



CHERYL FOGGO

FAILING STILL LIFE 101 MADE ME A BETTER WRITER

Lessons from the lemon tree

Once overheard a visual artist lamenting that our educational systems undervalue and mismanage art instruction so completely that most people stop drawing around the age of eight. Whether it was system failure or whether I was garbage at sketching in Grade 2, that observation was true for me. My small self's decision to abandon drawing because I believed I wasn't good at it was consequential later, when I became a writer who travels. Places and moments stayed with me if I drew them. More than reading my journals or looking at photos, reviewing my sketches pulled me into a truer remembrance of how those moments felt and smelled and sounded, which was useful for crafting character and setting. Unfortunately, my drawing skills were limited and clumsy.

I returned to thinking about the connections between visual art and literature in 2013, when I noticed that the first-time novelist in my writer's salon, professional sculptor Brian Cooley, had a gift for lucid prose.

Our salons were small, informal, and wonderful. My husband, Clem Martini, and I rotated hosting with Brian and his wife, Mary Ann Wilson, a landscape painter. Mary Ann doesn't write, so she used the time to make fun sketches of us. Structured around dinner and great conversation, these gatherings were always the highlight of the week. We agreed it would be fun to take the salons on the road "someday."



At that time, Clem was working on a novel, *The Comedian*, about the ancient Roman playwright, Titus Maccius Plautus. For research, he wanted to see the Villa Romana di Casale and the Teatro Antico di Taormina, both in Sicily. I reserved lodgings at the Lemon Tree Villa near Taormina, where the two of us spent our days exploring the sites that had brought us, or reading and writing on the balconies overlooking the Ionian Sea, Mt. Etna and Castlemola. We joined in harvesting the fruit of the villa's organic olive grove with the owners, Karen and Diego. The nights were just as good. With no restaurant on site at the villa, we either chose one of the many options in nearby Giardini Naxos and Taormina, or picked up groceries and cooked for ourselves. After dinner, we drank wine from the Lemon Tree's vineyard. At some point, one of us said to the other, "Why continue putting it off to some day? This is the spot."

Following a couple of years of planning, we returned to the Lemon Tree with Mary Ann and Brian and our first small cohort. We designed the offering as a space where creatives could explore in a tranquil and splendid setting. On alternating mornings,

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writing class convened on the patio or in the garden behind the villa. Drawing and painting classes in the afternoon were moveable. Sometimes Brian and Mary Ann took us to nearby ruins, sometimes we drew in the vineyard and olive grove, sometimes we set up our easels and sketch pads near a cliff above the ocean. The four of us offered optional individual consultation.

On non-instructional days, we took our guests on excursions, or arranged for a cooking class at the villa, or relaxed, or swam, or compared the gelato of Giardini Naxos with the gelato of Taormina. Every evening we gathered in the Simeto for three-course dinners that stretched across hours. Eventually, we drifted outdoors with our wine to watch Taormina light up across the valley.

The retreat was a success, and two years later we repeated the experience.

I took advantage of the opportunity to learn from Mary Ann and Brian and wasn't surprised to see improvement in my drawings. What I hadn't anticipated was that drawing would create new maps in my writer brain. The tools I gained from the crossover were crossing back over.

We conjure worlds as writers, but we don't need to draw every vein on every leaf for the reader to know it's a tree. There are things that can and should be left unshown, unsaid, unprescribed.

As the four of us observed one another's methods of instruction, we discovered many areas of overlap between the visual arts and writing. It seems obvious to say most artistic output requires outlining and planning, but we recognized similar challenges in our outlines. How do you guide the eye of the viewer of a painting, how do you direct the attention of your reader? Do you want to do it with invisible elegance, subtlety, and nuance? Or a sledgehammer? Your choice, of course, but as the author or artist, layer in a strategy during the planning phase if you don't want to swim in muddy water later.

Clem and I also noticed how Brian and Mary Ann used shadow, light, and contrast in their work to create tension. Brian's sculptures were active and alive. Mary Ann's paintings had moods that changed depending on the light in the room. We were reminded of how a scene with long shadows and skittering leaves at twilight is scarier than stubby shadows in the brightest light of day. Contrast, conflict, shadow, struggle, mood, rising action—these elements are present in all of our work, whether it be Clem's novel, my play, Brian's sculpture or Mary Ann's painting.

Drawing leads me to reflect on my writing often, in a good way. In either form, bolder strokes are more interesting than tentative choices.

Of course, making bolder choices can lead to what we might think of as failures in the moment.

One morning during art class, I showed Mary Ann my still life of a terracotta pot filled with flowering plants. I was pleased enough with it that I added watercolour for the first time. Mary Ann sat beside me to see the still life arrangement from my point of view. She looked at my colourful drawing, then gently said, "You can't see the dirt and stems from here. You drew what your brain told you was in the pot, rather than what you were actually looking at."

As drawing failures go, this was a transformative one for me. I spent a couple of days trying to figure out why I had sketched the contents of the pot as though I were standing above looking down. Why did I put in filler that was hidden from my actual line of sight? I went back to the spot several times to try again and realized my original chain of events was flawed. The first problem was poor research. Without investigation, I had chosen a still life I thought would be easy. I hadn't made an outline. At some point, the drawing became difficult, but instead of letting that thought trouble my mind,

I closed my mind. The terracotta pot my lazy imagination "showed" me was easier to draw than the real pot in front of me. I then attempted to cover my mistakes with the smoke and mirrors of watercolour.

This is not a metaphor about writerly imagination. Imagination is good. Lazy imagination is not good.

At the Lemon Tree, connections between different art forms often occurred unexpectedly and made me reflect not just on my writing itself, but also on my relationship to a genre.

During one session, I told Mary Ann I was dissatisfied with my trees. I couldn't diagnose what was wrong with them, only that they didn't look right. She picked up my sketchbook and flipped through several pages.

"You have to leave space for the birds to fly through," she said.

She didn't know she was pinpointing more than the issue with my sketches of trees. I came to writing for theatre late in my career, in my 40s. I rarely saw plays on Alberta stages written by Black people, and I was overprotective of my work, for fear that an industry that seemed content to ignore us would get it wrong. Yet trust in other artists is essential when writing for theatre, and my lack of trust was obvious. I overwrote my plays, filled in too much. I even had an actor take me aside once. She gestured to a passage where I had typed a word of her dialogue in italics, as an indicator of where I wanted her to place the emphasis in that line. "No acting notes, okay?" she whispered.

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The pandemic interfered with our plan to offer the retreat in 2021. No one can predict the future of travel, but we hope to get back to the Lemon Tree one day. Meanwhile, although I'm not giving up my day job as a writer, I continue to practice drawing, especially trees. And the more I learn to leave space where space should be, the more they look like trees. ■

Cheryl Foggo is a playwright, author and filmmaker. In 2021, she received the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Outstanding Artist Award, The Doug and Lois Mitchell Outstanding Calgary Artist Award and the Arts, Media and Entertainment Award from the Calgary Black Chambers. Her documentary, John Ware Reclaimed, can be found at nfb.ca.