

From: "Story Matters"
Contemporary Short Story Writers Share the Creative Process
An Interview with Daly Walker
By Margaret-Love Denman and Barbara Shoup

DALY WALKER

DALY WALKER is a fiction writer and practicing surgeon. Born in Winchester, Indiana, he was educated at Ohio Wesleyan University, Indiana University School of Medicine, and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine. His work has appeared in numerous publications including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, and the *Louisville Review*. His stories have been short listed for the O'Henry Award, Best American Short Stories, and Best Magazine Writing 2001. He lives Boca Grande, Florida.

Having come to writing fiction as a surgeon, naturally your work reflects that world. Your fictional doctors are often ambivalent about their success. They feel trapped in their lives, at the same time they enjoy the personal and financial rewards that comes with the profession. Looking at death on a daily basis as they do, they wrestle with unanswerable questions and suffer the consequences of irrevocable, unfixable acts. What is it about medicine that makes it so rich for fiction for you?

First of all, it was my little niche of the world, something I know about. Also an awareness of the human condition is paramount to being a decent writer and a decent doctor. A physician is privy to very things about people that nobody else is, even counselors and ministers. Patients come to you when they are the most vulnerable, when they are hurting. They want to trust you and open up to you. That is great material to write about. You just have to protect their confidentiality.

Because you're holding a person's life in your hands, or that person feels that you are?

Yes, that is certainly part of it. They often expect more from the physician that he or she can give. In "Pulsus Paradoxus" for example, the daughter says, "Why didn't you save him? You save everyone." My own daughters look at me like that. They think I can fix all their problems. But of course I can't, and it disappoints them.

The kind of helplessness that doctors sometimes feel in the face of that is complicated in a number in the stories whose main characters served in Vietnam. Strangely, though, war and medicine seem to have something in common in the passion and intensity surrounding them, a heightened sense of being alive. This is especially true in "I am the Grass," in which the narrator observes, "I feel a surge of force, a sense of power that has been mine in no other place but surgery, except when my finger was on the trigger of an M-60."

Both a soldier and a doctor have that power over people's lives that we have been talking about. Are you going to pull that trigger or not? Are you going to operate? Power is part of being a writer, too. You decide what's said and how it's said, how people behave. It's Godlike. I hate to admit it, but I suppose it's one reason I like to write.

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When did you begin to write stories—and why?

I started relatively when I was about forty, twenty-some years ago. A friend talked me into taking an undergraduate course at Indiana University. Sena Jeter Naslund was teaching at IU then, and I was lucky enough to get into one of her classes in the MFA program. She is a master teacher and got me pointed in the right direction. When she returned to teach at the University of Louisville, she formed a group of five writers including herself who met monthly and read each other's work. We did that for years.

Throughout your untraditional training as a writer, were there particular stories that you found instructive?

James Salter, in both his stories, like "Dusk," and his great novel *Light years*. I love finding surprises in a story, and almost every sentence in Salter's stories surprises me. His selection of detail is quirky, but impeccable. He seems to look at things differently than anyone else. Raymond Carver, too. His minimalism was very important to observe and understand. I don't consider myself a minimalist, but I think he helped me learn how to distill things, get rid of the impurities. Tim O'Brien's masterful *The Things They Carried* and *Going After Cacciato* helped me in writing about war, as did Tobias Wolff. O'Brien's stories taught me about conflict, how there should be a central tension that you never let go of in the story. Of course, there is Chekhov. Everybody seems to go back to him. That he was a doctor inspired me. I keep rereading him and rereading him.

What were your first stories like?

Not very good. You know how it always comes up, write what you know? My first story was a fine example of why that's important. I've always been intrigued by mountain climbers, but I had never climbed a mountain and knew nothing about it. In fact, I am afraid of heights. Anyway, I wrote about two climbers who fall into a crevasse and the choices they have to make in trying to get out. When I told the creative writing instructor it wasn't working and that I had an aversion to heights, he said, "Write the story about someone trying to climb the mountain who's afraid of heights." I did that, and the story still wasn't good. There was no real emotion in it. It was, in a way, a lie. But at least I learned something in the writing.

So it took you a while to get to the "hot wire."

Yes. Eventually I started writing about medicine and my own life. In doing so, I was coming to terms with my life and understanding the significance of my personal experiences. I think my best stories hit close to home.

