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Fiction Writing Exercises
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Edi:

Permission to Eavesdrop

by **Malina Saval**

Malina Saval was formerly Features Editor at *Variety*, where she covered film, TV, music and theater. She's won two LA Press Club awards and is a board member of the LA Press Club. Saval wrote screenplays for Touchstone Pictures and Walt Disney Films. Her book, *The Secret Lives of Boys: Inside the Raw Emotional World of Male Teens* was published in 2009 and she has appeared as a guest on such programs as NPR's "Talk of the Nation," CBS Radio and the "*Patt Morrison*" show.

I'm a natural born snoop, so it's lucky that I make my living as a journalist. Wherever I am, I am armed and dangerous, my weapons of choice alternating between a Power Book g-4, a mini micro-cassette recorder or, when I'm feeling old fashioned, a notepad and pen. I have a gift for deciphering dialogue between perfect strangers seated six rows in front of me; I can read lips. In Los Angeles where I live, I am often found at little outdoor cafés, sipping a vanilla soy latte while simultaneously angling my Dictaphone surreptitiously (it's tucked underneath a napkin) in the direction of a delicious conversation held, for example, by two snooty intellectual types draped all in black the next table over: "It's like explaining fire to a fish," says one. Responds the other, "It's true. Once you have found God, God ceases to be that which you were searching for. By definition you can't possibly conceptualize Him." A short essay that I had due for a required graduate level philosophy course about man's quest for God was thus hatched.

Other eavesdropping opportunities have borne far fluffier fare. I was once in an airport on an extended layover from Los Angeles to Boston, stuck in Dallas. In the bathroom I overheard two women—both with matching Texan beehives and valises the size of longhorn bulls—complaining about the direction in which bathroom stalls opened. "Why do airport bathrooms open from the outside in?" inquired one of the women. "I can barely fit myself in here without brushing my ass against the toilet, never mind my Louis Vuitton carry-on." I thought about it; the woman was right. Shortly after, I penned a whimsical, short article on the subject of airport bathrooms for a leading travel magazine.

Capturing the essence of natural-sounding dialogue is one of the most crucial elements for stringing together a refined piece of non-fiction featuring human conversation. The words must sing to the writer and reader alike. Possessing a keen ear for dialogue can function as the

essential technical tool when aiming to convey realism in a work of non-fiction. Snippets of conversation can often become the jumping off point for an essay, an editorial, perhaps an entire memoir.

EXERCISE

Venture out in public. Maybe it's your favorite park. Or a local café in your neighborhood. Maybe the beach. Or a dog run. Or a run-down, smoky watering hole serving two-dollar beers from the tap. Anywhere where there are sure to be people milling about and chatting.

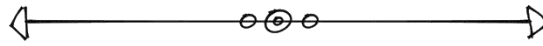
Park yourself in the midst of your surrounding. To start, commit to at least an hour. Once you get comfortable this time frame can be extended.

Listen. Don't be discouraged if on your first outing nothing more titillating than someone asking the time is overheard. Many a morning I have dragged my fluffy mutts to the dog park in the hopes of creative inspiration and the only living, breathing being mouthing anything of any interest is I to my dogs (Fenway and Coco, by the way, are superb conversationalists—woof! Woof!). Conversely, the next time I venture out, I'll eavesdrop on some disgruntled owner lecturing his stubborn dog that he needs a shrink. I've overheard posh Beverly Hills poodle owners compare the perks and pitfalls of veterinary health insurance. Poop is a popular conversation starter. "Look at its size and color!" I once heard a proud dog owner exclaim, beaming over her puppy's poop as if it were the meconium diaper of a newborn baby. It prompted me to submit a little ditty about the joys of dog defecation to *The Bark*. (Hmmm...they still haven't gotten back to me; maybe poop is passé?)

Bottom line: Be patient. Much of the creative process does involve letting the muses come to you.

Write down conversation bites of any sort of appeal. It may be an entire paragraph, or a sentence, or a single word. Or a sound—a gesture.

Free associate. Does the paragraph, sentence, words, sounds, and gestures inspire you to think of a particular subject? Is the conversation, perhaps, reminiscent of one you, yourself, have had? Did it make you laugh? Did it make you cry? Did it make you angry? Did you want to smack the characters engaged in the conversation because they sounded so utterly stupid? Did you want to contribute in any way your own opinion? Jot down words, sentences, syllables—anything that comes to mind having to do with the conversation bites you have scribbled. You're likely sitting on a wonderful slice of your own work of non-fiction—a scene, a chapter, the beginning of an essay or memoir.



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