

K.D. Miller  
LEARNING TO WRITE BIG



Kelly licks her finger. Presses it into the toast crumbs on her plate. Licks them off.

Long before I wrote any of the three Kelly stories which appear in *A Litany In Time Of Plague*, I saw a nameless woman seated at a breakfast table across from her husband, licking toast crumbs off her finger. There was something at once childish and mature about the gesture. I sensed that she was playing for time. Keeping the lid on. Keeping her temper about something small, for the sake of something big.

Actually, I'm not sure I knew that much. I certainly hadn't guessed that her marriage was in trouble. But I did know that the vision of Kelly licking toast crumbs from her finger was important. Important enough to leave alone.

So I did. I didn't pester it or try to make it do anything. I knew it would stay safe in memory until it was ready to tell its story.

If this is sounding a bit precious, all I can say is that the more I write, the more I am convinced that, for me, writing begins with something like a visitation. I feel as if I am being haunted by a character's ghost, long before that character's literary birth. And it's always a character that does the haunting. Never a place or thing or event.

People have sometimes remarked on my minimalist settings, the way my characters seem to float eerily against a backdrop of time and place that are only vaguely, if at all, identified. This could be a result of my theatre training. Subconsciously, I might be trying to write plays.

It is true that I almost never adopt the omniscient point of view. I much prefer working behind the mask. I like the gritty particularity of character, its abrasive limitations. The more unreliable a narrator promises to be, in fact, the more likely I am to let him tell his own story and bend it completely out of shape. Three of the stories in *A Litany In Time Of Plague* are told by Raymond Mayhugh, a man so entirely self-absorbed that he has yet to make his own acquaintance.

But back to Kelly licking her finger. Not long ago someone sug-

gested to me that a novelist takes more “responsibility” for her characters than does a short story writer. Well, I fluffed up and clucked that I took *full* responsibility for my characters, thank you, as much as any novelist. That exchange still rankles. Probably because I have no idea what it was about.

One of my dirty little secrets is that although I have written short stories for years, I haven’t a clue what a short story is. That is, I could not stand at the front of a classroom and chalk onto the blackboard three defining characteristics of same. Or two. Or even one. How short is short, anyway?

Now and then I get worried about my ignorance and thumb through a how-to-write book, where I usually find some kind of definition. I read it, marvel at its clarity and wisdom, then promptly forget it. And go back to writing short stories. Whatever they are.

And now, to my surprise and embarrassment, I am writing a novel. Whatever that is. Thank God that Kelly is my viewpoint character. I wouldn’t dare take this step if I didn’t have her damp-fingered hand to hold.

Actually, I feel more as if I were falling into a hole than taking a step. I did not consciously decide to write a novel. If anything, the decision was made for me by the book itself. I was busy working on a second collection of stories when something started nudging the back of my mind. I kept imagining Kelly in some kind of distress. Hiding out in surroundings that were at once comforting and alien to her.

I didn’t know where she was, what was wrong, or what was going to happen to her. But I did know I wanted to find out, and that the finding out would take time. Without knowing what the work would be, I could sense its bigness, its slow-moving depth.

As for the embarrassment I mentioned, I suppose that comes of my having claimed for years to be *exclusively* a short story writer. I’ve actually gotten a bit militant at times, particularly when I’ve been reminded that short stories don’t sell. Recently a bookstore manager told me that he has started pushing my book as a novel, since the linked stories make it teeter on the brink of being one anyway. As grateful as I was for his support, I was miffed by the form it had to take.

Why *don’t* short stories sell? Why have I so often run up against the



notion that a short story writer is in training to be a novelist? That once she gets it right, she'll write a *real* book? Does a flautist aspire to play the tuba? Because it's bigger?

I would like to think that, when it comes to the flute versus the tuba, music is music. I would like to think that, in the case of the short story and the novel, writing is writing.

But I know in my bones that I couldn't produce a decent haiku or libretto to save my life. Form does matter. A novel is different. And there's only one way to find out just how different it is.

