



NOTES FROM THE WRITING OF A FIRST NOVEL

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THEME:

"Authentic Swing prev. liv"

"Swing is Revealed"

2 cross lifetimes

M+BV clash, M resists

Climax = 18th hole

STEVEN PRESSFIELD

**THE
AUTHENTIC
SWING**

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THE AUTHENTIC SWING

Notes from the Writing of a First Novel

STEVEN PRESSFIELD



Black Irish Entertainment LLC

LOS ANGELES

NEW YORK



**BLACK IRISH ENTERTAINMENT LLC
65 CENTRAL PARK WEST
NEW YORK, NY 10023**

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**FIRST BLACK IRISH ENTERTAINMENT PAPERBACK
EDITION JUNE 2013**

**FOR INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIAL DISCOUNTS FOR
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TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1936891139

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-936591-07-8

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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The War of Art

*For Phil ,
and for Henry*

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GOLFERS & WRITERS

This book is intended more for writers than for golfers. It's about the writing process. However, golf is the subject of my first novel, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, so a word or two may be useful as we start.

Someone very wise once observed that golf is different from other sports in that, viewed from the outside, by someone who has never played it, the game looks utterly lame and incomprehensible. Golf? Please. It just seems dumb. A country club pastime indulged in by rich white guys in plaid pants.

The same cannot be said about skiing, say, or sky-diving, or even baseball. From the outside, these sports look like fun. We get it. We don't have to play the sport to understand its appeal.

Nor has golf been well served by movies, including the movie of *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. Only wild-and-crazy lampoons like *Caddyshack* and *Happy Gilmore* have fared well, or deserved to. Every time a filmmaker attempts a serious take on golf, the effort sinks without a trace.

On the other hand, if we're fair, we must admit that numerous highly sophisticated athletes, legends in sports other than golf—Michael Jordan, say, or John Elway, or Wayne Gretzky—are themselves passionate, and even obsessive, adherents of the game. Are you gonna tell Michael Jordan he's crazy? Me neither. The non-golfer must

acknowledge, however grudgingly, that though he himself might not get it, perhaps there is something to this game after all.

So please, dear reader, as you venture into these pages, do so with an open mind. Bear with me. I promise I will try to craft the experience in such a way as to render this incomprehensible game at least slightly comprehensible, or as comprehensible as is possible to us mortals.

PART ONE

FINDING THE IDEA

GROWING UP IN THE YARD

When I was a kid growing in New York in the 50s, there was such a thing as “working papers.” You couldn’t get a job without them. But you had to be sixteen years old to apply.

We were eleven.

We needed money.

My friend the Hawk said, “Let’s go caddying.”

You didn’t need working papers to be a caddie. All you had to do was show up.

My friend was not the real Hawk. That was his big brother Henry. Henry was the Big Hawk, the Original Hawk. My friend Phil was the Junior Hawk. His two younger brothers, twins, were the Sparrow Hawks.

The Big Hawk was the coolest guy in my hometown of Pleasantville. Yes, there really is such a place. The Hawk drove a convertible Corvette. He had a tattoo. He was going steady with Vivian Saglibene, the prettiest girl in high school. He was just cool.

The Hawk was a golfer. Not just any golfer, but the Westchester County caddie champion. In those days, when golfing legends like Ben Hogan, Byron Nelson and Gene Sarazen had arisen from the caddie ranks, a title like that really meant something.

The Hawk was ungodly long off the tee. He could set a ball on the concrete step of the pro shop and hit it 300 yards

in the air without putting a scratch on the soleplate of his persimmon MacGregor Tourney driver (which was actually a 1 1/2 wood).

Sometimes the Hawk would take Phil and me to the Elmsford driving range after work. Within five minutes he had drawn a crowd. Night had fallen; the bright lights had come on. The Hawk's ball—even those dead-ass, dimple-free driving range clunkers—came off the clubface of his driver with such an explosive crack that players froze in mid-swing, left their own rubber mats and buckets of balls, and clustered in awe to watch him. I did too. I can still see those red-striped, stone-inert range balls rocketing into the darkness and vanishing somewhere beyond Pluto.

One day, the Hawk took Phil and me to the local diner. A burger was thirty cents, a cheeseburger thirty-five. I got up without leaving a tip. Suddenly, I felt talons seizing me by the scruff of the neck. "These people," said the Hawk, "depend for their living on the generosity of the customers they serve."

I tipped five dollars.

To this day, I leave ridiculous tips.

We started caddying, Phil and I, when we were eleven. Sometimes the Big Hawk gave us a ride, but mostly we hitchhiked. You could do it then. People would pick you up. The club was in Armonk, New York—before IBM moved its world headquarters there—up a gorgeous, oak- and maple-lined two-lane to the clear, sunlit summit, the highest point in Westchester County. It was called the Whippoorwill Club.

It's still there. A great course, designed by Donald Ross, among others.

Before I went up to Whippoorwill, I had barely heard of golf. Baseball was my love. I only went up to the club to make money. But I was there one day and I fell in love with the game.

Growing up in a caddie shack is like growing up on a kibbutz or a cattle ranch, or maybe more accurately an orphanage or reform school. The caddie master was a sixty-year-old guy named Frank. He was the one who called your name and sent you out on a "loop."

Here is how you grow up in a caddie shack. The first summer, I was "Shorty." Next year, I was "Peanuts." At thirteen, I had a growth spurt: I became "Legs," then "Stretch." For a three-year interval, Frank called me, for no reason I could fathom, "Oklahoma." Then I went to work in the pro shop. Because I was always swinging clubs, I became "Sam"—after Sam Snead. I don't think Frank ever knew my real name.

The shack itself was a yard of denuded hardpan adjacent to the pro shop, open to the elements and screened off from the members' eyes by a canvas-swathed chain link fence. Inside this palisade, waiting for their loops, lounged the scum of the earth. Black Jack Barnes, Stevie Coleslaw, Bimbo Elliott, Two-Tone John, and the Bisceglia brothers. They wore muscle shirts with Marlboro hard-packs rolled into one sleeve above a tattoo either of Jesus on the cross with a tear trickling down his cheek or the Harley-Davidson

logo with Harley spelled “Hardly.” The Hawk and Danny Canizarro ruled the roost.

In the east and south corners of the yard stood two square green tables, at which high stakes poker games (with actual dollar bills in the pot) were in constant session. No chairs. Everyone sat on wooden soda crates, turned on end. You had to be a big kid to play poker. If you were little you could be a “plucker.” A plucker was a kind of parasite who hovered at the shoulder of a real player and was permitted from time to time to pluck a hole card, based on his own fervent self-attestations that he “had the juju” and could round out a flush or fill an inside straight.

We little kids played whist. Have you ever read the Horatio Hornblower books about the British navy in the Napoleonic Wars? Whist was the big game then. The officers and midshipmen played in the ward room of H.M.S. *Whatever*, while patrolling Gibraltar and Valparaiso. In the shack we were rabid whist players. Whist is like bridge without bidding.

The shack was like boarding school. Everything you knew about life, you learned there.

Sex.

“You do *what?* She does *what?* That’s disgusting!”

“Try it, kid. You might like it.”

Love.

“When you wake up with a girl the morning after, and you would brush your teeth with her toothbrush . . . that’s the

girl for you.”

You learned about money and loyalty and generosity and how you always picked up the tab when it was your turn and never welshed or played stoolpigeon or let your mouth go writing checks your ass couldn't cash.

The caddie population at Whippoorwill drew from two talent pools—the local Westchester towns (these were the clean-cut kids, bound for college) and Yonkers, where everyone was on his way to Sing Sing or the Marine Corps.

If you were a clean-cut kid like me, you wore T-shirts, “Ivy League” chinos (meaning with a little belt in the back above the pockets), and sneakers—Keds or PF-Flyers. On competition days the Foot-Joys came out. You can't get that quality golf shoe anymore. Nobody makes them. A pair of Foot-Joys cost \$38 then, four days' work. Today you'd have to fly to London to Crockett & Jones to get shoes made with such care. All-leather, no synthetics, yet 100% waterproof. Comfortable? You could walk in 'em all day. You felt like a prince in those shoes. And they had spikes. Real steel spikes that made a delicious clatter when you ambled across a concrete walkway. And they didn't slip, even on the slickest wet grass.

Lunch in the shack was a roast-beef wedge that we stopped for each morning at Briccetti's Deli in Armonk. A wedge is like a hoagie. We got the giant size, as big as your head, with a glass bottle of milk that we put Nestle's Quik in and shook up to make chocolate milk. A wedge came with “heavy mayo.” You didn't have to ask. Mr. Briccetti would

slit the loaf down the middle, then with three fingers scrape out all the bread in the center and slather the void full of mayo. “Hey, Mister B, could ya put in a little more?”

There was a cooler-type soda vending machine in the caddie shack against the pro shop wall. You lifted the lid and inside were steel runners between which were held the necks of bottles of Coke, Seven-Up, Nehi grape and so forth, with the bottle caps facing up. You put in a dime and a little gate, like a subway turnstile, opened. You slid your desired bottle between the runners and up out of the gate. Then one day someone discovered that, using an opener, you could snap off the bottle caps, without paying, while they were still inside the machine—then suck out the soda through a straw.

The next day a new machine appeared, upright, unbreachable.

The smartest guy in the shack was Bevo Martin. He went to Dartmouth and always carried a thumbworn existential paperback in his back pocket. “Hey, Beev, who’s this Camus guy?”

“Not CAMM-us, Camm-OO.”

By the time Phil and I were twelve we were carrying doubles. Two bags. You got four bucks each with a dollar tip. So a loop was ten dollars. Two loops was twenty.

The richest caddie was an old guy named Al Zapp. Al was so cheap he didn’t even bring a sandwich for lunch. He ate a Powerhouse bar. Ten cents. He caught a ride up from Yonkers each morning with Frank, the caddie master. The

rumor was that Al lived with his mother and saved every penny he made. He had a hundred grand stashed in his mattress. One day Al stopped coming up. A week later, Frank's Studebaker Lark was replaced by a Coupe de Ville. The word was that Frank had murdered Al for his money and buried his body behind the fourteenth green at Van Cortlandt Park.

My buddies were Phil, Joe Gallo, and Billy Torpie. Billy was killed in Vietnam, an infantry platoon commander. I dedicated *Bagger Vance* to him. Billy was clutch. He was the best putter at the club, including the members, no few of whom were scratch players.

We learned to putt on the hardpan in the yard. "Holes" were carved out of the iron-hard dirt. You had to putt over runnels, dry watercourses, around the poker tables. If you tried to clear the rocks away, your opponents reacted with outrage. "No cowpaths!" They didn't have stimpmeters in those days, but if they had, the speed would have set a new Guinness record. It was like putting on linoleum. You breathed and the ball went forty feet. On dirt you putt with spin. Slice it into the uphill so it stops right above the hole and dribbles in. No wonder we couldn't putt out on the real course.

Monday was "caddies' day" at Whippoorwill, as it was at every private course in the county. The club was closed; caddies were allowed to play.

