fantasized, invented, recollected, and transformed.
I lived in two worlds from late January to mid May of 1990. In one world I was graduate student, eating meals at a dining hall, living in a graduate-student dormitory, visiting with dorm mates. I studied at the library, fulfilled the duties of my assistantship, attended class, talked with fellow students in my program, wrote papers, and read, read, read.

In another world, I participated in the fictional lives of Nick Bassille and the characters he knew. For twenty-five to thirty-five hours each week I created the possible world of Blindside, kept a daily, reflective journal of that experience, and gave my fictional and expository manuscripts to Don Murray the day before our weekly conference.

The twenty-five to thirty-five hours were active ones in novel-making, my mind engaged purposefully in brainstorming, drafting, rereading, and revising. The total work of writing Blindside, however, involved much more time than thirty-five hours each week. And the productive work of my mind was not always obvious. Sometimes I did good thinking when my mind was dreamy, rambling, or wandering while doing some activity that required little concentration. Because of my immersion in creating the novel, because of the way
ideas and solutions to problems occurred to me when I least expected, my mind must have interacted with aspects of the novel, even when I wasn't aware of it.

"The story is always on my mind," Robert Cormier has said of writing fiction. "The characters become so real to me and I so involved with them, that they are with me all the time" (quoted in Lloyd 1987, 61).

Although I had other responsibilities during the four months I composed a first draft of Blindside, the plot and characters of the novel crept unbidden into other facets of my graduate-student world . . .

When I walked alone on campus, useful thoughts surprised me with sudden appearance. I stepped from a curb and somewhere behind my eyes, saw the quick, clear image of a mascot for the Pennington High School Pirates, he complete with wide-brimmed green hat, yellow bandanna, and oversized plastic saber. His place was at the pep rally in chapter 22, the scene I was currently working on, the scene I knew lacked something, but couldn't articulate what until I stepped from that curb and saw the buccaneer . . .

I lay abed in the minutes before the alarm sounded. My eyes opened to the morning and saw light but not the daylight sifting through the drapes of the window. The light I saw was a mental image of wavering lights against a black background that I knew Nick would dream in the opening of chapter 21 . . .
As I reached to open the door of my dormitory, a solution leapt to my consciousness: In chapter 21, I realized, the students would be working in small groups. That's why Nick grows so self-conscious! He begins talking about Julie in a small peer group in his English class and reveals more than he intends about the end of their relationship . . .

In the shower between shampoo and soap, I was struck with the certainty that I needed one final scene between Nick and his mother in which they talk about Nick's deceased father, and Nick, I saw, would ask his mother if she still had the shiny black stone that Gordy had given to her when she visited the cemetery with him each afternoon more than two years earlier . . .

Days later in that same bathroom, insight flashed and I knew that the way I'd planned to handle the scene with the shiny black stone wasn't right. Nick shouldn't ask his mother if she has it. No drama in that. Instead, the subject of the shiny black stone should not come up until Nick and his mother are at the significant setting of the cemetery, standing before his father's grave. At just the right moment, then, Nick's mother pulls the stone from her pocket and presents it to Nick, surprising him, surprising the reader, just as the insight had surprised me.

So immersed did I become in the world of the novel that I found myself thinking of it even when I was trying to concentrate on something else. This often happened when I
read, regardless of whether the reading was of high interest or low. While reading Don Murray's *Shoptalk* late one night, for example, I thought of a lead sentence for the chapter I would draft the next morning. While reading articles about portfolio assessment of student work, I thought of the last two words of the novel—heard them spoken, really—and saw Nick writing down the words as he sat in his English class. While reading a book about quantitative methodology in educational research, I reached for my note pad when suddenly I realized that Danny was concerned about the all-league middle guard who would play across from him that evening in the final football game.

This kind of thinking and planning that occurred when I was away from my desk and computer—yet subconsciously immersed in the project I so passionately cared about—became a crucial and reliable means of invention. *Blindside* would have been the less without such unbidden thinking.

My most productive time for planning and thinking was while I swam. Several times each week after three or four morning hours of work on the novel, I went swimming at the university pool. I swam a steady freestyle for thirty-one minutes, rested five minutes, then swam breaststroke another ten. My pulse rose, blood pumping faster through my veins, the rhythm of physical movement automatic after years of swimming. No conscious thought was necessary to execute each stroke, kick, and breath. Neither did I need occupy my
mind with lap-counting, since my time in the pool was
ddictated by the countdown on my watch. Unencumbered was my
mind as I swam back and forth in the solitude of breathing
and bubbles, turns and glides, liquid atmosphere and
predictable sound.

During this time more than any other away from my desk
and computer, I solved problems of plot, enhanced the narra-
tive with significant action, and thought of scenes for
future chapters. Examples best show this. For two weeks I
had known that I wanted a chapter in which an adult gives a
responsible sex talk to teenagers. How that might happen I
had little idea. I vaguely thought that it might take place
at Julie's high school. While swimming, however, I knew
with swift clarity that Julie's mother would deliver the sex
talk, and that she would deliver it to both Julie and Nick
when they returned from the Medville football game. Another
time, I swam knowing I needed more tension in the classroom
scene when Nick volunteers to read aloud the Dylan Thomas
poem. But how? As my heart raced and biceps ached, I saw
the way: While reading aloud in front of his classmates,
Nick falters. When he reaches the line in which the poet
addresses the dying father, Nick loses his composure,
catches his breath, is unable to continue for a moment.

During another swim in mid April, my mind jumped for-
ward several chapters to the final scene of the novel. I
saw a motion-picture still of Nick walking into his English

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I am neither alone nor the first, of course, to experience thinking in conjunction with exercise. Robert Penn Warren has caught glimpses of poems this way for years:

> I find that regular exercise, any kind of simple repeated motion, is like hypnosis—it frees your mind. So when I am walking or swimming, I try to let my mind go blank, so I can catch the poems on the wing, before they can get away" (Stitt 1990, 240-241).

My time spent swimming was productive, both mind and muscles working in concert. So taken was I with the quality of thinking I did while swimming that I sometimes set up my swims to woo that state of mind. Usually, such arranged wooing wasn't necessary, since I wrote nearly every morning. By the time I lowered myself into the water the novel was with me thoroughly. Had *Blindside* been any heavier on my mind, in fact, I would have sunk to the bottom of the pool. If, however, I'd attended to some other reading or writing on a particular morning and hadn't been living in the world of the novel, I took fifteen minutes prior to leaving for the swimming pool to read my latest chapter-in-progress, seeking to immerse myself in the content and language of the novel. That tack didn't work. Often I wouldn't think about the novel at all during a swim. When I did, the thinking was not productive—no insights gained, no problems solved, no scenes seen.
In fact, my mind usually sought more pressing matters, especially when I was writing a paper for another class. Despite what I hoped would happen, my mind knew what it needed to concentrate on. My best aquatic thinking about the novel came when I swam immediately after emerging from a long sustained period of intense fictional invention. It was then that solutions to problems broke through the surface of my awareness. For purposes of generating ideas, a brief cursory reading of my writing was no match for an hour or more of intense creation in which I considered problems, manipulated language, and invented new action.

Any thoughts and planning I did—regardless of the context of their occurrence—I wrote about in my journal the first chance I got, this to capture as many of the processes of cognition and composition as I could. I also wrote each day about the actual writing of fiction—how it was going and what I would write next. I recapped what I'd thought or done each writing session. But sometimes I went beyond recapitulation. Sometimes new thought arrived as I wrote an entry. Here is an excerpt from my journal of Wednesday, April 5, 1990, with the new thinking underlined:

Reworked the Nick and Julie bar scene. Almost all dialog. They had to talk. And they did about Nick's father some, about their relationship. The scene wasn't so melodramatic. I think it's clearer why she came down to see Nick. It strikes me now that maybe as she is getting ready to leave, she can spot the picture of his dad and ask about it.

The action of the chapter didn't end up playing the way
I conjectured in the last line of the journal entry. In chapter 27 of the final draft, Nick retrieves the picture himself and takes it to Julie, an act of maturity and self-confidence he would not have done several chapters earlier. After Nick and Julie talk about the picture, Nick leaves it on the bar. Later, after Julie has gone, Nick's irascible brother-in-law, Spence, arrives and notices the picture. Their talk about it begins a significant scene in which Nick attempts to understand Spence. These scenes were created because of the spontaneous, speculative planning that occurred as I wrote in my journal.

The kind of new thinking I did in the journal entry above, though, was rare. After three hours composing fiction, I was usually weary of writing and was satisfied just documenting the creative moves I had made in planning, drafting, revising, and thinking. For purposes of invention and problem solving, of far more use to me was the thinking and planning I did while engaged in other activities that didn't require my full attention, like walking, swimming, or showering. And sometimes when my mind should have been fully occupied—as when reading—the pull of the novel compelled me to subconsciously consider problems of fictional invention. Solitary, quiet activities were ripe times for second line planning and inventing.

This unplanned thinking was rendered most useful and accessible to me by my habit of jotting notes, mapping
possibilities for chapters, and writing down the terrain I had covered so I could better see where I had been and might go next. I found note cards, paper, pencil, and pen quite companionable for spontaneous planning and thinking.

Note taking served to place hold information I might not remember, to prepare to draft a chapter, or to plot the time scheme for my novel. John Gardner has written that "... plot is--or must sooner or later become--the focus of every writer's plan" (Gardner 1985, 56). When finally I had set aside the chapters of autobiographical history, when events had started to build from the narrative thread I'd begun, I grew ever more concerned with plot. Although I had done no formal plotting beforehand, I did a great deal of informal plotting during the process of writing.

Figure 4.1 features a page of questions and suppositions I wrote immediately after setting aside the autobiographical chapters. Murray had suggested I sketch an outline. Figure 4.1 represents the best I could do in that respect. It's the kind of planning--messy and free-formed--that I find productive. About three-quarters of the probing and questioning on this page led to chapters or scenes I used in Blindside. Putting such ideas down in my own handwriting and keeping them within easy reach for reference, enabled me to carry forth invention.
Fig. 4.1. List of questions and suppositions

Less than two weeks after making those notes, I focused on two of the suppositions in Figure 4.1, lines five and eleven: “Greater conflict between Nick & Peter [Jonathan in
the final draft]? and "Nick's mom wants to talk about it [his father's death]; Nick doesn't." I would explore these suppositions in a scene that occurs when Nick returns home from a date. Figure 4.2 is the mapping of action and gathering of detail I did before drafting chapter 12.

This planning was done quickly in a "telegraphic style," making "it possible to gallop ahead, exploring new
connections, a task that is much harder when the writer's intention is to shape connected and readable prose" (John-
Steiner 1985, 112). These jottings are notes to myself that cover the bones of chapter 12, some of the key images and bits of dialog I'd begun to see and hear. And so the line in the left center of the map--"Remember how I was"--I know will be spoken by Nick's mother and refers to her physical and mental condition in the months following her husband's death.

