Selling Non-fiction for Fun and Profit
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Thank you for coming out this evening and listening to me talk about writing non-fiction. I know there are fiction writers, non-fiction writers, and poets in the audience, but I hope that what I have to say this evening may have some applicability to all of you. My experience, however, has been in the non-fiction world, writing both magazine essays and books, and I'll speak from that perspective, describing not only how one might make a living writing non-fiction, and a pretty good living at that, but also how one might eventually write something that touches readers deeply, a book that they'll remember for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps some of you had this very thought. Perhaps it evolved over time or maybe it came as a sudden inspiration when you began to write. I myself can remember exactly where I was when the notion first occurred to me that perhaps, just perhaps, I might someday write something memorable.

I was fourteen years old and lying on the beach at my family's summer home on Long Island, New York, near Oyster Bay, and I was reading *Moby Dick*.

"It was a clear steel-blue day," wrote Melville, and when I glanced up, the Long Island Sound, stretching eastward to the Atlantic, looked just the same.

"The firmaments of air and sea," Melville went on, "were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive star was

transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells . . ."

Captain Ahab then turns to his chief mate Starbuck and says, "It is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky."

At fourteen years old, I didn't have the vocabulary to explain what Melville was doing with the English language—his use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance, his putting poetic meter to prose, his anthropomorphism, and his flights of orotundity anchored by a spare and economical sentence structure. All I knew was that he expressed better than I could what the ocean meant to me, while also capturing the sense I had of having sailed these seas before, that feeling evoked most strongly when, after the second day of chasing the great white whale, Ahab turns to a weary and despairing Starbuck and tells him, "'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled."

I still have that yellowed, paperback copy of *Moby Dick* sitting on my bookshelf, the sentences underlined in red, and my fourteen-year-old wish inscribed in the margin alongside them, "I want to write something like that someday."

I had no idea at the time that *Moby Dick* didn't even sell out its original printing of 3,000 copies and that Melville's total earnings from the American edition were $556.37, a sum worth $14,177.14 today or what some of us have probably spent in the coffee shop named after the chief mate whom Melville created.

Back then, the business of writing, of making a living at it, was hardly on my mind. All I knew was that in the short time I had been writing, I

hadn't come close to penning any words as good as Melville's. Nonetheless, I wasn't discouraged. I was hopelessly in love with writing, and reading, and shortly after finishing *Moby Dick* began to send my first short stories to *The New Yorker,* receiving back elegant little note cards that said, "Thank you for your submission, but the enclosed material doesn't meet our needs at the present time."

Still I went on, sending out manuscripts and getting repeatedly rejected, with the acid test of my commitment to writing—addiction might be the better word—coming at the beginning of my seventeenth summer when my father told me that since I was going to college next year I should get a job to help pay for my tuition. I replied that I did have a job. My cousin Peter, who was like my brother, and I had a commercial clamming business.

My father laughed uproariously. "You two clam just enough to buy gasoline for the boat," he reminded me, "and more fishing tackle. Clamming's not a job for you; it just a way to support your hobby."

He had a point and, being the dutiful son, I rode my bike into the nearby town of Oyster Bay and got a job at the hardware store. I weighed nails, cut glass, delivered lumber, and hated what I was doing from the moment I stepped through the doors at nine a.m. until the moment I left at five. It was boring as dirt, and I quit after three days.

On the night of my resignation, I told my father that instead of working at the hardware store I was going to fish and write a story about my summer's adventures. As I uttered these words I had no idea that I was embarking on one of the great traditions of the memoir form—gathering personal experience. All I knew was that I preferred standing in the surf on

a moonlit night, casting to the minor descendents of Moby Dick, than weighing out sixteen-penny nails. I wanted to smell the wind and stare up at stars. Casting lures into the pounding surf was all about being alive, and I wanted to write about it. Working in a hardware store meant having one foot already in the grave.

My father heard me out, then informed me that I was "a pipe dreamer." Hadn't all the rejections I had received shown me how hard it was to get something published in a magazine that actually paid an author money instead of my high school literary journal? I told him I couldn't go back to the hardware store. Much to his credit and my everlasting thanks, he said, "Well, give it your best shot."

