

ENGLISH TITLE

Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Conversation About Literature

AUTHOR:

Irati Jimenez

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TRANSLATED BY:

Kristin Addis

The supernatural ceremony of the writer

When I was writing my novel called *Nora ez dakizun hori (Nora)*, I made many conscious decisions, and I can review them all, one by one. But there are some things that I knew without knowing, beyond consciousness, and those I discovered with time, and with re-readings. After ten years of therapy, I realized where some of the things in that book came from. There is a worldview there, deep down, and because that worldview was unconscious, I didn't even know I was transmitting it. You have no idea how many times I've been surprised by that miracle. When I wrote that book, I put more into it than I knew because I wrote it with *everything I was* at that time, not with *everything I knew*. I wasn't in a very good state of mind when I wrote it, but when I was writing, my life disappeared and I entered a real fictional world. I wrote it *committedly*, and I think that's why it's been my most successful book.

I had no particularly elaborate ritual for writing. When I could, I put a little music on at first, and then turned it off. I read what I had written in the preceding days, but not always, and not in much depth, to avoid the temptation to rewrite. The goal was not to read what I had written, but to *imagine* what was there, to summon the universe inside me and immerse myself in that universe.

Poet Charles Baudelaire, father of poetic modernism, said the following about poetry: first of all, the writer must represent reality, and then he must learn to put what he saw into words, he must give it intensity, sound, clarity,

resonance, depth, and a final element that he called the “satanic spin.”¹ Call that spin a dive, if you will. A ritual. A spell. Whatever you want. I call it a supernatural ceremony. It is not necessary to believe in supernatural things to believe in this ceremony. It is enough to allow that the supernatural holds a place in our lives: transcendence raises deep questions and brings emotional experiences, we may have metaphysical doubts, we feel an interest in transcendence, and we have the capacity to imagine fantastic worlds.

Enter the ancestral room. Feel the charged air. Look for *what is inside*.

The last fire that literature needs is hellfire.

The purpose of learning technique is to be able to approach that fire. And once you approach that fire, you will learn all the techniques. You don’t need a map.

And there are only two rules.

Rule One of the literature club: read

We’ve said it before, but let’s say it again: if you don’t read, you can’t write.² What you’ve read in the past has been used up. Some writers don’t think so. But they’re wrong. All of them. If we do not read, we disconnect our practice from the limbic system of literature. It might not be noticeable at first, but sooner or later, it will be noticed. If the writer up to that point has read a lot and read well, the body will have more autonomy. The first symptoms may be delayed. They

1 “Keep first the capacity to see, immediately and individually, the appearance of things before the writer, and then the satanic spin. Supernaturalism looks at the general tonality and accent, the intensity, sound, clarity, ability to vibrate, depth and resonance, both in space and in time.” Every sentence in *Cuadernos de notas y consejos a los jóvenes escritores (Notes and Advice for Young Writers)* is a miracle. It proves again and again that the author is right when he says that language and writing are magical operations and that we are right when we say that Charles Baudelaire was the greatest poet of his time and the most brilliant literary critic of his time. He brought a revolutionary beauty to critical thinking about literature, a rare genius that combined the powers of black and white magic.

2 “Read, read, read. Read everything – trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You’ll absorb it. Then write. If it’s good, you’ll find out. If it’s not, throw it out of the window.” William Faulkner, a superb writer.

may appear gradually. Or with no warning at all. Some catastrophes are silent disasters, others are spectacular. And very, very swift. I can't tell you anything about that, I don't know exactly how it works, because I don't understand why a writer would refuse the pleasure of reading. Does the writer not write for that pleasure? Many years ago, I thought we were all alike in this respect, before I came to know other writers too well. I was mistaken: "Most people are other people," wrote Oscar Wilde, and he was right, as always.