Terrific authority comes from writing the world you know so well. The medical procedures you describe are technologically precise, yet the language is completely accessible to a lay person. How do you manage that?

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It's almost like introducing foreign language into a story. Notice how much Spanish there is in Cormac McCarthy's novels—the way he's woven it into everything, in context with language that's familiar. I try to do that with the medical terminology. I want it to lend authenticity to the story. I don't think it's important that the reader really understand everything I'm saying, but he has to trust that what *is* there is accurate.

I first heard about the importance of trust when I read John Gardner's *On Becoming a Novelist*. He talks about the fictional dream and keeping that dream alive, avoiding anything that makes the reader question and break through to the surface of the story. He expressed it better than anyone else. Michael Curtis at *The Atlantic Monthly* is obsessed with truth and accuracy in the stories he publishes. For instance, his editors checked out the hand surgery's validity in "I Am the Grass" at the Harvard Medical School.

The reader has to be able trust all the language in a story, really—and the quality of language is one of your strongest suits as a writer. A metaphor from another story, "Phantom Pain," comes to mind—a surgeon compares snow falling to bone dust coming off of a surgical saw.

It is in the language of a surgeon. I think only a surgeon would see snow that way. Inexperienced writers often want to use language in a beautiful but showy way, trying to be lyrical or poetic, but in doing so it draws attention to the writer rather than the story. That fictional dream we were talking about is interrupted.

As I do each year, I recently address an advanced high school English class. The teacher has the students and their parents read "I Am the Grass." They spend two days on the story. First they talk about it in class. Then the next day I come to the class to participate in their dialogue. Anyway, they had picked up on the grass metaphor, so we talked about that. So we talked about that. I remember warning them that metaphors are really dangerous to use. They can be dreadful and obvious. But when they're right—! And in that story, I kept after those metaphors more than I ever had before. Just little things, like the guy comes back and cuts the grass at Soldiers Field. He worked at Four Seasons. It's fun trying to get them right.

The title itself is rich with possibilities for metaphor. Did you have it from the beginning?

No. I didn't. I was reading some poetry in the midst of writing this and I read the poem by Carl Sandburg. I thought, man, this is it. This is my whole story in just a few lines. I can't believe how lucky I was to run across it. But discoveries like that are one of the recurring joys of writing.

There's some very strong language in the story. At one point, the narrator looks at a Vietnamese man and observes, "When I was here before, I would have called him a gook or a slope, a dink motherfucker." When is it appropriate to use language that you know others will find offensive?

The language must fit the character. If the character is a soldier likely to speak profanity and harbor prejudice, he must speak and think that way on the page. The reader must understand the

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author is not condoning profanity or prejudice; he's just trying to bring out the truth in his characters.

Given the influence of political correctness on language these days, did using those words in the story make you anxious?

Only because I knew that my mother was going to read it someday, and I'd hear from her! This brings up something interesting that happened when the story was being edited for "The Atlantic Monthly." In the opening the narrator says, "I cannot tell my thirteen-year-old daughter that once, drunk on Ba Muoi Ba beer, I took a girl her age into a thatched-roof hut in Tay Ninh City and did her on a bamboo mat." In the earlier version, I used "fuck" instead of the less profane "Did her." Michael Curtis called me and said, "I'm not going to make you change this, but would you, please?" Another story he'd recently published had used some opening vulgarity and he said, "We just got bombarded." So I agreed to the change.

How did you feel about changing it?

I didn't mind changing the word in the opening, but I told him I wanted to keep it later in the story. As I mentioned earlier, it's a soldier's story, and soldiers use the "F" word. That's the way they talk. It's part of the truth.

In fact, omitting it at the beginning makes the word stronger when we finally hear it—and also mirrors what's happening as he goes back into himself as he was then. Now he says "did," then he said "fuck." He can't keep it under anymore. It's interesting that an editorial issue actually strengthened the story in an unexpected way, rather than being only a compromise.

I agree that it made the word stronger, and I imagine, at some level, Michael Curtis knew that, too. He's a very astute editor.

All of this relates to voice.

Voice is difficult to talk about, because I'm never exactly sure what voice is being discussed. There's the writer's voice, like Eudora Welty talks about in "finding your voice," that's not related to any one story. Then there's the voice of the characters in the story, and the voice of the story itself, which has to do with how it sounds. I think what we were talking about was the voice of the character, which must be authentic.

