

Alice Mattison
15 Andersson St
New Haven CT 06511

Alice
MATTISON - 1

January 29, 2003

Dear Alice,

It's a long time since I've asked you to read work of mine, but I could really use your perspective on a text of 100 pages I've just finished.

I say "text" because I'm not sure what it is or how to think about it. For a year and a half I sat down every morning with a clear sense of what to write that day just as if I knew what I was writing at all, but I can't say I ever did. It was not a question of free association or automatic writing. The thing is highly structured--but structure of what?

The piece contains dialogue and has a script-like aspect but it is not a play. A story, two stories actually, get told in the course of it but it is not fiction. It sounds, at moments, like critical prose but it is not a work of criticism. What does that leave for it to be?

Maybe I should feel innovative, but in fact what I feel is bewildered.

I'd really like to know what sort of writing these pages look like to you. Some practical advice on what to "do" with them would also be welcome. (Stage them? How? Publish them? As what?)

Do you feel you could help me with this? If so, I'll mail or drop off the manuscript. Many thanks.

Best,

David Cole
137 Cottage St.
New Haven, CT 06511

203-624-3982

received 2/13/03

ALICE
MATTISON - 2

Wednesday, 2/12/03

Dear David,

I read up to about page 50, then turned the remaining pages to see in a rough way where you were going. Then I started again and read to page 25. I kept thinking "Well, he can call it fiction if he wants to..." In other words, in a sense it's obviously a novella or something like that: it claims to be a series of instructions to an engraver, preceded by an introduction by somebody else, but it's not. But of course we can call anything fiction if we want to. You write your autobiography, panic as it is about to go to press, and change the title page to read "A Novel." As a fiction writer, I'm glad fiction doesn't have any requirements other than that calling something fiction announces that it might not be true. And I wouldn't want to try to define fiction in more specific terms than that. The trouble is that if this thing you're writing is fiction, it's not terribly good fiction so far— it doesn't have momentum, either the momentum caused by telling a story (or two stories. But the story of Hercules is presented at the outset more than narrated; the story of the author and the engraver is more of a story) or the momentum of using clever tropes (like the confusion between eleven and twelve, or the reference to some piece of writing that isn't actually there) in different ways.

I don't understand how it could be a play— or maybe you mean that, at least theoretically, somebody could read the whole thing aloud, while actors demonstrated the poses and facial expressions in the engravings? The requirement for facial expression in the engravings— the description of the moment, often a moment before a thought, and how someone feels, just before feeling something different, is the most interesting thing in the book— the beginning of each instruction, but although I imagine people when I read those instructions, I don't particularly want you to hire some actors so I can see real people.

It seems more like a critical essay in the form of fiction (the way some Platonic dialogues are essays in the form of plays that wouldn't work in the theater). But if it's an essay— I suppose on the nature of a play script, and how a play is like instructions to an engraver— it again lacks momentum, or seems to go astray. As each instruction gets past the initial description (which has its own momentum), and moves into a sort of argument the author has with himself, the piece seems to lose direction— it's no longer either narrating something one is curious about, or probing the form (at least in a way I could follow) or presenting something that could be shown on a stage.

So I went to bed without knowing much (except that I had a feeling the issue is audience) but in the night I woke up and found myself thinking "He can call it fiction if he WANTS to" with a different emphasis. And that's what I think. That is, I think you wrote it without knowing what it is, so you didn't feel the energy of trying to do a particular thing. Now I think you need to imagine who your audience is— sense who it is you've been writing for. Either it's someone reading fiction—

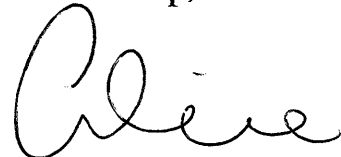
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reading a book, coming to it without preconception except I guess for the implied offer any fiction writer makes: "Read this— it will matter to you. Or at least it will be fun." Or it's someone watching and listening in a theater, who also, I think, begins with nothing but the author's similar implied promise "Come to the theater. You'll be glad you did." Or, if it's a critical essay after all, your audience is someone sitting and reading, but someone who has some prior interest. I'm supposing that the author of a critical essay is saying "This will matter to you— if you care about the date of Thomas Dekker's plays" or, in this case, "This will matter to you if you care what a script truly is." Once you know who the audience is (I assume that like me and most writers I know, you too have the feeling that everything you write is somehow already there someplace, and it's your work to feel your way to it, to discover it or rediscover it) —once you know the audience, then I think you'll feel a more specific desire, and will be able to continue working on the piece in order to make it conform better to what its audience will need— cutting or clarifying or whatever.

So I think that what's holding you back now is something that works as a topic in the piece (Is this a play? Is this a tale? What can it be?) and worked for you as you composed it, but no longer can work— that is, your lack of a desire to make it one thing or another. But surely you have that desire, and if you study the imaginary faces of your audience you'll find out what it is. The piece needn't say it's one thing or another, but I think you need to know which it is.

That's my reaction, anyway. I thought I could be clearer on paper than on the phone. I hope this is of some use.

In friendship,



Alice Mattison
15 Anderson St.
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February 18, 2003

ALICE
MATTISON

- 14

Dear Alice,

Thank you for that remarkable letter. To watch you reading, rereading, waking in the night, wrestling with my text, was extraordinarily moving.

You were more helpful to me in identifying a problem than in suggesting a solution--but then of course finding a solution is my problem.

You refer to my "lack of a desire to make it one thing or another" and add "But surely you have that desire." Well, yes and no.

I can't manage to see Hercules Belabored as fiction or drama or criticism manqué, with the implication that, of course, one would now wish to shape it into some one or other of those. If I had wanted to write a play about Hercules or about the dealings of an author with his illustrator, I would have tried that. If I had wanted to write an essay about the nature of scripts, I would have tried that. If I had wanted to write a story, I wouldn't have known what to try and probably would have dropped the whole idea. (The text as it stands is a "fiction" in the sense that it is pretending to be something it's not, but not fiction in the sense of "a narrative.")

But in fact what I wanted was to write from the moment of suspension between these (to me, for this material) equally unavailable alternatives, to explore the possibility of writing from, and of, that moment.

What your comments make me realize is how likely such a project is to arouse expectations it can't or won't gratify: expectations of narrative "momentum" (to use your word) or expository straightforwardness. This is something to think about and I thank you for setting me thinking about it.

Let me end where I began, with gratitude for the energy and intensity of your engagement with my text. I feel--and how else does one ever wish to feel--read.

Best,

June 10

ALICE
MATTISON

- #5

Dear David,

When I run things float through my head, and what floated in this morning was the conviction that there's something wrong with the speech about dropping the bomb and standing back to ~~wax~~ see the damage. I wish I had it in hand; I'm not even certain where it is or absolutely sure who says it. It's important, and I think probably wrong, partly because it echoes the downward motion of the going-down that is the main thrust of the play-- it should be completely metaphorical, out of another realm of movement, I suspect-- partly because it's too strong, not fresh enough-- it's been said before. Partly I think that there are 2 separate urges and the other is the more interesting one: the urge to act and possibly destroy everything, and the urge to act and possibly destroy something, which is after all what the YG in fact does.

I am very sure these days that the title of the play should be "The Passion for Down." It's a gripping, strong title, and I think the correct one despite all the possible obvious claims for the other, or for the alternative titles-- I love alternative titles, but I don't think you could just reverse them.

Love,
Alice