I admit to hugging the shore. It is no coincidence that Kelly licks her finger on the first page:

*Kelly is spooning warm peas and carrots into her mouth. She was able to use her fork on the scalloped potatoes, because they stuck together. And she could spear the pieces of roast pork she managed to cut up. But she couldn't lift the peas and carrots to her mouth with her fork, because they kept shivering off the tines. She tried three times before she saw Sister Nancy, still talking to one of the other guests, quietly put down her own fork and picked up her spoon.*

*There is conversation going on all around her in the convent dining room. She tunes in now and then, sometimes catching a phrase or following part of an anecdote. At the moment the voices are just noise while she chases a clump of peas around her plate. She finally traps it against her finger with the edge of her spoon. Lifts the spoon to her mouth. Licks her finger. Glances up in time to see one of the other guests politely looking away.*

*Well, she thinks, too bad. This is the first decent food she's had since Friday. What did she eat yesterday? Peanut butter on stale crackers, and half a canned peach. This morning? Kraft Dinner.*

*Now look at her. Gobbling food like a baby with her fingers and a spoon. Maybe for an encore she'll pee on the floor.*

*She did that once too. In the first grade. Didn't want to raise her hand and let the whole world know she had to pee. Thought she could hold it. Couldn't.*

*She remembers feeling amazed. Before the shame hit her. Amazed by the sudden release. The lightening. The pleasure, even.*

*But then there was the splattering on the floor, and Miss Ackroyd's "Why didn't you raise your hand and ask to leave the room, young lady?" And her own rising wail, "I don't kno-o-ow!"*

*She really didn't know. Couldn't imagine what had gotten her to the point of wetness running down her legs, soaking into her socks. The eyes of her classmates on her. Awed. Admiring, in a way. Then, as Miss Ackroyd's voice rose righteous and scolding, glad it wasn't them. Glad it was her.*

*She was made to stand beside her puddle until the janitor arrived to mop it up, and was made to apologize to him. "I'm very sorry I —" What could she say? What possible words could there be that would not be worse than the thing itself? "— did that." She pointed a shaking finger at the puddle on the floor.*

*Her hand is shaking again now. Some of the peas and carrots have fallen off her spoon, but some remain. She gets them to her mouth. Chews. Swallows over her stretched and aching throat.*

*A woman beside her is chatting brightly to Sister Nancy. Kelly tunes in. "— my annual treat," the woman says. "A whole week of nothing. My husband and kids know they can't phone me here unless the house is burning down. And maybe not even then."*

*"We get a lot of mothers as guests," Sister Nancy says.*

*Two other nuns at the table nod agreement. "And a lot of CEO's, too," one of them adds. A very old nun. Her face oddly smooth and tender, like a baby's. Sister Ursula? Kelly can't remember.*

*"People who live in a shoe." Sister Nancy again, sighing and shaking her head. "Who have so many children, they don't know what to do." She glances at Kelly, then away.*

*I don't have any children, Kelly thinks. I'm not a mother. I'm not a CEO. I don't live in a shoe.*

*She wonders how bad she looks. Is her face still blotchy? Nose swollen? Eyes piggy? Nobody has pressed her to speak, which is kind. Probably they can tell at a glance that she's lost it. Whatever "it" is. What do people mean, anyway, when they say they've lost it, or that they're losing it?*

*She doesn't know. She's too exhausted to care. She just wants to eat. She has cleaned her plate like a child, in order of preference. First potatoes. Next meat. Now, spoon to peas and carrots. Then up to mouth. There. Didn't lose a single pea that time. Good for you, Kelly. Maybe by the end of three days you'll be eating with a fork.*

*Will that count as a miracle, she wonders, and almost smiles. Could there be a Saint Kelly?*

I couldn't say how many false starts it took to get that far. For one thing, I was amazed to find myself beginning at the beginning. Usually, I surface in the middle of a story and flail toward the edges. Or I begin at the end and have to backpedal to find out how I got there.