Another way I preserve thought is by jotting notes wherever I am. In my shirt pocket I carry a blank card that I fill with notes to remind me of appointments, tasks, and phone numbers. While writing my novel, I also used the card to capture images, ideas, and lines of dialog that occurred to me. Figure 4.3 shows one side of such a card. Amid
names, times, dates, and book titles, I wrote two ideas for
for the novel while on the run, perhaps in the library,
drugstore, or locker room: "Nick faces the moment of
blindsiding somebody in the last game" and "Go to graveyard-
-Maybe use Gordy & stone. Mom has accepted father[s] death,
Nick hasn't." Both ideas—preserved on the card soon after
they had come to me—I used in chapters 23 and 30.

As the chronology of my narrative developed, I grew
concerned about its time span. Initially, I'd imagined the
novel covering several months. I knew now it would cover
only days. In one look I needed to see what I'd written and
planned for each day of novel-time. I needed this to look
linear, like the days on a calendar. More than the pages of
mounting manuscript, this list gave me a sense of sequence
to my chapters. Figure 4.4—which I wrote on a five by

```
F: nov 24
S: Nov 25 & 26: game
Su: bill day
M: after school day—first school theme
T: Jun almost caught
W: bill day, but before 3rd m & at school
Th: phone ring & Julie's scene of date
F: day at school—then that night stunned at game
```

Fig. 4.4. List depicting novel-time of Blindside
seven card--represents such a linear map with the subject of each chapter noted. In the telegraphic style of words, partial words, and abbreviations I noted the frantic, surprising opening chapter and Julie's football game that same Friday night (F-morn sur & Juli game). I ended with the following Friday at school and Nick's final football game (F-day at school, then that night stunned at game).

I didn't use one way exclusively to plan chapters. I used a variety of methods, and I used whatever was handy, usually writing notes by hand which I placed beside the computer when I drafted. Occasionally, however, I used my journal for ruminating. In the journal excerpt below I wrote about making extensive notes for the last chapter I would begin to draft the next morning, but ideas and images were so strong in me that I moved right into planning.

5/10/90 Thursday, 1:01 p.m. . . . I'll begin the last chapter, probably Saturday or Sunday morning. Getting worried about it and must remember to keep my standards low enough to enter the chapter so things start happening. Last chapters--especially this one since it's my novel--are crucial. I thought of making some extensive notes tomorrow morning, just to see who was available. Last night I thought that Coach Raymond should be in it briefly. Maybe Nick has not made the all-league team but it doesn't bother him. Anyway, Coach Raymond was likable and real (Mariana [my nineteen year old daughter] liked him very much in the one chapter she read). Jack is there, still with his eye bandaged. Carolyn is there, a little wary, but ready to talk with Nick. Powell there as Cocky as ever. Jim, cynical Jim there. Danny is ready to write. Perhaps he's been voted all-league center over the weekend. Angel, what about him. Did he get busted over the weekend for his drinking (Funny, yesterday Don said, "You're using the part about Angel, aren't
you?". Angel getting busted would be too righteous and I-told-you-so. How about Skid? He should come in here some way. Maybe he and Raymond are talking together. We'll see.

Three days later I drafted the final chapter, but before I did, I sketched a map (Figure 4.5) to gather more

Fig. 4.5. Map for final chapter of *Blindside*

images, information, and action to guide me in the writing. Near the top of the map I’ve jotted the name Simpson [Ms. 77]
Hennigan in the final draft]. I see she may bring a thermos to class because she likes to drink coffee while she writes. She also may bring in a Miles Davis tape for some mellow trumpet as background sound. I note further details of Nick, Nancy [Carolyn in the final draft], Danny, James, and Coach Raymond.

Not finished planning yet, I took what was handy—the side of a manilla folder—and listed (Figure 4.6) some of

Fig. 4.6. List of details for final chapter of *Blindaide*
the details of the mapping. This further manipulation of images enabled me to see them as a flow of events and to generate more information. The items in this list, though just a fraction of the detail that occurs in chapter 31, are in chronological order to help me draft the linear events of the narrative. You can even see that the sixth line about the Coach posting the all-league list was squeezed between two lines to preserve the chronology. While writing, I referred to this list as I needed to. In the first line, I have written a lead that has come to me: Nick had awakened. The past perfect verb tense, I realized, was crucial in noting Nick's increasing maturity.

This final chapter that I had felt such anxiety and pressure to compose became pleasurable to write. The material was impending in me. It had "grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it . . . [would] fall" (Virginia Woolf quoted in Murray 1990, 77).

I sometimes explored and speculated in my journal, ranging broadly over my characters, positing actions they might take and emotions they might feel, just as I had in thinking about the final chapter. The mapping (Figure 4.5) scattered my subject matter about the page, allowing me to break free of the linearity of language I'm so used to working in. Through mapping, I could quickly look at parts of my chapter, generating glimpses of images, concrete
detail, character action, even a line of dialog. In the final list, or outline of sorts (Figure 4.6), I moved back into linearity and language. I used the images of setting and character I had generated, envisioning as many of the specific, chronological actions of the chapter as I could. I watched Nick awaken, saw him pick up a pen, a fast moving roller ball he likes to write with. I saw the eight by ten picture of Julie on the nightstand and the crucifix hanging from the wall. That image of Christ sparked language: he had died long enough. I added this to the list and later used it in the draft. By calling forth specific detail I’d been working with throughout the book, the themes of death and suffering were with me again.

Planning Blindside took many forms—quick note taking whenever and wherever I needed, gathering information and jotting it down, listing information to place hold thought, mapping the detail and action I thought might be in a chapter, the better to visualize it, and listing events chronologically to prepare to write. All this planning occurred before and during the drafting of chapters. It captured, enhanced, and generated images, detail, and conceptualizations: the grist for making Blindside.
CHAPTER FIVE

VISUALIZATION AND DETAIL

One of the gratifying rewards of creating Blindside was repeatedly experiencing the fruits of the generative potential of language, detail, and image. Sparse conversations developed texture, vague actions grew vivid, skeletal ideas gained flesh. I use the word gratifying because the generation of something where there had been nothing, or very little, was immensely pleasurable.

An example best shows how this near-magical generation works. Below is an excerpt from the first draft of chapter 17, when Nick and Julie are alone at Nick's mother's apartment. Nick's sister, Donna, and her two children arrive unexpectedly. Nick half dresses and runs to meet them. His immediate problem is keeping two-year-old Angie and five-year-old Gordy away from his bedroom. In the following excerpt Nick has stopped Gordy's dash to the bedroom to get the football he and Nick often play with. Nick has picked up Gordy and returned him to the living room.

Nick set Gordy down on the floor. He ran to the coffee table. He twirled Nick's literature book around and looked at the picture on the cover. Nick saw Julie's coat lying on the couch.

"Who's that?" said Gordy.
"That's Shakespeare," said Nick.
Gordy looked up and tried out the word.
"Shakespeare?"
"Perfect," said Nick. He looked around at
Angie. She was doddling around the kitchen, holding on to the chairs as she walked.

Earlier in the chapter, before Nick and Julie went to the bedroom, he had read her a poem, then set his literature book on the coffee table. When Nick carried his nephew into the living room and set him down, Gordy ran to the coffee table. I didn't preplan the youngster's movement, but Gordy's high energy and earlier dash toward the bedroom demanded that he move quickly again. The information depicting the boy's impulsive movement earlier pushed me to generate further information.

This information generation happened rapidly, but in the sentences that follow I will describe my thinking processes deliberately. Once I had written Gordy's run to the coffee table, I wondered why he had done so. Mentally seeing the coffee table, naming it with language, using it in a sentence and typing it, made the detail dominate my consciousness. The coffee table and the literature book upon it appeared to me like a still from a motion-picture production. Movement began, then, as I described Gordy handling the book. Why would he do that, I wondered? What would intrigue him? I've seen enough high-school literature anthologies to know that pictures usually appear on their covers. Such a picture, I determined, would grab the boy's attention. I had no particular image in mind. But when Gordy twirled around the book to look at the cover, I knew he would ask the identity of the person pictured. Who
would it be? I settled on Shakespeare, envisioning the familiar image of him printed on the cover of the Plain English Handbook: trimmed beard, ear ring, near handlebar mustache, high hairline, and curly side locks.

None of the detail in the excerpt was planned beforehand. I generated actions and details from the images and language that preceded them. Often, this initial first-draft envisioning came with much difficulty, and some anguish. Not having images in mind is stressful for a writer (Nell 1988, 220). And for me writing fiction, before I get language on paper, I usually must have image in mind. If I were lucky, a couple days before drafting a chapter, images it might contain appeared to me. Days before I wrote chapter 10, for example, I saw stills of Nick and Mr. Kelly talking in the kitchen of the Kelly house when Nick learns that Julie has left for the dance without him. I saw another still of Nick and Julie arguing at the dance. At this early point in the creation process, I do not see much action, only stills. But action is implicit in them. The stills represent my conceptual knowledge of the emotion and action involved, in these cases, Nick shocked, angry, and hurt to learn that Julie has stood him up and, later, the two teenagers at odds at the dance.

Whether I get specific images or not before I begin a chapter, I finally come to the task of drafting, of constructing a scene with language. If I have images, they
enable me to generate words to describe them. If I don't have images, I create action; image and language occur almost simultaneously, though even in this instance, I think image arrives first. Think, I say. I'm not sure.

The action of the narrative I've begun is rarely continuous in my mind. I see only a bit of it—a burst of movement—and seek language that captures that movement. Sometimes words, too, come in bursts and take action farther than I envisioned, language and image occurring so fast, again, I can't tell which arrives first. They seem to run side by side like two thoroughbreds, first one taking the lead, then the other. I often imagine reversing the action and running it over as though I were a film editor hunched over an editing table, reviewing rough-cut footage on a Moviola. The visual replay aids my search for language to depict action.

Eventually, I have a first draft, language that approximates the vision I generated while planning and composing. I have pictures that move in a continuous flow when I reread. They are usually sparely detailed pictures, to be sure, but they spur my mind to generate further images, detail, language, and emotion.

When I reread a scene I've written—when I look at it, really—I become a film editor again, one viewing the first assemblage of a motion picture. I go a film editor one better, though, for when I review my narrative, I can not
only delete and rearrange material, but also instantly call forth newly conceived footage. I am not working from "possible" vision where there had been nothing, as I often did when constructing the first draft. When revising, I work from "depicted" vision. As I scan the language I've used, it induces me once again to visualize scenes. I see what is there and, if I am responding well, what isn't there but should be. I can delete one detail to sharpen the effect of those that remain. I can rearrange parts. I can invent new images to enhance a scene.

Certainly, I'm referring to visual detail, but that isn't all. The act of visualizing alerts me to attendant tastes and textures, sounds and smells. I become aware of the feelings and emotions involved, too. I add the detail, the action, the dialog necessary to activate imagination, the elements, in fact, that have been activated in my imagination as I revised. The act of visualizing, combined with the sound and rhythm of language, helps me experience what I'm writing. With that experiencing, I more accurately conceptualize what I'm doing. I begin responding to character, plot, and symbol.

Here is the scene of Nick, Donna, and the children, now revised as it appears in the final draft of *Blindside*:

Nick set Gordy down on the floor. He ran to the coffee table, where he twirled Nick's literature book around so he could look at the picture on the cover. Nick saw Julie's coat lying on the couch.

