



TOM LESKIW

SMASHING THE BOX

Although I've dabbled in fiction, I consider myself a nonfiction writer. Often, the inspiration for my work springs from an outdoor experience while birding, hiking, or boating. However, my near-absolute allegiance to writing about the natural world sometimes causes me to reflect on the fine line that can separate a groove from a rut.

I joined a writer's group a little more than a year ago. Other members of the group often tackle genres and situations foreign to my own experience: gritty, sometimes macabre noir mysteries; zombie-esque apocalypses; elaborate, engrossing tales of fantasy; period pieces set in Europe and elsewhere; and essays that reflect on the interpersonal dynamics encountered in the corporate world or teaching profession. It's not that their work doesn't move me. Quite the contrary. I'm impressed and a bit envious of writers who can create something from nothing . . . or at least something beyond their own first-hand experiences. Although I have an unpublished novel and a long-neglected outline for another work of fiction, time and again, I find myself returning to the natural world for inspiration.

Inspection + reflection = inspiration is a familiar formula to my writing. However, the mere act of writing these words makes me want to escape from this self-constructed creative gulag for . . . er, if not greener pastures, something exotic—topics I've yet to explore.

For the science-based writing I do, I need to stay true to the facts; the natural world contains boundaries that I must always acknowledge. I can't give a character long-range views through a leafless hardwood forest in mid-summer. Or claim that returning adult salmon, far from the ocean, have shimmering silver bodies, when, in fact, their bodies are riddled with the black-and-white fungus of decay. To do so would mean that my writing has lost its tether to the natural world.

How I choose to interpret the same or similar event can spawn a variety of responses from me over time. How an experience is framed: which aspect is