I worried that it might be amateurish to be starting my novel on page one. Starting and restarting it, that is. Then I found myself reading some writers-talk-about-writing article, and there was Brian Moore saying that he did exactly the same thing. He compared himself to a streetcar nudging around, looking for the right track. Trying this or that one and getting nowhere. Then finally finding the right one, and *zoom*.

So maybe what I was doing *was* professional after all. Sophisticated, even. Because Brian Moore did it too.

It is at times like this that I seriously wonder if I will ever become a writer in my own eyes. What is a "writer," anyway? The words imply someone who knows what she's doing. Can see around corners. Or at least has some inkling, at the top of a page, of what she might find at the bottom.

Well, forget it. Recently I was the guest of a book club that had chosen *A Litany In Time Of Plague* for discussion. I sat in a nice lady's living room, clutching a glass of wine and babbling on about *What I Do* and *How I Write*. All the while cocking an imaginative ear for the wup-wup-wup of a helicopter approaching. Getting closer. Hovering over the house. Then somebody leaning out of it, shouting into a bullhorn, DO NOT LISTEN TO THIS WOMAN. THIS WOMAN DOES NOT KNOW WHAT SHE IS TALKING ABOUT.

Do other writers feel this way? Does, by any chance, Brian Moore? Back to page one. And Kelly licking her finger.

I had found the right track. And I did go *zoom*, for about forty pages. Then I leaned back to read what I had written. And sat up appalled.

I had written those forty pages in a matter of days, going a mile a minute. Skimming the surface. Telling everything. Showing nothing. What was on paper was so thin and poor and unfelt that I seriously wondered if I was burnt out after one book.

Here's what had happened. I had rejected the notion that bigger is better. Fine. But in doing so, I had forgotten that bigger is *bigger*.



And that the bigness of a novel is not simply a matter of length. In other words, I had been trying to play the tuba the way I would the flute, and had produced a squeak.

It was one of those wonderful moments when you realize your alternatives are to quit, start over or start drinking. I had a drink and started over. That is, I began the process of learning to write *big*.

For years, I had written small. I had suggested, hinted, implied. Depended on my reader to find my subtly camouflaged clues. In editing my own work, I had done more crossing-out than anything else. Every word, as far as I was concerned, was there on sufferance. Either it went with the single thrust of the story or it went, period.

Now, I had to teach myself to do the opposite. To be generous without spoon-feeding. Forthcoming, but not gushy.

Actually, it was more a matter of *permitting* than teaching. I had to give myself permission to write something as big as a novel. And I had to give myself that permission over and over because I kept forgetting I had it.

For weeks, I resisted writing a physical description of Kelly. It should have been such a simple thing, letting my reader know what a character looks like. Why was I being so shy about it?

One reason was that I couldn't find the appropriate spot to work it in. Another was that I have always been irritated by pure description, by the way it slows a story down.

Well, I was right and I was wrong. The clue lay in my choice of words. *Pure* description is indeed gratuitous. And it does slow down a *story*.

But I wasn't writing a story, remember? I wasn't trying to get down on paper the psychological equivalent of a single leaf falling, or a single bell tolling once. I was crunching through a whole forest in the middle of autumn. I was in Notre Dame Cathedral, right underneath Quasimodo doing his scales.

Besides, who said description had to be pure? Why couldn't it get its hands dirty? Do a little work?

*There was a mirror above the sink in the convent room. Kelly studied her face. The pouches under her eyes weren't too bad, considering all the crying she*



*had done in the last week. She turned her face and checked out the line from eye to chin. Round, but not bulging. Well, it was years since she had seen her cheekbones.*

*There was a small hand mirror lying face down on the shelf above the sink. She lined it up with the wall mirror and studied her profile. As usual, her nose, its smallness and snubbiness, surprised her. For some reason, it felt bigger than it looked.*

*She had always wanted a big nose. She used to joke that she had married her ex-husband Phil for his nose, a gorgeous schnozz that honked when he blew it and muttered rhythmically all night. When she was married, she went through a stage of expecting to see Phil's long canine muzzle when she looked in the mirror, and being surprised by her own abrupt, foreshortened little face.*

*She put the hand mirror back down on the shelf. It made a loud click, and for the first time she noticed how quiet the place was.*

Okay. That simple description is doing some hard work, and getting me all kinds of good stuff for free. Until I wrote it, I didn't know Phil had a big nose. I didn't know Kelly envied it. I didn't know she sometimes looked in the mirror and was surprised to see herself instead of Phil.

