



The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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WHEN I WAS NINETEEN, I was at university studying a mish-mash of things, one of which was the piano. I used to commute from Exeter to London every so often to see a marvellous piano teacher called Yonty Solomon, who worked at the Royal Academy and was a superlative performer. His lessons were often characterised by fits of drama (which I adored!), such as berating me that I was too young to play the sad Chopin pieces, as I hadn't yet encountered enough tragedy in my life! One day, I was playing some Bach and he was getting more and more frustrated with me, as I wasn't playing it the way he felt I should be. He told me to get up and go and stand by the wall. I thought I was being sent to the dunce's corner, but no. There was method here. He told me to look at the music on the piano, quite far away by now. 'What can you see on the score?', he asked me. Not much from that distance, just some vague dark shapes on a white background. 'Take two steps forward', he said. 'Now, what can you see?' I described the shape of the music on the page, the way that lines went up or down. Another two steps forward. Then, I could begin to discern groups of notes, the way they twisted and turned in on themselves. Another two steps and now I could see single notes, what pitches they were and their length and rhythm. Then I was back in my seat, looking closely at the music, in all its detail. 'Only now', said Yonty, 'can you see that music is architecture. The broad shapes are the skeleton structure, the staves are the walls and the notes the bricks that make up the whole building. You have to understand the structure of the piece before you can interpret how it must be played.'



It was brilliant. It altered the way I played the piano forever. A couple of years later, I'd changed my degree to English, once I realised that novels were the only things I was truly passionate about. One day, sitting in a lecture talking about narrative, I suddenly had a flashback to Yonty's words. I realised that all art forms were about architecture. A novel was like a building too, with its chapters and lines and paragraphs and words and letters. And I seemed to have an innate ability to see that structure very clearly when I read a novel. When I came to start writing my own novels a few years later, I kept that in mind as I planned out my story arcs. Yes, there was an internal logic of cause and effect that the characters played out, but also there was a deeper internal structure that each novel followed, its foundations, its bones, its architecture. It helped me to see the whole novel in overview and create a satisfying structure that would hopefully please readers as much as it did me. So, you see, the best advice I ever received about writing was not from a writer, but from a pianist. And I'm very grateful to him for that, to this day.