



Raymond Obstfeld teaches at OCC and is the author of over 50 published books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, as well as a dozen screenplays.

His most recent works are What Color Is My World and On the Shoulders of Giants, both New York Times bestsellers co-authored with basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Together they won the 2012 NAACP Image Award. They are currently co-authoring a graphic novel and a TV drama for NBC. Obstfeld received an Edgar nomination for his mystery novel, Dead Heat and won the Delacorte Young Adult fiction award for The Joker and the Thief.

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Interview: Raymond Obstfeld

You have spoken in the past of your family's store. How did your family situation and the challenges your parents faced shape your most compelling lifelong questions? How did it affect your development as a writer?

My parents were immigrants from Germany fleeing Nazis. They settled in a small town in Pennsylvania and opened a Jewish Delicatessen with a huge Star of David on their sign. Turns out we faced the same discrimination there that they faced in Germany, though not quite as deadly. I was in fistfights from the time I was five from being called a dirty Jew. Our store had swastikas painted on it, bullets were fired through the window, and eventually the store was firebombed and destroyed, though my parents rebuilt it.

The effect on me was to want to get the hell out of Dodge as quickly as possible and go where people were a lot smarter. I developed a love for logic and critical thinking because I experienced firsthand the dangers of prejudice. The other effect was I developed a love of reading as a means to experience the world outside this small town. I started with comic books, then novels. I also became very interested in politics (hey, it was the Sixties) and began subscribing to various newspapers while still in high school.

This turned out for the best because, instead of hanging with my high school chums, I spent time at the local college. Because I was younger, I wanted to impress the girls so I started writing poetry and gave readings at the college coffee house.

It worked. Soon I was dating college girls and had college guy friends. This impressed some of my high school classmates and I suddenly had my own group of budding writers, artists, and politicians. I was on student council, editor of the school newspaper, and acting in plays. Now, that's the power of poetry!

Who were the mentors or writers you turned to for inspiration, and why?

I hate to be such a cliché, but *The Catcher in the Rye* woke me up to the possibilities of fiction. I also read a lot of poetry and plays. For a while, I memorized a poem every day and read a play. Again, this had less to do with my literary aspirations than my dating life. I had to play the role of the young writer. Then one day I realized I wasn't playing a role; it's who I really was.

When you were starting out as a writer, did you participate in workshops or retreats? How important is the workshop process for writers?

There weren't any workshops available until I went to graduate school. It was a hard adjustment because I'd never been critiqued by peers before and I wasn't initially receptive. Now I realize how invaluable it all was. Today, I'm constantly inspired by my students' writings in our workshops. If I read something that's really good, I go back and polish my work so it's better. If I read something with flaws, I go back and look for those same flaws in my work. And I find them!

Workshopping is one of the best tools for improving one's writing. The act of critiquing another writer helps you articulate strengths and weaknesses, which makes you better able to see them in your own work.

If you could pick just a handful of books or works of art that you consider indispensable for writers, what would be on that list?

Although I've written several books on writing, I think most are about the same. Yes, they can teach you some technique, but

mostly they're good for inspiring the writer by keeping them focused. You can't teach a technique to a writer until they are ready to learn it, which means until they have to confront that specific issue themselves. I've had students retake my classes many times, listen to the same lectures, then, after the fourth time hearing the same spiel, come up and say, "Oh, now I understand." That's because they weren't ready before.

I have writers I admire that inspire me. Right now that list includes Miranda July, Lorrie Moore, Leonard Michaels, Peter de Vries, and Gillian Flynn. But I'm also a big fan of young adult fiction. Recently, I read Meg Abbott's *Dare Me* and several books by Rob Thomas. Loved them. I also read a lot of mysteries and suspense thrillers and comic books. Plus, I watch a lot of TV and go to the movies every week. I find all of that inspiring.

Unlike writers who "specialize," you have written novels in multiple genres, screenplays, poetry, and nonfiction books on the writing process, history, world religions, and a wide range of other topics. Have you noticed recurring themes in your writing, and if so, how have they changed over time? How do you account for the range of writing styles you employ?

My agent told me a couple decades ago that I should stick to one genre if I wanted a good career. She was right; that is what you should do if you want to grow a loyal readership. But I'm too curious about so many things that I couldn't do that. I liked the challenge of trying new genres. Right now I'm co-writing my first comic book series. Very scary, but exciting.

Themes? I tend to write about characters who have to abandon the comfortable and familiar world to make an existential leap of faith in their own ability to make moral choices, even if they conflict with the rest of society. That's certainly not original, but I like to think that I do it in a way that's effective and inspiring. That's the theme in the middle school novel that Kareem and I wrote (*Stealing the Game*). Fortunately, most parents won't read it so they won't know how subversive it really is.

What is your writing process, and how has it changed over the course of your career? What routines help you to stay on course? What pitfalls do you avoid?

The biggest change is that I take my time. I used to be in such a rush because I was always so amped up. I'd stay up writing all day and into the night. Kids make that impossible because I want to spend more time with them. Ironically, as soon as I slowed the process down, I became a better writer. I polish more, think more about plot and character.

Now I get up, fret that I'll suck at whatever I need to write for the day, try to talk myself out of writing by listing other things that need to be done, then sit down and write. Same every day. That's the only way to actually get things done. I'm always on deadlines — for articles, books, scripts — so I can't indulge my neuroses. Knowing that I can't talk myself out of writing makes me a better writer.

