

What Would Chekhov do?

(Exercising Your Way to Fame
and Fiction)

By

John Dufresne



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**“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”**

—Samuel Beckett

Table of Contents

I. COAXING STORIES TO LIFE

19

-
- Here and Now!
 - Autobiography
 - The Shoe That Drops
 - The Writing Room
 - Memories Are Made of This
 - Making a List, Checking It Twice
 - Brainstorming
 - Connecting the Dots
 - Word-a-Day
 - Scene on the Street
 - Clustering
 - In the Beginning Were the Words
 - Word Association
 - There and Then
 - The Epigraph
 - Idea to Image; Emotion to Gesture
 - Image and Likeness
 - Curious Science
 - Objects of Desire
 - A Good Yarn
 - Morality
 - Germs
 - They Did and They Didn't

- Hometown
- Genealogy
- I Heard It through the Grapevine
- The Secret Life of Aunts
- Chance Encounters
- Young Love
- Brush with the Stars
- In Dreams
- The Loved One
- Depending on Your Point of View
- Words of Wisdom
- These Are a Few of My Favorite Things
- Obsession
- Fear and Loathing
- In Memoriam
- The Bizarro World
- Looking for Trouble
- Elementary, My Dear
- Lost and Found
- The Toy Store
- Menu As Memoir
- My Grandmother's Kitchen
- Stop-Time
- Secret Agent
- The Top Ten Lists

-
- Every Picture Tells a Story
 - Stopping Time
 - Snapshots
 - In the Beginning
 - Emergency Fiction
 - Steal This Plot
 - A Stranger Rides into Town
 - The Quest
 - Love and Marriage
 - Enquiring Minds
 - Badlands
 - The Ashtray
 - Strange Interlude
 - Everyday People
 - Secrets and Lies
 - Our Town
 - May-December
 - A Man and a Woman
 - Television
 - Found Stories
 - The Morning Paper
 - Story Line
 - Plottomatic!
 - A Field Guide to Fiction

IV. WORKS IN PROGRESS: REAL TOADS; AT THE END OF THEIR ROPE

107

- Attribution
- Time to Go Deep
- The World Intrudes
- Dream Time
- A Social History
- A Day in the Life
- The Interview
- Writer at Work
- Exteriors
- Interiors
- Days of Future Past
- Real Toads
- Quotable Lives
- Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself . . .
- The Cocktail Party
- Your Character Goes on Holiday
 - Destination
 - Baggage
 - Dining Out
 - Slide Show
 - The Encounter
 - The Traveler
- Dear Diary
- The Birthday Party
- Problems, Problems
- Defining Moments
- Thanksgiving

- Answering Machine
- You Can't Always Get What You Want
- Hanging Out
- Trauma
- In the Wake of Death
- Halloween
- The Secret Life of Characters
- Lie
- On the Seventh Day
- Annus Mirabilis
- Arts & Science
- Forced Relationships

V. WORKS IN PROGRESS: INCIDENT, INTEREST, ACTION

.....128

- Curtains Up!
- Curtains Up! II
- Curtains Up! III
- And in the End
- Dialogue Is Not Conversation
- Talking in Bed
- Talk Talk Talk
- Assisted Suicide
- Home Furnishings
- Keep Out of Reach of Children
- Imaginary Gardens
- Digging a Plot
- Rand McNally
- All the News That's Fit to Print

VI. WRITE WHERE YOU ARE

.....139

- Milieu
- The Naturalist
- Occupations
- Eavesdropping

VII. HINDSIGHT

.....144

- Rx for Your Ailing Story
- In the Heart of the Heart of the Story
- The Story's History
- Instant Revision
- Starting Over
- Mining the Ore
- Convictions
- Below the Surface
- When All Is Said and Done
- Reflection
- Words
- Hunting for Qualifiers
- Openings
- The World Intervenes
- A Field Guide to Your Novel
- It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing
- 'Twas the Night Before Christmas
- A Final Checklist
- Behind the Scenes

VIII. PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS

.....161

- Renga
- Two Truths and a Lie

IX. LET US READ AND LET US DANCE

.....164

- The Evening Muse
- Reading Yourself
- Reading Others
- Learning from Other Writers
- Reincarnation

X. PROCESS IS OUR MOST IMPORTANT PRODUCT

.....167

- Aleatory Composition
- Writing Time
- A Novel Idea
- My Life So Far
- My Life from Now On
- Scene at All the Right Places
- The Sum of Its Parts
- The Writer's Life
- Writing Every Day: Don't Break the Chain

Also by John Dufresne

*The Lie That Tells a Truth
Is Life Like This?*

Acknowledgments

This book is for all of my students over the years who brought their passion and talent to the classroom and who made me a better writer, and reader, in doing so. Thank you all.