It makes more sense to me that they get fed up with writing, but writers who do not read are hard for me to understand. And when I say they're hard to understand, I mean that I don't understand them at all and that thinking the opposite is vanity and that that vanity makes me ashamed, in a way that shames the moralistic part of me that sees a certain level of fraud in writing without reading. In fact, to each his own, as they say and as they should say. Judgements are for courts, sermons for mass, and squid for dinner. Let the writer who has no problems of conscience proceed without writing if he wishes. No one will punish him. No one will find out. At the most, a small noise will be heard, somewhere. A sound that indicates that the detonator that will destroy the literature of that writer has been activated.

The numbers on the display panel of that detonator cannot be seen. We don't know what they are. All we know is that they're counting down.

They're counting down and they will never stop.

Rule Two of the literature club: write

They say it takes a few hours to learn to drive a car, or a few miles. I don't know how many it takes to write. But it takes hours. And miles. You have to find them somewhere if you want to write: if you have to learn to write without time, learn. There will always be an excuse not to write; sometimes you have to force yourself to learn to write. Just when you think there's a refined tool,

new problems will arise, you will not be able to write some texts: and you will have to learn how to write those texts. Don't give up. I mean, if you love it, if you think you could love it, if you do it for pleasure, if you think it's a beautiful thing, don't give up. Make room for it in your life. Literature will give you more in return than it takes. Occasionally, you might write a lot; other times, you won't be able to find the time to write, no matter how hard you try.

Obstacles will appear on the way. Life makes noise all around. Enemies appear, or we make them. We'll get writer's block, run dry, become frustrated. Sometimes writing is the easiest thing in the world: line up words one behind the other, could there be anything easier than that? When it's difficult, it's the most difficult thing in the world. That's what writing is all about. Sometimes it feels like we've been ordered to dig a hole in the mud with a shovel, while we poop.

Reading, and writing, when it's easy and when it's not.

Those are the only rules.

To prove that it's not that easy, you have only to look at how many people are left behind. It's always interesting to know how people who manage to keep writing manage to do it. In order not to lose your way, Stevenson believed you should write for your friends, and it was while looking at the compass of friendship that this noble and loving man wrote the books we need the most among difficult books that seem easy: ones written for young hearts, ones that make hearts young. Stephen King did his part, and what a part it was, for the history of universal literature by writing for his wife. Novelist and screenwriter William Goldman, whom I mentioned earlier, wrote some wonderful films and novels out of revenge. Every time he told a story, he emerged alive from the darkness of his childhood, he was released from the chains of being the son of a violent father.

Compasses must be sought.

Not only to write, but also to write.

If you look for them outside, you'll go crazy. Look in the other direction and you'll find them easily.

Ask yourselves why you write. Where does the desire come from, the impulse, love, anger, rock and roll? To keep the fire alive, you need a spark. Literature is a very broad thing, and you will love many things in its breadth, but there will be something that you *really* like. Pay no attention to fads, pay no attention to the voices that say 'I don't know what you should do,' but do pay attention to the main reason you have for being in literature. Say yes to all the you inside of you. You'll find that writing with the energy of a teenager is an intoxicating experience. The teenager will give you electricity, libido, temperature, blood. Go through the doors of your childhood, look at where your child wants to go. Decisions must be made maturely, but the magic that literature creates is contributed by children.

I was six years old when I wrote my first fiction story. At 28, I published my first fiction novel, *Bat, bi, Manchester (One, Two, Manchester)*. In those 22 years, I went from making literature, first to not knowing how to do it, then to learning how to do it. I learned a lot. My child self, not a thing. She didn't need to. When she wrote *Maite eta txoria (Maite and the Bird)*, she already knew what I learned many years later: why I write and what spark my fire needs.

I write for the lion

For a long time, I didn't realize. I used to write a lot as a child. And then for many years I did not write. I had dried up. If the spark was there, I couldn't feel it. I didn't know what to write about. The stories I had liked so much as a child were nonsense. I couldn't write about pirates, I couldn't write about Martians. I couldn't write the story of a man who had taken poison. I couldn't write about the fantastical *nonsense* I had imagined. I had to write serious things. In real

life, a lion doesn't appear just like that, and since I thought I should write about real life, I couldn't write.