We played 54 holes every Monday. One time we played 72. That made us a little tired. We'd get to the course so

early that it was still pitch dark. One of us had to kneel behind whoever was teeing off so he could glimpse the first few feet of the ball's flight. We all knew the course so well that we could tell exactly where the ball would land.

We were good golfers, and we were good caddies. What makes a good caddie? One thing above all: picking clubs.

On TV, when you see Phil Mickelson in confab with Bones Mackay, that's what they're talking about. How far to the green? What club do I hit? Do I cut it? Draw it? Flight it low or high? Take something off? Where's the wind coming from? How strong? How heavy is the air?

In those days, there was no such thing as a yardage book. No sprinkler heads with the yardage marked on them. Not even a little juniper at the 150-yard mark. You had to eyeball it.

Westchester County (and the tri-state area—Connecticut, Long Island, New Jersey) is a golfing paradise. Great clubs are everywhere. Winged Foot, Wykagyl, Westchester Country Club, Apawamis, Fairview, Knollwood, Quaker Ridge, Fenway, and Century; on Long Island Blind Brook, Deepdale, Bethpage State Park, Shinnecock Hills, Inwood, Maidstone, Fresh Meadow, and Long Island National; in New Jersey Baltusrol, Plainfield, and Somerset Hills. Twenty-two U.S. Opens have been played in this tiny area. Bobby Jones (twice), Jack Nicklaus (twice), Gene Sarazen, and Tiger Woods have all won Opens here.

How did kids with no money learn to play? Not by lessons. We couldn't afford them. You studied the good players. The

men you caddied for. Sandy Piper, Hugh Skelly, and Jack Hesler: these guys could flat-out play. I put the microscope on them like Bobby Jones did on Stewart Maiden.

We became connoisseurs of golfers and of golf swings. The two were indiseverable. We could identify a player at 350 yards, not by his person but by his swing. It was impossible to look at a golfer and not, in your mind's eye, see his swing. A player *was* his swing. His swing expressed his identity, his character, his personality. His swing was who he was.

If you don't believe me, think about Fred Couples. Can you picture Freddy's swing? So relaxed and fluid, laid-back and yet powerful. Wow. That's Fred, isn't it?

Or Jim Furyk. Can you separate the swing from the man?

Ernie Els. Why is he "The Big Easy?" His swing. It's inconceivable to think of Ernie swinging like Jim Furyk.

Sergio.

Seve.

Lee Trevino

Bubba Watson.

Once you've seen them swing, it's impossible to picture the man without the swing. The man is the swing, and the swing defines the man. Each belongs to that player alone. No one else swings like him.

But here's the really interesting part. A player can't choose his swing. He can't decide, "I'm going to swing like Rory."

No.

Your swing is there at birth. Unseen but present. Indelible.

Fred Couples did not arrive at his swing by a process of trial and error. He did not try out a number of other swings before settling on the one that we all know him by.

No, that swing was there the first time Freddy picked up a club. He may have tweaked it a little as he grew. A lesson or two from his Dad may have fine-tuned it. But it was there from the start, just like my swing and just like yours.

Before you and I ever pick up a club, before we have even heard of the game, we have a swing. No one else in the world has that swing. No one ever will. And that swing will be with us as long as we live.

This fact has profound and far-reaching implications. Implicit in it is an entire philosophy, a world-view, almost a religion.

I had never thought deeply about this until I started to write *The Legend of Bagger Vance*.

RIPPING OFF KRISHNA

I used to read the *Bhagavad Gita* on airplanes. I figured if the plane went down and I met my Maker, I wanted to be reading something spiritual. Are you familiar with the Gita? It's been called "the Hindu Bible." Gandhi used its principles, so they say, to free India.

The Gita is not like the Old or New Testament or any Buddhist or Confucian or Native American scripture I have read. It advocates killing. "Slay the enemy without mercy," Krishna instructs the great warrior Arjuna. "You will not be killing them, for I have slain them all already."

The Gita addresses such topics as duality and non-duality, attachment and non-attachment, karma, meditation, and previous lives. It has a wonderful section called "The Field and the Knower." And it's short. You can read the whole thing in an hour. I have read it in numerous translations.

The Gita is basically a mentor-protege story. In it, the troubled warrior Arjuna declares that he has had enough of killing. On the eve of a great battle, he lays down his immortal bow, Gandiva, and refuses to fight. At this point, his charioteer steps forward. This charioteer is Krishna, i.e., God in human form.

Krishna reads Arjuna the riot act.

You are a warrior. You were born to fight. Stand up! Shake off this shameful self-abdication and do your duty!

One day on an airplane I thought, "I'm gonna steal this. I'm gonna use the structure of the Gita to write a story about golf."

Instead of a troubled warrior, I'll make it a troubled golf champion. And instead of the warrior receiving spiritual instruction from his charioteer, he'll get it from his caddie.

I didn't know it then, but that loony thought would change my life.

“YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME!”

At the time, I was a screenwriter. I had a B-level career going.

In the movie industry, a writer can make a decent living even if he never gets a movie made. What happens is that studios and production companies “develop” properties. For every script that actually becomes a movie, there are probably twenty-five in the development pipeline. I’m speaking of screenplays that have actually been acquired by legitimate filmmaking entities. If we counted all the scripts being written “on spec” by aspiring screenwriters at any one time, the tally would be in the thousands, if not the tens of thousands.

These scripts “in development” get written and rewritten, sometimes over periods of years. The writers get paid for each draft. You can make a living.

I’m a spec writer. What that means is I like to conceive story ideas myself, write them up in complete form, and then take my chances on selling them. Rather than being a writer-for-hire.

Writing on spec is risky. You can spend six months on a script and never sell it. I have a closet full of screenplays that met that exact fate. But if you do sell a spec, you get a nice payday. It’s fun. It takes guts. I like it.

My agent at that time was a gentleman named Frank Wuliger. It was our process, Frank’s and mine, that before I

began any spec project I would come in to his office and pitch it to him. That way he could give a hardball evaluation of the story's commercial prospects. Frank, like all agents, was aware of all the projects in development around town. If I told him I was about to plunge in on a contemporary film noir, he might say to me, "Fox is developing three, Paramount has two, and Warners is going into production on another in two weeks."

I enjoyed pitching new ideas to Frank. The exercise forced me to get my ducks in a row. Most times I would pitch him two or three ideas. Sometimes we'd be in his office for two hours.

I called him. "Frank, I've got bad news, and I've got worse news."

"Gimme the bad news."

"I have a new idea, but it's not a screenplay—it's a novel."

"What's the worse news?"

"It's a novel about golf."

Frank will tell you that he fired me. My story is I fired him.

The bottom line is I wrote the book and Frank wouldn't submit it.

In Tinseltown every writer, like every actor and director and every person who works for a living, has to have a lawyer. An entertainment lawyer. The firm that represents me—Gang, Tyre, Ramer, & Brown—also represents Steven

Spielberg and Steve Zaillian. I always say they have Big Steve and Medium Steve. I'm Little Steve.

I went to my lawyer, Lawrence Rose, and explained the problem. "How can I get a New York literary agent?"

"Lemme make a call."

Lawrence sent the manuscript to movie agent Jody Hotchkiss, who took it to his boss, literary agent Sterling Lord, who took it to his friend Larry Hughes, the head of Wm. Morrow Publishing, who bought it and somehow got it into the hands of Jake Eberts (who produced *Gandhi*, *Chariots of Fire*, and *Driving Miss Daisy*), who optioned it for a movie and took it to his friend Robert Redford, who said "I'm in."

If you've read my books *The War of Art* and *Turning Pro*, you know that I have been writing novels that nobody would publish for almost thirty years. Suddenly I was an overnight success.

The Legend of Bagger Vance was going forward.

WHERE DO IDEAS COME FROM?

How does a writer get an idea for a book? Looking back on my own stuff, it's hard to pinpoint anything. It seems like I'm two or three months into a project before I even realize I've had the idea.

NEW IDEAS

In the days before *Bagger*, when I was a full-time screenwriter, I used to sit down purposefully and try to generate ideas. I had a folder in my computer called NEW IDEAS. I still do.

I'll start by asking myself, "What movie do I want to see?" Not a specific movie. A hypothetical movie.

I'll start with genre. Would I like to see a Western? A film noir? A gangster pic?

I'd bang out idea after idea. It was hard. Almost all of the ideas were lousy. When I worked with a partner, which I sometimes did, we'd go through the same drill as a team. "What movie do *we* want to see?"

The odd thing, I've found, is that you don't recognize a good idea in the moment. It seems to need time to gestate. What happens with me is I'll be reading over a file full of my old lame ideas and suddenly one will jump out at me. "Hey, that's good!"

I have plucked many ideas out of the trash and gone with them, full-bore.

Bottom line: I'm always looking for new ideas.

Always.

CADDYSHACK

There has only been one decent movie about golf, and that movie is *Caddyshack*. The filmmakers got it exactly right.

Today, the golf cart has made caddies all but extinct. But in the 50s and early 60s, as I said, every self-respecting country club had a caddie master, a caddie shack, and 50 to 100 full-time caddies.

Some caddies care only about money. They want two loops a day. Others are killing time over the summer. Some loopers are drunks, some are semi-pro poker players; others are slackers and stoners. There are college-bound caddies, caddies who support families, caddies putting themselves through graduate school.

I was a golfing caddie. At thirteen, my dream was to be a player. Hell to me was getting sent out to caddie for a couple of hackers. Put me with the best players. I'll kill myself for them. This was my plea to Frank, the caddie master. Here's a passage from *Bagger Vance*:

Do you remember when you used to caddie for me . . . when you were ten or eleven? Frank the caddie master told me once how you asked to be sent out only with the best players, just so you could watch and learn. Frank showed me the list you gave him. Do you remember? The list of your approved players. I was flattered to find my own name on it.

That was me at eleven, and fourteen, and eighteen.

The bond between a caddie and his golfer is a deep and spiritual thing. It is not to be scorned or made light of, particularly when the golfer is in the prime of his powers and the caddie is a young man or even a boy. My second novel, *Gates of Fire*, is a story of the battle of Thermopylae, the famous stand in 480 B.C., when the three hundred Spartans held off myriads of Persians for three days before sacrificing themselves to the last man. The story is told from the point of view of a battle squire of the Spartans, named Xeo, a youth who carries the armor for Dienekes, one of the true historical heroes of the struggle. On the final morning, when the Spartans knew they were going to die (this is true historically), their king Leonidas gave the servants of the battle train permission to depart, to preserve their lives.

Not one did. They elected to stay and die with the warriors they served.

I based the bond between Xeo and Dienekes on the connection I knew from caddying. Don't laugh. There is something primordial about boys or young men carrying the weapons of older men across rolling hills in the service of competition.

But back to my agent, Frank, who has just told me he thinks I'm crazy to break off my screenwriting career (which is just starting to acquire serious momentum, by the way) to blow six months or a year working on a spec book project that, even if it's well done, will never be read by an editor at a publishing house, let alone accepted, let alone published, and even if it is, you'll earn zilch from it and meanwhile,

when you come back to the movie biz, five thousand other starving writers will have passed you in line and I'll have to remind everybody in town who the hell you even are!