"Who's that?" Gordy poked his finger at the
"That's Shakespeare," said Nick. Gordy looked up and tried out the word. "Shakespeare?"
"What did Mommy tell you about saying that word?" said Donna. Gordy continued his dance. "Shake stinker. Shake stinker."

Show-don't-tell is an old saw of writing well, one oft repeated to me and by me. When I taught that concept in the past, I was entirely concerned about readers. Give them example-rich prose. Appeal to their senses. Dramatize scenes. I knew that detail, that "splitting the second" (Hoffman 1986, 77) of a scene so readers could see and experience it would make writing resonate for them.

When touting the virtues of detail and specificity, I don't think primarily of the reader anymore. I think of the writer. In my own writing, I'd never linked the concept of "show-don't-tell" to the generative potential of language and image. Whenever I added details and showed something more vividly, I thought I always did so for a reader. Of course, I was doing it for a reader, though not a faceless, unidentified one. I was doing it for my first and most important reader--me (Murray 1982, 164). When I re-saw my drafts, I learned how they could be vivified and sharpened if I wanted words on paper to match more closely the scene I saw in my mind's Moviola.
In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978) Louise Rosenblatt has written about the creative act of reading. Meaning does not merely pop into readers' passive minds as they scan written language, she believes. There is more involved. As readers scan written language, they engage in an active transaction with texts and, by doing so, create meaning. In effect, it is the reader's transaction with print that makes texts into poems, novels, essays, and dramas.

When I revise a draft, I, too, seek a rich transaction with the words of my text, with the images, emotions, and ideas those words evoke in me. During my transaction with the first draft of the scene above, the very sound of *Shakespeare* combined with what I know about children and their love of language-play to make a rich, imaginative reading for me, a reading much more detailed than the words on the page revealed when I initially wrote them. This new reading, then, I turned into writing.

The interaction between my own knowledge and the language of the text led me to deepen the characterization of Gordy. Spurred by the delight in his own language invention, the child chants and dances, becoming frenetic, not my original conception of him. I describe this as though I had no control over Gordy's character development. I did have control, but it was a curious kind of control. Gordy didn't simply become what I predetermined he would.
He became more spontaneous, complex, and interesting because I interacted with the detail and images of my first draft and tried to be responsive to the generative potential they offered.

And those details and images, I must not forget, came from language; and that language, more often than not, came first from images. In Notebooks of the Mind Vera John-Steiner quotes Gestalt psychologist Rudolph Arnheim: "What makes language so valuable for thinking, then, cannot be thinking in words. It must be the help that words lend to thinking while it operates in a more appropriate medium, such as visual imagery" (quoted in John-Steiner 1985, 211).

The creation of Blindside was the result of a grand dialectic between my powers of seeing and saying. The two modes of thought--visual and verbal--enabled each other. Images spurred me to generate language to depict them. That language spawned further images. Both language and images gained precision during this circular process. Characters did and said things that extended plot. Through me, then, these acts generated emotions and actions in other characters as I imagined them responding. Further images and language occurred quickly, one mode of thinking answering another, upping the cognitive ante.

"[I]n general," writes Richard Nell, "authors are likely to make greater use of imagery than readers . . . ." (Nell 1988, 220-21).
Indeed. And the process is apt to leave writers gratified.

**Detail and Symbol**

Key images or symbols emerged in my novel through the concentrated use of detail. In *The Art of Fiction* John Gardner has written that

> Good description is symbolic not because the writer plants symbols in it but because, by working in the proper way, he forces symbols still largely mysterious to him up into his conscious mind where, little by little as his fiction progresses, he can work with them and finally understand them (Gardner 1983, 36).

By "working in the proper way," I take Gardner to mean working specifically with detail throughout the writing process, remembering detail that has been used in previous chapters, entering characters' psyches in which certain significant details are codified with complex, emotional meanings, and connecting the action and detail of one scene to another. When a character awakens in the morning, what does he think? What does he see on the dresser? What stories has a character told? What action has she lived that cuts directly to her soul? What meaningful memories does a character attach to certain images? Not that a writer knows the answers to such questions before the first draft is written, but that in writing properly about human beings and the detail of their lives, a writer discovers the significant, the genuine, the unforgettable.

Few of the key images or details in *Blindside* were
planned in advance of drafting chapters. I discovered them and their significance while writing. In trying to create the illusion of reality, I found that paying attention to detail and to characters' concerns caused me to repeat certain images. The flash of headlights, for example, that Nick imagines bore down on his father in the moments before collision and death was one such key image that achieved ever-increasing relevance as I continued to write the novel. It wasn't planned in advance. But on February 10, just two weeks into the writing, I arose before 7:00 a.m. and wrote a draft by hand of Nick being viciously tackled during a football game. In this surrealistic passage I paralleled Nick's stunned perceptions with the mayhem of flashing lights in the moment before his father was killed. Two days later I typed the passage into my computer and revised it, emphasizing the detail of the automobile accident and contrasting the lights with blackness:

A shoulder cut into his waist, driving him backward until a shock in the middle of the back stopped his momentum. A crushing blackness fell then lights flashed out of nowhere converging on him. "Look out!" Nick heard in the blackness. "Look out!"

The two tacklers swirled Nick around and held him up. Another shock slammed into his chest. The lights [went] out, metal roaring, colliding, exploding, fusing in heat and speed. Glass shattered about him, spraying the front seat and passengers with hundreds of jagged fragments. Nick heard a buzz. He opened his eyes and saw black sky and a blur of lights to the side.

I used an expanded version of this imagery two months later when I wrote chapter 23. Writing the first detail of
lights in mid February, however, when I had written only eighty-six pages of the novel, sensitized me to the importance of the light image. It must be crucial, I realized, if I had been driven to arise in the early hours of dawn to write it. And writing the scene, capturing it with a concentrated effort of language—not just thinking or jotting a note about it—heightened my awareness of the light image. During the three months of writing that followed, I paid attention to lights whenever they might occur in the scenes I wrote.

Indeed, I believe I was subconsciously drawn to light imagery. In addition to the light imagery at the crucial moment in chapter 23, I opened chapter 21 with Nick dreaming of lights amid blackness. In chapter 24 when I visualized the late night scene that followed the final football game, I saw the headlights of cars illuminating a parking lot. In chapter 20 when Nick and Julie are parked on a hillside above Medville, I looked down upon the town myself from that vantage point and saw illumination. Subsequently, I took care in describing the street lights and traffic below. Images of lights recur in the novel because in the process of working with detail and visualizing scenes, I saw them repeatedly. Such frequent encounters with light imagery made me realize I had something going.

Neither did I have plans to make a significant detail of the class ring that Julie gives back to Nick when she
breaks up with him in chapter 20. But once Julie slips the ring over the gearshift, I am, so to speak, gratefully stuck with it. The ring is with Nick now, and I, the author writing *Blindside* from his point of view, must deal with it in future action. So when Nick drives home after the break-up, he looks down at the ring on the gearshift, a tangible reminder of what has happened. The next day Nick puts on the ring and is self-conscious at school wearing it among all the students. He conceals the ring by balling his left hand into a fist. He taps the ring on his desk top. He drops the ring and cracks its stone. With his thumb Nick feels the ring. He takes the ring off after the final scene with Julie in the bar on Sunday morning, then puts it back on again before joining his mother upstairs in the kitchen and later at the cemetery.

The way some teachers and literary critics often speak about symbols one might think that writers prepared blueprints before writing, detailed plans that listed the symbols they would use in their novels. References to these symbols, then, they dropped into their narratives in strategic places. Some writers may work that way. I didn't. The repetition of symbols and key images in my novel did not occur through preplanning. The lights, the class ring, the crucifix, the picture of Nick's father from twenty-five years earlier—these symbols or key images were revealed to me during the act of writing; and, then, after they were
functioning in the text, further writing and spontaneous planning showed me new ways to use them.

**Detail and the Fictional Dream**

"[A]s we read," writes John Gardner, "we discover that the importance of physical detail is that it creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind" (Gardner 1985, 30). Detail activates imagination. As we read, we see part of the detail the writer has provided; and, because of our creative transaction with the text, we see further detail that might surprise the writer. So critical does Gardner believe is the novelist's responsibility to weave a fictional dream that he goes on to write that "one of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader's mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream" (Gardner 1985, 31-32).

Neither symbol nor plot, neither character nor setting is most important to a novel. What holds utmost importance is the maintenance of a fictional dream. Detail serves it and becomes part of the fabric of the narrative. Detail drives forward the story, creating one image after another, making plot, symbol, character, and setting.

Exposition, on the other hand, can break the fictional dream. Even amid plentiful detail, lengthy explanation can stop the flow of the fictional dream. Excessive exposition causes the stream of images to jump the track of the film projector. The potential of images to activate a reader's
imagination spools onto the floor. The movie screen in the mind goes dark, as a voice tells about events that have happened or events that will come. But readers haven't paid just to hear; they have paid to see, as well.

To illustrate what can happen when an author lets exposition intrude on the fictional dream, I offer part of an early version of chapter 14 from *Blindside*:

Mrs. Simpson, the bright, young English teacher in her second year at Pennington High School had put Nick in the first seat of the middle row, right in front of her desk. When he had asked her why back in September, she'd told him that she didn't want him hiding his intellect back in the corner.

"I won't hide it if you let me sit where I was--back by the window."

"No," she said, kindly but firmly.

The new seat soon became familiar to him. He was comfortable there. But today there was a tenseness about him that had come from last night's homework. He always read his English, usually liked it, sometimes even took notes as he had on John Keats' sonnet, "Bright Star."

But last night as he read the Dylan Thomas poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," the words had stunned him, rocked him. It was as though Thomas knew about Nick and the death of his father and was speaking directly to him. Yes, Nick thought, "rage against the dying of the light" was it exactly. And now with a mixture of excitement and anxiety, he waited for class to start, waited for the class discussion of "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

Mrs. Simpson walked into the classroom, carrying her English literature textbook. She looked at Nick as though to read him. Their eyes met, she smiled, and said, "Good morning." She placed the thick literature book on her desk and sat down. The class quieted to a murmur; the students liked Mrs. Simpson. Many of them, including Nick, had her for junior English the year before, her first year of teaching. And unlike many first years for teachers, the class had not been chaos from day one to final exam. It had been purposeful. It was clear that this young
woman loved literature, and wanted to include students in on her joy. She was dying to get them immersed in poems, stories, essays, and novels.

She had expected students to speak and write about their thinking. And she listened to them. She actually listened and responded to their thinking. That magic had transformed the English class. Instead of picking out parts of speech in sentences from a grammar book or from work sheets as they had in their other English classes as long as Nick could remember, the students in Mrs. Simpson's class began using nouns and verbs to make sentences of their own that reflected their own thinking.

After I read this excerpt to a small group of teachers, one woman said, "Boy, you've got an ax to grind." I suppose I did. The passage is clogged with writing-process propaganda. No fictional dream about it, just heavy-handed exposition. At the time of writing, I had no further plans for a chapter set in a classroom, and I was overwhelmed with all the detail I knew a vibrant secondary-school English class should contain. Neither had I firmly figured out yet how I could show Nick's strong response to the Dylan Thomas poem. Thus, instead of trusting a fictional dream to reveal the classroom atmosphere and Nick's state of mind, I went on at length explaining them.