But you know what?

I didn't *have* to write about real life.

I didn't *have* to write about anything.

We can do whatever we want in literature.

It was hard for me to understand, but I could do whatever I wanted.

I could write whatever I wanted.

And you'll agree with me if I tell you that that story is not much good as it is, but it's no good at all if Maite is alone.

She needs the lion.

I can't write without it. I don't know how.

I'm always looking for ways to include the lion. That's what I enjoy. The lion is interesting. The lion is sexy. The lion is fantasy. The lion is what you didn't expect. The lion is adventure. The lion is power. The lion is a miracle.³

It's important to discover what we want to write. That's where we'll work better than anywhere else. That's where we'll have fun. That's where blood will drip from our insides and go straight to the pen or to the keyboard. That's where we'll come up with our best stories. That's where we'll make literature, our best literature, with our whole body, with our whole heart, with our integrity.

That might be the most important thing. *Doing* what we want to do.

3

The lion gives literature its black magic, its supernatural wail, as Virginia Woolf would say.

What do we want to write? We need to ask ourselves that question. That's the best way to not get lost in what others expect of us. The best way to not get thrown off track. The best way to not lose concentration.

We need to know that. And then we need to do one thing.

I already told you what it is.

We need to learn to defend what we want to write

Don't think you won't have to defend it.

You will have to defend it.

The world will make noise, you'll get confused. Flowers will come. Paralysis. Writer's block. And you'll make enemies. If you're lucky, you'll decide which ones. You'll have deep reasons for this and they will be well crafted. But even if you don't decide, you'll have enemies. As one of W. H. Auden's poems says, there are people who don't like us.

They hate us because they hate. Sometimes they hate us because we don't hate them. Or because we are hateful.

Against the wolves, Aresti said. Against drying up. Against greed. Defend your home, with all your strength. Don't give up, keep the doors of creativity open, the power that you feel in the promise of creative impulse exists and writing when you feel that power is a great pleasure, if you love it, and as long as you love it, that power will renew itself over and over, remarkably. I don't know how many millions of hours I've spent writing since I wrote *Maite eta txoria*, you wouldn't believe how many hours in a row it was sometimes, but I swear to you I was never bored. And I'm convinced that I found there a large part of the strength that I have used in all areas of my life. I have always attended literary ceremonies as the mistress of the palaces in the kingdom of my soul.

I don't know how much strength this gave me.

I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't won the decisive battle to keep my creativity alive. I never had to find out, and I hope you never have to find out either. I don't know what you'll have to do to accomplish this, but you will have to do something, as Saul of Tarsus said, "for a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries."

Do you want some good news? What you learn to defend in literature will serve you the rest of your life.

I have mentioned before that I really like a book called *The Princess Bride*. There is also a movie of it, a popular cult classic from the '80s, that's very good. The novel is incredibly beautiful, a wonderful comedy, with touching depth, written from the heart, a mature fairy tale, highly recommendable.

Iñigo Montoya is one of the most interesting characters in the book, and in the movie. Iñigo is a master swordsman as he has dedicated himself to swordsmanship his whole life, with a single goal: to find the six-fingered man who killed his father with a sword when he was a child, and kill him with a sword.

The writer of the book, William Goldman, had a very, very rough childhood. The first six years of his life were so traumatic that he blocked them from his memory. I mentioned before that his main motivation to write was revenge. Like Domingo Montoya's son, he also lost his father as a child. He also wanted revenge. Iñigo had a sword, Goldman had a pen. An excellent choice if we are to believe the great Shakespeare: the pen is mightier than the sword, wrote this giant among giants.

There are great similarities, you see, between Iñigo the child and Goldman the child, and between the adult Iñigo and the adult Goldman. That's why the character is so powerful, and that's why it's so powerful when Iñigo's father dies – my favorite passage in the book.