What I had found was the relationship in a nutshell. The thing that had both held the marriage together and pulled it apart.

After that, writing began to feel like treasure-hunting. Instead of crossing-out, I took to drawing a symbol in the margin that looked like this:  $\angle$ . Between the spreading arms of that symbol, I would write, "more about martinis" or "expand" or "why?" or just "?"

At first, I thought of this symbol as a wedge nudging into a crack and forcing it wide. Then I got terribly earth-motherish and thought in terms of a branch being grafted into a living trunk. Yuck.

Finally, I saw the thing for what it was. The mathematical symbol meaning "is less than." What was on the page was less than what could and should be there. The greater quantity was unknown. And it was the unknown that would give meaning to what was already on the page.

A case in point was the paperback mystery Kelly is struggling, for some reason, to get through:

*. . . Not one of the characters had the slightest motive for killing the dead person. They did have all kinds of reasons to kill each other, but didn't seem to know where to start. Every few pages, one of them would reveal that they had had an affair years ago with one of the rest, and had borne or begotten yet another in the group, who was just as surprised as everybody else to find out who his parents really were. Meanwhile, the dead person was still dead and no opportunity, means or motive had come to light.*

This description showed up in my original forty-page marathon. It had the same gratuitous quality as the rest of the material, and came very close to being axed.

Then I realized that the humour of the situation lay not in the book's being badly written but in Kelly's struggle to go on reading it. Especially in the state she's in.

She has, as she admits to herself, lost it, and has been sent home from work by her boss, with orders to heal herself by Monday:

*"Look," Deirdre said to the nonstop blubbing mess Kelly had become by Friday noon. "You're stressed. Okay. It happens." Since her promotion to branch head, Deirdre has taken to talking in little barks of one or two or three words. "So go home. Veg out. Watch the tube. Shop. Buy something. Come back Monday. You'll be great."*

That's a tall order, particularly for Kelly, who has no idea what's wrong with her, couldn't veg out to save her life, and doesn't even own a tube.

In the original forty-page skim, I had Kelly go right to her bedroom and try to read:

*She sat on the bed, picked the book up, held it on its side and measured its thickness. Almost three inches. And her bookmark was barely half an inch in. She sighed. Sheer loyalty to her favourite author had gotten her that far. That and the price. Seven ninety-five. More like nine, with tax.*

*She opened the book to where she had nodded off the night before. Dimly, she remembered Lady Jessica blurting out that, owing to a sex change operation, she was not only Lord Bellingham's mistress but also his presumed-dead nephew.*

*Maybe if she made a list of characters, Kelly thought. Or drew a family tree to help her keep track of who had done what to whom. But that seemed too much like work. And she was supposed to be vegging out.*

Something was not working. Something was not hanging together. Why would such a bad writer be Kelly's favourite? And why, given her frayed nerves, would she struggle on with the book, even for the sake of loyalty? Why wouldn't she just curl up on the couch in front of the tube?

Because she doesn't have a tube. Remember? Oh. Right. Excuse me?

It was time for another "is less than" symbol. Okay:

< WHY DOESN'T KELLY HAVE A TUBE?