For the rest of that summer I rode my bike all over the hilly dirt roads of northern Long Island, carrying my waders and lure box in panniers and my surf pole stuck in a metal sleeve bolted to my handlebars so it waved overhead like a nine-foot-long antenna. I caught large striped bass—twenty, twenty-five, thirty pounds, luminescent beings from some mythic undersea world—and wrote about my adventures on a little Royal portable typewriter, mailing off the typescript at the end of September to *Outdoor Life*, one of the big three outdoor magazines of the era.

A couple of months later I got a small, parchment-like envelope with the magazines address on the flap. Enclosed was a letter from the editor-in-chief, Bill Rae, saying that everyone at the magazine had really liked my story, especially the unexpected slant of using a bicycle to surf fish, and consequently, under separate cover, they'd be mailing me a check for $350.

My jaw dropped. It was $110 more than I would have earned in the hardware store, working forty hours a week for the entire summer.

Instead, I had gone fishing. I had lain on the beach, reading *Of Human Bondage* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Old Man and The Sea*. I had gone water skiing with girls on lazy Wednesday afternoons, lying on the deck of our boat afterwards, trying to figure out how to take off their bikinis. I had lived; and I had written about it; and I had gotten well paid for it. In today's money, I had made $2,500 for having fun.

Triumphant, I ran to my father, waving the letter in my hand. He read it, and said, "That's terrific. I'm so proud of you." Then, in his ever-cautious, Depression-kid way, he added, "But don't let it go to your head."

Of course, I did. I vowed that I had paid enough dues to the nine-to-five commuting world—three whole days—and was now retiring from the American workforce. And, except for a few stints as a roofer, a painter, a dish washer, a chef, a carpenter, and a pretty long stretch as a ski instructor and mountaineering guide, I did retire from the American workforce.

I started freelancing to outdoor magazines and soon began to write about backpacking, paddling, skiing, climbing, wildlife conservation, environmental affairs, cooking, and building. I hadn't yet read Samuel Johnson's immortal line—"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money"—but when I finally did read it, I had to agree completely with the good doctor: There was nothing better than getting paid for your words.

Still, deep down, I knew something was missing. What I had recognized upon reading *Moby Dick* continued to elude me. Though I was getting paid, and paid well, to write, I had written nothing extraordinarily

memorable. I hadn't created anything about which people would say, "Wow! He nailed it!"

I kept my sense of underperformance to myself and tried to run my writing business well, figuring out the black holes of the non-fiction magazine world—skiing in China, hitchhiking over the Khunjerab Pass on the newly opened Karakoram Highway, first ascents in the Brooks Range, and running little known rivers from the Arctic Circle to Tasmania—and then getting editors to bankroll my adventures. In short, I had a very good life.

At one point I was simultaneously a columnist for *Sports Afield, Backpacker,* and *Outside,* while freelancing for anyone else who would buy my stuff. I was making a good living and actually sitting at my desk for only half the year, while traveling the rest of the time, and augmenting my writing income by illustrating my stories with my own photographs.

I also brought the bargaining of the Kathmandu marketplace to negotiating my fees.

"How about three thousand?" I would say to an editor.

"Fifteen-hundred," he'd reply.

"Two thousand five hundred," I'd counter.

"Two thousand and that's it. My last offer. Take it or leave it."

And I'd take it because that's exactly what I had figured he would give me, but it I knew it was doubtful that he would give it to me if I had asked for it in the first place. And then I would say to him (virtually all magazine editors were male at that time), "How about making it $2,050. It's a good piece and you said you loved it. Come on, fifty dollars more."

And almost inevitably the editor would add the fifty dollars, since it was very little money for the magazine, and it would show me that he was really a magnanimous fellow and it would help to ensure that I would send him my next freelance piece instead of sending it to some other editor. But as a writer selling 25 to 50 articles a year that extra $50 served a crucial purpose. If you get twenty editors to give you $50 more per article, you will make an extra a thousand dollars a year, an expensive air flight to research another story or some very nice end-of-the-year contributions to your favorite charities.

This kind of mercenary behavior did not endear me to my fellow students at CU's graduate English program, who were content to get two contributor's copies for a story they published in a literary journal, and who thought I was crassly commercial. Frankly, I was. But I was also desperately in love with writing and wanted to continue to do it rather than become a university professor or a ski patrolman or return to being a chef or a carpenter.

Consequently, I became ruthless in selling my writing for what the market would bear, and back then—the 1980s and 1990s—the market would bear a lot. It was the golden era of the adventure-travel magazine world, the newsstands filled with thick periodicals bursting with advertising. And it is advertising, not subscriptions, that pays the salaries of writers and photographers. It is still advertising that by and large pays bloggers, those freelancers who have learned to monetize their websites with the logos of companies that pay a commission every time a viewer clicks on a logo and buys something.

