R&R: We’re interested in the techniques and processes of writing. So let’s start there.

First let me say, thank you for including me in this interview process. I am flattered and grateful, though unsure that I have much to contribute. Most of all I want to thank you, Bob and Jack, for all the hours, days, months and years you have devoted to mentoring writers, creating a scheduled place, a sacred space for the madness that we know as timed writing here in Seattle. If it were not for the two of you, I don’t think that would have happened.

R&R: You practice timed writing. What is timed writing?

I sit down at a crowded table at Louisa’s Cafe. The timer is set. At two-thirty all heads bow. I write without looking up till the buzzer sounds. I write fast. It’s best done with other people, in a noisy place full of distractions, because that’s what puts me in the zone. Because I can’t cheat. I can’t get up and make a sandwich like I would at home. Once done, I have something. Not always something good, but something.

Once upon a time an aspiring poet asked William Stafford if it was true that he wrote a poem everyday before breakfast. He nodded that, Yes, it is true. The aspiring poet asked how is that possible? Stafford leaned forward, smiled, and said: “Easy. Lower your expectations!”

I have talked to writers far more experienced and successful who say they could never do timed writing because it is too spontaneous. Yet, it works for me.

R&R: Why do you write longhand? Do you write drafts longhand and follow on by computer?

Longhand feels more honest. I edit on the computer. Rarely do I print anything out. I used to write longhand and then cut and paste paragraphs, sentences, and even phrases with scotch tape. When I first heard about the word processor, I thought, maybe I actually could be a writer.

R&R: You have written and published a lot of short stories. What draws you to that form?

The short story remains (like jazz) a distinctly American art form. The short story, like the poem, has soul. It exists entirely on its own vibe. It reverberates around a single note. It has a rhythm and a style. There is very little room for error. And yet, like jazz, there is lots of room for improvisation.

I am not one of those people who think short stories are a lesser art form to the novel. Short does not imply easy! Nor does it imply inferior. It is simply a different kind of animal. If I can hold a reader wholly absorbed for up to twenty pages, and present images they won’t soon forget, I think that’s a pretty marvelous accomplishment.

I won’t pretend I haven’t tried to write a novel. I have started and abandoned several. I don’t feel I have the control of the novel form to write the novel that Iwould be anxious to read. But that doesn’t mean I won’t try again.

R&R: Are there advantages to writing short stories?

I don’t know if there are advantages, but writing short stories imposes certain constraints. There is a theory of art popularized by Chuck Close called ‘Enabling Constraints.’ The idea is that constraints actually enable creativity. This seems counterintuitive. How can you take something away and yet come away with more?

Writing with the constraints of the short form forces me to edit myself ruthlessly. Every word must count. Dialogue cannot ramble. Description must serve a purpose. Everything revolves around the same meaning. Characters reveal themselves through action. This is no different from the novel, but the short form is far more constraining. The short story is an unforgiving teacher.

There is a common misconception that short is synonymous with simple, and that the short story as an art form is dead. I never found that art and popularity had a lot to do with one another. Who knows what makes something popular? The number of movies that are made from short stories fascinates me.

When I finish a story, I get a feeling of accomplishment, and then I feel a let down. When I see a story published, I go through that same process again. It never stops. You are only as good as the next story.

However, when ready to publish a collection, the inclusion of a *previously published in this journal or that* on the copyright page lends an air of pre-approval to the collection at large. Somebody out there liked these stories enough to publish them!

Because of the nature of publishing, the short story writer has to work with a lot of editors and thus a lot of different editorial styles. Editors have personalities. Who’d have thunk it? That’s an education in itself.

R&R: Are there disadvantages to writing short stories over novels. If so, can you name a few?

The obvious disadvantage is the constant need to start over, begin inventing yet another new and unusual situation, and create new and memorable characters. Once finished with one short story, you begin constructing a new one. Writing and editing is hard work. But starting over from the blank page is both exciting and scary as hell!

The other disadvantage is the amount of time devoted to marketing, and rewriting according to editorial suggestions. www.Duotrope.com is a godsend to marketing. Rewriting and working with different editors is good training for any writer. But it all takes time away from the real writing. It is easy to get distracted and swallowed up by the process.

