

Dear Reader -

It all started when I was sixteen. When a high school English teacher, Mrs. Sundin, wanted me to write a music column for the school's newspaper during what would become my senior year.

Me? Who could not spell? Me? Who could seldom write a satisfactory sentence? Me? Who had only copied stuff from an encyclopedia, or a magazine, or a book?

It must have been Ben's idea. He was the music columnist for *The Arrow* and was about to graduate. And being Ben was among my best friends, he probably told Mrs. Sundin I was the guy to replace him.

But Ben knew how to write. All I knew was we shared the same taste and interest in music. It was Ben who introduced me to what was called "modern jazz."

During my sophomore year I helped form a dance band. We performed the dance music of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, and we performed the music arrangements of many other big dance bands that were popular during my parents' high school days.

We performed for high school dances, college proms, and an Arthur Murray ballroom dance studio.

And I had been elected to serve, during what would soon be my senior year, as the president of the high school's 110-member acapella choir.

I guessed Mrs. Sundin had some reason to feel I had a sincere interest in music.

So I spent the summer before my high school senior year reading music magazines such as *Downbeat* and *Metronome*. But that didn't help. Their magazine columnists had music vocabularies that left me in the dust. There was no way I could write like them.

*The Arrow* published every month. That meant I had to write a column each and every month? Holy moly Batman!

I didn't want to write about the pop singers and instrumentalists the high school kids loved. To me their music was simply "bubblegum music."

I titled my music column "Scoring A Hit With P.J."

What scored a hit with me was the artistry of Stan Kenton's band and his record album *Artistry in Rhythm*. And what was a jazz and blues singer's latest album: Joe Williams' *A Man Ain't Supposed To Cry*.

I wished to provide high school kids with educational info about jazz and blues performers they might enjoy as much or more than what appeared on the weekly radio "Top-40 Charts." Plus I wanted to use the "big words" music critics such as Leonard Feather used in their music books and magazine columns. Polysyllabic words. Words such as *modulations, transitions, and overtures*.

Kids would approach me and ask, "Hey PJ, how did you ever learn so many big words?"

At seventeen I became a music snob; strutting about the high school hallways feeling I knew better than "my readers" what music they should be listening to at home and in their cars.

Soon after entering college, at age 18, my father sat me down and said, "I suggest you try writing the way you talk, and not try to write in the fancy way your professors speak when delivering lectures."

Took me more than 20 years. And there continue to be moments where I lapse into believing I should try to use "erudite words" to impress my reader.

Oooooops. Just did it again! *Erudite?* Shame on me.

Was not until at around age 40, when I read a short story by Stephen King ("The Body") that it dawned on me to try to write in the same way that I *naturally* converse with others. Now, whenever I try to do that, I feel I best serve myself as well as my reader.

What King demonstrated in "The Body" was what Mark Twain demonstrated: One way to spin a good yarn is to just tell it like you talk.

Today's how-to books on writing often express it this way: "Discover your voice."

During the past 30 years several hundred people paid me to write for them. As their ghost writer.

If my clients were in any way disappointed with what I produced for them, they simply were not required to pay me a penny. And that only happened once.

I was "a professional writer" because they paid me.

As a professional I could not decide if I was working or playing. I simply let others decide that.

And as a professional writer I seldom took what is called "pride in authorship."

I always welcomed and accepted helpful and beneficial suggestions about how to craft what I wrote.

Professional athletes seem to spend endless hours and days striving to improve their skills. But writers? They too often whine and whimper if someone suggests their first or second draft requires revisions.

After writing and self-publishing two books filled with my favorite yarns, I chose, in my senior years, to try my hand at writing a screenplay.

When I completed a first draft I showed it to friends and relatives. They said it sucked. They were right.

So I rewrote it. And again, they were not impressed.

They said, "Go back to doing what you do best."

But I then chose to read more than a dozen books on how to properly write a screenplay, and attended lectures on the craft of screenplay writing.

While beginning to learn the fundamentals of the craft, I spent months reading screenplays. And discovered how screenplays are not at all what you experience while watching a good movie.

A movie is a combination of *sight* and *sound*.

A screenplay is simply *words* strung together on paper.

Words often strung together as incomplete sentences.

With lots of "white space" to help the reader scroll down a page at about one minute per page.

Most two-hour movies are produced from a 120-page screenplay, typed in 12-point courier font.

But that two-hour movie is *not* the screenplay.