The excerpt is full of information about Mrs. Simpson, a new character I was introducing, a character I was getting to know by writing about her. We learn her approximate age, how she feels about grammar and writing and literature. We learn that she nudges Nick in order to get the most out of him. We learn things about Nick, too—that he does his
English homework, that he likes poetry, that he was even moved by a Keats' sonnet on one occasion and was emotionally struck the night before by a Dylan Thomas poem.

The problem is that the exposition, however detailed, puts the fictional dream on hold. The dramatic clock stops. The reader awakens. The brisk movement of Blindside is halted. And with the cessation of the fictional dream, my novel becomes something other than modern fiction. It lurches away from "scene-by-scene construction," which Tom Wolfe believes is one of the reasons for the modern novel's narrative power (quoted in Nell 1988, 53).

Here is the beginning of the final version of chapter 14, with the teacher reconceptualized and renamed Ms. Hennigan and with the fictional dream carried forth again:

When Nick walked into English class Monday morning, most of the students were already there, turned in their seats, talking and jabbering.

"Hey, where you been, Dago Man?" said Powell. Nick laid his literature textbook and notebook on his desk, the first seat in the middle row, where Ms. Hennigan had put him on the second day of school. He sat down and turned to Powell.

"Stopped at my locker. The coach caught me and talked about Tusky, asked how my chin was."

"How is it?" said Powell.

Nick tilted his head so his chin protruded. "Still bruised and colorful." Nick touched the spot.

"It's lookin' pretty," said Powell. "You needed some color on that pasty face."

"Not purple, though."

"Purple. Red. Black. What's the difference? You just need to break up that white some."

"Wait 'til summer," said Nick. "I'll get a good tan."

"That's the best idea you had since Saturday."
Nick swiveled around and faced the front of the room. He flipped open his literature book to the page where he had marked last night’s homework. He remembered that the poem had stunned him.

The bell rang and the students talked right through it, not missing a beat of conversation. A minute later Ms. Hennigan walked into the classroom, carrying her usual cup of coffee. She wore a long black skirt, a black vest, and a bright green blouse.

“Ms. H.,” someone said, “you should wear that green on Friday. It would fit right in.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Ms. Hennigan, setting down her coffee cup amid the disarray of papers and books on her desk. “I’ll let Coach Raymond wear this blouse to the pep rally.”

The students laughed.

“I’ll get him some heels!” said someone.

Nick pictured Coach Raymond wearing high heels, the green blouse, and, of course, the baseball cap he was rarely without.

Ms. Hennigan sat down. She brought the coffee cup to her lips. She was plump. Her red hair scattered in curls over her head.

“So what's new this dreary Tuesday morning?” said Ms. Hennigan.

Maintaining the fictional dream takes precedence in this final draft. The film stays on track and runs unhindered through the projector. But it took far more space to weave this part of the dream. And although I’ve revealed detail of talk and books and chin bruise, I haven’t revealed much yet about Ms. Hennigan or about Nick’s response to the poem. In a similar number of words I told far more information in the expository version. But no matter. Blindside is fiction, not essay. Dramatized story is what I’m after, not exposition. Later in the chapter, the fictional dream continues and reveals through detailed actions Nick’s response to the Dylan Thomas poem and Ms. Hennigan’s views.
of grammar, writing, and literature.

And I took longer yet to weave information together. I found it necessary to visit the classroom twice more in chapters 21 and 31. In each, Ms. Hennigan reveals herself through action and image, detail and dialog. After the false start of relentless exposition in chapter 14, I dreamed Ms. Hennigan's classroom with its desks and poems and student talk. The language I generated enabled readers to combine those words with their own experience to create a vision of Ms. Hennigan's classroom.

Blindside is rendered through language. Tens of thousands of words, page after page of them. All that language might lead people to believe that verbal thought predominates in making a novel. That's risky thinking. Much of the language of Blindside was wrought from wordless mental images. And then, to be sure, language entered the picture quickly to name significant details of characters, settings, and actions. This language of detail spurred further images, which in turn spurred further language. The two modes of thought--verbal and visual--collaborated, creating something together that neither could create alone.
CHAPTER SIX

READING MAKING WRITING

The process of creating Blindside involved far more reading than writing. I read my own notes, lists, maps, and journals. I read and reread two, three, sometimes four drafts of a chapter before I went on to the next. I read the page. I read the computer screen. I read lines, and I read between lines. Several times while drafting the novel, I backtracked and read the entirety of my work. While revising the novel over a summer, I read and reread three drafts of it, each altered in scores of small and large ways from the previous draft. I read Don Murray's novel-in-progress, his notes to me, and his helpful reflections on writing in general and fiction writing in particular. I read young adult novels. I read books about fiction writing and books for a seminar in reading and writing instruction. All this reading affected my writing. Had my reading matter and reading processes been different, my novel, too, would have been different.

Reading My Own Texts

Rereading my fiction allowed me to view it closely, scene by scene, word by word. Several times during the creation of Blindside, I stopped writing new material,
stepped back, and reread all I had written, resisting the urge to revise as I read. The most action of hand I permitted myself was to pencil a line in the margin next to a spot where I saw work that needed to be done. I did not seek to dive into the sweet bliss of revision; I sought, instead, to reorient myself to the text and consider the novel as a whole before making major decisions.

In late January of 1990, before I resumed fiction writing, I read everything I'd written in the last two-and-a-half years that pertained to the novel. This rereading, this traveling a familiar trail, one I had been busy blazing the first time through, immersed me again in the fictional world of Nick Bassille, aiding my task of creation. As I read, I interacted with fragments and chapters, jotting notes about action, characters, and possible scenes. I saw the themes of adolescent sexuality, death, and loss emerge. In one handwritten fragment, I found a phrase--"forever and ever"--whose meaning and sound appealed to me. I thought it might become a significant repetition later in the novel.

Two-and-a-half weeks after I'd composed six new chapters to go with the ones I'd written during the summer of 1987, I again reread all my work, this time in order to arrange it--flashbacks and all--in the best chronology I could discover for Murray's reading and response. This act of arranging helped me see the folly of trying to include the flashbacks. On a later date, March 10, I reread the
manuscript again. By this time I had completed 157 chronological pages, but had been away from the novel four days because of other responsibilities. Through rereading I reentered the flow of the narrative, picking up scattered threads of plot and reacquainting myself with the developing characters.

My most important rereading of the novel-in-progress came Saturday, April 28, two days after I'd met with Murray and he'd told me that he thought the last three chapters I'd given him were off track with little tension, excessive predictability, and possibly even the wrong characters involved in one scene. I used the morning and afternoon that Saturday to read the 300 plus pages I had written. By deeply involving myself with character and story, I sought to build a momentum of inevitability that would help me rework the last three chapters and create anew.

I used this massive rereading strategy one last time, that was before I drafted the final chapter, the chapter I'd felt such anxiety to write, the chapter I had long wanted to be emotionally satisfying, even before I had any idea where it would take place or what it would be about.

5/13/90 Sunday, 8:22 a.m. About to start last chapter. I've been putting it off with the excuse that I was writing the portfolio paper and preparing to write the last chapter. I have prepared, rereading everything I've written since January, jotting down things I might pick up, getting the stuff of the novel in my head, some of it has been written so long ago.

I was pleased [to see in rereading] that the action moved right along. Some of the chapters
seemed to start abruptly. I thought that maybe I needed to write a pep rally chapter before that last game, after the one in which Nick suddenly leaves the classroom.

This strategy of rereading my writing from beginning to end without making changes was not only useful for inventing new chapters, but also for revising chapters I was working on. Regardless of the genre I'm writing, when I read a draft, I immediately see things to add, change, expand, or delete. I revise with more precision and less wasted time, however, if I hold off making any changes until I've completely read the manuscript.

When revising a chapter of fiction, for example, if I allowed myself to act upon my impulses to revise during the first rereading, I invariably regretted doing so. I'd change wording in one line that jarred wording that followed later (the aural discord akin to dinner plates crashing to a tile floor). I'd add detail and ideas that seemed vivid and inevitable. As I proceeded rereading, however, a line or two later I discovered why the detail had seemed so vivid and inevitable—I had already used it! My memory was good enough to retrieve significant information, but not good enough to remember I'd already used it.

I was best, then, to hold off revision until I'd read a chapter completely. I even avoided correcting surface features during a first reading, since a later decision could eliminate an entire paragraph at one fell swoop, the time spent correcting all for naught. Once I'd read a
chapter and created a holistic picture of it, then I could begin revising and know that my work would have continuity.

Reacquainting myself with the various parts of my text through rereading also allowed me to think about matters of unity. Rereading let me see how characters, themes, and details that had become important in later chapters were absent or barely mentioned in early chapters. Nick's brother-in-law, Spence, for example, is introduced in chapter 6, playing only a small role. As *Blindside* progressed, though, Spence's wife and children figured into a significant plot complication in chapter 17, and Spence became the antagonist in chapters 25 and 28. His character had also developed as irascible and conceited. After rereading the manuscript, I revised the scene with Spence, Stewy, and Nick in chapter 6, adding detail and action that began to reveal Spence's objectionable character and make him memorable: He rests his foot on the beer cooler, an act Nick's father never would have done. He looks bored and dig in his teeth with a toothpick, tossing it toward the waste can, missing, and not bothering to pick it up.

Nick's passion for writing and the eight by ten picture of Julie on his nightstand gained significance as the novel progressed. After rereading, I saw I needed to make these details part of the fictional dream in earlier chapters so their significance would be steadily developed. I wanted these details to build meaningfully for readers throughout
the novel, not suddenly surprise them in the last half.

Rereading helped me see how symbols, plot lines, and characterizations could be crafted into a novel. Building this kind of unity was immensely satisfying, a time I felt close to artistry.

Reading the Texts of Others

Reading the texts of others also influenced my creation of *Blindside*. Of course, Murray's notes written directly to me about my novel helped immeasurably. But I also read Murray's novel-in-progress, his metacognitive reflections on fiction writing, his speeches, columns, poetry, and notes about writing, teaching, and learning. All of his writing, but especially his fiction and metacognitive reflections, provided me with a model of an accomplished professional writer at work, writing fiction rapidly every morning. Each week I saw the evolution of Murray's story of a retired government agent slowly beginning to face demons from his days as soldier during World War II. In Murray's notes, I saw his inventive, precise intellect in a discursive and sometimes vulnerable way, as he expressed his philosophy of writing, revealed both confidence and doubt, and generated incredible surges of planning and thinking.

When I began my independent study, I imagined reading a dozen young adult novels as part of the project. The writing of *Blindside* became such a vast undertaking, however, that my plans for reading young adult fiction dwindled
to two novels: *Sex Education* (1988) by Jenny Davis and *After the First Death* (1979) by Robert Cormier.

