

From The Literatus, vol. 4, October 2023

Words & Music
by Lev Raphael

On book tours across the U.S., people have often asked me what the difference is between writing a short story and writing a book. It's a good question and preferable to "How much of your work is autobiographical?" That one comes up because readers often assume anything I write with a first-person narrator is really about me, which means I've had to explain things like the fact that I don't have a vacation cabin in northern Michigan like the hero of my mystery series: "*He's* fictional and *I'm* real." This has usually gotten some laughs.

I've more seriously explained that working on a book can sometimes feel like having your least favorite relative camping out in your basement because of personal problems and they're turning a space you've enjoyed into a pit. But developing a short story or essay can feel like having your best friend, who's extremely low maintenance, stay with you for just a weekend.

That contrast seemed stronger during the pandemic. When it began, I was two hundred pages into a novel that I thought might be better than anything I'd written before, but I'd hit a wall. I wasn't having problems with the storyline or the main character's arc—nothing technical was holding me back. I wasn't blocked. I was *exhausted*.

It was hard to stay focused on a book I knew needed easily another two hundred pages while worrying about staying healthy, not least because I'm married to someone with a heart problem. Edith Wharton once wrote that working on the middle of a book was like crossing the Gobi Desert, and I just didn't have the mental concentration for that forbidding a place.

The unfolding health crisis blurred my focus as I doom-scrolled through endless horror stories about overcrowded ER's and a national shortage of respirators. Now, some writers would have focused on the horror and written about it, but I needed a refuge, and I found it in an unexpected place.

I had stopped teaching creative writing at Michigan State University just two years before and launched my own editing and coaching site for writers. The budding and even experienced writers signing up to work with me in one capacity or another were all adults, all talented, and all hard-working in whatever their genres. I was thrilled to have all the joys of teaching without the administration and without difficult or even exasperating colleagues.

Inspired by the energy of the writers I now worked with, I discovered that writing essays and flash essays was safe, satisfying territory for me. Each one felt like an oasis of calm, especially since I was often writing early in the morning when the house was utterly quiet, there was no traffic passing by outside, and my dogs were fast asleep.

Better than that, instead of endless notes about structure and trying to keep it all in my head when writing a book, working with short essays I felt that I could see all the way round them and through them. Whatever the idea, the architecture wasn't complex, and I could focus on each line's rhythm, diction, and place in the whole piece with more intensity than when writing—or trying to write—something longer.

Having started voice lessons a few years earlier, I made another delightful discovery: working on a short essay was like studying a classic art song by Schubert or Reynaldo Hahn, whose beginning, middle, and end were always clear, and whose individual parts—down to specific notes—I hoped would become intimately mine. Moments of doubt would eventually give way to clarity and confidence.

My voice teachers offered me wonderful metaphors for how I should feel while singing, reminding me of Syrio Forel's advice to Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones* when he teaches her how to use a sword: I'm rooted like a tree. The space inside my mouth is as open as a beautiful church dome. The notes are like a long multicolored scarf being pulled from a magician's hand.

In singing, just as in writing, I am the instrument.