The screenplay only served to kindle the reader's imagination about how it could become a movie.

Served to ignite *images* in the reader's "mind's eye."

Served to spark *sounds* in the reader's ears.

Images and sounds that evoked laughter and tears.

Screenplays serve as two-dimensional "blueprints" for a movie.

Blueprints for a movie director.

Blueprints for actors.

Blueprints for music composers.

Blueprints for costume designers and set designers.

Blueprints for lighting technicians.

Blueprints for cinematographers.

Blueprints for a movie that matters to all involved.

Once the blueprint is passed on to a movie producer and director the screenplay writer is seldom again

involved in how the movie is going to eventually appear before an audience.

When screenplay writers accept awards for whatever they wrote, they know in their heart and mind the movie became far more than what they labored to place on the screenplay's pages.

And did they labor? Damn right they did.

A good screenplay is often the result of one thing: rewriting.

Screenplays are not written. They are rewritten and rewritten and rewritten again and again.

The same is often true about good poems.

And good short stories.

Forget the notion that good poems and short stories are the result of a brilliant writer sitting at a table and dashing something off while in the heat of inspiration.

Most often, good poems and short stories are the result of taking that which was "inspired" and then writing and rewriting it.

Often again and again and again.

Song writers will sometimes say they wrote a great song within five minutes. Bullshit!

But they may have been *inspired* within five minutes to then go on to write and rewrite the song until they felt they had crafted it properly.

Philip Roth, an amazingly "successful writer," more than once said he never wrote anything that didn't deserve to be rewritten. He was seldom satisfied he'd "written something right."

And again, the same is true with many successful screenplay writers.

That is why I obsessively continue to rewrite what has become my labor-of-love screenplay; over and over and over again.

Always shouting, "DAMMIT IT'S NOT YET RIGHT!"

The emotion becomes more intense than when attempting to complete a crossword puzzle in which I cannot find the right word for "22 DOWN."

There are nights when I wake up and exclaim, "That scene is much too long. It's much too long to hold the attention of anyone who might be suffering from an attention deficiency disorder."

There are moments when taking a shower I slap myself and say, "Change that word from *snub* to read *snuff*."

When I was still a teenager my father read Thomas Wolfe's first novel: *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Dad declared it was the best novel he had ever read.

Wolfe was a writer who seldom "wasted time" rewriting.

He simply let his editor and publisher do that chore for him.

But my personal editor? She often sits upon my left shoulder, always whispering like a pixie, "Change that and *that* and *that* until you get it right for a movie producer to read it."

I feel like the sculptor in *Look Homeward, Angel*.

The sculptor seemed to never get his angel's face to appear the way he imagined it should be sculpted.

After my father took me to a theater production of *Look Homeward, Angel* he told me the playwright, Ketti Frings, and the director, and the cast, did not capture what Wolfe had captured in his novel. But the play nevertheless received a Tony nomination.

How often have we heard ourselves and others say, "The movie was not as good as the novel?"

But as much as I have enjoyed reading novels and short stories, movies and theater productions have a way to move my emotions to highs and lows I do not often experience while reading.

Productions of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* can make me laugh and sob uncontrollably. I've seen the play produced more than a dozen times. And productions of the musical *The Music Man* make me laugh and cry each time I see and hear them.

Movies can be magical. Spell binding. Transformative.

When asked what he does, Steven Spielberg once said, "I make dreams."

So that is why I continue to persist in making changes to my screenplay. Always "tinkering" with it, always trying to make it seem more and more "magical" for a reader and motion picture artists who may someday make it take flight for movie audiences.

But I'm still afraid to "let go of it" and see if it might fly.

Years ago I would spend endless hours playing computer games until the sun rose to take me to a new day.

But now, as I continue to rewrite my screenplay, it has become "my computer game," a game I have yet to feel I have won.

Oh oh. I just now thought of a phrase I need to change on the first page of the screenplay.

So enough of this and back to work.

Or is it play?

Be well and stay well,

Paul

P.S. What's my screenplay about?

A wife challenges her melancholy husband to resolve the decades-old unsolved mysteries of his missing brother and murdered father. But when derelict Minneapolis homicide detectives conspire to discard his disturbing discoveries, he accepts what he must truly apprehend: the healing power of forgiveness.

The screenplay's title is *Above Justice*.

I'm now inclined to have my brother Larry attach it to our family website, in case you're inclined to give it a glance and then perhaps a chance to hear and see it take flight within your imagination.