Was "I Am the Grass" the first story you wrote about your experience in Vietnam?

Yes. I had buried that time in my life. My daughters and wife had never heard anything about my war experience. They didn't know what I did in Vietnam or how it affected me because I never talked about it—and I guess I didn't know it either.

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So you're the narrator's experience mirrors your own in that he, too, suppressed what had happened to him in Vietnam; in fact, that's where the true tension in the story lies. Did it scare you to write the story?

It did. It was like looking into your own grave. What made the story better than the mountain climber story was that it was based on real emotion. There was truth in it. I keep looking for something else to write about that's going to scare me as much as looking back at Vietnam. I think anybody that kind of has the craft down can come up with a story about almost anything that looks pretty on paper, but for it to really be good the author must have a deep emotional investment in what's at stake in the story.

Did you come out on the other side of "I Am the Grass" a different person?

Clearly, I did. I discovered a lot about myself, my feelings about war, how important peace is to me. It changed me politically, while at the same time parting the Vietnam clouds for me. Writing the story brought the emotional healing that comes with catharsis. I became involved in trying to help other Vietnam veterans, particularly some of the really damaged guys who were struggling with drugs and psychosis. More than anything, I think I was able to forgive myself for being part of an atrocity.

How does writing about a character whose experience is in some ways like your own offer a way dealing with personal secrets and helping to resolve them?

The beauty of writing fiction rather than memoir is that it allows you to say things that you would otherwise be reluctant to reveal about yourself and others. Distancing yourself from fact really frees you up to get at the truth. As to resolution, there is the cathartic effect I mentioned previously. Also by spending so much time exploring my own experience I came to understand myself in a way I never did before.

How did you end up in Vietnam and what was your actual experience there?

When I went to Vietnam, I was a real Fifties guy, a fraternity boy, flying around Indianapolis in a convertible. I didn't care anything about politics. I had this bad relationship with a girl, and I thought *I want out of here*—and this looked pretty exciting. I was drafted out of a surgical internship and had not completed my surgery training. They assigned me to an infantry division where I was a "field doctor" with a battalion. Then reality came in. The injuries we dealt with were horrendous. It is unbelievable what humans do to each other in the name of war. I can remember they'd bring these VC in by helicopter and I'd be waiting for them to come in. They'd be up there fifteen or twenty feet and they'd throw them out of the helicopter. Then I'd get these guys in surgery and I'd be trying to work on them and the intelligence people would come in and say, "Doctor, step out a minute." I could hear them in there torturing these guys. Also, I spent a good deal of time going out into the villages and treating Vietnamese civilians in the "MEDCAP" program. It was through that experience that I got to know and appreciate the Vietnamese. They are truly remarkable people—resilient and resourceful, tough and kind at the same time.

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When were you there?

Sixty-seven, sixty-eight. It was during a bad time to be there, but I guess there was no good time to be in Vietnam. It was at the time of the Tet Offensive. Everything changed after Tet. Before Tet, things were pretty relaxed. We were cocky, traveling the roads, enjoying Saigon night-life. Tet sobered us up. After that no place was safe, and the Vietnamese were an enemy to be taken seriously.

The narrator of "I Am the Grass" was a "grunt" in the Army, not a surgeon. Why?

I wanted the protagonist to be directly involved in the atrocities—a perpetrator, not just an observer. A doctor, even though he is part of the invading army, has a compassionate role. He's caring for people rather than killing them. A noncombatant just wouldn't fit with what I wanted to show about Vietnam. It would have lacked intensity.

Do any of the incidents in "I Am the Grass" come directly from personal experiences?

They do. If not my own experience, things that I observed. For example, the heads on a pole. When I was with the Ninth Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta, two VC were decapitated and their heads impaled on poles—not by U.S. troops, however. There were other powerful images that were part of my own experience that appear in the story. Like the big eye over the altar in the Cao Dia temple in Tai Nihn City. It reminded you that God was watching what we were doing to these people. Another powerful image was Nui ba Dihn, the "black virgin" mountain. I had an aid station there on top of the mountain that was overrun and six or seven of the men in my battalion were killed. Fortunately, I wasn't there that night.

When you were there and seeing those things, were you conscious of absorbing images? Did you ever have the impulse to write things down?