Only occasionally, during those heady years, like when I reread *War and Peace,* or *Huckleberry Finn,* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, did I pause to think about what else I might be writing, about what I could do with story and language, if I had more room than a 3,000-word magazine article to work with.

And with that in mind, I wrote two bad novels before coming to grips with the fact that my own life had more authentic adventure in it than what I was trying to invent, and that I should try to write a nonfiction book about what I was doing. So I put together a collection of my essays and sent it out to thirteen publishers. One of them, Stackpole Books, bought it, and a year later, sitting on the banks of the Gros Ventre River in Jackson Hole, I opened the package containing my author's two complimentary copies. There are few feelings as heady as seeing, for the very first time, your own take of the world, which someone has paid you good money to write, sandwiched between two hardback covers. If I had been intrigued by writing books before, I was now totally hooked.

So I started using my magazine assignments to finance and collect information for book-length works. Occasionally, as in the case of *Bloodties,* a book I wrote about the place of hunting in the modern world, I threw nearly $20,000 of my own money at the project, sensing that it was an important one to do. It was.

Bloodties was reviewed widely, twice in the *New York Times*, and has now been taught in at least a dozen university bioethics course. But it sold only 17,000 copies and barely paid back the money I had invested in it. Sometimes, though, like any good entrepreneur, an author has to invest in

his or her future, building a reputation, and showing the publishing world that one is competent, even though the fiscal payback may not immediately appear.

Another book I wrote, about canoeing in the Arctic, called *Out There—In The Wild in a Wire Age*—won the National Outdoor Book Award, was excerpted in *Outside Magazine*, and got me a nice interview on NPR's "Talk of the Nation." Yet, it didn't pay back its meager advance until recently and only now because it has been reissued as an e-book. In other words, when it came to making a living as a book author, I would have been destitute or—the ultimate nightmare for a lazy person such as myself—I would have had to have gotten a real job, had it not been for my magazine career.

However, by the early 2000s, I could see that the magazine industry was falling on hard times. The Internet was steadily sucking away advertising, and once hefty periodicals began to look like anemic pamphlets.

The length of stories that editors wanted went from 3,000 words to 800. When you're being paid by the word, this is not what you want to hear. And as editorial space continued to decline, I compensated by writing more, and writing for virtually anyone who would buy my stuff. In 2003 I wrote 52 articles, one a week, and brought in the same amount of money as I had in early 1990s, when I was writing 30 articles a year. I felt like a gerbil on a treadmill.

At this juncture, chance and luck intervened. My editor at *Audubon* magazine, David Seideman, sent me an e-mail suggesting that I meet his agent Russell Galen, who had sold a book by David on the logging industry in the Pacific Northwest. Russ was a birder and a naturalist, and David

thought we might hit it off. In addition, Russ was a knowledgeable and powerful New York agent, who handled a stable of well-known writers, David Sibley of birding fame, the perennial *New York Times* bestseller Diana Gabaldon, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, his list was long.

Having recently parted company with my long-time book agent, who was devoting herself to bringing up her young children, I was all ears and sent Russ my books. He responded that we should meet personally, and I flew to New York to visit with him.

It was one of the most memorable meetings of my professional life: two hours over lunch and two hours and fifteen minutes back at his office, during which he explained to me in the ins and outs of the publishing industry, an expanded version of what I am passing on to you tonight. My books, he said, even the long ones like *Bloodties*, were well written but far too essayistic—too wedded to the magazine form—to become commercial hits. What I needed to do, if I was going to continue to write nonfiction and actually make a living at it, was to reconceive my storytelling. As a first and crucial step, I had to find "a charismatic protagonist," as he called it, one who could carry a story for three or four hundred pages while keeping the reader entertained and engaged, *entertainment* and *engagement* being the operative words.

He then dropped his bombshell. In today's competitive book market, I needed to write a much longer proposal than I was accustomed to so that he could sell that proposal for a six-figure advance—enough money to take two years to write the book and have some money left over before royalties began to come in.

"Oh, I've written long proposals before," I said airily. "My proposal for *Bloodties* was almost twenty pages long."

