Literature and Less

Walker Percy Tells How To Write A Good Sentence

By DANNYE ROMINE
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HIGHLANDS, N.C. — "I'll walk out to the highway and meet you down at the bottom of the driveway," says Walker Percy, in a last-gentlemanly voice. "I'm a guy who's wearing yellow pants, and there ain't many other guys up here wearing yellow pants."

Ain't many other guys up here in these North Carolina mountains as extraordinarily concerned with the ordinary as Percy, either.

From the time he contracted tuberculosis in a medical school and lay upon his sickbed reading the existentialists — Kierbriel Marcel — Percy began developing a zealot's passion for examining the human soul.

A passion both lofty and lowly. Sublime and ridiculous.

A lust for the extraordinariness of human beings that arises from the ordinariness of human beings.

Winner of the 1962 National Book Award for "The Moviegoer," his first published novel, and author of "The Last Gentleman," "Love in the Ruins," "The Message in the Bottle" (essays), "Lancelot" and recently, "The Second Coming," Percy, 63, is gazing out upon glinting Mirror Lake from the honeysuckle-wrapped front porch of a summer house he's renting in Highlands, a place he chose to "flop, fish, read," after finishing this novel.

His visor-like forehead hoods pale blue eyes, and he's slim as a reed — although he has a sweet tooth and says he'd rather eat in a Waffle House than anywhere else.

"Walker says I'll spend $100 on groceries and not buy one bag of sugar," says Mary "Bunt" Percy, fishing in her purse for hotel sugar packets she's saved to sweeten her husband's iced tea.

"Bunt" — a nickname from her Doddsville, Miss., childhood — and Percy's brother LeRoy (Emphasis on the Roy) and wife Sarah of Greenville, Miss., are off for the one-mile trip to Highlands for lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, sugar.

Percy's writing before he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a freshman in 1933 consisted of a gossip column for the Greenville (Miss.) High School newspaper.

But a Greenville cousin — "Uncle Will" — early imbued Percy with a love for reading. "He knew how to communicate the excitement of good literature," Percy says. "Uncle Will" (William Alexander Percy), a poet-planter-lawyer best-known for his "Lanterns on the Levee," adopted the three Percy brothers — Walker, LeRoy and Phinizy — when they were orphaned. Percy's father committed suicide in Birmingham, Ala., in 1927 when Percy was 11, and his mother died in a car wreck two years later.

"Uncle Will had gone to Harvard, but he thought Chapel Hill was the best state university in the South," said Percy. "It was, and, as far as I know, still is. LeRoy and I both went. Tuition was $100, and there was no entrance requirement."

There was, however, a placement test in English, with classes divided, as Percy says, into "advanced, average and retarded." Percy had just finished reading William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury," and when he wrote his placement theme, he chose a Faulknerian style: no capitalization, no punctuation. "They put me in the retarded English class," he says, "and the professor really thought I was hot stuff. Compared to the rest of the dummies, I guess I was."

Percy majored in chemistry and minored in math and German, but one of his most vivid memories of Chapel Hill is sitting on the porch of the SAE fraternity house reading Douglas Southall Freeman's four-volume work, "Robert E. Lee, A Biography" (Scribner's, $90).

"It was natural to read things I really wanted to read," he says. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to become a writer without some other writer getting him excited."

As for becoming a writer himself, Percy says it never crossed his mind. At the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University — from which he graduated with honors in 1941 — he vacillated between psychiatry and pathology. "I think I would've ended up in psychiatry," he says. "Pathology is the most elegant of the medical fields, and psychiatry is the most interesting. I felt more at home on the psychiatric ward than anywhere else," he says. "Maybe it takes one to know one."

Percy believes there's a very close relationship between pathology and novel writing. "You might say I'm a pathological novelist," he says, chuckling. "Or a pathologist novelist. Novels are really exercises in pathology. The natural set of pathology is of someone trying to discover the lesion. The novelist says, 'What's wrong with this person? What's wrong with the best of all possible lives? What's gone wrong in the best of all possible environments?' The Pathologist says, 'What'd he die of?'"

—Staff photo by Ronald LeBeouf

Walker Percy At Home

Investigation is only one aspect of writing, however. There's also craft, which, says Percy, "Gets more difficult the longer you do it. It's not like bricklaying, which must get easier."

In his new book, there's a particularly fine sentence among many fine sentences: "The darkness sprang back like an animal." Did he "make it up" or did it "just happen?"

"It's a small thing," he says. "But a small, good thing. I don't know how that happens. A little figure like that makes you feel good. Every now and then, things break right.

"It's a matter of letting go," Percy says. "You have to work hard, you have to punch a clock, you have to put in your time. But somehow there's a trick of letting go to let the best writing take place.

"Maybe it's a day you wake up and you've had good dreams, and the day before you've left off at a good place. Hemingway always said, 'Quit while you still have juice, and the next day the juice will still be there.

"Well, that ain't true. When everything's going right, you can sit for three hours and stare at a blank piece of paper.

"But say everything's going wrong. It's a Monday morning, and you've had bad dreams, and you know nothing good is going to happen. But you go anyway. You go into your little office, and you look at a blank wall. And you give up. It's a matter of giving up, of surrendering, of letting go. You say, 'All is lost. The jig is up. I surrender. I'll never write another word again. I admit total defeat. I'm washed up.'

"And you stay there, and after an hour, you say, 'Oh, well. I've been cast up on an island. I'm a wreck. But here I am. Still Alive. Here's a pencil. Here's the paper. Here's the three-ring binder and the Blue Horse paper. And you say 'Since I'm here, why don't I write something. Life is finished. Western civilization is destroyed. I'm sitting in the rubble of Manhattan — everything's gone, everybody dead - except a girl. There's always a girl. Me and this girl. We'll just see what happens.'

"What I'm telling you is, that's when things happen.

"What I'm telling you is, I don't know anything. It's a question of being so pitiful God takes pity on you, looks down and says, 'He's done for. Let's let him have a couple of good sentences.'

"It's a strange, abject little-understood profession," Percy says. "Saul Bellow said being a writer reminds him of the mating of dogs."

Percy practices this strange, abject profession in a rented attic room over his daughter's bookstore in Covington, La. He's lived in Covington since 1950, raised two daughters there, become a grandfather four times over, watched the population double to 10,000. He describes Covington, 40 miles north of New Orleans, as "neither here nor there."

"It's just an ordinary place in the pine trees, and we live in an ordinary house by a bayou."

He practices there what he preaches in his novels: The art of staying put, sticking with it. "The trick is doing what you're doing without getting the itch," he says. "The itch usually doesn't work. You move on, and it's the same thing. Repetition is one of the six great themes in literature," he says. "Figuring out how you can live in the same place without being miserable."

"It takes," he says, "a conscious cultivation of the ordinary."