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Your Toddler: Socrates in Training Pants

by Lockie Hunter

"I think it is a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things." -Flannery O'Connor on writing fiction

The What Question

When Francis Bacon first postulated that truth is learned through experience, he must have had the toddler in mind. Their thought processes are vastly different from adults, as theirs is a world of constant experimentation. Prior to the birth of my daughter, my world, particularly that of my writing, was somewhat formulaic. Write in scenes. Use interesting language. Be aware of the arc of a piece. I seldom took chances with form. My characters were unsympathetic, dull even. My thought processes were simple, unwavering. The creative had plunged out of my creative writing. The thought patterns of a toddler, however, follow those of a philosopher. As my daughter learned to stretch her creative muscles, I began to take note and stretch mine as well.

Just as Bacon believed that knowledge is gained through experimentation, so, too, does the toddler seek to find meaning in her world through investigation. The toddler is familiar with the material Play-Doh. She molds the Play-Doh into various shapes. What would happen if it were placed, say, in the cat's fur? I created a handy matrix to use in various instances.

Do not put the _____ in the _____.

Column A

Play-Doh
booger
toothpaste

Column B

cat's fur
shoes of the dinner guests
DVD player

All a parent need do is pick an item from Column A and an item from Column B and speak the consequent sentence to her child. Unfortunately, I realized that my formulaic writing followed a handy matrix as well.

1. Premise

Did the protagonist _____ in the _____?

Column A

die
betray a friend
take solace
reveal his hidden past

Column B

boudoir
rose garden
surf at the beach
trenches at Normandy

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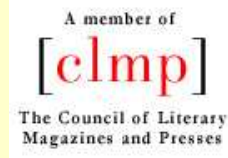
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have a coming of age
experience

arms of another man

2. Character affectations. Circle all that apply.

Does the protagonist have a _____?

southern accent
ascot
limp
facial tic
rosebud mouth
three-day beard growth

My fiction was composed like the game of *Clue: Colonel Mustard killed Professor Plum in the library with the rope*. Recycle characters, change the setting from library to say, trenches at Normandy, and begin again. While the matrix was making my writing somewhat banal, I thought it was still working and clung to it like a life raft. However, the handy parenting matrix began to dissolve when my daughter's actions and questions stepped outside the realm of predictability.

My husband and I agreed long ago that we would answer the questions of our children with as much honesty as we could. If asked how rain is made, we would not tell them that rain was made when the angels cry. Instead, we would discuss condensation, air density, and gravity. Our child would be armed with real knowledge of the way the world worked. I could justify writing predictable scenes in the same manner. *The world behaves in a certain way*, I tell my daughter, and then I translate this concept to my writing where my characters behave according to the constructs and limitations of this world. Daughters (and characters) run from rain -- don't they?

My characters *always* ran from rain. Their actions were those of wind-up toys. They reacted to stimuli in a predictable manner. I never asked why they ran from rain and how they knew to run. But now that our toddler knows what rain is, she will wish to know why and how there is rain and why she should not simply stand outside and soak herself in it. If my daughter wishes to stand in a downpour, truly experiencing the rain on her little face, then why should my characters not do the same?

The Why Question

Three year old bursts in to the bathroom where I am having a shower in our glass shower stall.

Pascale: *Are you taking a shower?*

Mommy: *Yes.*

Pascale: *Are you getting wet?*

Mommy: *Yes.*

Pascale: *Are you using hot water?* (This question is important as the three-year-old is only allowed to use warm or cold water.)

Mommy: *Yes.*

Pascale: *I'm only allowed to use warm water.* (The toddler pauses. Mommy feels the question building.)

Pascale: *Do you like the hot water?*

Mommy: *Yes. I do.*

Pascale: *But why do you like it?*

I share this exchange with my husband, who has a degree in philosophy. "It sounds like your daughter is Wittgenstein," he says, clearly impressed. Wittgenstein helped to inspire so-called ordinary language philosophy. My husband hands me a tome titled **Philosophical Investigations**. "Better brush up."

I had a character in a recent story, a grandmother named Pearl, who faced a

dilemma: She was trapped under a department store awning without an umbrella during a deluge. Pearl, a true "lady" would never ruin her magnificent hairdo or be caught loping awkwardly in public. She was ensnared by societal standards that I, as author, imposed on her. Though she was late for a doctor's appointment, the prospect of running out into the downpour terrified her. I thought the story was solid, but it was rejected by journals with the comment, "not enough at stake." As I revisited the story with Pascale's eye, I realized that the reader did not understand why the character was so fearful of precipitation. The character did not wish to ruin her hairdo. Her motivations for staying under the protective awning were tied into her definition of a "lady." I rewrote with this new eye, this "why" eye. I added depth and consequences. There was now something at stake.

The How Question

Three-year-old interrupts another relaxing shower. She presses her small face to the glass and studies the stream of water.

Pascale: *Mommy, how do you know the water is hot?*

Mommy: *Because I know.*

Pascale actually places a hand to her chin and asks, *How do we know what we know?*

Mommy: *That question has been puzzling people for millennia.*

Three-year-old seems pacified. *Okay*, she says and grabs her bedtime-bear and runs off.

This time when I relate the story to my husband he is even more stirred. "Hmmm," he says and goes to the bookshelf and grabs a thick volume. "My daughter" (Notice it is *his* daughter at this point.) "is following in the steps of Spinoza." Spinoza believed that sense perception is the most important form of imaginative perception.

"Spinoza?" I ask. For my undergraduate work, I attended a college with a good football team. We did not bother with such trifles as how we knew what we knew. Heck, we just knew! And we were happy to know.

"Here ya go," he says, handing me **On the Improvement of the Understanding**.

"Great. Thanks."

Revisiting Pearl: after I determined *why* she was panicked, I needed to determine *how* she came to this sorry state. My back-story was missing. How did Pearl know what she knew? She was the product of her formal upbringing. She could not be seen in public with a damp mop for a hairdo.

I knew that I would learn from my children. I didn't predict that I would need to learn *for* them. I also foresaw that having children would inflate my housework, but I did not anticipate that there would be this much *homework*.

As I immersed myself in Spinoza, trying to find an answer for my inquisitive toddler, I realized how much I did not know. Not only how much I did not know of the world around me, but how much I did not know about my own characters. Taking a cue from Pascale, I now ask of my major characters, why did you choose this course? Why are you feeling this way? How did you become the person you are in this story?

As I search for answers, my characters become deeper, the stakes are raised. Each nuance carries meaning. It only rains when it is essential that it rain. Rain has meaning. I learned not only how much my children can teach me, but how much more there is to learn if I open my mind to the reality that is viewed by the toddler, the experimental kingdom of putting the Play-Doh in the cat's fur, just to see what would happen. This openness has informed my writing. I find that I take more chances on the page. I let my characters explore the less-traveled path. I allow them to lose their footing a little as they discover their undefined world. As my daughter Pascale says when confronted with anything new, "I love it! I love it! What *is* it?"

Lockie Hunter is pursuing her MFA in creative writing at Emerson College in Boston where she lives with her toddler Pascale and infant Graham. Her fiction and essays have been published or are forthcoming in the *Emerson Review*, **The Morning News**, **Southern Hum**, **Seattle Writergrrls**, **Muscadine Lines**, **ken* again**, and **Wild Violet**. Lockie's also writes a humor column for **The Mad Hatter Review** titled "Lockie Confidential" and is working on a Southern novel that she hopes will help to preserve some of the eccentricities and joy of her family and hometown. You may find more of her work at **Lockie Hunter**.