"This is my own time that I'm talking about," said Frank. "I have busted my ass for you. You can't do this to me!"

What can I say?

I believe in the Muse.

The goddess is a lady, and you can't say no to a lady.

HABITS

I'm superstitious. I have habits.

I always give a false name to the book I'm working on. I never use the real title when creating the working file. Why? Because the devil might see the real title. Then he would have power to jinx it. I called *Gates of Fire* "Spartans." I called *The War of Art* "Resistance."

I called *The Legend of Bagger Vance* "Foxy," after a hole I love at Royal Dornoch in Scotland.

I'm old school. I don't use the calendar on my Mac or my iPhone. I use an old-fashioned Day Runner. Each day when I finish work, I write down the project I've worked on and how many hours I've worked on it. I have a wall calendar too, the Sierra Club/Ansel Adams type, with a two-inch square for each day. In the bottom left corner of each square, I write what fitness stuff I did that day—gym, run, whatever. In the upper right corner I put a one-letter abbreviation for what project I worked on—and a check mark beside it. For *Bagger*, I put "F" for Foxy.

This is more than ritual or crazy superstition. It's reinforcement.

When I can thumb through my Day Runner and see day after day of the sight encourages me and gives me confidence. When I can scan a calendar month and tally up twenty or twenty-five check marks and the same number of fitness notations, I know I've got momentum.

"FOXY" 4 hours

A writer doesn't have a boss. No one hands me a paycheck or pats me on the back or buys me a drink and tells me, "Good job, Steve."

I have to do that for myself.

I have to haul myself out of bed and march myself into the office. I have to psych myself up to plunge in and kick myself in the ass when I start grumbling and complaining.

I reward myself too. Simple stuff. If I get a package in the mail that looks like it might contain something interesting, I won't let myself open it till the day's work is done.

The writer's life is about self-motivation, self-discipline, self-reinforcement, and self-validation.

I need every trick I can think of to help me keep going.

MY HOUSE

When I was starting *Bagger*, I lived in a little Spanish-style house off Robertson, south of Pico. I remember reading the *Los Angeles Times* one morning, a story about a drug-infested neighborhood where white stoners came to score weed, coke, and crack from various gang-banging entrepreneurs of the adjacent hood. I thought, “Wow, that sounds like a real hellhole.”

Then I glanced at the map in the article.

That’s *my* neighborhood!

Oh well.

I’m writing a mystical novel about golf, what do I care?

SHOULD A BOOK HAVE A CONCEPT?

In *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, William Goldman famously wrote, “Screenplays are structure.” I believe that completely.

In other words, the architecture of a movie is more important than its constituent elements. If the structure works, you can get away with less-than-stellar dialogue or imperfect casting. But you must have structure.

I feel the same about books. A piece needs a concept. It needs a guiding, unifying structure. I think of it sometimes like a clothesline. The concept is the line upon which we will hang the shirts, the socks, and the underwear: the sequences and the scenes.

What do I mean by a story concept?

Ideally, it should be simple and classic.

The story of Jesus is a concept. The *Odyssey* is a concept. Xenophon’s *Anabasis* is a concept. *Romeo and Juliet* is a concept.

There is nothing wrong with stealing a great concept.

A great concept gives you confidence. You know this kind of story has worked before. Maybe it’ll work for you.

A great story concept gives you a theme. The Christ story is about a man who’s too good for this corrupt world. *Cool Hand Luke*, *Serpico*, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

A great concept gives you story beats. It supplies a villain. It provides a cast of characters.

John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Pontius Pilate. Believe me, when writers work with the Christ story, even if the piece they're structuring is about crooked cops in New Orleans, they sit around a table and ask themselves, "Who's our Pilate? Who's Mary?" When actors are cast in these roles, they will read and study Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The structure I stole for *Bagger* was the structure of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

This gave me tremendous confidence, even before I had written a word. Because I knew I had a timeless structure, a timeless theme, and timeless archetypal characters.

I had the clothesline.

Now all I needed was the shirts, the socks, and the underwear.

A SIDENOTE ON STEALING STRUCTURES

First rule of Fight Club: You do not talk about Fight Club.

First rule of stealing structure: see above.

(It's okay in a book like the one you're reading now,
because I'm coming clean to my homies.)

WHERE AM I GONNA SET THIS DAMN THING?

The genre model for *Bagger Vance* is a book called *Golf in the Kingdom* by Michael Murphy. Michael Murphy is the founder of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. I loved *Golf in the Kingdom* when I first read it, and I still do. It was the first successful modern literary work that explored with wit and originality the deep, loony, mystical aspects of the game of golf.

Kingdom is set in a mystical Scottish realm, which in the real world is the Kingdom of Fife, where St. Andrews is located. The book is narrated in the first person by “Michael Murphy,” a young American golfer and seeker of wisdom who travels to Scotland and meets (or is led by mysterious forces to) a craggy, reclusive golf professional named Shivas Irons.

Shivas schools Michael in the inner aspects of the game, highlighted by his revelation of “true gravity.” I’ve never figured out exactly what true gravity is, but it sounds suitably occult—and it worked like gangbusters in the book.

Kingdom, then, is a mentor-protege story, just like mine.

How can I keep mine from seeming like it’s ripping *Kingdom* off?

And what about the setting? Where in time? Where in place?

Michael Murphy, damn him, has already used Scotland, so I can't do that. Where else? And when?

The story can't be contemporary. No one will believe magic things can happen in the present.

And I can't go too far back. Gutta-percha golf balls? I can't have guys playing in tweed jackets, smoking meerschaum pipes.

I'm pacing my little house in Los Angeles.

What era, what region, what realm of sport and history can I conjure that possesses glamour and style, with a hint of mystery? An epoch that is close enough to the present so that the game of golf still possesses power and pizzazz, yet is far enough into the past that we can believe that mysterious and magical events might transpire?

The Palmer-Nicklaus era? Too close to ours.

Hogan and Snead? Nah, still too close. Not mysterious enough.

I can't go back all the way to Harry Vardon and Ted Ray.

Wait a minute.

Bobby Jones.

Walter Hagen.

The 1920s!

An era of Gatsby-esque glamour, when flappers danced all night to the Charleston and men with brilliantined hair drove Franklins and Hupmobiles and LaSalles and the look was Art Deco. I like it. It was an era of style and energy, but still haunted by the ghosts of the Great War. It has major

chords and minor chords. And I love that epoch in the American South. There gentlemen yet retained a code of chivalry and honor, but one informed by a sense of rue and regret, of vanished greatness. No landscape is prettier for golf than the Low Country. And all those atmospheric details: tea cakes and silver salvers, talcum powder and beautiful women, magnolias, Spanish moss dripping from live oaks.

I like the clothes of that era too. Plus-fours, neckties on golfers, the great black-and-white shoes called “spectators.”

This is how a writer thinks. Before the story, what’s the world? What’s the universe? What does it look like? How does it feel?

Does it possess the palette I need? The mood?

Game of Thrones can’t be set in contemporary Brooklyn, and *The Hangover* could happen nowhere except Las Vegas.

MAGIC

At this stage I know no events in the story. I don't have any characters except "Krishna" and "Arjuna."

I know that outlandish events will happen because they do in the Gita, but I don't know what events and I don't know why. I know I must not allow these events to tax the reader's patience or to violate his willing suspension of disbelief. How do I know this? I have no clue. I just feel it.

Golf is magic and so is the process of writing a book.

Keats spoke of "negative capability." He meant the ability to keep functioning with confidence even when you don't know where you are or where you're going. That's writing, or any creative enterprise.

It's golf too.

To write on spec requires massive levels of Keats' negative capability. The process has to be fun. It has to be a game.

You can't do it any other way.

WHERE DO CHARACTER NAMES COME FROM?

Sometimes they're in-jokes between the writer and himself. They can be pretty lame in-jokes.

In *Bagger*, I named the character based on Arjuna "Rannulph Junah."

The name Bagger Vance came from one of the titles of respect applied to Krishna—*Bhagavan*, meaning "Lord."

The great battle in the Gita takes place on "the field of Kuru." So I named our golf course "Krewe Island."

Did anybody get it? It doesn't matter.

After the book came out, I received an invitation to speak to a Bible group in Augusta, Georgia. My hostess took me aside before the evening commenced. "Now, Steve, you must promise me one thing: do not mention to these good folks that this book comes from a Hindu text. They all think it's about Jesus."

I did tell them of course. No one seemed to mind.

A GREAT STEAL IN *GOLF IN THE KINGDOM*

Michael Murphy pulled off one of the all-time great steals in *Golf in the Kingdom*. It's the scene when Michael and Shivas go to dinner at the home of Peter and Agatha McNaughton.

The scene is a set-piece. It's confined to one place. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's a standalone piece.

Before I tell you about it, let's cut away to Plato's *Symposium*. Did you study this in college? If you haven't read it, stop right now and order the Penguin paperback. No citizen of a Western society may call himself cultured until he has read the *Symposium*. And it's funny.

Symposium in Greek means "drinking party."

The short version is this:

In Athens at the height of its Golden Age, an illustrious company meets for dinner in a private home. Among the guests are the prize-winning dramatist Agathon, the comic playwright Aristophanes, and, of course, Socrates.

As servants bring the *krater* of wine, one among the group of friends, the physician Erixymachus, rises.

"My friends, recalling the bout of heroic boozing in which we all participated at last night's dinner, I, as your friend and medical counselor, must declare that I cannot be responsible for the health of our company if we follow up

last night with an equally monumental debauch. Therefore, I propose an alternative entertainment. Instead of drinking, let us each proffer a speech for our collective amusement. We'll begin at one end of the table and go round in order, culminating with an oration from our mentor Socrates. The subject of the speeches shall be the same for us all. We shall each speak in praise of love."

And they do.

But halfway through the evening, a great tumult of shouting and laughter is heard out in the courtyard. In troop more of their friends, already drunk, led by the great general, politician, and lover, Alcibiades.

(These characters, by the way, are all true historical personages who were contemporaries of one another and were, in truth, friends. For all we know, Plato did witness a party very much like this—and constituted of the very same personages. He may have dashed home and copied down his notes verbatim.)

The guests welcome Alcibiades to their table and immediately attempt to recruit him to their game. Will he speak, in turn, in praise of love?

Oh no. "I will not speak in praise of love," says Alcibiades, "but I will speak in praise of Socrates."

And he does. Alcibiades' panegyric is hilarious, profane, and epic. It is followed by the climactic speech of Socrates in praise of love—another classic.

Michael Murphy hijacked this scene in brilliant fashion. Instead of speeches in praise of love, he made them speeches in praise of golf.

Instead of Alcibiades arriving drunk, he created the equivalent, a fictional Scottish golf champion named Evan Tyree. Tyree refuses to speak in praise of golf and instead speaks in praise of Shivas Irons.

Then Shivas tops everyone with a wonderful speech in praise of golf.

Do you see what I'm getting at in terms of stealing?

