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Essay by Fred Setterberg

Clarity—Finally!—After a Hard Day's Work



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Monday night, so I'm making soup. Nothing fancy. *Minestra di pasta e fagioli alla Siciliana*. Or, as you Americans say, bean soup with cauliflower and whatever noodles might be lurking in the dark corner of the cupboard. Thanks to Norma Wasserman-Miller's superb *Soups of Italy*, which I've been cooking my way through for the past six months, I know the result will satisfy the gustatory demands of both my wife and our seventeen-year-old niece, who shares a meal with us weekly.

If only I could say as much for what I've written today.

I've been perseverating over the first twenty pages of a book I might conceivably finish sometime during the foggy final

quarter of my life.

Dinner will be served at 6:30.

I write, therefore I cook. Not to “win honor, power, wealth, fame, and the love of women,” as Freud diagnosed the genesis of all artistic urges (though I’m well aware that my wife’s heart and stomach align more closely than conventional anatomy allows). Rather, I cook to get something in the pot and dished out on time.

I cook for relief. As recompense. As penance for the day’s mishaps, blunders, dead-ends, and daydreaming. As evidence that I’m still alive and trying to make something out of—well, not nothing, but many things. Most of which I don’t understand yet.

In the kitchen, there is clarity.

Grasp the onion with splayed knuckles, cleave with a single, manly swop of my chef’s knife, and chop with steady, forceful strokes. Moments later: a pungent pile ready to pool and crackle in heated olive oil. Success! Toss in some minced garlic and it begins to smell like a masterpiece.



[5]Writing, as I know it, is chiefly about failure.

I begin a new book with an equal measure of hope, ambition, delight, confusion, and desperation—the *bouquet garni* of anxious invention. Sure, I can look back at previous efforts—words on printed pages, pages assembled between hard and soft covers—and it appears that I did somehow manage to finish the damn thing and serve it up to anybody willing to take a nibble. But if I’m honest with myself, I have to acknowledge that the process always involves a long and winding trail of crumpled pages.

I long for a recipe. But every book is *sui generis* to its author—of its own kind, its ingredients unique, its method of

preparation a hodgepodge.

An onion is always an onion. Over time, I've learned to slice, chop, and mince them more efficiently, spilling less blood on the cutting board and eliminating from the soup the unintended tang of iron. It's cooking's tangible demands that I crave after spending all day immobilized at my desk. Wielding dangerous tools and lighting small fires, feeling up the vegetables for freshness—one finger dipped into the sauce pan to check for taste and temperature, palms and knuckles pawing the bread dough. I relish, so to speak, the physicality of the kitchen. With the oven raging and too many things to do at once, I can actually work up a sweat.

Starting out on a writing project, it's impossible to know precisely where it will end. Even what form it might take. Essay fragments get embedded in narrative sections of a novel. Characters from two unrelated stories meet, marry, and procreate in a third. With cooking, the limits stand firm. My coq au vin will never emerge from the pot as moussaka.

Then there's timing. Books take years. Since there's already a surfeit, readers can wait. (And with all that snacking on Netflix and Pandora, not to mention less nourishing and wholesome websites, the public may not be as hungry for another book as most writers would like to believe.)

When do people want dinner? They want it now.

Even at the height of chaos and confusion—kitchen faucet spouting geysers, cumin mistaken for cinnamon, bouillabaisse on the floor—I know the meal will eventually be served. If it's late, we might eat at seven, even eight. (If it's past nine, I'll speak rakishly about evenings in Barcelona and audaciously strive for a continental flair.) But I'll never serve up tonight's dinner tomorrow. Much less postpone eating until next month or next decade.



Dinner gets done. Books get abandoned, bungled, finished, finally published, and ultimately forgotten. Not always, of course. Not immediately. Better or perhaps luckier books may linger on the senses, lodge in memory. Still, if my cooking took as uncertain a course as my writing, we would be spending this evening in one of Oakland's finer pizzerias.

While I've never cooked a genuinely splendid meal, and probably never will, I've made plenty of dishes that have been

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consumed with gusto. Even the worst course gets eaten—and that includes last Wednesday's truly dreadful *vegetables farcies* with the droopy, saline eggplant and the hoof-hard *merguez* sausage. (It all turned out better the next day when stuffed into an omelet.) Despite my endless errors, inadequate technique, and a penchant for experimentation that sometimes goes awry, my wife and friends keep coming back for more. As a cook, I meet a hungry, forgiving world.

I could dwell on thoughts of the scrambled mess I've left at my desk to sort out tomorrow. But there's no time. Right now, thank goodness, I have to make dinner.

Publishing Information

- *Soups of Italy: Cooking over 130 Soups the Italian Way* by Norma Wasserman-Miller (William Morrow Cookbooks, 1997).

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Fred Setterberg is the author of *Lunch Bucket Paradise: A True-Life Novel*, published by Heyday (2011) and *The Roads Taken: Travels Through America's Literary Landscapes* (Interlink, 1995), which won the AWP Prize in Creative Nonfiction. He lives in Oakland, California.

To learn more, visit [Fred Setterberg's website](#) [7].

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