The sequence is memorable. With his own eyes, Iñigo sees how the six-fingered man deals death to his father. Without saying a word, he stabs him through the heart with his sword. In the cruelest way, in order to not pay Iñigo's father for the sword he made by hand. Not only the father's heart but also the son's is pierced by the sword of the six-fingered man. Torn apart by pain, Iñigo begins to shout. He picks up his father's sword and goes after the much larger and more skillful man, yelling. He challenges him. He insults him. He tells him that he is cruel. And a coward. He tells him that he'll kill him and the man and the child start to duel, forced to by Iñigo. It doesn't last long, of course. The man immediately disarms Iñigo, without much effort. Before leaving, he marks each of Iñigo's cheeks with a wound that will leave a scar. Then he mounts his horse and disappears. For a second, however, a tiny second, he sees Iñigo's genius, the talent of the man who will one day be the best swordsman in the world. And he is afraid. But after his wounds heal, Iñigo decides to travel the world. He will become a master swordsman and one day, when he has the six-fingered man before him, he will tell him that he is Iñigo Montoya: "My name is Iñigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

He will always bear the scars on his cheeks, made by that man.

We all have them. Our wounds, our scars. We do not leave childhood without them. And we all have another thing: *that powerful child*. He is able to take up a sword, shout, tell his enemies that they are cruel and fight them in a duel. Our devotion to the pen usually comes from that child, and we must learn to defend that devotion with the sword.

For that, it's important to know what that child wants. It's important to ask ourselves that question. It may be difficult, but sooner or later, we have to answer it.

It appears to be an easy question.

Why do we write?

I write to not be alone.

If you are shy or used to be shy – that is, if you’re in progressive rehabilitation, like all of us shy people are – you know that for us, building relationships is not the easiest thing in the world. We find it easier to observe life than to live it. And it is easier. At least at first. Over time, what was easy may become the most painful and complicated thing in the world. To prevent that from happening, you have to learn, one way or another, to build relationships with the world and with others. You have to understand what is stopping you and you have to find courage, because life requires you to make a leap of faith and you owe that faith to yourself.

It’s difficult at first. More difficult for some than for others. If you do it little by little, it will take you a lifetime. But if you don’t do it, life will get the better of you. The first choice is better: I can’t promise this will lengthen the path of your life, but it will broaden it enormously.

Everything that helps along the way, helps. The friends you love, everyone who loves you, a moment you’ll never forget, songs that make your heart swell, your favorite movies, lessons that will appear to you throughout your life, small moments of pleasure. Occasionally, if you’re lucky, and you will be, you’ll find wonderful people, you’ll find men and women who prove that cynicism is ridiculous, ones who keep all options open, uncorruptible ones and invincible ones, happy ones and lucky ones. You can’t live without them, I couldn’t. I would lose faith and I need faith above all else.

This is what makes everyone feel it’s worth it.

It took me a long time to find the beautiful things in life, and I was in a state of drought for a long time, too lonely, too lost, too disconnected. I’m convinced that at those times, literature helped me save my life, helped me stay alive. Thanks to literature, I’ve never been alone, it has always appeared in

the deserts of the soul; this miracle that we perform with words has been the main intimate territory that I have never abandoned. Power is stored here, fire is here, literature is here.

To make my own darkness a landmark, I think that's why I write. All my triumphs of happiness owe something to literature. That's why I write. To stay alive. Whenever I'm in literature, I feel that I am a part of humanity, and that is a great thing, especially if you're a shy kid who sees life from the sidelines and you need a little help to get out of the little fabric house you have in your mother's hairdressing salon, to approach people in life as in literature, and to give all the love you have inside of you with courage.

If they ask you what literature is good for, you can say that it makes words out of its discomfort, that it helps us see the world, that it's a tool for understanding people, it helps us identify lies, it offers us beauty, it can give us courage, it inspires love. Or you can say that sometimes it saves our lives.

It happened to me as a child.

And recently too.

A personal example of the power of literature

Not long ago, I broke up with a close friend. I didn't expect it. And it was very tough.