It's not theft when the writer puts an interesting new spin on the purloined material.

P.S. Michael Murphy, in interviews and commentary, never breathes a hint of the origins of this scene. And of course there's no clue in the actual book.

The scene stands on its own, whether its provenance is reckoned or not.

WHAT I STOLE

What exactly is the *Bhagavad Gita*? What's the structure? What's the theme? Who are the characters?

The Gita starts on the eve of a great battle. Two armies are lined up across from each other. Great heroes are arrayed on each side, on horseback, in chariots, bearing lances and swords and mighty axes and bows.

Our protagonist is the great warrior Arjuna. Mounted in his chariot, peering across no-man's-land toward the enemies he will soon confront in mortal combat, Arjuna recognizes the faces of men he knows and loves, of friends and mentors and relations. Suddenly he is seized by grief and anguish. How can he slay these good men? Would such an act not be a crime?

Arjuna saw them standing there: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, kinsmen on both sides, each arrayed against the other. In despair, overwhelmed with pity, he said:

"As I see my own kinsmen gathered here, eager to fight, my legs weaken, my mouth dries, my body trembles, my hair stands on end, my skin burns, the bow Gandiva drops from my hand. I see evil omens, Krishna: no good can come from killing my own kinsmen in battle. . .

"We have often heard, Krishna, that men whose family duties have been obliterated must live in hell

forever. Alas! We are about to commit a great evil by killing our own kinsmen, because of our greed for the pleasures of kingship. It would be better if Dhritarashtra's men killed me in battle, unarmed and unresisting."

Having spoken these words, Arjuna sank down into the chariot and dropped his arrows and bow, his mind heavy with grief.

I will steal that scene. I will rip it off lock, stock, and barrel. It will be the moral crisis of my story too.

It will be the inciting incident.

PART TWO

HOW A WRITER THINKS

FINDING THE THEME

When Robert McKee was a young writer/director in New York, he got the chance to interview Paddy Chayefsky, the only person to have won two Academy Awards for original Screenplay (*Marty* and *Network*.) Chayefsky shared this priceless nugget: *As soon as I figure out the theme of my play, I type it out in one line and Scotch-tape it to the front of my typewriter. After that, nothing goes into that play that isn't on-theme.*

If there is a single more powerful piece of wisdom for any writer, artist, or entrepreneur, I don't know what it is.

Theme.

Theme is everything.

Once we know the theme, we know the climax, we know the protagonist, we know the antagonist, we know the supporting characters, we know the opening, we know the throughline.

I said before that I have a file in my computer titled NEW IDEAS. I have another: THEME. For each new project, I open a new file and title it THEME. I go back to this file over and over. I pile paragraph on paragraph, trying to answer the question, "What the hell is this book about?"

It's hard.

I have written more than one novel all the way through before I could answer that question. I have asked excellent

writers, “What’s the theme of your great book X or movie Y?” and had them stare back blankly.

Even Chayefsky, peerless as he was, struggled with this. See how he says, “*As soon as I figure out the theme of my play. . .*”

In other words, he doesn’t know from the beginning. He’s faking it just like I am.

Again I’m pacing my little house in the drug-infested neighborhood.

What, I’m asking myself, is *Bagger Vance* about? I’ve got a couple of characters. I’ve got the setting. But what’s the theme?

In writing, the ideal practice is *not* to wing it. Yes, sometimes I’ll dive into the ocean and swim blindly for the opposite shore. But this is an amateur way to write. And it’s not efficient. If I pile up ninety chapters that are linked only by chance and circumstance, I can wind up too exhausted (and too confused by the material) to ever be able to pull back and whip the mess into shape.

The theme, the theme . . .

But I can’t crack it.

Sometimes a writer doesn’t know his theme. That’s just the way it works.

No choice but to plunge in anyway.

A SUBJECT THAT GRABS YOU

Here's how I experience the inception of a project:
Something grabs me.

It may be a character. It may be a setting. Sometimes it's just a line of dialogue.

But something seizes me. I become hooked. The process is like falling in love. You don't know why, you can't put your finger on how. But you're smitten and you know it.

A writer has to think beyond that, however. He has to ask himself (and not let go till he has the answer): "What *exactly* am I in love with? What's *the essence* of it? If I boil it down to one sentence, what does that sentence say?"

In other words, we're seeking the theme.

For me with *Bagger*, this process played out in two ways: First, in off-hours when I kept coming back to that question.

Second, in the writing itself.

Scenes began coming, characters appeared and spoke lines of dialogue. But I didn't know where these scenes went, or what the overall thrust was. I could tell when a scene "fit." But I didn't know where to slot it into the overall story.

A writer (or any artist) trying to come to grips with his specific, mysterious inspiration, has to dig deep into his subject.

For *Bagger*, that subject is golf.

Okay, great.

We could write ten thousand books about golf. What *exactly*, Steve, has seized you about this particular story, setting, and characters?

I started thinking as deeply as I could about golf.

Why is this sport different from football, say, or basketball, or baseball? What are its parallels to life?

What is the essence of the game?

The following chapters detail the thought process that ensued.

GOLF IS AN INDIVIDUAL SPORT

Yes, there is such a thing as the Ryder Cup. Yeah, golf has team competitions.

But golf is not a team sport in the way that basketball is, or football, or baseball. You don't pass the ball in golf. There are no "plays." You don't celebrate a victory with your teammates.

In life, you're born alone, you die alone, and most of the time you live alone.

Golf is just like that.

In golf, the competitor is on his own.

IN GOLF, YOUR OPPONENT MAY NOT IMPEDE YOU

The quarterback may be flattened by the blitzing linebacker. The slugger can be struck out by the fireballing hurler.

But in golf, your opponent is not allowed to impede you.

He can't tackle you or punch you or even try to rattle you by jingling the change in his pocket. In fact, the etiquette of the game insists that he comport himself at all times as a sportsman and a gentleman.

In golf, no one can hurt you but yourself.

IN GOLF, YOU PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

Yeah, there is such a thing as “winter rules” and “lift, clean, and place” when the fairways are muddy. And yes, Bill Clinton has been known to take a mulligan.

But at the competitive level, the player hits the ball, finds it, and hits it again. No adjustments, no slack, no do-overs.

In golf, the playing field is absolutely level.

GOLF IS PLAYED FROM A STANDING START

Do you remember the scene in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* when Paul Newman and Robert Redford are trying to get hired as payroll guards for a mine in Bolivia? Strother Martin plays their potential boss, Percy Garris. Percy wants to see if Sundance is good with a gun, so he chucks a plug of tobacco onto the ground about thirty feet away.

PERCY GARRIS

Hit that.

Sundance draws his Colt, takes careful aim, and fires. He misses. (Much to Butch's astonishment.) By now, Percy is shaking his head and walking away.

SUNDANCE

Can I move?

PERCY GARRIS

What the hell you talking about?

This time Sundance quick-draws. Three shots. Each one drills the tobacco plug. Percy's eyes grow wide. Butch grins.

SUNDANCE

I'm better when I move.

We're all better when we move.

But in golf, we're not allowed to.

The tennis player dashing to return a shot is lucky. In motion, he doesn't have time to think and screw himself up. Same for the center fielder or the wide receiver. They make their plays *in the flow of action*. The ball is moving and they're going after it.

In golf, the ball sits still.

This is no small thing.

Many world-class athletes are absolute hackers in golf. Why? Because the game doesn't give them the luxury of movement. It doesn't let their bodies react the way the human body was designed to react.

In golf, the ball sits there, staring up at you.

Many brave men's knees have buckled, confronting that gaze.

IN GOLF, THE PLAYER POLICES HIMSELF

There's a rule in golf that says if your ball moves while you're addressing it, even if that movement is only a fraction of an inch (and even if the cause is an "outside agency" such as the wind), that movement is deemed to constitute a stroke.

You have to count it. You have to take the penalty.

In other words, a player can lose the Masters, the U.S. Open, or the Grand Slam through no fault of his own.

And here's the kicker:

The competitor must report this infraction himself. Even if no one else sees it.

Bobby Jones did just that in the 1925 U.S. Open. He called a penalty on himself when his ball moved in the rough during the first round. No one saw the ball move except Bobby. The one-stroke penalty cost him the championship.

Golf is about impeccable integrity.

That's how the game is played.

THE GOLFER CAN PLAY ONLY ONE SHOT AT A TIME

In golf, there is no way to undo a shot that has already been played. By the same token, the golfer cannot hit a shot that exists in the future.

He can only confront the specific problem that lies before him in the moment.

THE GOLFER CAN ONLY SWING HIS OWN SWING

No matter how hard he tries, the golfer cannot swing anyone else's swing. He can only swing his own.

Therefore, he must find his own swing—and make it as good as he possibly can.

IN GOLF, THE PLAYER HAS TIME TO THINK

Because the ball doesn't move, the golfer preparing to hit it has time to think. And we all know what happens when we have time to think.

GOLFERS CHOKE

The competitor facing a 210-yard shot over water into a heavily-bunkered green may feel his puckerstring contracting. That's not hard to understand. But let's consider a more diabolical example.

Let's stride up to the green and take our stance over a three-foot putt. Three feet equals thirty-six inches. A child could knock a three-footer into the hole. We can do it one-handed. Left-handed. Blindfolded. We can practically kick it in.

And yet . . .

Doug Sanders missed a putt of that length to lose the 1970 British Open. Scott Hoch lost a playoff in the Masters on a putt even shorter. Golfers choke. They blow drop-dead leads. Even the immortals—Hogan, Palmer, Snead, Watson—have taken the gaspipe.

THE GOLFER'S GREATEST ENEMY IS HIMSELF

I watched the '96 Masters on TV with a bunch of friends, among whom were several professional golfers. Greg Norman was leading the championship by six shots when he and Nick Faldo teed off in the final pairing. Who is tougher than Greg Norman? Who, in those years, was a stronger player?

As the holes ticked past and Norman threw away one shot, then another and another and another, my PGA pals began drifting out of the room. They collected on the porch, smoking and silent. They wouldn't come back inside. They couldn't stand to watch Norman's self-crucifixion.

Even Nick Faldo felt terrible. When he embraced Norman on the 72nd green, having made up all six strokes (and five more on top of that, to win the championship), it was like watching a living man putting his arms around a corpse.

Faldo didn't defeat Norman.

Norman defeated Norman.

The golfer's greatest enemy is himself.

GOLF IS A MENTAL GAME

Let's review for a moment.

The golfer is all alone.

No one can impede him but himself.

The golfer must play from a standing start.

He must play the ball as it lies.

The golfer competes by the honor system, enforcing the rules of the game on himself.

He cannot play more than one shot at a time.

He cannot swing anyone's swing but his own.

Golfers choke.

The golfer is his own worst enemy.

Oh, I forgot one thing:

The golf swing is the most complicated, difficult, and unnatural athletic movement in sports.

Then there's the final, weird quirk that sets golf apart from all other sports:

THE GOLFER HAS A CADDIE

We said earlier that golf is an individual sport. The golfer competes alone. He may not be counseled in play by his coach, his mentor, his father, his wife, his priest, his shrink, or his sports therapist. The rules forbid it.