Everybody has a tube. Why not Kelly? In answering that question, I came up with answers to a few more I hadn't even gotten round to asking:

*She had gotten rid of her TV a couple of years ago when she caught herself watching a week-long Dirty Harry film festival, even though she had seen each of the movies at least twice. How much better it would be, she had lectured herself, to devote those hours to yoga classes. Volunteer work. Courses in how to invest her money.*

*Well, she resolved, she would do all those things and more. She would pare herself down. Become lean and capable and knowing.*

*Then she discovered mysteries. She had never read mysteries before, but once she started she went through them like popcorn.*

*Now, as she went into her bedroom where her latest paperback was sitting on her night table, it occurred to her that Inspector Wexford, Adam Dalgleish and Lord Peter Wimsey might be just classier versions of Dirty Harry.*



Okay. So far, I knew why she was reading a mystery. But it still didn't make sense for her to be ploughing through such a bad one. The old excuse, loyalty to her favourite author, didn't hold water any more. If she's become a true mystery buff, her favourite would be the likes of P.D. James or Ruth Rendell.

I decided to go sleuthing through the three Kelly stories in *A Litany in Time of Plague*. In the middle of "Requiem," I found the clue I was looking for:

*Kelly knows there is something about her that attracts the unfortunate. It's no use trying to avoid the unfortunate either, because they find her. Wispy old ladies grab her arm for ballast in heavy traffic and high winds. Bores back her into corners at parties, seeming to know that she'll smile politely through their bad breath. Refugees of totalitarian regimes seek her out on subway platforms. They have some obscure address to get to for a job interview, but they won't ask the drivers for help because they're terrified of anyone in uniform.*

Of course. The author of the mystery had to be someone who had snagged Kelly's overabundant sympathy. Someone who was at a disadvantage. Time to go *zoom* again:

*The book was written by eight people. According to the back cover blurb, each of the eight had yearned to write mysteries, but had been kept from achieving his or her potential by long-buried memories of one kind of abuse or another. Together, the victims had tapped each others' traumas until they had felt sufficiently empowered to apply for literary arts grants sufficient to support them for three years while they produced the eight hundred-page paperback for which Kelly had paid eleven ninety-five. Thirteen fifty, with tax.*

*Five dollars out of every sale, the blurb assured her, would go to support the support group, which now had full charity status and called itself Survivors Unbound: Celebrating the Creativity of Repression (S.U.C.C.O.R.).*

*Kelly had bought the book because she felt guilty about having no repressed memories. Or at least, none that she could discern.*

*Her good health, the fact that she was employed and had a roof over her*



head, made her feel more and more like a walking reproach to the whole hurting world around her. When she rode the bus to work and looked at the ads, she felt rebuked for not having spina bifida or muscular dystrophy, not being a street kid, not needing to be saved by the Salvation Army, and not being one of just twenty-seven albino kinkajous left on earth.

The same thing happened when she opened her mail, and the same ads came at her again, complete with tear-off portions she was entreated to fill out and mail back, indicating the amount she agreed to have automatically withdrawn from her bank account on a monthly basis. She would keep the ads tucked into her desk blotter for a few days, then furtively transfer them, one by one, to her waste paper basket.

The paperback book had been particularly troublesome because Kelly secretly envied people who were able to repress memories. She herself couldn't repress a thing. Certainly not abuse. Any humiliation or petty cruelty she had suffered at the hands of her loved ones was always right there for her, instantly accessible, in full colour and excruciating detail. This envy exacerbated her guilt, making her try all the harder to plough through the book.

What was emerging was something I had known before, but had had to learn all over again. Namely, that Kelly is too nice for her own good. Much too nice for the world in which she must live. The world that is driving her nuts.

Kelly lacks the necessary cynicism, the layer of emotional callus needed to deal with things like downsizing in the workplace. (Or "rightsizing," as it has been recently euphemized.) She breaks down at the sight of the brown bag lunch left behind in the staff room fridge by a man who's just been laid off. She didn't like the man, but she didn't want him to disappear either.

She feels increasingly disoriented in her own neighbourhood. Every time she takes a walk, she finds more stores with their windows papered over, and signs announcing whatever new business is going to nudge into the space for a little while until it goes belly-up too.

