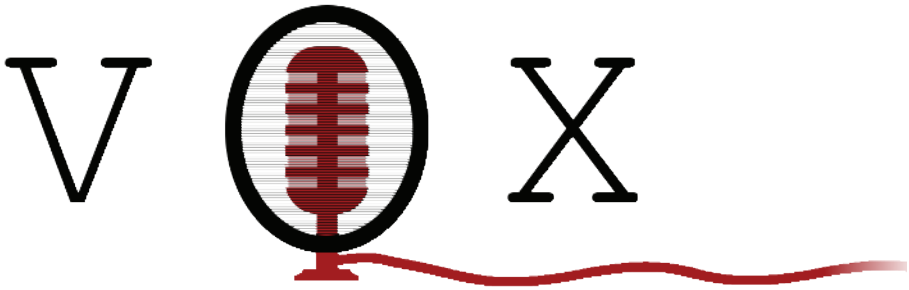

Sara Wheeler

The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

EVELYN WAUGH IDENTIFIED three qualities essential to good writing. First, lucidity, which he said could be acquired. Second, elegance, which the writer can strive all their life to achieve. Third, a distinctive voice, for which, Waugh said, 'you can only pray.'

Waugh's prose is certainly lucid and elegant, I thought when I started out and still think now. His *Collected Travel Writing*, a selection of pieces written between 1929 and 1958 has stood the most brutal test — the honour time bestows on a book or, more often, withholds. I took his advice, except for the praying part. A writer can surely earn a voice, chiefly through reading and taking note of what works. For example, on that vital ingredient in a travel book, dialogue, the yeast which makes the dough rise, I turn again and again to Robert Byron, and especially *The Road to Oxiana*, his 1937 account of a journey in Persia and Afghanistan. I've learned a lot from that book.

George Orwell advised writers on the practicalities of the trade, and he too influenced me when I started out all those years ago. He handed out six injunctions. One, 'Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print'. I would add, cliché — and that kicks off the battle over what is a cliché and what isn't.

Two, 'Never use a long word when a short one will do'.

Three, 'If it is possible to cut out a word, always do so'. More about that later.

Four, 'Never use the passive when you can use the active'. I was suspicious about this advice at first, but take my advice: Take Orwell's advice. Go back to a piece you have finished and change every passive verb to an active. See what I mean? If it won't easily change, turn the sentence round, or otherwise rephrase. I am convinced of this one, or rather, this one is convincing.

Five. 'Never uses a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent'. True, but again, there is tricky middle ground. 'Hors de combat'? Probably not — replace with 'out of action', or something better, for example, according to context, 'knackered'. 'Schadenfreude'? *Definitely* ok. It's a word naturalised through usage and says exactly what you mean.

Six, of course, Orwell advises, 'Break any of these rules rather than say anything that is downright barbaric'.

To return to cutting, I have learned that it can only make my prose better — which is rather depressing when you take that to its logical conclusion. Late in my career George Saunders dished out advice on this topic which really made a difference. In *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, a selection of essays based on his teaching of Russian stories in English, he writes, 'Extreme cutting is a gateway to voice'. So perhaps Waugh was wrong, as I suspected — you don't have to pray after all.

Saunders has plenty of other suggestions for the aspiring writer in *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, a book which should be on the syllabus of every writing course. Here's a selection.

'Structure is an organisational theme'.

'A story must respond alertly to itself'.

'Don't say something for no reason. Make it matter.'

He also insists that every sentence is a referendum on truth — do I, the reader, believe this?

The book analyses three Chekhov stories (the 'Swim' from the title is in 'Gooseberries'), one each by Turgenev and Gogol and two by Tolstoy. From close readings, Saunders develops the acronym TICHN — things that I couldn't help noticing. In other words, referring back to Saunders' advice 'Don't say something for no reason'; if you include a detail, make sure it means something, and repeat it, with subtle variations. In Tolstoy's superb short story 'Master and Man', for example, a line of washing appears three times as the protagonists ride by in the cart, each time appearing a little differently as tension builds. Saunders calls this 'escalation of detail'. I try to remember Saunders' comment that every detail or character must be there to 'Route the energy to the heart of the story'. Saunders himself claims the best advice he ever received as a writer was from Dr Seuss, whose real name was Theodor Seuss Geisel.

Seuss the reader asks the writer, 'Why on earth are you bothering to tell me this?'

I find that's an excellent question to ask myself as sentences unfurl.