But at the player's side stands an individual, technically his servant, upon whom he depends more than a Formula One racer relies on his pit crew or an alpine climber on his belaying partner, and with whom he shares a union that is in many ways closer than the bond between brothers.

No other sport has a figure comparable to a caddie.

Caddies evolved out of the obvious necessity of relieving the competitor of the burden of carrying his own bag and clubs. But something magical happened when a squire took his place alongside a knight.

Who is the caddie anyway? What is his role?

The caddie exists for the golfer alone. He effaces his own ego. He serves. That is his only purpose.

At the same time, the golfer is utterly naked before his caddie. He cannot hide. He can't dissemble. The player is known by his caddie more intimately than by his confessor, his psychiatrist, his loving wife. The caddie sees parts of the man that only God sees.

Wait a minute.

We may be onto something here. . .

After *Bagger Vance* was published, I was invited by a lady named Jane Howington and her husband Jerry to visit them at their home in Augusta, Georgia and to play a round at “the National” (as the locals call Augusta National.) Part of my stay included an evening’s literary talk with seventy of Jane and Jerry’s friends.

To them, *Bagger Vance* was a Christ figure. He was Junah’s “personal savior.” This made absolute sense to me. In my own mind, *Bagger*’s antecedent is Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In other words, a very similar divine personage.

Writers think in metaphors. What, then, does a one-on-one god or avatar, a personal deity represent?

He represents the highest expression of the inner man. The connection to the divine ground. He represents the Self.

Bagger is Junah. He is Junah’s supreme self, that seminal source to which Junah is struggling to return.

Here, to me, is the most fascinating mystery of all:

Why is this divine core depicted in scripture and in myth as a *servant*? Shouldn’t he be a king or a hero? Why is Jesus a “man of sorrows,” who kneels to wash the feet of one he wishes to save? Why is Krishna a humble charioteer?

I don’t know.

But I’m beginning, now, to get an inkling of what this story is about.

PART THREE

WRITING IT

COVER THE CANVAS

My mantra for first drafts is “Cover the canvas.” What I mean by that is that our supreme priority is to get SOMETHING down from Page One to The End—no matter how incomplete or imperfect.

Don't stop.

Don't think.

Don't look down.

The enemy in the first draft is not incompleteness or inexactness or imperfection. The enemy is Resistance. The enemy is self-sabotage.

INSTINCT

I said before that I don't believe in winging it. Lemme take that back. At this stage, the embryonic stage, the writer has nothing but instinct.

HOW WRITING WORKS

The Muse gives you stuff. That's how writing works.

The writer's job is to get out of the way.

RESEARCH

If the book were about atomic fusion or 14th Century Ireland, I would have to do research. There'd be no way to go forward without it. But because *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is about a subject I know intimately, I'm lucky. I can work with what I already know.

Here's one thing I know:

In 1926 an exhibition match took place between the two greatest golfers of their day, Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen.

The match was played over 72 holes: 36 at the Sara Bay Country Club in Sarasota, Florida on February 28, then 36 at the Pasadena Golf Club in St. Petersburg a week later. The prize was \$10,000—an incredible sum in those days. If Hagen the professional won, he'd put the dough in his pocket. Jones was an amateur. If he prevailed, he'd contribute the pot to charity.

I was thinking about that match. The idea came:

“What if there were a third competitor? What if that competitor were Junah? What if Bagger Vance was Junah's caddie in that match?”

That's it.

Now we have a story.



Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen play an exhibition match at St. Petersburg, Florida, 1926. This event was the model and inspiration for the competition in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. Note the “plus-four” trousers, so called because they’re bloused four inches below the knee. Note also the “spectator” shoes and the neckties.

A CHARACTER'S VOICE

As a writer, how do I know what a character will say?

I don't. I have to trust it. By "it," I mean whatever comes through from the Muse, the unconscious, the Quantum Soup.

I've tried patterning characters after real people, to help me get a feel for what they'll say. It never works.

Another habit I assiduously avoid is thinking ahead to a movie. I don't imagine Tom Cruise as one of my characters. That would make me crazy.

Hemingway made a point of never referring to the fictional individuals in his books as "characters." He always said "people." I agree. If I start to think of them as "characters," I'll condescend to them. Then I'm finished.

I have to hear Junah and Bagger in my head. I have to surrender to them. My job as a writer is not to shape these people, or control them, or make them conform to any preconceived notion of who they should be or what they should say or do.

My job is to find who each one is—and let that person come forward on his own.

NOVELS AND SCREENPLAYS

Most screenwriters will “block out” their scripts before they write a word.

They’ll break the story down into three acts. Act One goes from Page 1 to around Page 28. Act Two is approximately twice as long, running till somewhere around 75. Act Three is the length of Act One or shorter. The story ends around Page 110.

I’m not going to work that way on this book. I don’t know why. I’m gonna wing it. I’m going to start on Page One and let it rip.

I say that, and I mean it. But the habits I’ve developed in writing for the movies are hard to break. They’re sound habits. I believe in them. So I find myself asking over and over, “What’s the theme? What’s this story about?”

I ask myself, “Who’s the protagonist? Who’s the villain? What aspect of the theme does the protagonist represent? How does he clash with the antagonist? What’s the crisis? The climax? The resolution?”

And this critical question:

“Where do we put the camera?”

I NTERMEDIARY CHARACTERS

That doesn't mean I'm thinking of this book as a movie. I'm not. What it means is I'm asking, "What is the point of view?"

Through whose eyes do we see this story?

Does Bagger tell it?

Junah?

The omniscient author?

I see a boy. I don't know why. A boy of ten. A local kid, in short pants. A golf-mad young boy, like I was.

He'll tell the story.

This is a huge breakthrough, though I don't know it yet. I don't understand what an intermediary character is.

An intermediary character is someone who bridges the gap between the reader and the central characters in the book. You need this sometimes. A story about Lincoln, say, or Churchill. The characters are so towering, so much larger than life that the reader can't relate to them.

Mutiny on the Bounty is by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall. These gentlemen were interesting characters. Both had been fighter pilots in World War I. They had problems when they came home. They were drinking

heavily and getting into trouble. One day a friend took them aside. The friend was an editor. “You guys need a mission, some epic endeavor that will capture your imaginations and enlist your energies. Otherwise you’ll wind up in jail or dead.”

The friend suggested that Nordhoff and Hall write a book about the (real historical) voyage of H.M.S. *Bounty* and (the real historical) Captain Bligh and Mister Christian. What a story! What a challenge! The research would take the two to Tahiti, to England, all around the world. Maybe they’d stop drinking and start working.

They did.

I love *Mutiny on the Bounty*. I read it once a year. One of the best things about it is the way Nordhoff and Hall solved the problem of writing about such epic characters as Bligh and Christian.

They used an intermediary character.

They invented a fictional narrator: Midshipman Byam.

Midshipman Byam tells the story. He narrates *Mutiny on the Bounty* in the first person. It works. It’s perfect. As a junior officer, Byam can befriend Mister Christian and even become a confidant. At the same time, he possesses *entre* to Captain Bligh. He can provide an objective perspective on the voyage, the crew, the mutiny.

I will use a character like that myself.

We’ll set this fictional golf match in Savannah, Georgia. Junah will be a Savannah native. That’s how we’ll get him

included in the match against Jones and Hagen: the local fathers will insist, as a way to make the hometown proud.

Where will we put the camera?

The camera will be “Hardy Greaves,” a golf-crazy boy of ten.

Somehow we’ll make Hardy part of the match. He can assist somehow. He’ll be a fly on the wall.

As Midshipman Byam could be friendly with Mr. Christian, young Hardy can have ready access to Junah. He can share bonds with Junah’s family. He can tell us all about him.

In a city like Savannah in the era of the 20s, a young boy can go anywhere. He can be our eyes and ears into every aspect of the town.

And he can recount with the wide eyes of youth the magical realism that will unfold.

* * *

Two *Mutiny on the Bounty* tidbits:

I was in London a few years ago doing research at the Imperial War Museum at St. George Road and Lambeth Road. Passing a row of apartments, I happened to glance up. There was a plaque beside one door.

Residence of William Bligh, 1754–1817

Master of H.M.S. *Bounty*

I thought, “Wow, the guy was real!”

The other tidbit is a bar bet. “What rank was Captain Bligh?”

Answer: Lieutenant.

The trick? Any ship's master is called "Captain," no matter what his rank.

MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

Having a young boy narrator helps in an unexpected way. I can have him tell the story, not only as it's happening in real time, but *in remembrance*. He can recall the events as an older man.

This helps in two ways. First, it gives me multiple points of view and lets me tell the story in multiple time frames. I can tell it in Savannah in 1931, and I can have further events unfolding in the present, 1995.

This is huge because it helps keep the narrative fresh. If we start getting bored with the golf match, we can always cut away to some other adventures in the present day.

But the second advantage is the big one. By telling the story as the distant past remembered, I can slather a dollop of Vaseline on the lens. Events can be blurred legitimately. Our narrator Hardy (I've decided he will be a doctor, 70-plus years old) can be forgiven if his recollection of such larger-than-life personalities as Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen (or Bagger Vance and Rannulph Junah) is magnified and made more dramatic by the passage of years.

Did it really happen as I recall it, Dr. Greaves can ask himself, or has the romance of memory amplified the tale? Was it really as overwhelmingly significant as it seemed at

the time, or was it all just the self-dramatized recollections of a starstruck ten-year-old?

In candor, another factor has made me reluctant to make public these recollections. That is the rather fantastical aspect of a number of events of that day. I was afraid that a true accounting would be misinterpreted or, worse, disbelieved. The facts, I feared, would either be discounted as the product of a ten-year-old's overactive imagination or, when perceived as the recollections of a man past seventy, be dismissed as burnished and embellished reminiscences whose truth has been lost over time in the telling and retelling.

That works. When I read it over to myself, it has exactly the right tone. It sets the table.

But now I have run into a dilemma I've never experienced before. Clearly Dr. Greaves is a man of experience and years far beyond my own. He's smarter than I am. How the hell am I gonna write him?

A CHARACTER SMARTER THAN I AM

Writing Hardy Greaves was a revelation to me. It shouldn't have been, but it was.

I realized something I had already known:

The part of our psyche that does the writing (or painting or designing or film-making) is far deeper than our personal ego. That part is tapped into a source whose wisdom far exceeds our own.

All we have to do is trust it.

STORIES ARE ALWAYS WISER THAN WE ARE

Books and movies are never about what we think they're about. I'm speaking from the writer's point of view. You think you're writing a story about a war or a crime or a family. But when you get down to the meat of it, the story is writing about itself.

You have not chosen the story. The story has chosen you.

Writing is a process of self-discovery.

When you finish the book, you look down at it and say, "Where the hell did *that* come from?"

PART FOUR

THE AUTHENTIC SWING

HOW WRITING WORKS, PART TWO

You start. That's all you can do.

The trick to writing, or to any other creative endeavor, is that once you start, good things begin to happen. You can't explain it. You don't know why.