R&R: Do you hate novels and novelists? If not, why write the short story instead of a novel?

I love novels and novelists. I read novels, some I love, some I don’t, and not all are created equal. I, however, appear to be unable to write a novel I myself would like to read. I lose interest at about page eighty, by which time, my writing has become about as much fun as a case of diarrhea.

R&R: Some of your stories, *Jasper Rincon’s Loft* and *A Hunk of Meat*, have been nominated for Pushcart Awards. Do you write for a market? Do you write to write or do you write to see what happens and take that?

I write what interests me. Sometimes I get lucky and an editor likes what I write. I write a lot. I always have several stories developing at the same time. When one is turning to crap, I turn for inspiration to another. I type everything up, and keep them all organized in Scrivener folders. When I complete a draft, which often runs to 100 pages for a story meant to be only 16 to 20, I revise everything. I alternately add-on, then take-away. I am cold-blooded about editing my own work. I edit in Scrivener, which allows me to take snapshots. It took me years to get over the fear that I would destroy my own story by working on it. I save the line editing for last. Sometimes I get a second wind, or a third, and I rewrite the whole damn thing.

I don’t target my stories to specific literary journals, but gradually I am learning some journals are more open to the kind of narrative fiction I enjoy writing. Duotrope is a godsend. It is a subscription based non-profit searchable database of writer’s markets, a submission tracker, and I would be lost without it. If you are a short story, article, memoir, or essay writer and not familiar with [www.duotrope.com](http://www.duotrope.com), and <http://www.submittable.com>, (a submissions manager used by magazines, journals, book publishers, and agents) then you need to get acquainted. These sites offer a writer significantly more control over their hard written words. Plus they save time and money.

R&R: Where do you get your ideas/inspiration.

I go through other writer’s trash :) Not really, but I probably would if I could.

I suspect there is a lot of luck involved. I never write the same type of story twice, so I don’t have a set structure or method of discovery. But I do notice repetition in my method.

I keep a pad and pencil next to my bed. Don’t ask me where I heard this but Pablo Neruda was supposed to have had a sign that hung on his doorknob when he took naps that read, “POET AT WORK.” I’d like to get a sign like that.

Most of my stories percolate in the half-asleep/half-awake moments of the morning. That and in the shower, which I hate, because it’s nasty trying to take notes under water. Or in the car while driving. You would think your muse would be more considerate. Like, do you really want to get us both killed here!

I take long three-mile walks around Green Lake everyday and carry a notebook because I am lousy with the thumbs, and I know I won’t remember my fantasies when I get home.

Oh, and by the way… marijuana’s legal now!

R&R: Walk us through one of your stories from the first glimmer to the final edit. Give us an idea of the process from blank page to published story. What do you do? How do you do it?

I’ll take you through the inspiration for *Jasper Rincon’s Loft*:

I woke up one morning with a reverie of a man whose life was about to change. I knew his name, Albert Givens. I knew he was not a risk taker, and that he was a bookkeeper by trade. I knew he was single, and not happy about it. I knew he was about to inherit something. That’s all I knew. I went to writing practice and it started like this:

*“My name is Albert Givens and I’m a bookkeeper… I lead the most boring life. But that all changed the day I decided to go out on a limb, make a change, let the dice roll… So it shocked everyone when I announced I was moving. Not only was I moving. I was moving to Pioneer Square, to a loft. Not just any loft, but the loft recently vacated by the late artist, Jasper Rincon, the father of Northwest Modernist painting and the most notorious womanizer who ever taught at Cornish art college…”*

It went on like that. Not bad. Not great. But a start. I took it all home and transposed everything to close third person.

At the next writing session I introduced Albert to the woman who would be buying the boring house he was soon to vacate, and after a disappointing date, send him home, alone, to spend his first night between the cavernous walls of Jasper Rincon’s loft… Needless to say, stuff happened. I was as surprised as anyone.

Once I have the first draft, I edit out superfluous scenes, superfluous language, superfluous dialogue, etc.

The final draft gets numerous out-loud readings from beginning to end, making corrections to the language as I go. I fix the rhythm. I imagine that someone with talent could sing this little ballad. The point is to let the reader maneuver through the story like a canoe maneuvering the rapids of a fast moving river.

