

Habits of a highly effective writer

Timothy Taylor's creative discipline

by Cheri Hanson

March 2006: Many writers are disciplined, with regimented schedules and 1,000-words-before-coffee rules, but Timothy Taylor is a special case. The banker-turned-novelist works out of a downtown Vancouver office, which serves the dual function of literary haven and professional headquarters, and he divides his writing into three main areas: novels, non-fiction magazine pieces, and film work.

In fact, Taylor calls his approach to writing a “business model” – though he uses the phrase as a tongue-in-cheek wink to his corporate past. He’s pragmatic, but he also has a tangible passion for the craft.

Taylor’s 12th-floor office exudes comfort and tidy efficiency. Vintage teak furniture encircles a cozy sitting area. Black-and-white boxing photos hang alongside finger paintings created by his two-year-old son. On this oppressive January day, the city view is obliterated by fog and drizzle, but the mood here is welcoming. Taylor’s chocolate lab, Buster, licks himself happily on the carpet. It’s surprising to find such a warm sanctuary in the historic Dominion Building, built in 1910 and now situated in an urban tug-of-war between the starched business district and the impoverished Downtown Eastside. It’s a fitting location for Taylor, since colleagues describe him as an accessible sophisticate who could slip seamlessly between a corporate meet-and-greet and rounds of bourbon in a gritty bar.

The building’s architect, J.S. Helyer, tripped on the steps of his trapezoidal, cast-iron staircase and fell to his death – a tale that keeps the artists, writers, and film-biz tenants whispering about a curse. But that’s another story.

Taylor began renting the office in 1995. In making the shift from banking to books, he realized that he needed the structure of a more traditional workday – and a comfy place for Buster. Working from home had put him in opposing cycles with his wife, Jane, and made it difficult to juggle family and writing. The unique location also stirred his first rush of creativity. “I felt like I had discovered this new, in-between zone,” says Taylor. “I’ve always responded to that.”

That creativity is also nurtured through focused effort. “He approaches his work with great discipline,” says Taylor’s agent, Dean Cooke. When Cooke read an initial draft of Taylor’s first novel, *Stanley Park*, he was struck by how accurately Taylor captured the language and frenzy of a professional kitchen. Cooke put himself through university by working in restaurants, and remembers saying to Taylor, “So, obviously you’ve been a waiter.” In fact, Taylor had never so much as taken a drink order.

For his new book, *Story House*, to be published by Knopf Canada in April, Taylor has brought the same kind of thorough research to the architectural profession. The novel is the account of two half-brothers, Graham and Elliot Gordon, whose father was a celebrated B.C. architect. After a combative adolescence, the brothers settle into separate and vastly different lives in the same city: Graham is a semi-successful architect, while Elliot sells counterfeit goods and exists on the fringes of Vancouver society. Drama builds when the brothers reluctantly join forces to restore a house their father designed in the early days of his career.

It took four years to complete a first draft of *Story House*, says Taylor. The novel didn't proceed sequentially and hit a few blind alleys along the way. "It pieced itself together like some kind of investigation, where I was being given clues and I was trying to connect the dots." Untangling the complex and jargon-filled world of architecture posed another challenge. Taylor explored Vancouver with Trevor Boddy – a local architect, critic, and award-winning writer – and also spoke with a younger architect in the early stages of his career. Those conversations informed the character of Graham Gordon, and the "occupational bitterness" he carries into his middle years.

Through it all, Taylor's goal was immersion without fluency; there was no need to understand how cantilevers work or how to draw a reflected ceiling plan. "I'm not really trying to know enough that I could pretend to be an architect," says Taylor. "I'm trying to know enough that I could write the way an architect might speak."

Taylor's writing often tackles the intricate details of his characters' careers – the down-and-dirty work of a professional chef or an antiques dealer or a handicapper at the track. If anything sparked his interest in how other people live, it's the somewhat winding path the 42-year-old novelist has paved for himself. Born in Venezuela, he arrived in Canada as a toddler and grew up near Horseshoe Bay in West Vancouver. He spent his teenage years in Edmonton, then completed an economics degree at the University of Alberta and an MBA at Queen's. He launched his career in the Toronto financial world and transferred to Vancouver shortly afterward, in 1987.

Four years later, Taylor realized that a critical part of his life was noticeably absent: he wanted to write. "It was a sense of something being undone. I was really busy and increasingly unhappy, and there reached a point where the cost seemed to be outweighing the benefits." The transition, though, was difficult and often discouraging. He had no literary credentials, and struggled to sell even a single freelance story. After landing his first magazine piece in *Canadian Lawyer* and publishing a short story in *Grain*, Taylor juggled his writing with a fisheries policy consulting practice, which he didn't close until 1999.

Taylor hit the nation's literary radar after winning the Journey Prize for short fiction in 2000 and becoming the first writer to publish three stories in a single edition of the *Journey Prize Anthology* – an accomplishment that remains

unmatched in the award's 16-year history. His reputation hit overdrive after Knopf Canada published his first book, *Stanley Park*, in spring 2001; the novel was nominated for the Giller Prize and the Ethel Wilson Award for Fiction. Taylor followed that up with a short-story collection, *Silent Cruise*, published in 2002 under the Vintage Canada imprint.

Story House is Taylor's first book since then, and many eyes will be focused on its reception. "It's been a long time since I've seen a second novel greeted with such anticipation," says Cooke. Taylor downplays any stage fright, though, saying only that he has no firm sales or critical expectations for his second novel, and Knopf has not shared any of its own targets. "I assume that for every book I write, there will be some degree of pre-pub anxiety."

In the meantime, he can always keep busy with the two other aspects of his MBA-style writing model, magazines and films. He's a frequent contributor to such publications as *Toro*, *enRoute*, and *Vancouver*, and says the work has a positive effect on his fiction, often generating new story ideas and observations. Most importantly, it keeps him engaged with people, places, and ideas. "I need ... obligations in the outside world." Taylor has also penned several documentary films, and Canadian actor Bruce Greenwood optioned his screenplay for *Stanley Park*. Like the magazine assignments, film work allows him to collaborate and explore new creative territory – and it comes with some financial rewards. If *Stanley Park* does go into production (it's currently scheduled to start shooting this summer), it would be his most lucrative payday of the year, Taylor says.

What doesn't seem likely – at least, not anytime soon – is another short-story collection. Taylor says he's currently writing a short story and still loves the form, but hasn't submitted one anywhere in years. "It's not a particularly attractive product for publishers at the moment. My impression is that there's just about anything you can bring your agent or your publisher that they will prefer."

Cooke agrees. "Short-story collections rarely sell, and I say that as a reader of short stories and someone who loves short stories," he says. "It's one of the depressing realities of the marketplace."

But it may be a moot point anyway, since Taylor ultimately defines himself as a novelist. "My heart belongs with writing novels. There comes that point in your writing life where you feel bold enough to introduce yourself as a writer. I'm now confident in introducing myself as a writer, but I still get a little frisson from introducing myself as a novelist, as if to identify myself with a form that I've only tackled twice.

"I'll say it with absolute, unswerving confidence after I've written seven."