An energy field is created by your love, your will, your devotion, your sweat. This energy field draws to it like-minded particles.

You start writing a scene and suddenly a new character appears. He opens his mouth and out comes a real person with a real point of view.

Amazingly, this person fits into the story, and his point of view augments the central theme of the tale.

How does this happen? I don't know. But I've been doing this for forty years and it always seems to work.

Trust it. Be brave.

THE AUTHENTIC SWING

When I was growing up in the caddie shack, I had two friends who were identical twins—Tom and Todd Sandler (the Sparrow Hawks). I always marveled at the fact that their golf swings were wildly, radically different.

Writing the first draft of *Bagger Vance*, I had Bagger musing on this phenomenon. If identical twins are composed of the exact same genetic material, shouldn't they have identical swings?

(Of course, since Bagger is a god, he knows the answer.)

Further, Bagger observes, the golf swing of *any* player is unique to that individual. Not only that, but it is indelible. A player can plant himself on the lesson tee and hit a thousand balls a day from now till doomsday, seeking to ingrain some “new” or “ideal” way of making a pass at the ball.

It never works. The golfer's swing remains the same. A friend who knew him at ten years old will recognize his swing when he's seventy.

As I was writing these paragraphs, following this line of thought, a phrase fell out onto the page:

The authentic swing.

Maybe you don't believe in the Muse. I do. I recognized that term immediately as from heaven. And I reckoned it as the core concept of the book. At once I added initial caps.

The Authentic Swing.

From this simple phrase an entire philosophy unspools.

WALKING THE COURSE

“I believe that each of us possesses, inside ourselves,” Bagger Vance began, “one true Authentic Swing that is ours alone. It is folly to try to teach us another, or to mold us into some ideal version of the perfect swing. Each player possesses only that one swing that he was born with, that swing which existed within him before he ever picked up a club. Like the statue of David, our Authentic Swing already exists, concealed within the stone, so to speak.

Keeler broke in with excitement. “Then our task as golfers, according to this line of thought . . .”

“ . . . is simply to chip away all that is inauthentic, allowing our Authentic Swing to emerge in its purity.”

This chapter takes place at night, on the (fictional) Alistair MacKenzie-designed championship course at Krewe Island, Georgia. The big match begins in the morning. Bagger Vance, in his role as Rannulph Junah’s caddie, has set out to walk the course in preparation. Bagger studies each hole as he walks it, pacing off yardages, examining the slopes and contours of the greens.

Young Hardy accompanies him. The two proceed alone until the thirteenth hole, when they chance upon the solitary figure of the true historical personage O.B. Keeler,

journalist and close friend of Bobby Jones. Keeler has ventured out as well, beneath the moon, to walk the course. He, Hardy, and Bagger fall in together and continue to trek the final six holes.

Our fictional Keeler is, like his true-life counterpart, a student of the game and one of its keenest and most perceptive chroniclers. But as he listens to Bagger's elucidation of golf's profound and occult subtleties, Keeler begins to fall under the mysterious caddie's spell.

"Consider the swing itself," Bagger Vance said. "Its existence metaphysically, I mean. It has no objective reality of its own, no existence at all save when our bodies create it, and yet who can deny that it exists, independently of our bodies, as if on another plane of reality."

"Am I hearing you right, sir?" Keeler asked. "Are you equating the swing with the soul, the Authentic Soul?"

"I prefer the word Self," Bagger Vance said. "The Authentic Self. The game is a metaphor for the soul's search for its true ground and identity."

DOES A STORY NEED A PHILOSOPHY?

The Godfather has one. So does *Chinatown*, *War and Peace*, and *Happy Gilmore*.

Bagger Vance wears its philosophy on its sleeve.

“The search for the Authentic Swing [Bagger Vance continues] is a parallel to the search for the Self. We as golfers pursue that elusive essence our entire lives. What hooks us about the game is it gives us glimpses. Glimpses of our Authentic Swing, like a mystic being granted a vision of the face of God. All we need is to experience it one time—one mid-iron screaming like a bullet to the flag, one driver flushed down the middle— and we’re enslaved forever. We feel with absolute certainty that if we could only swing like that all the time, we would be our best selves, our true selves, our Authentic Selves. That’s why we lionize men like Hagen and Jones and treat them like gods. They are gods in that sense, the sense that they have found their Authentic Selves, at least within the realm of golf.”

THE MENTOR -PROTEGE STORY

In a mentor-protégé story, there is a teacher and there is a student. Obi Wan-Kenobi has a single lesson to impart to Luke Skywalker: “Trust the force.”

Bagger has an equally fundamental truth to pass on to Junah.

“Swing your Authentic Swing.”

Junah’s problems, Bagger declares, stem from trying to be someone other than who he is. Isn’t that what ails all of us?

But how do we swing our Authentic Swing?

If it were easy, we’d all do it at once.

Apparently it ain’t easy. Apparently we have to go through hell.

I decided that that’s what will happen to Junah.

Bagger Vance will kick his ass up one side of the golf course and down the other.

HOW WRITING WORKS, PART THREE

A second idea fell out right after the Authentic Swing: the idea that the golf swing is not learned, it is remembered.

This is Plato's idea of knowledge. Have I read him? Backwards and forwards. But somehow this concept had never penetrated to the front of my brain. Now it popped out from the back.

It came in the middle of a sentence. I was following a train of thought and suddenly there it was.

I loved this idea and the idea of the Authentic Swing because they gave the book philosophical heft. But the ideas did not come from outside. This is important. They arose organically from the material.

This is how writing works.

You start with instinct.

You plunge in.

Good things happen.

THE GOLF SWING IS NOT LEARNED, IT IS REMEMBERED

Writers think in metaphors. Editors work in metaphors. A great reader reads in metaphors.

All are continually asking, “What does this *represent*? What does it *stand for*? “

They are trying to take everything one level deeper. When they get to that level, they will try to go deeper again.

What does it mean: “The golf swing is not learned, it is remembered?”

First, when we say “the golf swing,” we don’t mean the golf swing. We mean everything in life. Everything we do and everything we know.

To say that the golf swing is not learned but remembered is to say that you and I, as individual souls, enter this world not as blank slates, but already possessing a vast fund of knowledge, wisdom, and consciousness.

That’s a pretty empowering statement, if you think about it.

It’s also very democratic.

Huxley said in his book of that title that the “doors of perception” begin to swing shut in childhood. Here is William

Blake's poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

*If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing
would appear to men as it is, infinite. For man has
closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow
chinks in his cavern.*

What Blake meant was that the child-mind has access to founts of awareness and consciousness but that socialization, schooling, and education beat that access down, shutter it, and seal it off from our adult selves.

Then there's the second half of this point of view: the idea of the Authentic Swing.

To say that there is such a thing as the Authentic Swing is to build upon the concept of not-learned-but-remembered. It is to take this idea to the next level and say, not only does each of us possess from the get-go a vast fund of knowledge and power, but that that fund is *unique to every individual*.

What would be "authentic" to you would not be "authentic" to me.

My Authentic Swing would not be the same as yours.

Further, it would do me no good to try to steal your swing. I couldn't even if I wanted to, as you could not steal mine. The best and wisest thing we both can do is to find our own Authentic Swings and swing them.

JUNAH LOSES HIS AUTHENTIC SWING

Remember, a few chapters back, the scene in the Gita where Arjuna orders Krishna to drive his chariot out between the two armies? Remember how Arjuna lets his immortal bow Gandiva fall from his hands and sinks, himself, to the ground, “his mind heavy with grief?” I said then that I would steal this scene and make it my inciting incident.

The Chalmers pulled up on a sand ridge beyond the greenskeeper’s road that paralleled the eighth and ninth fairways. The car stopped and the parking brake cranked on. Before Bagger Vance stepped out, I had already sprung from the running board, scampered to the rear, and hauled Junah’s golf bag from the trunk, not even sure why except perhaps hoping to inspire the champion with the sight of his weapons.

“Put the clubs away, Hardy,” Junah said in a voice nearly inaudible. “I see no profit in them or this whole fool enterprise.”

The enterprise is, of course, a 36-hole exhibition golf match featuring Junah, Bobby Jones, and Walter Hagen, a publicity stunt meant to save the multi-million-dollar Krewe

Island resort from folding in the wake of the Crash of '29.

“‘Victory’ and ‘defeat’ . . . I’m sick to death of them, and of men contending as if there were any difference between them! What good ever came of human beings facing one another in conflict? To see men of such stature as Jones and Hagen steeling themselves for this child’s game, it was all I could do to keep from howling with hysteria, or despair, which would have been more appropriate. While the world is coming apart, our countrymen starving by millions. . .”

Junah has served in World War I, and the ordeal has changed him forever.

Junah’s eyes rose now and met Bagger Vance’s. “I have been a warrior,” he said. “I have fought, and nearly died, in battles as grave and calamitous as any in the history of man. I have seen friends perish, and enemies who might have been friends but for the madness of war. I will never take up arms again”—he gestured toward the bag and its clubs —“even surrogates as preposterous as these.”

Saying this, Junah slumped yet deeper onto the running board, his mind tormented by grief.

MY PHILOSOPHY

At the time the twin concepts of “the Authentic Swing” and “the swing is not learned but remembered” popped out on the page, I did not realize that I believed them.

I did. They are now the core of my personal philosophy. But I didn’t know that till I read them on the page.

Then there was a third part to this philosophy, which sprang directly from the pages of the Gita, a section called “The Field and the Knower.” I had read that passage a dozen times, but it wasn’t until Bagger Vance said to Junah,

“Know that all that is flows from the union of the Field and the Knower,”

that I really knew I believed that.

Writing is weird medicine. You sit down not knowing what you believe and you get up knowing.

The act of writing, or the pursuit of any art, is that adventure by which the Knower injects himself into the Field. You go in not-knowing and you come out knowing.

FINDING OUR VOICE

How does a writer find his voice?

The same way Junah finds his swing.

“WHO ARE YOU, JUNAH?”

The match begins. Junah is a champion at the local level, a hero in the little pond of Savannah. But he is leagues over his head now, competing against the likes of Jones and Hagen.

He begins falling apart. In front of his friends and neighbors, before the national press. As each hole passes, Junah’s public mortification increases. He can’t drive. He can’t putt. He can’t swing. His agony becomes excruciating.

Bagger Vance keeps speaking into Junah’s ear, but whatever he’s saying is only making Junah play worse. Finally, one of Junah’s patrician champions, a local jurist, accosts the caddie and demands to know what is wrong and what Bagger Vance plans to do about it.

“Junah’s problem is simple,” Bagger Vance said. “He thinks he is Junah.”

“What in damnation does that mean?” The Judge’s face flushed crimson. “He is Junah, you damn twit!”

“I will teach him he is not Junah,” the caddie answered with his accustomed calm. “Then he will swing Junah’s swing.”

Bagger in essence is giving Junah a nervous breakdown. He keeps asking him one question:

“Who are you, Junah?”

Vance would ask this, then answer for Junah, keeping up an unbroken harangue as they strode from shot to shot.