*Sex Education*, which I read in mid February, featured an atypical high-school, sex-education class in which the teacher spoke matter-of-factly about sexuality. I think the book influenced me in depicting the scene with Nick, Julie, and Mrs. Kelly in chapter 4, even though I used a parent to deliver the sex talk. My journal reveals that as early as February 2—two weeks before I read *Sex Education*—I’d planned such a scene, though my first inclination was to set it in school. On the afternoon of February 16, I talked unexpectedly with Jane Hansen—who served as the inspiration for Mrs. Kelly. That same night I began reading *Sex Education*. The next day I drafted chapter 4.

Although I didn’t use any specific detail from *Sex Education*, I think that reading about teenagers and sexuality kept me immersed in the topic. Davis also dramatizes scenes thoroughly. The first class meeting of the sex-education course, for example, is a sustained, tension-packed fictional dream. On the day before I wrote my own sex-talk scene, Davis had provided me with a good model of narrative sans exposition.

On March 16 when I flew to Oxford, Ohio, for spring break, I began reading a Robert Cormier novel, one which I’d first read in 1986. The new reading, however, was from a different perspective. Here’s an excerpt from my journal of
March 17, 1990:

I read half of *After the First Death* on the way home, reading it as a writer this time. So many similes and metaphors. On the layering I'm doing this morning, I'm finding myself pushing similes. Some may go, but it's pleasurable, and I think it gives the writing another dimension.

Here is the figurative language from chapter 19 I wrote that morning under Cormier's influence:

"It [the hospital corridor] smelled antiseptically clean, like the locker room just after it had been mopped and sprayed with disinfectant."

"Jack's skin felt as dry and thin as paper."

"'Hey, you guys,' he whispered, his voice dry and gravelly."

"'I remember his eyes,' Jack went on. 'They were as big as eggs.'"

"Yellow flowers, bright and proud, sat upon Jack's dresser."

"The look Nick imagined was indelible, like a stain on something valuable that you couldn't throw away, a stain on something you had to own for the rest of your life."

I finished reading *After the First Death* a day later.

On March 19, 1990, I wrote this journal entry:

Finished Cormier last night. Found myself using the word *spill* to describe tears coming from someone's eyes ["His eyes brimmed with tears, some spilling onto the bruised skin below his eyes"]. I'd remembered Cormier using that word [to describe tears falling].

I wasn't concerned about another novelist's style and
voice so overwhelming me that it took over my own. In fact, I welcomed the influence of Cormier's vigorous verbs, metaphorical language, and deep characterizations. Reading Cormier enriched my possibilities for language choice and provided me with another superb model of excellent writing.

In mid June of 1990 after I had revised Blindside once, I reread Nathanial West's novella Miss Lonelyhearts ([1933] 1962). I'd read it seventeen years earlier and liked it. I reread the book because one of my characters--Carolyn--had read it. I needed to know Miss Lonelyhearts anew so that Carolyn could talk specifically about it. I also wanted to see if the themes in West's fiction touched those in Blindside.

My rereading revealed a sophisticated, fast-paced, hard-edged novel, one that a hip Ms. Hennigan would mention in class, and, given Carolyn's intellect and love of literature, one that she would read on Ms. Hennigan's recommendation. I also discovered that West's themes of salvation, suffering, and loss of the ability to believe in Christ fit well Nick's religious crisis and one of the key images in my novel--the crucifix. Even though most readers wouldn't be aware of the similarities between West's themes and mine, I didn't want the novel that Carolyn read to be a random selection on my part. I wanted a book that would significantly touch the meanings of Blindside.

The rereading made the content of Miss Lonelyhearts
live fresh in me after seventeen years, and this enabled me to revise the dialog between Nick and Carolyn in the final chapter of Blindside. In the excerpt below that I wrote before rereading Miss Lonelyhearts Nick is helping Carolyn pick up her books which she has dropped upon colliding with him in the hall at school:

Nick touched the cover of the paperback on top. "How was Miss Lonelyhearts?"
"I loved it," said Carolyn. "Miss Lonelyhearts is really a he—a columnist that lonely people write to, so he knows about all this sadness and misery. It gets to him."
"You recommend it?"
"Sadness and misery?"
"No," Nick laughed, "the book."
"I think you'd like it," said Carolyn.
"Loan it to me when you're through."
Carolyn handed him the book.

In revising the dialog, I added depth to the conversation by eliminating the misunderstanding about sadness and misery and creating, instead, some brief book-talk between the adolescents that also reveals Nick's interest in reading and writing when he mentions another prominent novel. Here is the revision of the dialog as it appeared in the final draft of Blindside, written after I'd read Miss Lonelyhearts:

Nick touched the cover of the paperback on top. "How was Miss Lonelyhearts?"
"Not sentimental, that's for sure."
"Who is Miss Lonelyhearts?"
"Miss Lonelyhearts is really a he—a columnist who lonely people write to. He gets letter after letter about sadness and misery."
"How does he handle all that grief?"
"It gets to him. He wants to save those people."
"Sounds like The Catcher in the Rye and..."
Holden wanting to save all the kids."
"That's right. I hadn't thought of that."
"Is Miss Lonelyhearts able to save anyone?"
"Here," said Carolyn. She handed him the book.

During the semester I drafted Blindside, I read something that worked itself into the substance of the novel. I was greatly influenced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (1990). As I noted in the opening chapter, Csikszentmihalyi's idea of optimal psychological experience, of altered states of consciousness that accompany doing something one becomes passionately lost in, described what happened to me numerous times while composing Blindside. But Flow was not only descriptive of my psychological state of thinking and creating. The theory of optimal experience was present in the novel, too, both in scenes I'd written before I'd read Flow, and after.

Several times during Blindside, optimal experiences are part of the fictional dream: the repeated running of the same play in chapter 8 when Pennington drives for a winning touchdown, the sexual play between Nick and Julie in chapter 11, the class discussion of the Dylan Thomas poem and Nick's subsequent writing about it in chapter 14, and the Sunday morning waxing of the barroom floor in chapter 28.

But an explicit statement of optimal experience—a touch of exposition by a character, really—occurs in chapter 20 during the conversation between Nick and Julie in the front seat of the car when she is about to break up with
him. Although Nick does not yet understand Julie's love of
cheerleading, Julie does understand his passion for
football. And she understands because she's become aware of
optimal experience through her cheerleading. In her own
way she explains "flow" to him:

'You like football because you lose yourself in
it. You get involved in what you're doing. Jack
gains five yards. You throw a pass. Danny blocks
somebody just right. Maybe some things don't
work, so you make changes and try something new.
It must be a real kick.'

My writing was also influenced by my reading of modern
poetry over the years and by my interest in alternate styles
of writing as discussed in Winston Weather's An Alternate
Style: Options in Composition (1980). I am often most at
ease writing, most caught up in the music and meaning of
language, when I have fallen into rhythm or repetition. A
parallel language pattern helps me generate words, create
imagery, discover meaning. Earlier in this chapter, I men­
tioned that when I reread all my chapters and fragments, I
picked up the phrase "forever and ever" and thought it might
become a significant repetition.

As I wrote chapter 15, "forever and ever" became a
generative force for language and meaning, driving me to
explore images I remembered from my father's funeral,
images that came alive through Nick's experience. As I
shaped the end of chapter 15, isolating the phrase "forever
and ever" on separate lines, sharpening the images that
followed them, I became so caught up in the rhythm and
evocative meaning of the words that tears sprang into my eyes. Here are the last few hundred words of chapter 15, influenced, I'm almost certain, by my experience reading the rhythmical patterns and vivid imagery of modern poetry:

And then the memories moved to his mother who had experienced the calling hours and funeral in numb terror. She had sat between Nick and Donna in front of the coffin. The three of them saw all the people pay their respects. Hundreds filed by: relatives, friends, customers. They spoke to his mother and sister and him, then they went to the coffin. Many knelt at the railing and said prayers. Nick remembered Mr. Francini genuflecting over his father. At one point Nick and his sister and mother knelt at the railing and said the Lord's Prayer, sobbing and weeping the whole time. It took all the courage he possessed to get through the Lord's Prayer, because Nick wasn't sure he believed it anymore. He wanted to believe. How he wanted to believe, but he wasn't sure anymore. Thy will be done, thought Nick. Thy fucking will be done. Was his father dead in a coffin God's will? His father clean shaven with make up, frowning forever. His father clutching a rosary in death when he hadn't been to mass in years. Was this God's will?

"Forever and ever," Nick had said through overwhelming grief.

Forever and ever
with his hands clasped and pressing hard
against his forehead.

Forever and ever
through tears that made his hands slick and
burned the skin between his fingers.

Forever and ever
through the memory of his uncle Mike wrestling with the funeral director, pushing him aside, and kissing his father three times on his dead lips.

Forever and ever
as he broke away from his mother and sister
walking from the funeral home, broke away and ran back into the room to see the funeral director removing his father's ring and the rosary and the crucifix and then closing the lid of the coffin forever and ever.

"You can read without writing," Donald Murray writes,

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"but you can't write without reading" (Murray 1982, 165).

Amen.

No reading, no Blindside.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE INFLUENCE OF PEOPLE

My interaction with people played a significant role in making Blindside. Most of that interaction was with people who read and responded to the novel-in-progress. But some of it occurred as part of my regular traffic with people during the time I was writing. Their influence crept into the novel in surprising and helpful ways.

On February 8, 1990, for example, while amid the throes of recasting the English teacher and expositional beginning of chapter 14, I heard Marge Piercy read her fiction at the University of New Hampshire. She wore a shiny, red blouse, black sweater vest, and long black skirt. In my journal I wrote, "I was definitely influenced by the short, plump, dynamic figure of Marge Piercy yesterday."

Nick's English teacher, Ms. Hennigan, is a bit blowzy, hip to students' ways and means, straight talking, and informal. In chapter 14 she wears "a long black skirt, a black vest, and a bright green blouse," green to match Pennington's dominant school color. Thank you, Ms. Piercy.

A week later I continued to stew about creating a scene in which Nick and Julie receive a responsible sex talk from an adult. I couldn't think of a way for such a scene to occur. My problem was solved after a chance meeting with
Jane Hansen, a member of my dissertation committee. My journal:

2/17/90 Yesterday I talked with Jane H. about my dissertation, higher psychological processes, and many other matters. In the pool, lapping away the yards, I thought of making Julie's mother the talker of sex, something she's been thinking about. I would make her responsible, a little apprehensive herself about bringing this subject up to Julie and Nick, but really laying matters on the table. I referred to her once as a hotshot secretary. No reason I can't make her a sensitive, intelligent woman. I thought college teacher since I thought of Jane.

In chapter 20, the chapter in which Julie breaks up with Nick, the two are parked in a car at a spot known to teenagers as "the lights of Medville." "On the highways leading to town," I wrote, "car lights moved like slow, purposeful insects." The night before composing that sentence I'd spoken at length to a graduate student on my dormitory floor who sat each night at a table in the lounge cataloging insect specimens. He told me--at length--about his work. Was my creation of the entomological simile the result of the conversation the night before? I wouldn't rule it out.

Because of my immersion in the world of the novel, this kind of serendipitous invention spurred by my interaction with people probably happened more often than I realized. When I was aware it, it delighted me.

