

Largely About My Dog

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

ROBERT F. YOUNG, author of over a hundred stories, mostly in the science fiction and fantasy field, has had his work published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Family Circle*, *The Toronto Star*, and many other magazines. The story referred to in this article is scheduled for publication in *Analog*. Several of his stories have been reprinted in anthologies.

YOU have seen mornings like this one. Bright mornings, bright with the brightness of winter sunlight and bright with the immaculateness of new-fallen snow. Such mornings are sleight-of-hand subterfuges designed to deflect our attention from the malicious activities that are going on behind our backs, and to lull us into thinking that the purpose of all creation is the perpetuation of life.

A little while ago I let my dog out into the crisp and bright and immaculate day, and hardly half an hour later, one of the village police officers drove into my driveway and told me my dog was dead. I have in my possession one beat-up dog collar from whose buckle forlornly hangs a little license tag with a number on it, and out in the kitchen by the back door lies the small rug where he slept and upon which he was standing, wagging his tail, when I came downstairs on this bright and crisp and immaculate morning and let him out; and I remember him, standing on the back porch in the bluish shadow of the shed, looking upon the new day and breathing in its brightness and its crispness and its immaculateness, and then setting forth to die.

My dog was only ten months old. Last July, my sister-in-law brought him up from Pennsylvania for my daughter, and when my daughter's husband said they didn't want him, I said I'd take him. I'll see to it that he has a good home, I said — largely for the benefit of my wife, who doesn't like dogs. You might say that he was a dog whom nobody wanted, but it wouldn't be quite true. I wanted him. He was a digger, my brother-in-law said. That was all right. We've got a big backyard, so there was plenty of room for him to dig. The trouble was, he seldom stayed in it. Dogs, you see, have a different concept of a backyard from the one people have. When a dog goes out your back door, he has no eye for boundary lines. To a dog, a backyard is a place to romp and to roam in, without restriction. To a dog, a backyard is the whole wide world. I kept my dog chained for a while, but keeping a dog chained is like keeping a wild bird caged, and, finally I let him run. You never saw a dog run the way that dog ran.

Ten months isn't very long even for a dog to live, not nearly long enough for him fully to explore his section of the big backyard of the world, not nearly long enough for him to dig up the bones he buries or to keep the promises he made.

His name was Ginger. I used him in a story I wrote several months ago. In a subsequent: rewrite his description got altered considerably, but he's still the dog about whom the approximately 11,000 words are all about. In the story his name is "Zarathustra," and he wags his tail throughout its pages the way he wagged it during his brief sojourn on a planet called Earth. I am going to write another story about him now, and this story will be fraught with poignancy and regret and hope and fear and love and hate, and it will be a kick in the seat of the pants to a society that condones killing in the name of the great god Speed. With the words I choose, I will hammer down the doors of every house in all the land, and I will come into your living room and make you cry.

I am going to batter down your doors with words; I am going to inundate your houses with words; I am going to send words churning waist-deep down your streets. I am going to fill the sky with words and send them down like rain, and it will be raining words, words, words, and in your living rooms that little dog of mine will come to life again and wag his white-tipped tail and look up at you with his golden-brown and gentle eyes, and you will see him as I saw him on this bright and crisp and immaculate

Transferring your emotions ...

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golden-brown and gentle eyes, and you will see him as I saw him on this bright and crisp and immaculate morning before he took his first sweet breath of the dawning day and set off across the fields to die. I am going to make you cry. So help me, I am going to make you cry.

THE room which I have set aside for writing is an enclosed front porch that looks out over the lake, or that would look out over it, if the houses across the street didn't obstruct the view. The windows are equipped with draw-drapes, and ordinarily I keep the drapes drawn because, when you are writing, it's no good to have your attention distracted by passing cars and people.

Jack London wrote a story about a dog named Buck, which you may have read. It is a fine and

somehow magnificent story, and I wish I could write one as good. I can't, of course, but that's all the more reason for me to try, because by trying to do something more than I'm capable of doing, be

standing on my literary tiptoes, and by standing on my literary tiptoes, I may get off something better than would otherwise have been the case. For the same reason, I read Turgenev, Dostoievski, Flaubert,

Stendhal, and all the rest of them.

In addition to the dog story I wrote, I wrote three other animal stories. Two of

them were about

parakeets, the third was about a cat. Aside from the basic rules of writing fiction, which you can read about elsewhere, the requirements for writing an animal story are the same as the requirements for writing any other story. You need a typewriter, a quarter of a pound of paper, and an urge. The urge must consist of two elements: The first is the mechanical aspect of your literary nature—your determination to be a successful writer, come hell or high water; the second is the desire to make someone else feel about something the way you feel about it.

It is this second element that I am primarily concerned with here, not only

because I feel compelled to talk about it, and to demonstrate it in the process, but because I think it is the most important ingredient in fiction writing. Unless it is present to some degree in what you write, what you write will be cold and lifeless, and you will do better to try your hand at writing do-it-yourself items for *Popular Mechanics*, or Civil War pieces for *American Heritage*. You've got to cry a little or laugh a little before you can do a fiction piece that will be worth more than the paper it's written on, and if you can get mad, too, so much the better. If you don't cry or laugh, then your potential reader isn't going to cry or laugh either. He's going to lay your story aside and do what he really wanted to

do in the first place — turn on his television set and watch *The Flintstones*.

Naturally, as an aspiring fiction writer, you are up in your room reading Kafka or Dostoievski or Melville or Fitzgerald whenever the *Riders of the Wasteland* is on. If you're not, you should be. You should be widening your literary horizons, not narrowing them; you should be sharpening your literary perceptions, not blunting them. You're a gourmet, and gourmets don't sit submissively by phony cook fires and eat bacon and beans — they go looking for less stereotyped fare. Snobbery? You bet your books it's snobbery! You've a right to be snobbish. It's your duty to be

snobbish. You owe it to yourself to be snobbish, because if your reader wants clichés, he won't be looking for them in fiction. He will be looking for them in the garbage can with the big eye that he keeps in his living room.

I DON'T know how many articles on writing I've read, but they are legion. Many of them have helped me, and I hope that this one will help you. You have found herein no tried-and-true blueprint for writing salable stories, because I do not have such a blueprint. Aside from the basic rules that apply to it, fiction writing is largely a matter of intangibles, and actually there is very little one writer can do to help another. If you've done any serious writing at all,

you are probably accustomed by now to being

regarded by your friends and neighbors as something of a freak. Undoubtedly you have already been cornered by people who insist on telling you Their Story, and who confidently expect you to make a best-seller out of it. Unquestionably your anguished and excruciating efforts in the little room under the eaves where you do your writing have already been written off by your family and your friends as

senseless self-indulgence. All of these things are a part of your burden as a writer, and if you are wise, you will accept them and forget about them. Probably you already have.

When I came downstairs this morning, I planned to do an article on fiction writing, but I had no

intention of putting my dog into it. After I learned that he had been killed, I couldn't have kept him out of it if I had tried, and I saw no reason to in any event, because the essence of fiction writing is the imparting of feeling, and it seemed to me that I could convey this best by telling you how I felt about his death. I've advised you to stand on your literary tiptoes and to try to reach the top shelf, and I've made it clear to you, I hope, that writing is not in the least glamorous and that to get anywhere at all, you have to write and write and write and write. In addition to these

things, I've told you about my dog.