“Tell me who you are, Junah. Who, in your deepest parts, when all that is inauthentic has been stripped away? Are you your name, Rannulph Junah? Will that hit this shot for you? Are you your illustrious forebears? Will they hit it?”

“Are you your roles, Junah? Scion, soldier, Southerner? Husband, father, lover? Slayer of the foe in battle, comforter of the friend at home? Are you your virtues, Junah, or your sins? Your deeds, your feats? Are you your dreams or your nightmares? Tell me, Junah. Can you hit the ball with any of these? No? Then who are you?”

Remember, this is a mentor-protégé story. It’s a love story between a knight and a magician. It’s Arthur and Merlin, Milton and Vergil, Frodo and Gandolf—with a scullery boy (who stands in for us as readers) as witness and participant.

We were crossing between the nines now. The surge to the tenth tee carried the massed throngs away from the ocean to a run of five inland holes. The gallery’s weight and depth seemed to cut off all breeze; the heat hit you like a blast oven. The backs of Jones’ and Hagen’s shirts were drenched with sweat as we climbed the rise to the tenth tee. Junah removed his hat and buried his face in a towel; the

moisture was dripping from it; I gave him tea and an apple and a big chunk of ice, which he wrapped in his pocket kerchief and applied to his burning neck.

The big scoreboard by the tourney tents was visible when he reached the height of the tee. Hagen 35, Jones 36, Junah 41. The nine behind felt like a war zone; it seemed impossible that the competitors still had a siege of 27 more holes to play.

I watched Junah peer around, trying to gather himself. The massed humanity, the heat, the blistering sun; across the dunes the galleries surged in battalions, one hole ahead, two holes ahead, swarming over brows of ridges in a relentless advance, flanking and maneuvering for position. Junah's face was flushed; you could see his temples pound. He was not here on Krewe Island, but somewhere else, somewhere. . .

"Yes, this is war, Junah. As you said before."

Bagger Vance moved beside the champion on the tee. "But this war is not between you and your opponents, or even between you and the course. No, Junah, this battle like Reality itself takes place on a higher plane. The plane of the Self. That higher battle is the one you are losing. It is why you are losing here."

Jones and Hagen tee off, lashing perfect drives down the fairway.

"What can I do, Bagger? Tell me."

The gallery turned now to Junah, who still stood over his bag, his face inches from his caddie's.

“Who are you, Junah? Nothing you call yourself can help you now. I have emptied you of all that. This match, this heat, this day have emptied you. All your ‘selves’ are exhausted and gone. Now: hit the ball with what is left.”

Junah’s glance was desperate. “But there’s nothing left.”

Vance nodded. “Exactly.”

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE AUTHENTIC SWING

The philosophy that underlies the idea of the Authentic Swing contradicts the Western ideal of education, training, and evolution. It rejects the axiom that “you can be anything you want to be.”

According to Bagger Vance, we can only be who we already are. If we find ourselves lost or tormented or in pain, the reason is that we have somehow become estranged from who we really are, from the ground of our individual being.

Our salvation lies, then, in getting back to that source, that Self.

THE AUTHENTIC SWING, PART TWO

Now I'm beginning to understand what hooked me about this material. It's this: that the struggle of the golfer, particularly one in Junah's tormented, fallen condition, is the same as the struggle of the writer.

It's the struggle of any artist or entrepreneur, any athlete or warrior, anyone engaged in a spiritual pursuit, as meditation or the martial arts, yoga, dance, calligraphy; any person, male or female, in any creative or ethical field.

What is this struggle? It's the quest to connect with one's true ground. To become who we really are.

It's the search for our true voice.

THE FIELD AND THE PLAYER

Let's review one more time the attributes of the field upon which the golfer (and the writer and the artist and the athlete and the warrior and the seeker) contends:

This field is solitary, level, self-policed, self-reinforced, self-motivated. Within this sphere it is impossible to escape into the past or to project oneself forward into the future. It is impossible for the contender to be anyone other than who he is.

Lastly, the player has at his side in this contest an intimate associate/mentor/consigliere, whose participation is technically that of a servant but who functions in fact on a far loftier level and whose contributions are often indispensable to the outcome of the contest.

The last part is the one that's interesting to me. The caddie part. Because that caddie is the secret, central actor in the drama.

JUNAH'S PROBLEM

Junah's first (and lesser) problem is that he misidentifies the source of his travail. He believes that something has happened to him. That "something," in Junah's view, is constituted of his experiences in the Great War.

In Junah's mind he is a casualty of events. External forces have compelled him to undergo a terrible ordeal, and this ordeal has traumatized him. It has made him wish to withdraw from life, to renounce all action, to give up. It has made him want to die.

But Junah has a second, much deeper problem. It is the same problem shared by all seekers: he is unable, for whatever reasons, to trust his own deeper nature.

A voice is speaking to Junah, but Junah refuses to hear.

BAGGER IS JUNAH

The weird part of writing a book is that you think you're crafting a story, but in fact the story is crafting you. The story is like a dream, in that it bubbles up spontaneously from some deep internal source. The story is wiser than you. Like a dream, it is trying to tell you something about yourself.

That's why it hooks you.

There's a second part to this. You think that your story is private, unique, idiosyncratic. You believe that no one will be interested in it but you. But the more deeply you enter into your story, the more you perceive its universality.

The story is never about what you think it is. It's never about someone. It's always about everyone.

LIVING ON TWO LEVELS AT ONCE

The story of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is the story of a man who, after years of resisting, finally listens to his own inner voice.

The mentor/guide/servant/savior/avatar character is that part of ourselves that has access to the Quantum Soup, the Divine Ground, the dimension of the eternal.

That part of ourselves is the part that we write from, paint from, make movies from. It is the element from which all creativity derives.

What saves Junah is when he stops resisting this part. What saves him is when he surrenders.

“I will teach him he is not Junah,” says Bagger Vance. “Then he will swing Junah’s swing.”

PART FIVE

THE MOVIE

JAKE CALLING

The first thing that happened was they fired me. The producer Jake Eberts phoned. I expected it. I've been fired off every film project I've been on, on which I was the originating writer.

I don't blame the filmmakers. I would fire the original writer too.

The original writer is a pain in the ass. He has ideas. He has a point of view. And the worst part is he believes he possesses the moral authority to give voice to these ideas.

You have to get rid of the original writer.

The worst thing I ever did in my professional life came after I optioned a novel named *Delilah*. *Delilah* is a wonderful book, published in 1941, about a World War I navy destroyer (the ship's name is *Delilah*), written by Marcus Goodrich. Marcus Goodrich was a very interesting fellow. He was married to Olivia de Havilland. He was one of the founders of the Screenwriters' Guild, which became the current Writers' Guild of America.

I fired Marcus Goodrich. Fortunately I didn't have to tell him (he was 92 at the time and living in a nursing home) because the movie never got made. But I had taken Mr. Goodrich's novel and, unbeknownst to him, torn it limb from limb. He would have murdered me if he had found out.

What can I say? I had a different vision.

That's the way the industry works.

But back to Jake Eberts, the producer who bought the rights to *The Legend of Bagger Vance*.

Jake called me up one day and told me that Robert Redford had come on board the project and that he, Redford, wanted to work with another writer, Jeremy Leven. Jake was calling to tell me that my services were no longer required.

I was speechless. Not because I was getting canned, but because Jake was such a sweet guy that he actually phoned me to let me know. Usually a writer finds out such news by reading it in the trades. My agent Frank once had me replaced on a movie by another writer that he represented. He never told me. Neither did the other writer.

"Jake, thank you so much for being a gentleman. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. I understand completely about Redford and Jeremy Leven. Good luck and Godspeed. Just invite me to the premiere, okay?"

TIMING

Quick note: one of the key reasons why *Bagger Vance* was optioned for a movie was timing.

Had the book come out three years earlier, no one would have touched it. Three years later? Same fate.

So if your freshly-published novel doesn't get picked up by Tinseltown, don't despair. It's probably just bad timing.

THE PREMIERE

They did invite me to the premiere. It was held in New York. I had to pay my own plane fare, but I didn't mind. You gotta go to the premiere.

I went with my girlfriend at the time, Bernay Grayson, and two friends who were big supporters of the book, Mike Henderson and Mick Luckhurst; Mick used to be the field goal kicker for the Atlanta Falcons.

On the night, Mick showed up at the hotel with a stretch limo. What a guy! Total surprise. We had champagne, we were wearing tuxes, Bernay looked terrific. The evening was going great until we saw the movie.

GOOD MANNERS

The writer is not allowed to complain.

You made the deal, dude. You cashed the check.

Be grateful and shut up.

IT'S HARD TO MAKE A MOVIE ABOUT GOLF

I'm not complaining. I'm grateful.

But in the interest of our own educations, can we as writers draw any lessons that might help us in the future?

1. It's hard to make a movie about golf.

Other than *Caddyshack*, there's never been a good one.

You wouldn't think it would be that difficult. Golf plays great on television. Tiger winning his first Masters. Rory blowing the field away at the Open. Grown men wept watching Greg and Nick at Augusta in '96.

The tube even does a good job of capturing the scale of the game. Watching Bubba Watson bomb one, you get the sense of a 340-yard drive. Super slo-mo of a Titleist being compressed against the face of a titanium driver? The tee flying, the ball rebounding and catapulting off the clubface? The sound? You feel like you're right there.

The camera captures the beauty and technical perfection of the great players' swings. Even if you're not a golfer, you

have to be amazed at the slash and power of Tiger or Bubba or, back in the day, Seve and Arnie and Jack.

Why can't a movie do that?

What's the problem?

2. No actor can execute a credible golf swing.

On *Bagger*, I was lobbying for CGI. Put Matt Damon's head on Davis Love's body.

3. Where is the love?

Two all-time great sports movies: *Bull Durham* and *Slap Shot*. Why? Because the filmmakers (Ron Shelton writing and directing the first, Nancy Dowd and George Roy Hill on the second) knew their sports intimately and *loved them*.

Their affection for the game bled through every frame. The Hansen brothers "putting on the foil." Crash Davis's monologue about "one dying quail." That's Tolstoy. That's Shakespeare.

How did those movies put actors in the field and on the ice and make them believable? How did *Rocky* or *Raging Bull* look so real?

Caddyshack had an advantage over every other golf movie. It wasn't trying to depict the real game. It was just going for the insanity.

4. A serious movie about golf becomes too interior.

There's never been a really good movie about the 60s. I don't know if there ever will be. The 60s were too interior. How do you film an acid trip? Girls with flowers in their hair just look ridiculous.

The closest anyone's come is *My Dinner With Andre*. But that was two guys at a table, talking. It was not a movie, it was an anti-movie.

Golf, like the 60s, is too interior. How do you film pressure? How do you make a three-foot putt equate to despair?

5. Golf does not play onscreen as a metaphor.

Because motion pictures are experienced by the viewer the same way he experiences dreams, their subject matter and the sphere in which they are set must work as symbol and as metaphor.

Star Wars works. *Lord of the Rings* works. Prison movies and cop movies and cowboy movies all work because they're visual metaphors for aspects of our own real lives.

