

Here are a few insights regarding my new novel, *Forty Ways to Square a Circle*. With the best of intentions (and apologies if any of this serves only to confuse), I offer the following remarks.

GENRE

Since this story contains comic touches, I had best begin with a caveat. The comedy in this book is not of the kind you have seen from me in the past. While you are reading this book, temporarily banish *I See London, I See France* . . . from your mind. Expect subtler varieties of humor. I regard this work as serious and literary. A bit of humor can enhance the development of any story; but I would caution you against anticipating a purely comic novel.

1. Elements of comedy in this novel are intended to serve two primary functions:
 - a. In the school plot, comedy is employed to satirize educational priorities.
 - b. In the home plot, laughing-to-keep-from-crying may sometimes be necessary.
2. Let me suggest (without pretending too much) that my story may be cut from the Dickensian mold—with just a dash more stream of consciousness. Like a Dickens' novel, my book offers a bit of humor, a bit of tragedy, a bit of social criticism; and it features a protagonist who ends with more hope than he could reasonably have expected.

THE TITLE (*Forty Ways to Square a Circle*)

The title is suggestive of a Dantean journey.

1. A reader familiar with Dante's *Divine Comedy* will discover deeper meaning in the square and circle imagery. Allusions to Dante (most of them quite obscure) abound. Nevertheless, the reader who is unfamiliar with Dante need not be intimidated. For those who like to dig, there are a good many bones to uncover. Those who choose to read without attending to literary models will not be confounded. Dante is very quiet. Anyone who wishes to ignore him entirely may do so.
2. I am, nevertheless, indebted to Dante for part of the structure of my novel and for the general imagery of journeying through hell to get to—well, if not heaven, at least to a place where new beginnings and second chances seem possible.
3. Merriman's aunt (admittedly a strange stand-in for Dante's Virgil) must teach the first lessons; but (like Virgil) she seems to lead the protagonist primarily in a downward spiral.
4. Cohesion with Doria (Merriman's Beatrice) will be required before an ascent can truly begin.

WHY THE NOVEL IS SET IN 1996

1. I wanted to tell my story without the baggage of the post-September 11 world.
2. Similarly, I deemed it important to set the action of my story at a time when a

shooting at a school could still be met with disbelief.

3. Certain historical facts revealed in 1996 I find to be useful—at least decoratively.
4. Weather is used as a tone-setting device in my novel. I wanted storms—for both literal and symbolic reasons. While healthy rains can be looked for at any time in the Pacific Northwest, the most recent year of record rains and devastating floods was 1996. When you read, in this novel, of children scooping salmon out of their lawns, or cattle being carried away by a raging river, you can be sure that I am recording historical events specific to the time and place.
5. The economy was booming in 1996. It is important that my novel be set during a healthy economy. If my story were set during rough economic times, a reader might be tempted to conclude that the staff cuts (so important to this tale) result primarily from lack of funding.
6. Public access to the Internet was still new in 1996. As a result, interest in computers as the new educational panacea was developing rapidly at that time. I have attempted to capture some of the initial excitement—as well as some of the excesses.
7. Let's not discount Dante's influence. Dante set his *Divine Comedy* in 1300, but he wrote the poem several years later.

NOTES ON VERISIMILITUDE

1. In crafting this novel, I followed traditional wisdom: "Write what you know."
 - a. The first of two intersecting plots revolves around school politics. After twenty-five years in the classroom, I know a little something about the subtleties and horrors associated with policymaking in public education.
 - b. The second plot involves caring for an elderly, dementia-stricken relative. Considerably fewer than twenty-five years were required to teach me about minds in decay. I looked after my aunt during the last few years of her life. I know what goes through the head of a caregiver, and can accurately represent some of the trials of the invalid.
2. A few words about the type of breakdown toward which Merriman finds himself spinning: Though Casey Merriman is not, strictly speaking, autobiographical, plenty of autobiographical elements pertain. Foremost among these is Merriman's method of breaking down. The symptoms he exhibits bear striking similarities to symptoms I have experienced. What this means is that no one will be able to say, "People simply do not break down in that way." Some do. I did. And, if you ask me how a person with such debilitating symptoms can go on teaching without being "found out," once again, I would answer, I did. I taught a full year under the crush of this ailment and hid the illness pretty well—just as Merriman tries to do. Some breakdowns have limited impact on the reason and on one's ability to articulate. Mine did. Merriman's does as well. I can appreciate, of course, that people break down in different ways; but I can also positively attest to the fact that the breakdown depicted in this novel represents one, true way.
3. A few words about dementia, as delineated in this tale: At the age of eighty-nine, my

aunt underwent heart valve replacement surgery. Prior to surgery, her mental functions were sharp. After the surgery her short-term memory declined rapidly. Dilly is the one character in this novel who is intimately based on a real person. The depiction of her condition closely relates to my aunt's experience—and to my experience in caring for her. I can say, without fear of contradiction, that the portrayal of Dilly's infirmity in this novel accurately represents one type of mental degeneration. This type of dementia exacerbates paranoia because it limits options. The mind, after all, is our chief protection against danger. When the mind goes, danger is (at least potentially) everywhere.

4. Finding balance: One of the difficulties I faced in creating the character of Dilly was achieving a balance. I wanted to accurately portray my aunt's condition and, at the same time, steer clear of mockery. In my attempt to accomplish this goal, I occasionally offer the reader two crucial reminders:

- a. Dilly's erratic behavior is a symptom of her illness—not a flaw in her character.
- b. Before her surgery, Dilly was gifted, considerate and generous.

I regard the character of Dilly as a tribute to my aunt—in her suffering, and in her prior time of wholeness.

5. Having gone to such lengths to establish the life-likeness of the principal characters, I would caution you against viewing some of the lesser characters as mere types. The principal and the coach may seem stereotypical at times, but anyone who has taught in our public schools for any number of years can testify to having encountered them. I maintain that any limitations in their personalities are their fault, not mine.

- a. The administrator (put in the awkward and ironic position of evaluating teachers who are more qualified than he) represents a common concern among educators.
- b. The coach who is hired for his skills on the playing field, without regard to his skills in the classroom, is, likewise, only too active in the real world.
- c. I confess that the businessman in my story possesses symbolic qualities. He is never actually heard to speak, but (keeping Dante in mind) a demon who plants ideas in the heads of poor, wayward souls is a useful device.

6. News events mentioned in the book can help a reader locate himself/herself in time. When you read of Clinton's visit to the disaster area, or the arrest of the Unabomber, or Bob Dole's resignation from the senate in order to focus on a run for the presidency, be assured that the relevant chapters are set on precisely the days when those events were reported. [Though I doubt that it would be of any particular importance to you, I could supply you with the exact dates of each chapter if you like. In general, the story begins during the first part of February 1996, and concludes at the end of May that same year.]

7. Though the town of Coboway is fictional, it sometimes looks a lot like home. (The view from Merriman's deck, for example, is uncannily like the view from my own deck.) If Faulkner could fictionalize Oxford, Mississippi, surely I can do something similar for my home town. Doria's home (as I visualize it) could actually be inside Fort Stevens State Park. One can work such wonders in fiction. The school is very deliberately unlike

any building in which I have taught. The political environment inside the school, however, (even when acted out by totally fictional creations) definitely rings a bell.

I hope these few hints from the inside will prove helpful. I would encourage you not to pay too much attention to the metaphorical and symbolic elements as you read. I mention them only to give you an ultimate edge over other readers. In fact, much of what I have written here may initially be misleading; but after you have read the book, I think these comments will make better sense.

Neil Hummasti