

REFLECTIONS

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MY DESK

Writers are always being asked the same questions about their working habits. Where do you get your ideas? Do you work every day? What hours do you work? What sort of research do you do for your stories? Do you use a computer? What kind? How many drafts do you usually do? Do you show anyone your work before you send it to your publisher? And so on and so on, very little variation over the years. (Except that nobody would have asked you about your computer before the 1980s: typewriter vs. longhand would have been the more usual query.) Most writers, after the third or fourth interview, have the prefabricated answers ready even before the questions are asked.

The one question that I've never been asked is about the most basic part of the whole enterprise: the desk at which I write.

I was looking at my desk this morning—my dear old battered desk, which dates from the start of my career, which has been sitting there patiently in front of me for decade after decade while I've written hundreds of short stories and I know not how many novels on its broad back (and several hundred of these essays for this magazine)—and I realized that it has never had proper credit for its role in my career. So I dedicate this column to my beloved, antiquated, battle-scarred desk.

I sold my first few stories in 1953 and 1954, when I was still a college undergraduate living in a rented room near Columbia University. The room came with some sort of desk, about which I remember nothing after sixty years. I had an Olympia portable typewriter then, and during my college years I sat it on whatever sort of flat surface my little room provided and typed away, and that was how I launched my career.

In June 1956, I graduated from Columbia and moved from that ten-dollar-a-week room on West 114th Street in Manhattan to a vastly more imposing

five-room apartment nine blocks to the south, and there, newly married, I set out upon the business of being a full-time professional writer. For the first few weeks we had only minimal furniture—a bed, a couch, a rickety bridge table, a few chairs—and I quite clearly remember writing the stories of September 1956 on that bridge table, which was set up in our kitchen and doubled as our dining-room table at mealtime. But a bit later that autumn I bought a real desk, and those who know me well, who know how stubborn and retentive and downright ornery I can be, will not be at all surprised to learn that I am still using that very same desk, which has served me well for (as of the day I'm writing this) fifty-five years and six or maybe seven months.

It's not a grand and glorious desk, some splendid construction of teak or ebony or mahogany. I admire a fine desk as much as anyone, and in my novel *Valentine Pontifex* I gave Lord Valentine "a magnificent desk, a great polished slab of deep red palisander with a vivid grain that resembled the starburst emblem." All well and good for the monarch of the biggest planet in the universe, but my professional needs, as of the fall of 1956, were not nearly so grandiose. I wanted something strong and functional and not immensely expensive. What I bought was a rugged commercial desk, a gray steel box sitting atop two sturdy legs. Cole Steel Equipment Co. was the manufacturer—they are surely long out of business—and the label on the front proudly declares, MADE IN U.S.A. If you google for "Cole Steel Desk" and rummage around for vintage or antique models, you may be able to find a picture of it, as I just did, though I can't be sure it will still be posted when this essay is published. Desks of that sort have come into new popularity, thanks to the television show "Mad Men," and, in fact, an old advertisement for a Cole desk of the right vintage that I found on the in-

ternet tells me that Cole Steel's offices were at 415 Madison Avenue.

I don't remember where I bought it, but I do remember, only too well, the day it was delivered. My apartment was on the fourth floor of a fifteen-story building; and one warm autumn afternoon I heard the buzzer of the house-phone ring and our doorman's voice informed me that a package was waiting for me out front in the street. In the street? Puzzled, I looked out the livingroom window and saw a delivery truck parked outside the building; and sitting just behind it was the "package," a six-foot-high carton that I realized must contain my new desk.

I am a man of medium build, and in those days I was pretty flimsy—perhaps 140 pounds, not much for five feet ten. The carton was bigger than I was and a lot heavier. I had expected door-to-door delivery, and that's what I got: door to *building* door. The trucker did not intend to bring the desk inside. Our friendly doorman wasn't going to haul it for me either. I could no more lift it myself than I could levitate it to the fourth floor. As I stood there in the street scratching my head, Providence brought to me a local SF fan whom I knew in a peripheral way, a big, burly, jovial man, whose name, to my shame, I have now forgotten, though I think it was Dave. He sized up the situation instantly and offered to help, and, together, we shoved the carton into the building, crammed it into the small freight elevator, got it upstairs to my apartment, and installed it in the second bedroom, the one that I had chosen to be my office.

I have lived with that desk ever since. It moved with me from 105th Street in Manhattan to semi-suburban Riverdale in 1961—hired professionals did the heavy lifting that time—and a decade later I shipped it to California, where I live now. Over the intervening half-century-plus since Dave X and I first hauled the desk upstairs I have grown a beard, watched it turn white, changed my address three times, divorced one wife and married another, acquired new cats every ten or fifteen years, written an uncountable number of books and stories,

and moved from New York to California; but in all those turbulent years of change the desk has followed me from one place to another and from one end of the country to the other, and I expect that only death will sunder me from it.