In movies about boxing, the metaphor is the fight. "Life is a battle," says the filmmaker, and I will show it to you through the metaphor of two heavyweights slugging it out in the ring.

That plays.

We get it.

Baseball is a subtler metaphor, but still a powerful one. Baseball is America. The diamond is the geometric expression of decency and fair play. Within its chalk-lined confines, rivals clash by the standards of medieval knights.

We get that too.

It works.

But golf is not a metaphor. The hero's struggle exists inside his own head. For the audience to understand the protagonist's ordeal, it must be *told*—and telling never works on the screen.

Golf, alas, works better in books than it does in movies.

I hate to say it, but *Bagger Vance* should never have been made as a film. Terrific actors were wasted, and everybody lost money but me.

THE BEST THING ABOUT THE MOVIE

The best thing about the movie was the casting of ten-year-old Michael Moncrief as young Hardy Greaves. He was by far the brightest and most authentic presence in the picture.

I have to give Robert Redford credit. He and the casting people tried out over two thousand young Southern boys, actors and non-actors, and they picked the right one. The only problem was that Michael was so authentic—his Low Country accent, his ease on a golf course, his old-timey look, right down to his cowlick—that he made everything else in the film seem like it had been imported from Hugo's in West Hollywood.

After the filming was over, Michael phoned me and asked if I thought he should continue pursuing a career as an actor. Can you guess what I told him?

THE SECOND BEST THING ABOUT THE MOVIE

The Legend of Bagger Vance was Jack Lemmon's last movie. He played Hardy Greaves as an old man. Jack Lemmon died (in the film) in the opening sequence.

Too bad.

I would've loved to have seen more of him.

ROBERT REDFORD AND THE HON. ANDER CRENSHAW (R-FL)

My friend Ander Crenshaw is a Congressman from Jacksonville and a crazed golfer. He became obsessed with playing an onscreen role in the movie. He's an interesting-looking guy—6'4", craggy and Lincolnesque. Redford said yeah, we'll find something for you. Here is Ander, telling the story ("Kitty" is his wife):

Kitty and I drove up to Kiawah Island, South Carolina, where the movie was being filmed. We had to get there real early in the morning because I was gonna be in the first scene. I'd be walking somewhere behind Jack Lemmon. I met Redford by his Winnebago. He explained where I was supposed to walk and told me not to look into the camera, just act natural. Then someone called him away. He was talking and people were mumbling and I started getting a bad feeling.

Redford came back. He said, "Mr. Crenshaw, the movie business is a strange business. Careers come and careers go, and I'm afraid yours just came and went."

For some reason they had cut me out of the scene. Maybe I was too tall. I told Redford, "Dang, Kitty and I drove all the way up from Florida for this." Redford said there might be a chance later

that evening. “We’re shooting a scene tonight with about two hundred extras, but frankly I don’t think you’ll be able to be recognized among such a big crowd.”

At that point I’d had my fill of the movie business. I went back to the casting director’s office. They gave me a check for \$75 and a T-shirt that said “The Legend of Bagger Vance.”

Kitty and I drove home, where I embellished the story from beginning to end, and I’ve been dining out on it ever since.

A PROCESS OF SELF-DISCOVERY

As I write this in 2013, I have twelve published books and three more in the works. But *Bagger* was the first, after trying and failing for almost thirty years. I had no clue, then, that anything would carry forward.

Aspiring artists often kill their careers in the cradle by overworrying and overthinking.

Don't do it.

I've said before that you have to be dumb to be an artist or an entrepreneur. You do. You can't apply logic, because the world of inspiration doesn't follow that dynamic.

You will be led somewhere. But you don't (and you can't) know where. As you initiate Book #1 or Album #1 or Business #1, you have no idea what #6 or #12 will be, or even if there will be a #6 or a #12.

Don't plan.

You can't even if you try.

Does Neil Young know what his next album will be? Did Jack Nicholson of *The Wild Angels* know he was going to do *Five Easy Pieces* or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *As Good As It Gets*?

You discover who you are as you go along.

What defines you is what you have done, but the weird part is you never know what that'll be until you do it.

The trick is: Do it.

Then you'll know.

Do it again, and you'll know more.

Keep doing it again and again.

PART SIX

WRITE THE NEXT ONE

SMART WRITERS AND DUMB WRITERS

I was speaking a few chapters back about spec writers and writers-for-hire. In the movie biz, that's a pretty accurate breakdown of the most common types.

In the world of books, there's another type: the franchise writer or the genre writer. This type is more of an entrepreneur than a writer. This type is a business person.

Agents love this type of writer. So do publishers. This writer makes money.

How does a franchise/genre writer work? He or she will pick a genre that he or she feels an affinity for—romance novels, say, or thrillers—and set him or herself the task of learning how to write that type of book. The decision is market-driven. If there's a demand for thrillers, the writer thinks, I'll supply that demand, people will buy my books, I'll be a success.

A writer working in this mode will then study the conventions of thrillers. He'll read a million of 'em. He'll learn that thrillers usually have a tough-guy (or tough-gal) hero, that the story is told in the third person, that the hero returns in book after book producing a franchise, and so forth. Same thing with romance writers, detective writers, cowboy writers, etc.

That's one way of being a writer. It's a smart way. It makes sense. You look at a block in a city and see that there's no yogurt store on this block. You know that people like yogurt. So you lease space on the block and open a yogurt store.

I don't knock this type of writing. I've read many books penned by this type of writer, and I have tremendous respect for the champions who can pull them off. I've studied their techniques. I've stolen many ideas from this kind of writer.

But it's not the way I do it.

My way is a lot dumber. My way drives agents and publishers crazy. My way makes no sense at all.

The reason my agent Frank was so pissed off at me when I pitched him the idea for *Bagger Vance* was that the project, viewed in the perfectly legitimate terms of payoff for the writer's expenditure of time and effort (not to mention the agent's), was totally stupid.

A first novel from someone who had never published a novel? A novel about golf? The mystical side of golf?

It was clear even to me that few ideas could be lamer.

But it worked.

It succeeded.

It succeeded better than anything else I had ever done.

What writing *Bagger* taught me was that I am a specific kind of writer. Not a thriller writer, not a romance writer, not a writer for hire, not a genre writer, not a franchise writer.

I'm a writer who follows the Muse.

If I'm seized by an idea, no matter how uncommercial it seems, I am wiser (and will be more financially successful) to shut up and do that idea.

In other words, that style is my Authentic Swing. I can't swing anyone else's swing. I can only swing my own.

WHAT THE MOVIE BUSINESS TEACHES YOU

The way screenwriters drive themselves crazy (as do actors and editors and everyone else in the industry, not to mention novelists and playwrights and short-story writers) is by finishing Project #1 and obsessing about it while waiting for it to receive a response in the real world.

What you learn is to move on.

Start #2 before you've finished #1.

Start #3.

Start #4.

When my part of writing *The Legend of Bagger Vance* was over—i.e., delivering the finished manuscript to Larry Hughes, my editor at William Morrow—publication was still a year away. My advance was \$25,000. I had already spent it.

What's next?

Start something fast.

YOUR CAREER IS OVER, KID

I was thinking back to that first meeting with my agent, Frank, when he said, “You can’t do this to me!”

Frank meant you can’t go off and waste time writing this long-shot book because thanks to my hard, hard work (this is Frank talking) your career has acquired some serious traction. You’re about to take off, Steve, and make me some real money.

Now, only four months later, that reality had altered utterly.

I could feel it. In meetings at studios, the air was dead.

I still cared. I still wanted to make movies. But the ship had sailed.

Like the Hon. Ander Crenshaw, my movie career was over.

THE MUSE IS A LADY

I was now a writer of books.

Okay. What book am I gonna write next? The only way to follow a novel about golf is by killing yourself.

I've always been a lover of ancient Greece. I read Plato for fun. I've read Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* six times. I can quote entire pages. I've never read Xenophon or Herodotus or Homer because I believed they would pay off somehow, that there was profit in them. I just read 'em for fun.

I was reading *The Histories* again, the section about the battle at the pass of Thermopylae, where 300 Spartans and their allies held off for several days an army of (according to Herodotus) two million Persians, before being overrun and slain to the last man. I came to this passage, which I had read at least four or five times previously: *Although extraordinary valor was displayed by the entire corps of Spartans and Thespians, yet bravest of all was declared the Spartan Dienekes. It is said that on the eve of battle, he was told by a native of Trachis that the Persian archers were so numerous that, when they fired their volleys, the mass of arrows blocked out the sun. Dienekes, however, quite*

undaunted by this prospect, remarked with a laugh, "Good. Then we'll have our battle in the shade."

Sometimes you can stand before the wall of a story but you can't find a way in. Then a crack opens.

I thought: Dienekes.

I know this man.

I can tell this story.

It's right up my street because the idea couldn't be crazier or less commercial.

Thermopylae.

Ancient Greece.

A story in a genre that's been moribund for decades, set in a place that no one has heard of, that potential readers can neither spell nor pronounce, featuring characters whose names are as tongue-twistingly alien as monikers from Mars, fighting wars in a style that no one has seen for two thousand years, for a nation that no one knows anything about, in a cause that couldn't be more dusty or arcane or obscure.

And, because it's a novel, I'll have to write the whole thing on spec, a two-year adventure with commercial prospects somewhere south of sub-zero.

Sounds like my kind of project.

The Muse is a lady and you can't say no to a lady.

So I did it, and that book worked too. Better yet, the editor who bought it at Doubleday was Shawn Coyne, who insisted that I write another after that, and that one worked

as well. Today Shawn and I are partners in Black Irish Books, the entity that's publishing this little book that you're reading now.

Are you a writer or an artist or an entrepreneur? Don't copy me. Don't do it my way. Work at four in the morning if that feels right. Work in the shower, work on the subway, work at the wheel of a moving taxi cab. Start at the end, play backward, write your stuff in Urdu and translate it later.

Do it your way.

Don't swing Rory's swing, or Bubba's, or, for heaven's sake, Jim Furyk's. Listen to Bagger.

Swing your Authentic Swing.



If you've read his books *The War of Art* and *Turning Pro*, you know that for thirty years Steven Pressfield (*Gates of Fire*, *The Afghan Campaign* etc.) wrote spec novel after spec novel before any publisher took him seriously. How did he finally break through?

Ignoring just about every rule of commercial book publishing, Pressfield's "first" novel not only became a major bestseller (over 250,000 sold), it was adapted into a feature film directed by Robert Redford and starring Matt Damon, Will Smith, and Charlize Theron.

Where did he get the idea?

What magical something did *The Legend of Bagger Vance* have that his previous manuscripts lacked?

Why did Pressfield decide to write a book when he already had a well-established screenwriting career?

How does writing a publishable novel really work?

THE STORY BEHIND *THE LEGEND OF BAGGER VANCE*

Taking a page from John Steinbeck's classic *Journal Of A Novel*, Steven Pressfield offers answers for these and scores of other practical writing questions in *The Authentic Swing*.

BLACK HISH ENTERTAINMENT