She is distressed by the increasing size and changing demographics of the beggar population:

*Shambling old winos are giving way to young men in still-clean designer jeans. Their hair looks like it has been cut in the last month, their teeth are in good shape and they don't smoke. The last one who said to her, "Help the homeless, Ma'am?" held out a Gucci shoebox jingling with loonies.*

What pushes Kelly over the edge is her own vulnerability to what she sees. Her overwhelming sense of personal liability. She is too good a samaritan. Filling a brown paper bag at Loblaws with Kraft Dinner and canned goods for the food bank merely compounds her guilt, rendering her incapable of buying her own groceries:

*She stood staring at the fresh vegetables. They didn't look like things to eat. They were too shiny and bright and colourful even to touch. Just when she was telling herself not to be silly and was working up the nerve to reach for a red pepper, the automatic sprinklers came on and gave everything a bath.*

*Fruit was just as alien. Apples. She had never thought before about how many different kinds of apples there were. Macintosh. Granny Smith. Royal Gala. Delicious, red and golden. Spartan. Who named them, she wondered suddenly. Who decided these things?*

*And oranges. Navel. Valencia. Mineola. Clementine. Blood. Somebody had actually developed a blood orange. Why? For what? Did she need a blood orange? Was she entitled to a blood orange?*

*Then there were all the strange new things she couldn't identify, from countries she couldn't place. Ugli fruit. What would she do with an ugli fruit? It actually was ugly, kind of like a turnip. How would she eat it? And where exactly was Kuala Lumpur?*

*In the deli section, her cart still empty except for the food bank bag, she watched an employee cutting slabs from a huge block of Monterey Jack cheese. Kelly has always loved cheese. A friendly food, solid and satisfying and easy. She usually makes her choice for the week with barely a thought from a shortlist of favourites. Havarti with caraway. Old cheddar. Colby. Brie. But this time her favourites were lost in the abundance of cream cheeses and blue cheeses and cheeses with green veins running through them and cheeses with almonds embedded in their tops and cheeses with cherries lurking all the way through.*

*The employee slicing the Monterey Jack must have felt Kelly's presence, because he turned and said severely, "May I help you?" She shook her head and wheeled her cart away.*

*In the end she bought a second round of canned vegetables, canned fruit, peanut butter, Kraft Dinner and beans. The cashier looked at her curiously and asked if she wanted another brown paper bag for the food bank.*

I'm not going to claim that all of the above came about as a result of my asking myself why Kelly didn't have a TV. But when I asked that question, something did click into place. Then one thing led to another, and another.

Questions and answers. Seeking and finding. I had always thought novels were planned and plotted things. Maybe, for other writers, they are. In my own case, I have to admit that for all my scribbling and scratching out and cutting and pasting, the work is ultimately out of my conscious control. I rely as much as I ever did on my "visitations," those hauntings by characters as yet unborn.

Meanwhile, the < symbols continue to show up in the margins. The material between their spreading arms is causing the book to grow more or less the way an onion does, by generating new layers from within. You might say the thing isn't so much getting longer as putting on weight.

And I am pleased to say that much of the material in the original forty pages is salvageable. In fact, some of it seems almost to have been waiting for me to catch up with it. To get to the point of being able to appreciate it. Like Kelly licking her finger. And like Sister Nancy referring to her as someone who, though childless, in fact has so many children she doesn't know what to do.

Well, she still doesn't know what to do. And I don't know what I'm going to do with her. That is, I don't know what is going to happen to her during the three days she hides out in the convent.

I do know she is not going to come away with any pat answers. Sister Nancy is not going to be a wimpled "Sarge" in a spiritual boot camp, whipping Kelly into the shape of a clean, serene praying machine.

But beyond that, I haven't a clue what the book is going to con-



tain. Maybe that's why question marks continue to appear most often between the spreading arms of my "is less than" symbols. Those question marks are my way of interrupting myself and saying, Excuse me? What do you mean? What are you talking about? What is underneath this? What is behind and beyond it? How does it relate to Kelly's past, present and future?

And above all, what has it got to do with her licking her finger?





