

On Writing “Elements of Fire”

An incident long ago inspired “Elements of Fire.” My father was assisting on a weekend Boy Scout camping trip, supervising the young lads in the main cabin while I, along with the scoutmaster and other older boys, camped outside some distance away. When we returned home on Sunday, Dad regaled us with his account of a small boy who’d come up to him at dinnertime and asked how to cook a large raw chicken in an undersized mess kit pan. My father, who’d never cooked food over a campfire in his life, was unable to help the boy. He did point out the obvious—the chicken was twice the size of the skillet. Surgery on the fowl was required. Dad told this anecdote with riffs and flourishes. He poked fun at himself and brought our family to tears of laughter.

I always thought this vignette would make a good centerpiece for a story, but it was all I had. What was the real subject? Surely something more serious and consequential than a father’s ineptitude. The supporting cast of characters? The plot? I had a spine, but no trunk, limbs, or head. The kid and his supersized chicken were merely a beginning. I would have to discover the real subject of the piece as I went deeper. Writing “Elements of Fire” became a ten-year journey filled with false starts, dead ends, reimaginings, and frustrations—an untidy process of trial and error, as I shaped and reshaped the work, searching for its “aboutness.”

The fifteen-year-old Patterson boy, protagonist and narrator, was in place from the very beginning. He’d grown up lacking a significant connection with his traveling salesman father. Okay, should I concentrate on father and son, or, alternatively, the father’s encounter with the younger boy, Ned, an encounter that, in my retelling, would

likely end quite badly? In other words, who was the second character—the Patterson boy’s father or Ned, the kid with the chicken? The answer wasn’t obvious, at least not to me. Because of his poverty and backward ways, Ned seemed a little more interesting than the workaholic Mr. Patterson. But son and father offered the probability of deeper emotional conflict.

For the longest time I wasn’t sure which way to go, but I knew my decision would drive how the story had to be proportioned. If the primary narrative arc was to be about the older boy and his father, I had to spend some time with them before the camping trip began so readers could get to know them both and learn some of their shared history. On the other hand, if Ned was to be the second character, the two boys ought to have a past that the story explored before the present action began. Each option offered unique dramatic possibilities, possibilities that might be lost depending on my decision. But, either way, I couldn’t begin *in media res* with the camping trip and chicken fiasco.

Eventually, I decided to focus on the father and felt that full disclosure of certain family secrets, as soon as possible, would serve the story best. From the outset readers should know about the father’s (perhaps unintended) neglectfulness, the tension in the family because of the mother’s affair, and that the trip was a chance for father and son to restore their on again, off again, bond. Ned should not and would not be the second character. Rather, Ned would serve as the catalyst who pushed the father/son relationship into something better or worse, whichever it might turn out to be.

Thus armed and dangerous, I attacked other parts of early drafts. Only the triggering event remained a constant as I rewrote the story and moved the pieces around. Other questions came to the fore as I went along: How could I achieve a greater sense of

intimacy between son and father in the telling? Was first person best or might a tight third convey the closeness I sought? I decided to write in the second person, as if the story were a letter the son might have written to his father. Also, I had to work out how Ned's ultimate act of frustration, the burning of his trailer home, the murder of his mother and her boyfriend, would inform the protagonist's understanding of his relationship with his dad. Both boys were searching for a special, seemingly unobtainable, rapport—Ned with his mother, the young Patterson with his father. Yet there were important differences. Ned was fatherless, overcome by poverty and social isolation. The older boy was solidly middle class and socially adept. As the story concluded, this juxtaposition drove the narrator's empathy for Ned and propelled his connection with his father to a better place.