What Would Chekhov do?

**(Exercising Your Way to Fame
and Fiction)**

I. Coaxing Stories to Life

**“Thinking up stories is hard. Getting them
to come to you is easier.”**

— *Lynda Barry*

Here and Now!

Write about where you are physically right now. In the writing room or in the kitchen, in a theater or on the subway. Write about the feel of the pen in your hand or about the sound of the paper as your hand and the nib of the pen glide across it. Hear your handwriting. Write about the click of the keys on your keyboard. Write in first-person, present tense. The smell and the sounds. Even the silence has a sound—let us hear it. Keep jotting down sense experiences. What do you see out the corner of your eye? Think of a color and look up and write down what you see that's blue or green or whatever color you chose. (Interesting how that invoked color suddenly jumps out at you, how the color itself determines what you see.) What about the textures of things? What does the seat feel like? Think about your body and how it feels configured as it is. Shift around a bit. How does that feel? What do you see now that you didn't see before you started writing? How could you have missed it? How can you look at something, you might wonder, and yet not see it? What else have you been missing all your life? ("The first act of writing is noticing." —W. H. Auden) When you get distracted, go with the distraction. Write about it.

Autobiography

You want to write your autobiography, your memoirs, but you don't know where to begin. Well, you start by writing, but not by writing *I was born on . . .* and then continuing on until today. Too large and daunting. You need to focus, to gather material. The following is a list of questions and suggestions that might help you do that. But don't limit yourself to them. Answer the questions and explore the suggestions in as much detail as you wish and write about anything else that they suggest to you. The source of much of the material that finds its way into our writing is our own lives, our own values, our own emotions. Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who has survived beyond the age of twelve has enough fictional material for the rest of her life. And

remember, too, the unexamined life is not worth living.

- What are your tastes in music, books, painting, sports, cars, foods, beverages, films, plants, furniture, houses, politicians, magazines, appliances, friends, and television shows? (That should take the rest of the day.) Have your tastes changed as you've grown? How? Why?
- Describe what you remember of your childhood prior to beginning school. Do you remember your toys, your dolls, your room? Where did you play when you played outside? Whom did you play with? What is your earliest memory? Write about that. I've had people tell me they remember being in the womb. Other folks have said they can't remember anything before they were six or seven. Why do you suppose that is? I can remember a dream I had when I was two. I know my age because my sister, my competition, had just been born and carried home from the hospital. She was killed in my dream, suffocated by two-dimensional shadow men. (I've apologized.) I also remember being a year old and standing in my crib watching my father come home from a night out with friends in his gabardine topcoat and fedora. But perhaps this memory was constructed from photographic evidence—there is a picture of me in his snazzy hat taken at that moment. Can it be a memory of an actual event if you see yourself in it? Probably not. But it is a memory, nonetheless. At any rate, memory, faulty as it may be, is our autobiography. And your first memory is where you say your life begins.
- Discuss three events that have caused you to be profoundly unhappy. And it's not always the obvious events that make us the saddest. Think hard. What is the best thing that has happened to you in your life? The worst? (Just a reminder: there are no right answers. Do this again next week, and you'll likely have different responses.) What are your foremost fears? We usually

think of phobias as abnormal and irrational, even juvenile, but they still count. And not all fears are irrational. I've had friends tell me they aren't afraid of death. I don't believe them for a second. I'm with Celine who said, "If you have no imagination, death is nothing. If you do, it is too much." Give examples of your fears and try to trace the fears back to childhood incidents if you can. Maybe you're afraid of the dark for a damn good reason.