I don't think I was conscious of absorbing those images. Although I was interested in literature, I wasn't a writer then. I did chronicle some of them in letters I wrote to my mother. Part of my research for the story was to read those letters I sent home. They were poorly written, but they were filled with description and emotion that I was able to weave into the story. I did write an essay about going back to Vietnam in 1992 and working in a hospital. After that, the past began to bubble up to the surface. I began to confront my Vietnam demons. I knew I had to write about the war.

Was the character, Dinh, based on someone you met when you went back?

My characters are often a conglomeration of several people I know. Dinh is a combination of two people that I met when I returned to Vietnam. The head of hospital where I worked contributed a lot to the Dinh character. He was a big man in the provincial Communist party, a regional vice chairman. Like Dinh, he fought the French as an infantryman when he was fifteen, then later was a surgeon on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, fighting the South Vietnamese. So he was

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my counterpart. He was very leery of me at first and not particularly friendly, but we got to know one another and were able to discuss the war in a cordial way. The other person who contributed to Dinh's character was the head of surgery at the hospital. He was not a communist. He was an extremely talented surgeon. We became quite good friends, and we still stay in touch.

Were either of them injured in the way your character was?

No. I experimented with several different maladies before I arrived at the amputated thumbs. They seemed a perfect metaphor for the war. The war was so dehumanizing. Opposable thumbs do set us apart from other primates, and so to lose them is dehumanizing. So I thought it was the perfect thing.

That bizarre detail about cooking it and eating it. Did you make that up?

Yes. I agree it is bizarre, but then much of what happened there was bizarre.

The reader's first view of Dinh pretty much tells all he needs to know about the man. How did you accomplish that? Why those particular details?

I did it by pondering it endlessly and by rewriting and rewriting. Finding just the right details is one of the most important elements of good writing. When you look at a person, there are a thousand things you could choose to mention in the description of that individual. Choosing the few right details is the key, the things that will be most effective in the story.

And then let them stand.

Exactly. You have to guard against overwriting and over-explaining. Sometimes I'll show what I want to about a character, then I'll add an unnecessary sentence or two to explain it instead of trusting the reader to draw the right conclusions on his own. That's where self-editing comes in. You need to go back and pull out the superfluous words.

The first line of "I Am the Grass" does double duty, at the same time telling the reader exactly what he needs to know about the narrator and pulling him into the story that's about to unfold. The writer and editor Gordon Lish once said that the beginning of a good story should feel like the writer taking the reader by the lapels and saying, "I have to tell this story or I will die." "I Am the Grass" certainly accomplishes that!

I would certainly agree with Lish. Tim O'Brien influenced my beginnings when I was in his workshops years ago. He emphasized that you have to open up with the conflict and never let go of it. Keep blasting away at it the whole time. He talked about the unity of the short story and how everything has to relate to the central tension that you introduce at the beginning. In a novel, the author can stray a bit, but not in a short story.

That litany of secrets that follows the first line, was it always part of the beginning?

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It was. I added one or two along the way, but the secret atrocities were always in the beginning. They are part of that central tension we just talked about. The story builds from there.

After the litany of secrets, the story falls backwards to "Twenty years have passed..." and it moves chronologically, eventually working its way his arrival in Vietnam in the present and his experience with Dinh. There are no long flashbacks, just moments that take him backward from time to time. Yet the reader always knows exactly what he needs to know.

Sometimes it's difficult for me to get time sequence right. When does a flashback work? Or a flash-forward? I tend to first write in a linear way, using a straight time sequence. Then I go back to it and try and see when the story really starts, when the reader knows there is something at stake—and I begin the story there. Then I start moving paragraphs around. Part of the process is adding details that need to be known early. Getting transitions right often comes pretty late in the writing process. I'm often helped in this by the one or two people I trust to read my stuff. In that regard, you must guard against getting too many opinions about your work. When you're learning how to write, seeking advice is fine, but you eventually have to stand alone with your work. You can't work by committee.

Good transitions are crucial in a story that moves in and out of several levels of time as this one does. It's interesting to note that they are, for the most part, simple and purposeful. "After I was discharged from the Army..." Often they incorporate a bit of flavor somehow. "In the morning I walk from my hotel through steamy air, on streets boiling with people, to the hospital."