By way of an answer, and without the least bit of condescension, he took out two proposals from his desk that he had recently sold for six figures. One was on the boxer Joe Lewis. It was 252 pages long, that's 8.5 by 11-inch pages, double spaced. The other was on Tiger Woods. It was 276 pages long. My eyes rolled back in my head.

"That's a year's work," I gasped, "just for the proposal."

"That's right," Russ replied. "You're going to have to invest some time and capital to do this. You have to show a publisher that you have the right stuff to bring the book to completion. And you've got to convince them that the book will sell well. No one is going to give you six figures up front, if you don't write such a proposal. And you want them to give you that big of an advance because it means that they are then deeply invested in marketing your book and getting back their money."

A good proposal, he went on, consisted of six or seven totally buffed chapters—the actual beginning of the book, which would hook editors. Writing these chapters was, of course, a bonus for the author. They were now done. The proposal should also contain summaries of all the rest of the chapters. Finally, a good proposal should have a literary and personal autobiography, demonstrating why the author is well suited to write about this particular topic.

We then discussed the ideas I had brought along with me—a famous skiing guide struck down by an avalanche tragedy, doping in ski racing, elephant conservation, the plight of the tiger, the story of the mountain men,

Tibet's bid for freedom. Russ shot down every single one of my ideas as having too small of an audience or having been done before in the way I was proposing to do it.

"I might sell one of those proposals for forty or fifty thousand dollars," he told me off-handedly. "But do you really want to spend the next two years of your life working for $25,000 a year, and not even that, since I'm going to take 15 percent of your advance, and you have to pay taxes on the rest."

I had run a very efficient magazine business, which was why I was still doing it after twenty-five years, but I had been pretty naïve when it came to make a living off of books.

Russ saw my sober face. "Go back home," he said, "and think of more ideas. E-mail me any time with them."

Standing, we shook hands, and I thanked him profusely for his kindness in spending so much time with me.

He looked me in the eye and said, "It wasn't kindness at all, Ted. I think I'm going to make a lot of money off of you."

Back in Wyoming, I started e-mailing him book ideas. He found some commercial flaw with all of them, shooting down over forty proposals. Then one day while I was talking with a writer friend in New York, Lorrie Bodger, about what might be the next book for each of us, a subject we discussed constantly on the phone, she said, "You know, you should write about Merle."

"About Merle?" I said in surprise.

"Yes, Merle," she insisted. "I'm your total urbanized New Yorker. I know nothing about dogs, and even less about skiing and river running and

hunting, but when you talk about Merle, and what you two do together, I'm riveted, and I want to hear more. If you can hook me, you can hook anyone."

A few months later Merle, who was nearly fourteen, became ill and six weeks later died. He and I had done everything together for over thirteen years, and I was devastated.

I did little for the next three weeks except hike, ride my bike, and sit by his grave. In midstride, I'd think about him and begin to weep. Wanting nothing more than to have him by my side again, I started to bring him back by writing about him—his smile, his little jig, his "ha-ha-ha" pant, his golden coat shining in the autumn sun, his independence, his loyalty. At the end of three weeks I went to the library and took out an armful of dog books and read them through.

My immediate impressions were twofold: First, where were the dogs in these books? The people, not the dogs, were center stage. And second, what kind of dogs had these people lived with? Most of these dogs—or at least how the people wrote about them—didn't remind me of Merle. They were shallow, one-dimensional beings. This little bit of research only reinforced my feelings about most of the dog books I had read in the past: they were full of unsubstantiated facts and old wives' tales, and except for a few heroic dogs like Old Yeller, White Fang, and Lassie gave dogs few opportunities for adventure or much original thought.

I knew that I could write something far different, far more engaging, far more entertaining, and that Lorrie Bodger had been right: not only had Merle and I shared a remarkable adventure, but he had also given me an opportunity to witness how a dog develops when he isn't crammed into the

straightjacket of draconian training. In short, I knew something firsthand that not many other people did, which of course is the raw material of an unforgettable memoir and the first law of writing: Write what you know best, and, hopefully, about what you deeply love. Most important, in Merle I had my charismatic protagonist, one whom I knew as intimately as I knew anyone.

I collected my thoughts and floated the idea by Russ. He said simply, "Dog books are always good sellers. Write me the proposal."

Merle died in June of 2004, and I began the proposal for his book in August, simultaneously finishing the last three articles I had under contract. Then I went cold turkey from the magazine business, knowing that I'd never be able to write the proposal Russ wanted while traveling on assignments. However, there was a small hitch: I still had to pay my mortgage and keep the fridge full for the next year.

