

A Novelist's Toolkit

— AN ESSAY BY —

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Excel spreadsheets. Bar graphs. Bubble maps. Pie charts. Scattergrams. Intersecting and overlapping normal curves. Not the usual items in a novelist's toolkit. But my tools nonetheless. Granted, I have a math background—one of my areas of specialization in graduate school was statistics—and everyone knows that being able to invert a matrix is a prerequisite for a successful literary career. Or not.

But I'm forced to fall back on these skills because I suffer from a serious deficiency in the novel-writing department. Some novelists tell tales of being seated at a computer and getting nowhere, when suddenly the characters take charge and march the story in a completely new direction that the author is helpless to stop—but thrilled to go along with.

Not so for me. I sit at my computer and wait and wait and wait. *Come on*, I say to my characters, *start moving this damn story forward. Get up some gumption!* But no one ever shows up. They're either too docile or I'm too concrete. Whichever it is, I'm left with my graphs and maps and charts.

And so began *The Muralist*. I decided to write a book about art set during the Depression, and it didn't take long to discover that, in those days, most serious artists were working for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), the visual art division of Roosevelt's New Deal program. In New York City, these artists included some of my favorites—Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner—who were young, unknown, and in the early stages of developing the first completely American school of art: Abstract Expressionism. In between long bouts of work, they drank and smoked and partied and jumped in and out of each other's beds. What fun. They all had to be part of the novel.

Because they would be interacting with my fictional protagonist—at this point I had no idea who he or she might be—I started a spreadsheet to keep

track of Mark, Jackson, and Lee's biographies, personalities, and whereabouts. When I learned that the WPA/FAP was abruptly terminated at the start of World War II and much of the artists' work was thrown out as trash, I had my first inkling of a story.

What if a present-day fictional character found a box of these trashed paintings? And what if some of the artwork turned out to be created by my now-famous artists? I graphed the major turning points, using a normal curve as my model, and transferred them to a set of red file cards. This red story line, in which Dani Abrams finds a box of discarded WPA paintings, was included, excluded, and then seriously revised before it was included again in the final version of the book.

During my research, Eleanor Roosevelt's name kept popping up. I've always been fascinated with her, and when I learned she'd been instrumental in creating and supporting the WPA/FAP, she was in, too. But it wasn't until I found out she'd worked to get European refugees into the United States, and that her failure to do so was the greatest regret of her life, that a second story line evolved. Another set of turning points, this time transferred to blue file cards. Eleanor was added to the spreadsheet—FDR, also. Charles Lindbergh, Joe Kennedy, and Breckinridge Long were her antagonists in this fight, so each got his own column.

But what of my protagonist? The person who would carry the novel, who would *be* the novel? Based on my two story lines, she had to be an artist working for the WPA, living in NYC right before World War II, and somehow involved with European refugees. Voila: Alizée Benoit was born. A muralist “on the project,” close friends with Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, romantically involved with Mark Rothko, aided by Eleanor Roosevelt in her attempts to get her Jewish family out of France, thereby becoming the nemesis of Lindbergh, Kennedy, and Long.

And what if the reader discovered at the beginning of the book—back to Dani with her box of trashed paintings—that Alizée had mysteriously disappeared in 1940, and no one knew why or what had happened to her? My major story line dropped into place. I graphed and recorded it on yellow file cards. I used bubble maps to work out Alizée's relationships with each of the other characters and gave her a spreadsheet all her own.

I shuffled the red, blue, and yellow file cards to make them into a coherent

story, added in a set of purple cards for Mark Rothko's subplot, pink for Lee Krasner's, orange for Breckinridge Long's, and green for Alizée's fiancé's, Henri. And I began to write. I read and researched and wrote some more. I played around with my story lines, reworked my graphs, and developed a new series of charts to track the timing, location, and tension level—this is where the scattergrams come in—of each chapter. Then I rewrote and rewrote and rewrote some more. Two and a half years later, with more than a little nail biting, I sent the manuscript to my editor. On Monday I was convinced she'd hate it. On Tuesday I was just as convinced that she'd love it.

I was wrong on both accounts. She didn't hate it, but she didn't love it, either. So after I had a good cry, we brainstormed ways to solve the problems. Then I went back to work. I redid all the story lines, included Dani and excluded Henri, changed up the bubble maps, revised all the file cards until the scattergrams took on the right contours. Henri transformed into Alizée's brother and Dani into her grandniece. Alizée grew more desperate, and Breckenridge Long appeared to be getting the comeuppance he deserved.

Nine months later I sent it back to her. This time she claimed she *almost* loved it, but that it wasn't quite there yet. I shed a few tears. Then finally, finally, finally, after another six months of revision, she declared she *did* love it. It was finished and ready to go into production. I had another good cry.

From my experience, and contrary to popular belief, there's nothing particularly sexy about writing a novel. Yes, there are those moments when the world disappears and it's just you and your imaginary friends, or when you believe—usually falsely—that you've written a truly great sentence, but these are very few and very far between. Mostly, writing's about getting your butt in your chair and working through the painful parts to reach those beautiful words, "The End." Or in this case, "Ready to go into production."

So although I'm happy with the way *The Muralist* turned out, and I hope you will enjoy it, I can't get away from the notion that my life would be so much easier if I could just find a few more characters with gumption.