

What Is It Like to Write a Novel?

Lorrie Moore

Those American travelers in the 1990s who had to go through Detroit may recall that particular airport before it was redesigned and relocated to an entirely new space. They may remember the cramped hive of the original, with its burnt orange and ochre decor figuring so prominently that it seemed to be already signaling its autumnal condition. Across the way, the new airport being built was not that discernible and so *Pardon Our Dust* signs were not even necessary. A traveler might glance through some plexiglass darkly over at the horizon and see machinery, but beyond that, it was a bit unknowable. Much like the new Bay Bridge in San Francisco, emerging while the old one was still used, the construction went on for some time. And so while the new airport was being built, the old one carried on its decrepit and imperfect life of stalled, disgruntled passengers and fast food. The two airports side by side – or two ideas of an airport – were like a thought experiment. Schrödinger’s cat was still alive but also perhaps on its way to death; although in a parallel reality, it was simultaneously dead and alive, carrying on in one or the other condition. Only witnessing (reading it) determined which. A cat can very well have two lives, insists the experiment, subtracting seven of them.

When the new Detroit airport finally opened (the fantastic one being built across the way) it couldn’t have been more different from its predecessor. It was gleaming white and light and airy and the sun poured in. It had a monorail and glass walls and ceilings. There were bars and nice restaurants and stationed at shiny baby grands were pianists singing selections from the American songbook. The new airport had taken so long to finish that birds had got trapped inside and made their nests in the open white beams, and so they too would sing while swooping around the place.

What happened to the old terminal? I’m not sure. What happened to the old cramped airport, forced eventually into some other expression, one taking place right nearby? And having delivered so much of its former swarming life to a new construction and having its rhythms and footfall, its sweet and acrid muggy smells and voices somewhat sucked out of it, or at least in the end diverted, and so succeeding in creating something else, was it not somewhat the author of its own new incarnation? Was it somewhat like a snake shedding its skin, only to have the skin come alive, or like an extraterrestrial mothership hatching out a fantastic new creature? Like the old eastern span of the Bay Bridge that one could still see as

one crossed the new Bay Bridge, one could photograph them together before the original became first a husk and then a memory and then a kind of biographical criticism.

Does the author – initially living, then dead – become the silhouette or shadow or shade of the newly written book? Perhaps somewhat, even right from the start, but certainly more so as time accumulates. I have no idea when demolition finally came the old airport’s way. I failed to watch and register its demise. But the novel one lives on, with much accidentally trapped nature and scheduled soaring, as well as singing and shopping and wine.

In this way, then, a novel lives alongside its author’s life, much the way Schrödinger’s two cats lie side by side in parallel and contradictory existences: that is, if one refuses to collapse two realities into one (and novelists and readers of novels should always refuse). A novel lies adjacent to its author and recirculates that author’s blood. It then does the same thing for a reader’s. The novel is the live cat when the other cat no longer lives. The novel is the new construction going up across the way and soon you – reader, author – will be there instead of where you are now. For a while. Planes will still land and take off, delivering and departing. This sort of journeying and hunger for parallel lives and multiple, uncollapsed realities and new designs and stories that are not explanations or contrivance or brand-promotions or TED talks but repositories of mystery and questions can never come to a full stop. Because how could they? Real life gets trapped within the structure every time an author builds something new. The characters sing. The birds sing. The monorail zips by. Those are just the nameable things. The unnameable things – essential and considerable and yet so strange in an art deeply tasked with naming – are what people will always come to the novel for. Voice, heart, spirit . . . yet again the monorail zips by. There are souls inside and their faces can almost be glimpsed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorrie Moore, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2001, is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of the novels *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009), *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* (1994), and *Anagrams* (1986) as well as the short story collections *Bark* (2014), *Birds of America* (1998), *Like Life* (1990), and *Self Help* (1985).