I thought about taking in renters. I mulled over working as the information director for a conservation organization when the position was offered to me. In desperation, I drafted a couple of magazine queries late at night

At last I did the only thing I could think of that would let me write about the dog whom I missed so much and create the proposal that the agent who believed in me wanted to see. I put my rental house in Jackson up for sale, a move that realtor friends said I would deeply regret. Prices were rising dramatically, and the house would probably double in value in a few years. I thought I was listening to my father all over again.

I sold the house, paid off its mortgage, paid off the mortgage on my own house in Kelly, which had taken all of my savings to build, and, now debt free, banked the remaining proceeds, mentally dividing them into twelve portions—my living expenses while I wrote Merle's proposal over the next year.

It actually took me eleven months to complete it, though I didn't really write any extended sections until the last four months. I spent the first seven months reading, taking notes, and organizing my information, recollecting something that John Grisham once noted about how he wrote his own novels, saying that he spent the better part of a year outlining a book, then wrote it in a mad dash of three months. I followed the same front-loaded procedure.

I organized all my photographs of Merle, putting them in chronological order and writing sketches about them—where we were and what we were doing, restoring every one of his little idiosyncrasies. I went back to my ski journals and highlighted in yellow every mention of Merle and expanded some of these entries. I did a search through my hard drive and found every appearance of Merle in my published essays and took pieces from them.

And I read constantly, 123 scientific and behavioral books about dogs in that first year alone, having to agree with the novelist Ian McEwan when he says, "It's worth knowing about ten times as much as you ever use, so you can move freely." I wrote notes in the blank pages at the back of each book, and through interlibrary loan I requested the articles that these authors cited, so I could see the primary scientific material that was being quoted. My requests mounted into the hundreds. When my research was done, I transposed my pencil notes into a master computer file and subsequently

interlarded this material into the narrative sketches I had written about meeting and living with Merle.

At last, I printed out a hardcopy version of this file, got a hole puncher, and put all these schematic chapter outlines into a looseleaf notebook, color coding the material as "must use," "possibly use," and "use another time." Then I sat down with this notebook behind my keyboard and wrote the first seven chapters of a book that still didn't have a title—which is the very first hook that grabs an editor—all the titles that I thought of being hopelessly hackneyed and maudlin, like *A Man and His Dog: A True Story of Canine-Human Love*.

I kept a notebook by my bedside and wrote down dozens of titles along with the odd flashes of memories about Merle. One night in March 2005, I was lying in bed at 1:30 a.m., pencil in hand, title-challenged for the umpteenth time, while I thought of what grouping of words would capture Merle's character. Foremost, and unlike many dogs, he had had a life of his own, which he shaped and created. "A life of his own" made me think of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Merle didn't have a room of his own, but he had a door of his own. *A Door of His Own: The True Story of a Wyoming Dog*. No, that would not do.

"Oh, Merle," I said, letting his name hang in the air. "What can I call your book?" I sat bolt upright and thought, "*Merle*. *Your door*."

Merle's Door.

It came off the tongue; it referred to a key element in the making of Merle's personality; and it was metaphorically perfect, Merle having opened

my eyes to who dogs could be, if only given the chance, as well as his opening my heart into giving completely to another.

In the ensuing months, I finished the chapter outlines and worked on a two-liner that would express succinctly what the book was about, a necessary guide in your own mind to keep your writing on track as well as a selling point for your editor and publicity department. It's also your throw-away line when a reporter asks you, "What is your book about?"

It's the story of one dog, my dog Merle. It's also the story of every dog who must live in an increasingly urbanized world, and how these dogs might live happier lives if we changed some of our behavior rather than always trying to change theirs.

If you want to sell a book, it pays to write that snippet.

By July 2005 I had finished the proposal. It was 70,000 words long. I e-mailed it off to Russ, and a week later he sent me a short e-mail in response: "I think this may be one of the finest proposals, and finest projects, I've ever seen. . . . I was ecstatic, sad, moved, impressed, and exhilarated. And I know just how to sell the royal fucking hell out of this thing."

Russ sent the proposal to twenty-nine publishers, and it went up for auction, every author's dream. Eventually, the bidding went over six figures, as Russ had foreseen, and Tim Bent of Harcourt prevailed. As he began to edit the first seven chapters, I began to write the rest. This was one of the happiest times of my life, getting up at 2:30 in the morning, at three, at four, so excited about putting down the words, about still being with Merle, that I couldn't stay in bed.