If anyone is interested, links to *Jasper Rincon’s Loft* and other published stories can be found at: [www.maxdetrano.com/short-stories](http://www.maxdetrano.com/short-stories)

Coincidentally, I once heard of a writer whose life was saved by reading out loud at his computer. An armed burglar broke into his the home late at night, heard the racket, and fled when he discovered the homeowner was mad as a hatter, alone shouting at his computer screen. So be sure to read LOUD.

R&R: What do you see when you’re writing longhand? Another side to that question: do you see a story or hear it?

No answer

R&R: How is writing longhand different from keyboarding?

No answer

R&R: How do you develop your characters? Do you see them in a situation? Do you see them as people you follow around so you can write down what they do and say? Do they come to you in a dream?

I get them everywhere. I read obituaries. Usually just the names. Somehow that helps me conjure up characters. That’s where I fell in love with the name, Jasper.

R&R: You’ve been in the book business. You’ve read a lot of stuff. Do you think your writing has anything to do with myth?

Once when I was another person living a different life I found myself having dinner with the editor-in-chief of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux *(Anyone interested in how publishing works should read: Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux by Boris Kochka)* when he asked me what I was reading. I confessed it was John Grisham’s *The Firm*. My dinner mate asked, what made that book so popular? I replied that it was based on an old myth. The Faust Story. He nodded in agreement but added, “Yes, but Grisham probably didn’t know he was doing it.”

I suspect he was right. Myth runs so deep in our storytelling that we cannot help copying it, even when we don’t realize it. Myths are the basis of our moral system. Without them we would be barely human.

R&R: Have you ever thought about why you write this character instead of that one?

No answer

R&R: We think that the art is in the rewrite. We both rewrite a lot. Do you rewrite your stuff or do you bang it out and ship it out?

I have rewritten stories that I originally wrote twenty years ago, bringing them to writing practice, circling what I perceive to be the meaning, and let the process take over. An example is *The Stone* which I wrote twenty-five years ago and rewrote last year at Louisa’s Cafe. Mouse Tales Press currently has *The Stone* scheduled for publicationin April. Never throw anything away.

Elmore Leonard gave good advice when he said, “If it sounds like writing… rewrite it.” I’m no Elmore Leonard, but I do take his advice. Elmore, by the way, though primarily a novelist, wrote a great many very good short stories, some of them adapted for the screen, including *3:10 to Yuma*, *The Tall T,* and *Fire in the Hole* as part of the FX television series *Justified*.

I think of rewriting and editing as two different species. One is done on computer. The other I do longhand. But to answer your question: Yes, I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite.

R&R: Your style is very clear. That is you get strong action and depth from few words. Do you think of yourself as a stylist?

Thank you, Bob and Jack. Coming from you guys, that’s a huge compliment.

I suppose I have a style because people like you tell me they recognize my writing. I don’t think about it that much.

If I have a style I owe it to Flannery O’Connor, Ray Bradbury, and Keith Richards. Flannery O’Connor for teaching me to seeing what is. Ray Bradbury for teaching me to see what isn’t. And to Keith Richards for teaching me it’s okay to borrow from everybody and make it your own.

R&R: What are the elements of style for you? In other words, what makes you write the way you write?

Do we really have a choice?

R&R: Three questions: What are you trying to achieve with your stories? What drives you to spend all that time putting words on paper? How do you know when a story is finished?

No answer

Max’s Short Bio

Max was born in Hoboken, NJ. He's been a writer, a bookseller, an independent publishers’ rep, and an art importer.

Max's words have recently appeared or are forthcoming in: Small Press Magazine, Alaska Airlines Magazine, Northwest Magazine, The Seattle Weekly, The Sun, 10,000 Tons of Black Ink, DuLügstSoSchön, FICTION on the WEB, Foliate Oak, Fabula Argentea, and Mouse Tales.

Max’s short stories have twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and once for 2013 storySouth Million Writers Award.

Max lives in stormy Seattle, WA, and is often seen scribbling with friends at Louisa’s Cafe.

Learn more at: www.maxdetrano.com