A number of people were of even more assistance to me in my sustained effort to create Blindside. They read and responded to my evolving novel, offering positive reception,
helpful questions, and useful advice. My interaction with these readers kept me from the potentially dangerous, insular experience of writing without human contact.

Of first, if not primary importance, were those people I met in small peer groups. During the summer of 1987 while writing those first autobiographical chapters in Murray's class, I met regularly with as many as nine others in various small groups. These folks provided an audience for my first words, making easier the task of pursuing the story I wanted to write. They took my writing seriously, engaging me in conversation about characters, action, and theme.

Another important peer response group was the one I met with every two weeks for a strict hour throughout the school year from September 1987 through December 1988. With these three people--English department colleagues in the high school where I taught--I talked about the novel and occasionally wrote fragments of it during the twenty-five minutes we allotted each meeting for writing. When I read passages to group members, they listened. Sometimes the emotions they felt were on their faces and in their voices. Always, they spoke of what the words had done to them, asked questions that elicited more information from me, and let me see where meaning was cloudy for them. During my full-time work as a high-school teacher when I sought to keep the potential novel alive, the members of this writing group offered me acceptance, interest, and wishes of Godspeed.
Another reader, a friend, John Gaughan, read all the chapters I had written during the summer of 1987. In the margins of the manuscript he wrote comments and asked questions. Later, when we went through the manuscript, his marginalia spurred our talk. It was this copy I reread in January of 1990 before I began writing fiction again. In the margin by one scene--when Trisha, the deceitful head cheerleader, is introduced--John had written, "I see trouble coming." When I wrote that chapter, I had no further plans for Trisha, but when I resumed writing the novel two-and-a-half years later, I gave Trisha's role more significance. John's perception of Trisha got me thinking about possibilities for her further development and role in the plot.

Another good reader of my evolving manuscript was my wife, Kathy. I began sending her chapters to read when I had written a third of the book. A registered nurse by training, Kathy is unschooled in literary matters. Although she lacked the benefit of wide reading in fiction, she had the distinct advantage of a mind uncluttered by dogmatic literary theories. She likes reading novels from time to time, particularly those of John Irving. She proved to be a reliable reader for me, a barometer for the taste and interest of a general reader.

"I just thought the break-up was too smooth," she said of Julie and Nick in chapter 20, "too cut and dried." This was a chapter I'd felt uneasy about and worked hard on in
subsequent revisions.

"What happens to Nick's glasses?" she asked me. In the opening chapter I had mentioned that Nick wore glasses, then never referred to them again. I hadn't realized this until Kathy brought it to my attention.

"Did you see the hospital?" I asked her of the chapter in which Nick and Skid visit Jack who was injured in a car accident.

"Yes," she said, "I saw it clearly, but remember--it doesn't take much for me to see a hospital."

I asked Kathy how she had responded to the first version of the Stewy and Nick scene in chapter 26. "That wasn't too interesting to me," she admitted. (Days later I learned that it wasn't too interesting to Murray, either).

Over the summer of 1990 Kathy Gibson, one of my students enrolled in the Institute On Reading, Writing, and Learning at the University of New Hampshire, asked to read my novel. She had revealed herself to be a capable fiction writer. I readily agreed to let her read my manuscript. Kathy liked the novel and told me that although she didn't care about football, she had been interested in the four football chapters of Blindside. I'd wondered how female readers would respond to them. Now I knew how one had. Kathy also said that I'd probably want to change the name of Nick's English teacher, Mrs. Simpson, because of the popular television cartoon, "The Simpsons"--a detail so obvious I
needed someone else to point it out to me.

Another reader, Susan Stires, a colleague in the University of New Hampshire summer institute, read the novel one weekend. She responded by writing on post-it notes and attaching them throughout the text to call attention to lines or scenes that had struck a chord in her or that she had a question about. Susan thought *Blindside* was poetic in spots and believed its audience was not just teenagers. I valued her close reading. Unlike most of my other readers, she had not read chapters-in-progress or heard me talk about the story. Her response made me feel she'd read a novel, not merely a manuscript. And because she was the mother of two teenage daughters, Susan saw anachronisms in the novel, details that had come from my 1960s experience as a teenager and did not reflect contemporary adolescence.

The most influential person involved in my creation of *Blindside* was Don Murray, professor emeritus of the University of New Hampshire, who had agreed to meet with me for an hour each week in a fiction writing independent study. Author of newspaper columns, fiction, articles, poetry, and writing textbooks, Murray lived through the written word. He was both model and mentor. He responded to everything I gave him: nearly 500 pages of fiction and 114 pages of journal entries. He believed I could write a novel, something that had seemed remote and impossible to me for twenty years. Perhaps the most important thing Murray did
for me during our fifteen weeks together was to show faith in my ability and discipline, whether my weekly writing was badly off track or steadily steaming along.

In written responses to me Murray occasionally dealt in general praise. I found three examples of this in the "Romano Notes" he wrote each week to respond to my chapters and journal entries. On February 22, 1990, after I'd gotten back on track from a radical swerve away from the fictional dream and a sudden plunge into exposition (a plunge Murray saw as wrong-headed and immediately pointed out to me), he wrote, "Read Romano's pieces for this week. Good stuff. He writes awfully well and captures the teenager world, making it real, never patronizing. He is writing fiction again."

Nearly three weeks later on March 14, he wrote, "The novel is really working, Tom. The characters are developing, the conflicts deepening."

And a day later: "This is a fine and inspiring piece of writing, Tom. It helps and inspires me."

These statements of praise were meaningful because they came in the context of respect—mine for Murray, Murray's for me. But I found only three examples of general praise like that, praise I appreciated, to be sure. Most of our talk, though, was about the workings of the novel: What was happening? What might happen? How were characters behaving? How was the prose reading?
Murray told me where the writing worked:

"Her slippers' messages were good. Her reading condom as if she hadn't seen one is excellent. Kiss at end is great."

"Angel is good and the beer bottle toss wonderful."

"Great that he talks about Julie. Maybe you've done it just right. Another fine chapter. It's rolling."

And he told me where the writing didn't work:

"The story is proceeding with little tension."

"The dream-light beginning to chapter 21 is badly overwritten."

"Not enough force in Nick and his mother's scene. It's abrupt. There's no reason for her looking at album. I'm not persuaded. It's an expected situation in expected language."

One of the constant pieces of advice Murray gave me was to "turn up the heat," as he put it, to write fiction that contained tension. "I am obsessed with the issue of tension in writing," he wrote.

Tension takes fiction a crucial step farther than mere fictional dream. A scene may progress through dialog, action, and detail with nary a hint of exposition but taste as flat as uncarbonated soda. The lesson of getting at the potential tension in scenes was one I had to keep learning.

In late April, after nearly three months of fiction writing, I gave Murray chapter 25, the scene that occurs on Saturday
night following the disastrous Friday night football game
with Tusky and the Thursday night break-up of Nick and
Julie. Most of the scene takes place in the barroom:

Nick looked up from the newspaper down the
length of the bar. It was all but empty. Spence
and Stewy talked down near the wine cabinet. Nick
shut the paper and folded it. He stacked the
sections neatly. Why did he bother? He would
only throw the paper away tomorrow morning when he
cleaned.

"Hey, Nick."
Nick looked down the bar again. Stewy walked
his way, waddling and smiling. Spence had turned
to the cash register and was looking at some
figures.

"How's it feel to be done with football
senior year?"
Nick eased up on a barstool.
"Seems like just yesterday it was August."
"Take it from me, Nick. You'll look upon
this as the best days of your life."
Nick said nothing. He felt his eye
twitching.

Stewy slapped his shoulder. "What are you
doing around here on a Saturday night anyway?"
Nick shrugged.
"You're not moping because of last night?"
Not last night, thought Nick, the night
before.

Stewy sipped the beer he brought down with
him. "I seen a lot of teams play," he said.
"Tusky was one of the best. If Jack had been able
to play, it wouldn't have made a damn bit of dif-
ference. In fact, maybe we wouldn't have even
scored six at the end."
"They were good," said Nick.
"One bright spot."
"What's that?" said Nick.
"I didn't know Angel could run that fast. I
mean, I knew he was fast from seeing him in the JV
games, but I didn't realize his speed was that
blinding."
"He's fast," said Nick. "He'll be good the
next two years."
"We'll need him," said Stewy, "with all you
guys graduating."
"What's with you tonight, Stewy? I'm
usually getting shit from you. Now, here I am
getting praise."
Stewy pushed his empty beer glass out to the edge of the bar and tapped it. Spence looked up from his figuring, laid down his pencil, and walked their way.

"Oh," said Stewy, "I like to kid, but I don't mean any harm. You can take it, can't you?"

"I can take it," said Nick.

Spence took Stewy's glass, walked over to the beer taps, and drew another draft. He brought it back and set it down in front of Stewy, the foam spilling over the sides.

Stewy took the glass by the base and slid it in front of him. "No date tonight?" he said.

Nick moved his left hand from the bar and put it to his side. "No," he said.

Spence looked bored. "From what I hear, he's already close to married. Make sure you wax tomorrow," he said. Spence turned and walked back up to the cash register.

"What's he in such a good mood about?" said Stewy.

"He's always half pissed about something," said Nick. Nick had wondered if his sister had told what he knew she suspected. Now he knew. Had she told his mother too? Nick didn't care. It didn't matter. If he only had Julie back, it didn't matter what anyone knew.

"Well, I think I'll drink this beer and go home."

"Me too."

"Young boy like you? I'd think you'd be out whoring around if you don't have a date."

Nick slid off the stool. Stewy raised the glass to his lips and took a long drink. "Ah," he said, and wiped the foam away from his upper lip with the back of his hand.

On April 25, Murray wrote: "Nick and Stewy. May be a good idea but I don't see how it advances the story. It says something important but there isn't enough conflict, tension, something between them. The tension must come out of the characters."

I wasn't eager to read such criticism, even if I had been forewarned of the scene's low level of interest several
days earlier by my wife. The end of the novel was near. I could see it. I needed chapters for just two more fictional days. I wanted to get on with ending the book. But as happened so many times, as soon as Murray pointed out something to me, I knew it was true.

I saw that the primary potential for tension in the scene was not between Nick and Stewy, but between Nick and his brother-in-law, Spence. It was Spence who ignored Stewy's request, Spence who sarcastically remarked about Nick and Julie's near-discovery by Donna and the children, Spence who needlessly directed Nick to wax the barroom floor the next day.

Murray had recognized that a scene between Nick and Stewy might be a good idea, if it advanced the story. I thought I could do that. I went at the scene again, my purpose to turn up the heat between Nick and Spence and make the dialog between Nick and Stewy meaningful and revelatory:

"Hey, Nick."
Stewy waddled toward him, carrying a half-filled glass of beer. Nick looked up from the newspaper he was reading as he stood at the end of the bar. Stewy smiled and sipped his beer as he walked. Down by the cash register, Spence gripped a pencil, hunched over a piece of paper. Except for the three of them, the bar was empty.