Having a schedule means that I spend the rest of the day thinking about the work. This is the most important part of the process. In my mind I write scenes, reject them, write others, reject them, until I find something I think will work. That way when I actually write, I have some notes to work from and it goes better.

How does a novel idea come to you? To what extent do you plan a novel before you begin the actual writing? Or do you simply begin and then base your plans on what emerges?

I've done it both ways. When I'm working on a series, I have to submit outlines to the publisher. However, those are only rough guesses of where the novel will go. They always change. Usually, I just start the novel at a place that I think is interesting, have something outrageous happen, and figure it all out from there. I try to write the kind of opening that would compel me to keep reading because that's what will compel me to keep writing.

Are the characters in your books purely invented, or are they based on situations you have observed in life or people

you have known? If the latter, how do you determine what is off-limits?

It's a combination of both. Like most writers, I observe people, notice quirky things they do or say, and use them for my characters. When I was writing as Laramie Dunaway, I based the main female characters on my wife, Loretta. They had to have a certain combination of wit, intelligence, self-deprecation, and curiosity that she has. That's probably why those books were so successful.

You have written under several pseudonyms in the course of your writing career and employed a wide range of narrative voices. What is your process for developing a narrative voice very different from your own?

I'm not sure the voice is ever radically different from my own. Once I find whatever it is I like about the narrator, it's easy to become that voice. The most challenging are when doing young adult because you have to recapture a certain innocence without it seeming forced. But once you do, it's like re-living that time all over again.

Having written westerns, sci-fi, mysteries, and young adult fiction, how do you regard genre distinctions as a whole? What differences do you notice in your approach to writing in different forms?

Every genre has certain requirements. The mystery requires a dead body and some sort of detective. The young adult requires a coming-of-age conflict. I like the challenges of working with those requirements because I love them in the genre works that I read. The important thing is to not let those requirements dictate characterization or style. That's where the best writers are able to elevate the genre. I write every novel as if it's meant to be a literary work, regardless of the genre.

Describe the collaboration process with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Depends on the project. With novels and scripts, we each write and exchange our writing. Then we critique and form the final project. We usually get together before we start and just brainstorm ideas to form a rough outline of themes, characters, and plot.

Are there still aspects of writing that pose problems for you?

Fear of writing crap. Every day I sit down scared that I'll write crap. The secret is that every day I do sit down and write crap. But I've come to realize that hard work and many, many re-writes will transform the crap into something passably good.

What is the role of research in your novels?

I do a lot of research for every novel because I like characters who are a lot smarter than I am.

In addition to your tremendous output as a writer, you also teach full time and you are raising a family. How do you negotiate the challenges of juggling these roles?

Time management is the key. I keep a very strict writing schedule. I make notes on my various projects throughout the day. I also keep a strict sports schedule because I need the exercise to keep doing everything else. If you think about the projects while driving or working out or running errands, you don't waste time during your actual writing time.

To what extent can writing be taught?

It's like a sport. Some people may be born with a certain amount of raw talent, but that's not enough. The techniques of writing that elevate a book from something with potential to something worth reading can be taught. I have seen many students with raw talent never amount to anything with their writing because they lack the passion, the drive, and the disci-

pline. On the other hand, I've seen many more students start out with what appeared to be an average ability and turn that into a startlingly original, compelling voice. I love the fact that it doesn't matter where you start — your passion and drive can elevate you past everyone else.

What is your advice to students who want to major in creative writing or apply for an MFA program?

Do it! If nothing else, it gives you time to immerse yourself in writing and complete some projects that you might be able to sell.

What is the best way to market work in the Internet age? What are your thoughts on e-books and self-publishing?

It's an integral part of the business now. But many beginners don't realize that just because you upload your book doesn't mean anyone will read it. Everything depends on your willingness to promote your book — relentlessly and for a long time. This goes against the disposition of many writers, who take up writing because they enjoy the solitude. Too bad. You will have to promote, promote, promote.

What do you see as the role of a college literary journal, as compared to a more commercial publication?

The lit mag is the showcase for new talent and fresh voices. Yes, many established authors are featured in lit mags, but most journals are dedicated to finding new talent. I read them for inspiration.

What are you working on now?

Kareem and I just finished the third book in our middle school series. We are doing a comic book based on Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's older brother (which Netflix expressed interest in developing as a series). We're also doing two books for Time Books and one for Dutton. We also have a TV drama that we

wrote the pilot for that NBC said they were interested in. And we're doing an interview show on racism in America. I'm also working on a pilot for a TV show with writer-director Julie Davis.

After 40 years of teaching, and after launching the careers of so many young writers, you have a wealth of experience and insight into the challenges young writers face. What advice would you offer aspiring writers to help them stay on course?

Mistakes I made as a young writer:

1. I rushed to finish a novel. Now I take my time and make sure every word is the one I want. I challenge every plot choice I make to see if there's not a better one (hint: there always is!).

2. I bristled at advice from teachers, peers, and even editors. I thought I knew better. Turns out, a lot of their advice was really good. Now, I take time thinking about their advice. About 70 percent of the time, I follow it.

3. I wasn't disciplined at first. I wrote when I felt like it (using the excuse that I wasn't "inspired"). That's the death of most writers. I discovered that I write better when I don't feel like it (which is 90 percent of the time) because I'm more critical of my work then. I also found out that once I start writing, even when I don't want to, I will soon get swept up into the challenge of it.

What would you like to say to new writers working on their first stories or novels?

Write what you want to read. Make sure every scene has conflict and every scene surprises the reader in some way. That surprise could be a clever simile, a plot twist, or a line of dialogue. Every page must reward the reader in some way.