I knew we had problems, but I was willing to talk about those problems. I thought we could and would solve them. Faith gives great strength when it's real, and I had faith, in love and in the work of love. I was convinced that we would be able to do that work. I felt strong, almost nervous to start work. But my friend didn't want to fix anything, and that's what I failed to take into account. He didn't want me in his life, a possibility that had not crossed my mind. The problems between us could not be solved because he did not want to solve

them. I tried a couple of times. The first didn't go well, the second couldn't have been worse. We haven't been together since I left his house crying, we haven't spoken again and I don't think we ever will. We were close friends and it was very painful for me. I learned for the first time what it feels like when the person you love doesn't love you, even though you thought they did. I felt what I had heard about in the movies: my heart split in two. I told you it was very rough. I had a hard time grieving, these things take time, and as I said, I hadn't expected it. I learned that a happy heart holds a lot of vanity. I mean it: until the moment when I saw with my own eyes that it was happening, I had never imagined that I would lose my friend. I didn't think it was even a possibility.

But I lost him, and you have no idea how many times in the months that followed I remembered Terry Lennox, Raymond Chandler, and the end of his novel *The Long Goodbye*, which made me cry the first time I read it. I won't tell you the ending, but know that in the novel, detective Philip Marlowe makes a friend, that this friendship doesn't end well either, and that at the end of the novel, our protagonist ends up alone in his silent office. When I broke up with my friend, I often remembered that scene, that loneliness, and I reread the end of the book many times. When I read it for the first time when I was about fourteen, the final scene tore my heart out. I thought it was a harsh ending in its honesty. I thought it was honest, *moral*, brave and sad, very sad. When I picked it up again several years later, it was still moral, honest and brave, but its truth seemed *truer* to me. I shared the pain of losing a friend with the protagonist of the book, and feeling that I shared that truth in a personal way was a comfort to me at the end of the book instead of a source of pain. The sad ending didn't make me sad, it helped me in my sadness. I didn't feel lonely because I wasn't alone. I had found a friend in literature, and old friend, and its company helped me. It was no sadder than I was, no lonelier, and I would never have to say goodbye to it. That's why I love *The Long Goodbye* so much. Many books have helped me understand the world better, and I've learned something about myself with every one of them. But with few of them did I feel, as I did with this one, that the book understood me.

Some books know who we are.

They know us well.

Because we are written.

What we want to say and what we don't know how to say. Everything is written. Somewhere.

What I didn't know how to say when I lost a friend was written by Raymond Chandler, a half English / half Irish / half American writer from California, while he was taking care of his wife. They had been married for 31 years. Ciccya was older, and was dying at home. In the hours that he spent outside of caring for his wife, he wrote his best novel, and one of the most beautiful detective novels ever written, if not the most beautiful. It was the result of long effort by a committed writer. It took him many years to write an honest story in a second-string genre, one without prestige, against greed and with disease all around him. But he did it. He had the gifts of all great writers: empathy, humility, intuition, magic. And he wrote like all great writers do: obeying an inner rhythm, following the dictates of a musical beat, in an emotional swing, musically. This is how writers who write well get inside the reader, this is why we feel so sluggish at the end of a bad book, and so fresh, so alive, so powerful at the end of a good one. In the latter case, most of the effort is not made by the readers, but by the writer, with his craft, with his technique, with his magic.

If I could, I would make a hole in the currents of time with the power of literature, and I would spend a night at Raymond Chandler's side, while Ciccya sleeps. To offer help, I would think, if it weren't for arrogance, to keep him company, if he wanted, to thank him for all the help he's given me at various times in my life. The writer who writes for himself, as long as he is the owner of his soul, is writing for his friends, including for those he has not yet met.

In some way, on some level, in some form, Raymond Chandler and I are friends. He's been a better friend than I have, needless to say. That's how literature works. You make some friends as a reader, and remain forever in their debt.

Writing, on one level, is an attempt to pay that unpayable debt.