

Dear Jesse -

I'm now wondering if you have the same problem I have.

But first let's look at your mother and your father. Back around 1982, while watching your mom "dash off" a painting, I asked her why she painted so quickly, instead of taking more time with her brush strokes.

She said, "Paul, when you have three kids, you have to paint quickly."

And I may have asked her, "When do you know a painting is finished?"

And she may have replied, "When my kids need me."

And your father seldom finishes whatever he may start. Or so it seems. Maybe he has a short attention span. Or maybe he has ants in his pants.

Back in 1969, while driving to Boston to visit with your father and your mother and their first baby, I drove the streets within a quaint Massachusetts town founded in the seventeenth century: Ipswich.

I wanted to see the home of Anne Bradstreet, a mother of eight children who during the seventeenth century was the most prominent poet residing in North America. She was the first female writer in the British North American colonies to be published.

After failing to discover where Bradstreet had resided in Ipswich, I stopped at a gas station.

A man approached and asked, "Fill her up?"

And while he was filling my gas tank, I recalled a poem written by John Updike:

Ex-Basketball Player by John Updike

Pearl Avenue runs past the high-school lot,
Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off
Before it has a chance to go two blocks,
At Colonel McComsky Plaza.

Berth's Garage is on the corner facing west, and there,
Most days, you'll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—
Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,
Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.
One's nostrils are two S's, and his eyes
An E and O. And one is squat, without
A head at all — more of a football type.

Once Flick played for the high-school team, the Wizards.
He was good: in fact, the best. In '46
He bucketed three hundred ninety points,
A county record still. The ball loved Flick.
I saw him rack up thirty-eight or forty
In one home game. His hands were like wild birds.

He never learned a trade, he just sells gas,
Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,
As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube,
But most of us remember anyway.

His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.
It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae's Luncheonette.
Grease-gray and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,
Smokes those thin cigars, nurses lemon phosphates.

Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods
Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers
Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.

My college English teachers admired Updike's poetry,
his short stories, and his novels.

So I asked the gas-pump jockey if John Updike still
lived in Ipswich.

He pointed to a barber shop located down the street
and said, "Ask in there."

There were two barber chairs in the shop and only one
barber. No customers.

When I asked the barber about Updike, he pointed
toward the ceiling and said, "Up there."

So I climbed a staircase and knocked on a door.

The door opened and there stood John Updike, himself.

He appeared to be in his middle thirties and as homely as his photos on the dust covers of his books. As I now recall this, he could have passed for being one of Bill Gates' uncles.

I stammered and stuttered.

He gestured for me to enter his office and to sit upon a chair near one of three tables. Each table had a typewriter with paper inserted.

I asked for directions to Bradstreet.

He laughed and said, "Bradstreet was living in a house on the site where the house at 33 High Street is now."

I asked him when he knew a poem or a short story or a novel is finished.

And he said, "When my wife tells me."

Then I asked, "Why three typewriters?"

"One's for poems. One's for short stories. And one's for novels."

"Do you have three in progress now?"

"When I tire from typing a poem, I move on to the short-story typewriter. And when I tire from typing a short story I move on to the novel typewriter. And then by noon I call it quits and go home to my kids."

"But," I said, "It's now past noon."

"When I heard you knock on my door, I thought you might be my wife. She picks me up and drives me home."

"Your wife has to knock?"

"No one is allowed in my office. No one. Not even my wife. This office is my sanctuary. My playpen. Where no matter what I do in here is judged by others."

"Not even your agent?"

"I've never had an agent. I'm my own man."

I asked, "What made you choose to let me in?"

"You stuttered. When I was your age I stuttered."

At this moment, I'm now stuttering again. Stuttering because I hesitate to ask you this simple question: When and how will you know your novel is "finished?"

I've been informed by accomplished and professional writers that nothing they write is ever "finished."

They insist whatever they write for publication is never perfect. But if they need cash, publish they must and so be it.

Anne Bradstreet never intended to have any of her poems published. But someone got his hands on a pile of her poems and without her consent got the poems published in London in 1650.

She then became so angry that she never allowed any of her other poems to become published.

During the past several years I've been writing and rewriting a spec screenplay that I hesitate sending to anyone involved in the movie industry. Why? It's far from being "perfect."

For one thing, it contains too much dialogue and not enough "action." And I question if it's entertaining. But rewrite it I must. Until the moment arrives when I feel it's ready to take flight.

I've attached it to an email to you as a PDF file, and when and if you might have two sustained hours to read the spec screenplay, perhaps you might identify where it needs doctoring. Or perhaps just tell me to give up and pronounce the patient "dead."

I sent an earlier version to your father and to your Aunt Sylvia. So far no response from either. And years ago I sent a first version to my cousin Nancy.

Nancy said, "It's immature. Looks like it was written by an eighth grader for eighth graders to read."

The only solace I derived from her critical comment came from a book on how to write a spec screenplay. The book advised that good spec screenplays are easy for eighth graders to read. Oh well.

If and when you feel your novel is ready to be read by me, I shall welcome receiving it from you.

Blessings,

Uncle Paul