As I said, it's nothing grand and glorious. It's made of gray steel, just under five feet wide and standing on two long pedestallike legs. Its upper surface—the "desktop," I guess I can call it, though that word has a different meaning today—is fashioned from some rubbery gray plastic substance, and is cluttered, as I suppose most writers' desks are cluttered, with all manner of stuff: a desk calendar, an assortment of pens, a box of paper clips, two boxes of diskettes, a pair of chopsticks (don't ask: I don't know the answer), a calculator, a return-address rubber stamp, a little stack of foreign coins, a couple of paperweights, and, to my right and left, two untidy stacks of papers that I have been trying to get rid of for decades. (As fast as I file one thing away, two new ones take its place.)

At the center of the desk, of course, is the computer: the massive and hopelessly obsolete 1990-model Compaq 386 that I still stubbornly use for all my writing work. (My office is in a separate building from our main living quarters. In the main house we have two shiny modern iMacs with full Internet capacity; but over here in the office there is no modem and my computer is the archaic one that can be used only for writing. I like its software better than the modern kind, and I want no distractions when I work—e-mail can't get to me in this building.) The plastic desktop shows the scars of the ages: from 1957 or so until 1982, an Olympia standard typewriter rested on it, and I see some light circular marks that its feet probably left, but the real damage has been done by the computers I've used for the past thirty years, first a bulky dedicated word processor and then the Compaq. The feet of the computer have dug deep round imprints into the plastic over a surprisingly wide area, telling me that I restlessly move the computer around quite a bit during the

course of my work, and the keyboard has slashed scars of its own in front of that. There are other signs of injury, too, because in February 1968, a fire in my attic wrecked the third-floor suite that had been my office in the big Riverdale house, and although the desk survived, it took quite a bashing, and various marks and stains are still visible.

There are five drawers. The skinny one in the middle contains postage stamps, rubber bands, staples, and other standard desk detritus. The two large filing drawers on either side of my knees are stuffed with ancient manuscripts and correspondence; those drawers reached capacity about thirty years ago and I neither add nor subtract anything nowadays, just leave it all in perpetual stasis. Some of the earliest stories I wrote are in there, teenage stuff: my heirs and my biographer will find them of interest, though I don't. There's also a swiveling desk chair, as ugly and battered and brutally functional as the desk itself; its leatherette-covered arms are cruelly worn away where they've intersected, over the years, with the two metal pull-out shelves on which I store reference material while I'm working. I had them reupholstered once, but before long they were chewed up again, and I will not take the trouble a second time. (The chair itself, to my horror, had one of its swivel wheels broken off about five years ago by a telephone repairman who leaned too heavily on it. I shopped madly around eBay for a week or so to find a vintage replacement, without success, but then a friend who is a master craftsman soldered the wheel back in place for me, quite successfully.) To the left of my desk is its continuation, a work table that holds a computer printer, a telephone, a few photographs, and another stack of perpetually unfiled papers. To my right, beyond the wastebasket, is another grim hunk of gray steel office furniture: eight filing drawers covered by a long plastic top, on which stands my 1968-vintage typewriter (simply an artifact now), some ledgers, and a stack of my recently published work that I can't seem

to find time to put in its proper place. There's another table, too, behind my left shoulder, and more papers, all too many papers. I could weep, sometimes, looking at all the paper that my writing career has generated. I hope someone files it all neatly away after I am gone. That I will ever get around to doing it myself is just one of my little wishful fantasies.

Although I have many close friends in the writing profession, I don't know much about *their* desks. I don't ask to go poking in their offices, and I don't encourage visitors to enter mine, mainly because it seems so sloppy to me. I can summon out of memory Harlan Ellison's desk, a prettier one than mine, surrounded on all sides by millions of posted documents and photographs and memoranda, but everything meticulously arranged, for Harlan is a meticulous man. I remember seeing the small cramped plywood desk at which Jack Vance worked, with a specially adapted keyboard that had big waxen attachments on the keys to allow him to find his way around it, for his vision was failing. And I dimly recall a very modest working space in Isaac Asimov's Boston home, forty-odd years ago. Roger Zelazny, who was a long, lean man, didn't bother with a desk at all, but sat in a reclining chair that he kept tipped far back, holding a laptop computer on, well, his lap. That's about it for my immediate colleagues. I have it on second-hand authority that Ernest Hemingway was another who did without a desk, just using the top of a dresser, where he wrote standing up; Saul Bellow also was said to write while standing. Hemingway, Bellow, and Zelazny, having no desks, thereby avoided desk clutter, but I'd wager that those of us who do have desks have, most of us, cluttered ones, for clutter zooms in on a writer's desk like bees to sweet flowers. I tidy mine from time to time, but it does no good; somehow, overnight, everything becomes as chaotic as it had been the day before. And I am a well-organized man. I shudder to think what the desks of some of my less tidy colleagues are like. But now, at least, you have some idea of mine.