The following spring, still blissed out at not having done any real work for close to two years—writing about your dog hardly qualifying as work—I received a surprise from Tim. Barnes & Noble—which doesn't exactly control the publishing industry, but which often acts a sort of Cardinal Richelieu, pulling the strings of power from behind the scenes—asked Harcourt if they might have a dog book in the works that could ride the coattails of *Marley and Me* onto *The New York Times* bestseller list.

"Why, yes we do," Tim replied, "We have *Merle's Door.*"

He sent B & N the proposal, and they were thrilled by it. There was one hitch. Harcourt had slated publication for the fall of 2007. Barnes & Noble wanted the book published in the spring of that year, so as to capture sales from Mother's and Father's Day, and the Memorial Day and Fourth of July book-buying weekends. Tim wrote me and asked if I would move up my deadline by six months.

His request seemed outrageous. I had a leisurely writing schedule planned for those six months, generously sprinkled with spring ski and summer river trips.

I wrote Russ and asked his advice. He sent me back a one-liner: "Move heaven and earth to get it done."

I cancelled my ski and river trips. I worked longer days. I got it done.

Then the rewriting began. I rewrote most of the chapters ten to fifteen times, paying particular attention to the transitions between paragraphs and the closing of one chapter and the opening of the next, until the starts and stops became a smooth harmonic line, until there was melody. I rewrote one key paragraph twenty-six times. I cut the last heartfelt chapter about

Merle's death from 45,000 words to 12,500, with no one looking over my shoulder except the heartless editor whom all of us must cultivate within ourselves, the pitiless voice that says, "No one except you will ever be in love with all those goddamn words. Write just enough words to make the reader love and cry and care, just as you once did, and not a single word more."

And then I read the entire book out loud three times, finding missing words, and flaws in the rhythm, and repetitive ticks, the sort that the eye corrects automatically, but the ear catches instantly. Satisfied at last, I sent the manuscript to my new editor at Harcourt, Tina Pohlman, Tim having left for the Oxford University Press. I didn't hear from her for three weeks, my anxiety rising that the book was too long, too sentimental, too self-conscious.

One morning, I came into my office to find the answering machine blinking. I hit play and heard her voice: "Now that I've stopped weeping long enough to talk to you coherently, I just wanted to say that I love it, and I'm going to send it off to the copy editor as it is." Which is exactly what every author dreams of hearing.

Merle's Door eventually spent nine months on *The New York Times* bestseller list and has now been translated into seven foreign languages as well as a worldwide British edition. Sales were helped by the website I created, and my Facebook page, both of which these days are pretty much de rigueur if you want to augment your sales. It also helped that I didn't turn down a single radio or TV show or bookstore appearance that was offered to me. Harcourt eventually sent me to 62 cities over five months, and I never said no to a single gig, my being an uncomplaining team player not only selling more books, but also helping Russ to get more money for my next one.

I'm sure that all of this would have pleased Dr. Johnson enormously. Best of all, for a lazy person such as myself, the success of *Merle's Door,* and then of *Pukka's Promise*, has allowed me to continue to show up at work anytime I want, which is usually very early.

There's been another gift, however, underlying the popular and financial success of these two books, the very gratifying reward that I dreamt of while lying on the beach as a fourteen-year-old boy reading *Moby Dick*. I've finally written something that really touched people. As so many readers have written, "You said what I always felt about my dog, and about the love between any two beings, but could never put into words."

As well, *Merle's Door* has had a meaning I never intended or could have foreseen. Hundreds of people have written me that his story reminded them that life is indeed short and that they were in the wrong job . . . or the wrong relationship . . . or living in the wrong place.

"Thanks to Merle," these readers say, "I'm going to try to change that."

I could never have predicted that a story about a dog would have had this sort of impact on readers, especially all those readers who have written that Merle's death finally gave them permission to grieve for their own dog . . . their own mother . . . or the child they had lost so long ago. But then who would have thought that a story about a whale would have sent me off on the adventure of writing books.

Beyond hearing that one writes well, which all of us want to hear, an author can hear no sweeter words than these—that the words he or she has written have truly mattered to the reader. I hope someday that those of you

who aspire to telling stories, in whatever form you chose to tell them, hear such words as well.

Good luck with your work and thank you for listening.