- When do you feel most at ease and comfortable? And where? And what are you doing when you are at this ease? Are you alone? (Why is it that we can stare at the ocean or at a fire in a fireplace for hours? What is the comfort we find there?)
- Now that you're blissful, and since I brought it up: How do you think you'll die? How would you prefer to die? *Prefer*, I suppose, is the wrong word. (I think of Woody Allen's line about achieving immortality, not by creating an enduring work of art, but by not dying.) Imagine your own funeral, your wake, the gathering after the burial. (This is your only chance to be there.) Listen to the mourners talk about you. What are they saying? What are you going to miss? Where are you now that you are dead?
- Describe some silly, foolish thing you've done. What does it feel like to remember this? How did it feel then? Would you do it again?
- What are your attitudes toward the opposite sex, love, money, insanity, suicide, abortion, violence, family life, animals, and poverty? Remember that our attitudes are seldom simple, often ambivalent. Be honest with yourself. Maybe you're a liberal and a feminist and believe in a woman's right to choose, but you're not sure what you'd

do if you were confronted with an unwanted pregnancy.

- What would you like to change about yourself? So why haven't you done it already? When will you begin this change? (*Wanting to write* starts today.)
- What are the motivating forces in your life? What are your ambitions? Describe your life in ten years, as you want it to be. How would you live if you could have anything you want?
- What do you want? What have you always wanted? Do you want it badly enough? Have you struggled to get it?
- Describe any jobs you've had. Write about the people you worked with. I just remembered a man named Émile with whom I worked when I was fourteen and working split shifts at a nursing home where I was the only employee in the kitchen who didn't speak French. Émile and I worked Saturday evenings together making supper—always French toast—for the patients. He had black hair combed back in a wave, a haircut we called then a *boy's regular*, and gray half-frame glasses. His wife and family were still back in Quebec. He didn't speak English. He was always smiling—a sweet man and a diligent worker. He worked quickly, frying fifty or so pieces of egg-soaked bread at a time.
- Have you had any mystical experiences? What were they? What do you feel like when you talk about them?
- When you were five, what did you want to be when you grew up? (Me, I wanted to be a cowboy-priest. Riding the range, delivering the sacraments to the buckaroos by the campfire in my Roman collar and John B. Stetson.) When you were ten? Why aren't you that person you dreamed of being? Do you still long to be that person? What's

stopping you?

- Write about all of the places you have ever lived. Describe each house in great and loving detail. Recall if you were happy or unhappy in these places and why? Describe the kitchens, the yards, your bedrooms (especially your bedrooms with their brimming closets and all that stuff under the bed, in the drawers, and on the walls), the neighbors, the views, etc. What were the family dynamics in each house? List the smells you remember and the memories they conjure. Remember the meals. Breakfasts, lunches, suppers.
- Remember the worst part of being a child. Dramatize it. Remember the best of it and dramatize that.

The Shoe That Drops

You are aware that something is missing in your life. And it's not money. It's something more important than that. What is it? Or who is it? Don't resist it now. It can't hurt you. No one else needs to know. Something (someone) you've never had or something (someone) you've had and you've lost. It is a hollowness that eats at your heart. It's what you think about when you're sitting alone in a quiet room, and it's three A.M., and you can't sleep. It's the shoe that drops and snaps you out of your dreams. It's what you remember just when you think everything in your life is going so well. Or perhaps, when you consider dying, you think: This is what I need before it's too late. Write about this void; give this emptiness a shape.

The Writing Room

For years I wrote in the kitchen. Now I have a writing room, a converted sun porch, which will last until the next hurricane. I face out on a mangrove preserve. Yellow-crowned night herons,

great blue herons, ibises, and Louisiana herons sometimes perch on the fence in the yard and watch me work. We have monkeys, too, vervets escaped from a bankrupt chimp farm in the sixties, but they just eat the flowers and nibble the fruit. My cats curl in puddles of fur on my desk or walk up the window screens for the hell of it. We have agreed to share the space. If you are ever momentarily stuck, look at the objects in your writing room. What do they have to say about you and your past? About your present? You're writing this down, of course. That Roy Rogers alarm clock. The Ranger Joe ranch mug. The Corgi model bus. The wooden shoe. The photograph of a derelict house in Arkansas. The Mardi Gras beads. Why are these objects important to you? Why have you saved them? Why do you keep them near? How do they make you feel? What treasures that you have owned in your life do you wish you still had?

Memories Are Made of This

Write about *a memory* that each of these words provokes. Take five minutes on each. You can always return and write some more in that notebook. (You do have a notebook, don't you? You do carry it with you, don't you?) Here we go: *window; flowers; photograph; classroom; rain; crayon; wedding; vacation; pet; fear; teacher; storm; dance.* Anytime you want to get started in the morning, you can open your dictionary (it's never far from your desk; neither is the thesaurus) and chose a word at random and write about the memory evoked. I just opened the dictionary and got *radio*.

End of 1st Installment