Stewy slid onto a barstool. "Last night you guys fell in the shithole again."
"Thanks, Stewy."
"There wasn't a choice. Tusky's the best team I've seen in years around this league."
"We could have played better."
"You can just about always play better," said Stewy, "but no matter how good you guys played, Tusky would have had to play a helluva lot worse for you to beat them."
"You don't think we could have won?"
"You couldn't have won with three Jack
Thompsons in uniform. You couldn't have won, even
if you had hit twenty passes instead of ten."
"Not one of my best nights."
"Not a bad night, just not a star night. You
threw a helluva block, though.
"You saw it?"
"It was sweet." Stewy leaned toward Nick.
"What are you reading? Sports?"
"No, the arts section, an article about the pleasure of writing."
Stewy sipped his beer. "Never gave me much pleasure."
"I like to write," said Nick, "especially in Ms. Hennigan's class."
"The red-head?"
"The red-head with the coffee and the mission," said Nick.
"The mission?"
"To teach literature and writing."
"When do you start basketball practice?"
"I don't."
"What?"
"I'm not playing this year."
"That's crazy. It's your senior year, the best time of your life. You got to play."
"I'm not playing."
"A lot of people are counting on you."
"That would be the worst reason to play," said Nick. "Commit myself to four months because a lot of people are counting on me."
"You guys can be good."
"They'll be good without me, Stewy. I'm not the cog that makes the whole machine run. Maybe Jack. Powell. Maybe even Angel."
"Ah, Angel. What a sweet surprise he was last night." Stewy drained the last of his beer. "I knew he was fast from watching the JV games, but I didn't know he could burn up a field like he did."
"I didn't either. Nobody did. He was buried on second team. He's going to be great the next two years."
"All he needs is an offensive line. A lot of you guys are graduating."
"Coach Raymond'll develop a line."
Stewy pushed his empty beer glass out to the edge of the bar and tapped it several times. Spence looked up from his figuring, then went back to it.
Stewy tapped lightly again.
Spence paid no attention.
"Guess he doesn't want to sell any beer," said Stewy. "Hey, Spence, what's a man do to get a beer around here."
Spence made no move.
"Here," said Nick, sliding off the stool.
"I'll get it for you."
He took Stewy's glass and went behind the bar to the beer taps. He tilted the glass and pulled the tap forward.
Spence slammed down his pencil and strode to Nick. He jerked the glass from his hand, slopping beer to the floor.
"Jesus Christ!" said Spence. "You're too young to do that. You'll get the place closed down."
Nick moved back a step. "Just trying to help."
"Well, you're not."
Spence shoved the glass under the steady stream of beer that poured down the drain.
"You're awful touchy tonight," said Nick.
"I hate things going wrong."
"Then why didn't you get Stewy a beer? You saw he wanted one."
"I was busy," said Spence. "I'm not the maid around here."
"No, you're not the maid," said Nick.
"You're the bartender."
"Get the mop and soak up that beer."
Nick made no move. "You want the beer cleaned up?"
"Just get the mop."
"You want the beer cleaned up, Spence, you get the mop and do it yourself."
Spence simmered as he topped off the draft. He set the beer on the bar. "I'll get the mop," he said, "and we'll see who cleans it up."
Spence disappeared through the door that led down the steps to the cellar. In a moment he reappeared with the mop in his hand. He held it out to Nick.
Nick looked into Spence's eyes a moment, then turned and walked away. He sat down beside Stewy.
Spence leaned the mop against the bar by the beer taps. He picked up the glass of beer and brought it over to Stewy, setting it down on the bar with a bang, foam spilling over the side.
"That was a complicated order," laughed Stewy.
Spence pointed his finger at Nick. "He had no business drawing that beer."

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"If I hadn't," said Nick, "Stewy would still be waiting."

Stewy slid the beer in front of him. "You two better stay out of each other's way." He sipped the beer. "What are you doing around here on a Saturday night, anyway, Nick? No date with your babe?"

Nick cupped his left hand so the class ring didn't show. "No date," he said.

"From what I hear," Spence snorted, "he's already close to married."

"And just what do you hear, Spence?"

"I hear plenty, like you half-dressed and somebody visiting the apartment who shouldn't be."

"Maybe Donna tells you things that are none of your business."

"When my children are involved," said Spence, "it's my business."

"Don't you sound like the devoted father," said Nick. "Maybe we can swap stories about Saturday nights when you close the bar early."

A muscle jumped in Spence's jaw.

"Just make sure you wax the floor tomorrow."

"I'd planned to," said Nick. "You get the new wax applicator?"

"It's been here all week."

"I didn't need it all week," said Nick. "I needed it two weekends ago."

"Just make sure you do your work."

Spence walked back to the cash register, turning his back on the spilled beer and the mop. Stewy looked up from the bar. "Is it safe to surface?" he asked.

This final draft is nearly a third longer than the first version, but the force of the narrative does not flag. The heat is turned high. The conflict between Nick and Spence is no longer hinted at. It is clear and dramatic. Nick is maturing, gaining new power and feeling autonomy. His circumvention of Spence's authority as bartender is an example of that emerging independence. He also reveals this independence in the dialog with Stewy. Nick won't play basketball just because people want him to. He admits his
interest in writing, even though he knows that writing isn't valued by most of those in his present milieu.

I was largely inexperienced in writing fiction. I needed teaching. In one sense I was like a raw athlete eager to succeed. I had skills but needed tips on technique from someone who knew the ins and outs of the game. I needed Murray's direction on occasion, a push from him to get me back on track when my fiction diverged into exposition, or advice to turn up the heat of scenes that didn't rise above simmer. His timely direction about basic strategies enabled me to take creative flight.

Between praise and direct instruction came suggestions from Murray. Some of these suggestions—such as that Nick's father die within the narrative of the novel, for example, or that Nick be a bit of a rebel in school and suffer run-ins with an unsympathetic teacher—I rejected. They conflicted with plans I had for the characters and would move the novel in directions I didn't want it to take.

Other times, however, a suggestion from Murray led me to productive expansion, adjustment, or transformation. In chapter 29, for example, when Nick helps his mother prepare spaghetti sauce for Sunday supper, I'd had enough dramatic sense to refer to the character of Jonathan, the boyfriend of Nick's mother, but not enough to develop that reference. Here is an excerpt from the draft I gave Murray. Nick and his mother are talking:

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"Anybody coming over?" [said Nick]
"Just Jonathan. The three of us will have pasta."
"That suits me," said Nick. "We would always have pasta when Dad was alive."
"That was his favorite."

Here is the revised excerpt after Murray's suggestion that I do more with Jonathan:

"Anybody coming over?"

"Just Jonathan." Nick's mother looked at Nick from the corner of her eye. "That ok with you?"

"You don't have to ask me, Mom."

"I know. I just wondered how you were feeling. Remember how you and Jonathan acted last Saturday night?"

"I remember," said Nick. "He's been important to you, Mom. I didn't realize how much. I'll make sure we get along."

Dreams and nightmares played a significant part in the novel. In chapter 26, Nick's mother mentions that she, too, has suffered from them. But I left the subject largely undeveloped. A first version of chapter 26:

Nick's mother reached out her hand to his.
"It wasn't right the way your dad died, Nick. Nothing has ever shaken my faith in God the way that has. I'll have nightmares for years because of it."

"You have nightmares?"
"Not as much now, but I've had them."
"I've had them, too," said Nick, "and not just when I'm sleeping. Sometimes my mind just spins with nightmares. Horrible thoughts, memories I don't want to think of. I think a lot of the night we got the telephone call."
"You should have told me."
"I couldn't, Mom."

Murray thought I had touched something significant when Nick admits to his nightmares and reveals to his mother that he couldn't tell her about them. "You could lean just a bit
heavier on his not sharing the nightmares with his mother," wrote Murray, "and his mother saying he ought to share with her, [or] with Julie? [or] with Jonathan [since] she can?"

I didn't pursue the suggestion involving Jonathan and Julie, but the idea "to lean just a bit heavier on his not sharing the nightmares" sparked my thinking. I decided to explore the nightmares, to reveal more about them and have Nick and his mother come to understand each other better. Such sharing and listening are important for Nick's developing maturation. In listening to his mother he learns that grief and fear live in others as vividly as they do in him.

Nick's mother reached out her hand to his.
"It wasn't right the way your father died, Nick. Nothing has ever shaken my faith in God the way that has. I'll have nightmares for years because of it."
"You have nightmares?"
"Not as much now, but I've had them. I've dreamed of that night, Nick, of running into the kitchen and knowing that a woman was going to tell me over the telephone that my husband was dead."
"That doesn't sound like a dream," said Nick.
"That sounds like the truth."
"There's more," said Nick's mother, then her eyes went to her hands again.
"What is it, Mom?"
"In my dream . . . "
Nick waited. His mother breathed deeply, then raised her eyes to him.
"In my dream you were dead, too, Nick."
Nick felt his chest tighten. He needed to breathe in, and he did.
"Both my husband and my son were dead."
"Oh, God, Mom"
"I've never told anyone that until now."
Nick said nothing. He was breathing hard.
His face was hot and tingling.
"And you have nightmares, Nick?"
"Yes," he said, "and sometimes they happen when I'm awake. My mind spins with horrible things, memories I don't want to think of. I
think of Dad in the casket. I think of the telephone call."
"I wish you had told me about this, Nick."
"I couldn't, Mom."

Other times Murray offered a suggestion that I wouldn't take in the context it was made, but the suggestion lingered in my memory, transformed, and played a part somewhere else in the novel. For example, Murray noted that I had lost Julie in chapter 18, the football practice in the rain, and chapter 19, Nick and Skid's visit with Jack in the hospital. I'd made no mention of her in either. Murray suggested that perhaps in chapter 19 Nick could think of phoning Julie or could see a vision of her standing in the hallway of the hospital. As soon as Murray mentioned the absence of Julie in these chapters, the omission loomed like a chasm. To bridge it and keep Julie in the reader's mind, I had Skid refer to Nick and Julie's relationship when he explains his own relationship with his girlfriend.

Still, Murray's mention of a phone call had put the idea in my mind. Less than a week later when writing chapter 21, the morning that Nick goes to school after the night Julie breaks up with him, I wrote this:

Nick rose from bed and went into the kitchen. The telephone hung silently from the wall over the little desk. Julie usually called him every morning before school. Maybe she would call this morning. Maybe she would call and say that last night had been a great mistake, that she loved him and needed him and wanted him desperately.

The telephone didn't ring. Should he call Julie? She would be up now, dressed, maybe eating breakfast, maybe getting Abby up for school, her mom and dad gone to work. She might be listening
to the radio. Maybe a song would remind her of him. Should he call? Did she know how he felt? How he wanted to die without her?

No, he decided.

He would not call.

He had pleaded enough last night, and that had done no good. He loved her and the thought of being without her was unthinkable, but he could not call her. She would have to call him. And then with the sickest feeling he'd ever known, he knew that Julie would not call.

And in the final chapter, just before Nick is ready to leave for school, a phone call again plays a significant role:

Nick went to the kitchen. It was getting late. He wouldn't have time for toast and tea.