Doing things simply takes confidence. Early on, I was afraid what I was writing was somehow too simplistic. Maybe I was worried about not looking literary or smart or something, but now I don't worry about it. I think it goes along with finding your voice.

The plot of the story hinges on the thumb surgery. Did you always know it wouldn't work?

I discarded the possibility that it would be successful very early in the writing process.

Why did it have to fail?

Because all wars and Vietnam particularly are failures of mankind. No one really wins. In Vietnam thousands of people were left dead or maimed. Vietnam isn't a free society now. The United States was ripped apart by the war, and it still hasn't gotten over it. And now there's Iraq that looks a lot like Vietnam to me and makes me realize we didn't learn much in Vietnam. How could there be a happy ending to a story about the Vietnam War?

How did you find your way to the end of the story?

I let my characters lead me there. I always knew that these two men could never end up bosom buddies. In one version, I had them meeting at the end in a cool, unemotional encounter; but finally I realized that having them meet would be trying to wrap things up in a nice package. I did want the ending to reflect the movement of the narrator's character. In the end, he wants to

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accept the same risks as the Vietnamese baby and mother, and he wants to be part of their land. I'm not sure exactly how I got to the ending I have, but I do remember that when I got there I knew it was right.

Early in the story, the narrator begins several flashbacks with, "When I was here before, I would have done...", or "When I was here before, I would have thought..." Then, talking with Dinh about how unlikely it is that the surgery will be successful, he thinks "about how the fortunes of the Vietnamese always seem to be in the hands of others." Something shifts in him. He's never thought of the fortunes of the Vietnamese before, never allowed himself that vulnerability before. How did you know to underpin the larger moment, the failure of the surgery, with this smaller, more subtle emotional fulcrum?

I didn't actually know I was doing that. It just happened. It think that's true with much in literary fiction. The author doesn't consciously manipulate things. Rather, they just come by osmosis.

When all is said and done, what would you say that "I Am the Grass" is about?

I'm looking for one word, but not coming up with it. It's a story about coming to grips with demons. Maybe "atonement" is the word I'm searching for.

What do you think is the most important thing for an aspiring writer to know about this story? What do you think it could teach someone who's learning how to write?

Most importantly, the story is really a heartfelt story. The Vietnam experience was something that was very important to me and had an emotional grip on me. I was willing to put a lot of time and effort into making it a good story because of that. It was important to me to do it right and to say what I needed to say about Vietnam. My advice is to write about something that matters a great deal to you.

Did you feel that something was over for you when you finished "I Am the Grass?"

Yes. I'm often asked, "Are you writing other things about war and Vietnam?" The answer is, I'm not. The question makes me think, well, this has been pretty successful, maybe I should expand it into a novel. But I don't feel the need to. "I Am the Grass" seems to have said everything I need to say about the war, at least for the time being. Maybe the war is over for me, but I'm not sure about that. I think Vietnam will always haunt me.

WRITING EXERCISES

Read: "I Am The Grass" and the interview with **Daly Walker**

Ponder: How the litany that begins the story sets up the story's theme of atonement.

Write: Imitate the litany in "I Am the Grass" to create an opening paragraph that prepares the reader for what the story will be about.

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- Think of a world or niche in which you are an expert. Invent a character with the same expertise and set him/her in motion in a setting where a conflict with another person involves his specialized knowledge somehow.
- Create a series of similes and/or metaphors that reflect the essence of a specialized profession or pastime.
- Remember an event or a time in your life in which you did something for which you are ashamed. Invent a situation in which you (or a character based on you) might achieve atonement.
- Remember an event that scared you so much that, to this day, you avoid thinking about. Think about it. Hard. Write the event in scene. Tell everything. Don't be melodramatic. Don't explain anything. Don't flinch.
- Re-read journal entries or letters you wrote to someone long ago about a significant event or time in your life. Write a story about a character that is like you were then.
- Write three different endings for a story you are writing. Which one works best? Why?
- List the scenes or moments of your story in chronological order and, next to each one, name the emotion the character is feeling to discover the emotional plot of your story.
- Write the first paragraph of a story that establishes a conflict. Then write the story, making sure that the conflict you appears and is deepened in some way in every scene.
- Think of an occasion that's rich with personal history (positive or negative)—like trimming the Christmas tree or celebrating a wedding anniversary or a wedding anniversary. Write a scene that contains at least one flashback that is triggered by something that happens as the action plays out.