The telephone rang. Nick's attention jerked as though he'd heard an accident. Someone waited to speak. Someone from Medville? The telephone rang again. Nick stared at it as though a mute intruder had suddenly made his presence known. It rang again. And now Nick was afraid the ringing might waken his mother; he moved to the telephone and picked up the receiver as it rang for the fourth time.

"Hello," he said.

"I was going to hang up. I thought you'd left."

It was Danny.

Telephone calls had been part of Blindside in earlier chapters. Murray's suggestion had put the idea in my mind afresh where it made subconscious connections with characters and past action. While writing the final chapter, visualizing the setting and Nick's actions and thoughts in the minutes before he left for school, my mind seized the idea of using the telephone to increase Nick's inner tension and offer--if only for a few lines--the possibility that Julie might be waiting for him to pick up the telephone.
Although Murray made dozens of suggestions and more than a few directions that enabled me to enhance sections of my novel and avoid common pitfalls, his relationship to me was that of a helpful, knowledgeable friend, not an interloper seeking to make unlawful claims. "I have an idea of how you could end this," Murray wrote to me at one point, "but I won't say."

And I didn't ask.

This problem of ownership, of how much help and what kind a teacher should offer a student, was something Murray fretted about. On one occasion when we were just two weeks into the independent study, he wrote in his notes, "I worry about interfering. Few teachers do, I suspect, but I do. . . . Hope Tom doesn't pay too much attention to me. This is his book and he must listen to the book and to himself."

He was right. I listened to the book and to my responses as the book evolved. I listened as best I could. Sometimes that meant I introduced characters and created plot turns that surprised and delighted me and made the novel stronger. And sometimes my listening meant that I clung to crippling ideas even after I'd expressed doubts about them in my journal. I needed the counsel of others, particularly that of a mentor. Murray's suggestions, directions, and respectful acknowledgement of work done well were indispensable to me. Blindside would never have been written without my weekly meetings with him. And that
apprenticeship experience, I believe, will help me be more autonomous writing fiction in the future.

Also important were the responses and suggestions of numerous others who listened to fragments or read the novel or parts of it. The crucial thing about the responders, I think, was twofold: One, I trusted them as readers. And, two, I knew these responders were on my side. They were Tom Romano-rooters—my wife, John Gaughan, the members of my response group, Susan Stires, Don Murray. A hand-picked bunch, to be sure. But the stakes were high. I didn't want a kind of response that would stop my writing. I knew the response and suggestions from the people I chose to read my work would be helpful, would grow from their intelligent perceptions of writing and the goodwill they wished me. I needed that help and goodwill to write Blindside.
Late one evening my daughter, Mariana, stepped into the room where I sat before the computer. She was eighteen then, in the last month of her senior year of high school.

"Will you listen to my story?" she asked.

Closing in on some writing of my own, I turned my head to her but kept my fingers at the keyboard. Mariana wore sweats. Her blonde hair was clipped back from her forehead. Her contact lenses were soaking in a heat sterilizer for the night. Her glasses had slid halfway down her nose; she pushed them into place with a forefinger. She looked weary. Track practice had been longer than usual. In her hand she held a dozen sheets of ragged-edged notebook paper she liked to write on with soft-leaded pencils. I knew the pages represented a draft of her final paper for senior English. She had been thinking about this assignment for months, researching here and there, gathering information and impressions, asking me questions about my family. Since her late supper of microwaved leftovers, she had been in her room bent over her desk, filling pages with her looping handwriting.

For this assignment Mariana's teacher had asked the students to research particular years or eras and then--
instead of composing traditional research papers—to write short fiction that incorporated details learned from their research. Mariana had made the assignment her own, had chosen to research Ellis Island and 1914, the year my father, then a boy of nine, immigrated to the United States from Italy.

Mariana dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged to read me her story. I removed my fingers from the keyboard and swiveled around to face her. She read, turning the pages sideways at times to read words written in the margins, looking closely other times to make out words she had squeezed between lines.

"Felice felt he was drowning in the ocean of people," she read. "He closed his eyes and tried to breathe. He could feel the small wooden pony against his heart and remembered Luca. Tears welled in his eyes but he swallowed them this time. Giuesseppe would call him "bambino" again and hit him. Felice wanted to be strong too, and he wanted to be able to stand up to Papa like Giuesseppe said he was going to."

Elbows on my knees, chin resting in my hands, I gazed down at my daughter, then let my eyelids close. I entered the fictional dream Mariana had woven of my father, his two brothers, sister, and mother as they shuffled along in a crowd, moving off the ship that had brought them across the Atlantic Ocean. Filomena, the youngest child, slept in her
mother's arms. Antonio, the youngest boy, cried and held his mother's skirt. Giuesseppe, the oldest child, carried himself bravely, almost disdainfully, as he moved toward American soil. Felice, my father, was between his brothers, but closer to Antonio's tears than Giuesseppe's defiance. The wooden pony Felice kept in his shirt pocket had been carved and given to him by his friend, Luca, before the family left the village near Naples.

Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner has said that What we need in America is for students to get more deeply interested in things, more involved in them, more engaged in wanting to know; to have projects they can get excited about and work on over long periods of time; to be stimulated to find things out on their own (quoted in Brandt 1987/88, 33).

Mariana's project qualified on all these counts. She was deeply interested and involved, engaged and excited. She was exploring a mystery she'd been aware of for years--the great influence on our lives of my father, he dead then twenty-five years, the mythlike story of his family's immigration to an America decades away from fast food restaurants, designer jeans, and alternative rock music. Mariana's research in books had not been extensive. A half dozen times, however, she had watched the opening of Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather II, the scenes when the Italian immigrants enter New York harbor, are awestruck by the statue of liberty, and disembark at Ellis Island. These images had shown Mariana early twentieth century
America and the look of frightened, hopeful immigrants. The images spurred her imagination, bringing new vividness to the stories told and retold by members of our family, stories I'd heard my father and aunts and uncles tell when I was a boy sitting at the dining room table after a traditional Christmas Eve supper, stories that rolled from their tongues in the quiet fullness after the meal, stories that sparked further stories and drew my beloved relatives into debates about events, people, and memories.

During those fleeting hours of storytelling, I sat transfixed, asking questions that prompted an uncle or aunt to retell some incident or maybe, just maybe, reveal some bit of information I'd never heard before. And when my uncles and aunts and father slipped into the assured rhythms of reminiscence, I hoped that the telephone would not ring and that no one would knock at the door. Carefully, quietly, I refilled glasses with the dry red wine my uncle made each year. I wanted nothing—not an empty glass, not an unexpected call, not a glance at the clock—to break the spell of telling.

Mariana leaned forward, reading slowly, treating her language with great respect, adopting a colloquial tone when she read dialog. Her sincere, urgent voice rolled up to me from the floor and entered my very bones. I'd never imagined my father as a boy at the moment he arrived in America, never imagined that he may have left a best friend
in Italy, that his sister may have slept and younger brother may have cried. Because of "The Wooden Pony," Mariana's fictional dream woven of image and story, language and imagination, I would never think of my father in the same way again. Mariana read the final lines:

Felice looked past Mama and met the gaze of Giuesseppe. He watched two tears roll out of his older brother's eyes and make their varied path down his face.

The two brothers stared at each other, expressionless.


They laughed silently together. Felice patted his heart and thought about the future.

Mariana looked up to me and saw my eyes filled with tears.

A day or two after that night I thought of buying Mariana a carved wooden pony for her high-school graduation. I had no luck finding such a present in area stores. I remained optimistic, though, since I was traveling a good deal. On trips to Calgary, Toronto, Montana, and New York I found wooden bears, raccoons, wolves, seals, whales, moose, but no wooden ponies. Not even wooden horses.

My mother-in-law saved the day. She knew a wood carver, a long-time friend of hers, who agreed to whittle a wooden pony for me. I sent him a copy of Mariana's short story so he could generate his own vision. Before he began his wood working, however, he suffered a heart attack and underwent triple-bypass surgery.
Two months later I learned that he still wanted to carve the pony, that he and his wife, in fact, thought the work would be good therapy for him. By this time it was mid summer.

"Are you getting me something for graduation or not?" Mariana said to me.

I asked her to be patient.

The following year, ten months after she had written "The Wooden Pony," Mariana was home from college for spring break. On the day before she headed back to school she and her mother went shopping. When they were gone, a small package arrived in the mail. I opened it and pulled out an object wrapped in tissue paper: a stiff-legged, blockish wooden pony. I turned it over in my hands, touching the ears, running my finger along the smooth back. I stood the pony on the kitchen counter. I was disappointed; it looked amateurish.

In the package I found a note from the wood carver's wife. "Merle wasn't happy with the way this turned out," she wrote, "but our ten-year-old grandson loves it and wanted to take it home. We thought it might be just the thing Luca would have carved for Felice."

Precisely, I thought.

Mariana arrived home from shopping in a flurry, dropping plastic bags to the floor and plopping down to
open them. I sat reading in a chair.

"Open the package on the counter," I said to her. Mariana was busy removing skirt, sweater, and shoes from the bags.

"What's in it?" She laid the sweater against the skirt on the floor and eyed the combination.

"Just open it. Please."

"I will in a minute," she said, her voice colored with annoyance. She spent a moment more with her new clothes, then walked to the refrigerator and opened a can of soda pop. Finally, she turned to the package. Her eyebrows were pursed, troubled, as I had often seen my father's.

From the package Mariana lifted the object. The tissue paper fell away. She held the wooden pony in both hands, her eyebrows raised in startled surprise. She glanced across the room to me. And this time, this time it was her eyes that filled with tears.

Writing, reading, storytelling. Some truth. Some fiction. And always our lives. These elements were woven together in Mariana's research and subsequent short story. Her fictional dream had taken me to a place I'd never been, enabled me to imagine my father in a coarse, woolen cap and high-top, black leather shoes, let me see the boy who became a man and the central reason I wrote Blindside.

At the 1987 English Coalition Conference in Wye,
Maryland, participants made a clear call for the inclusion of story and narrative in school curricula, for writing that renders experience, not just writing that explains it. In his reflection on the conference, Peter Elbow writes,

The importance of narrative thinking was a recurring note at the conference. Jerome Bruner's *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* is an interesting exploration of how narrative world making is just as important a kind of thinking as discursive or abstract world making . . . . We impoverish our students cognitively if we don't also give them practice past the fifth grade in . . . [narrative] thinking too" (Elbow 1990, 191-92).

"The Wooden Pony" went far beyond the classroom, much farther than the teacher could have imagined. Mariana's uncles, aunts, and cousins; great uncles, great aunts, and grandmother read the story and talked about it and read it again. The story triggered further stories. In a small town in northeastern Ohio, a retiree recovering from open-heart surgery used the images he envisioned from reading "The Wooden Pony" to guide his hand, eye, and brain in shaping his own creative response. Mariana's fiction reached back seventy-five years, took readers to a moment when an immigrant child stepped ashore at Ellis Island. America and his life lay before him. And years later, one of his granddaughters, a girl born seven years after his death, thought long about this grandfather she knew only through family stories and photographs, wondered further about a magical day in October 1914. Powerful images took shape and language stirred. Setting became real.
Characters spoke and moved. Mariana wrote a fictional dream. And we who entered that dream were never the same.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


