



Chapter 3 - Apricots by Eric Maisel

One summer morning I go out shopping for fruit at the open –air market on the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. The prices at the multiblock market are low-whole pineapples at the equivalent of 75¢ each, apricots at 40¢ a pound – and, after curbing my enthusiasm to buy everything, I decide on the apricots. As I approach one of the fruit-and-vegetable stalls, I notice a woman selecting individual apricots and putting them in a paper bag. I do the same, selecting the good and avoiding the bad ones.

A young Arab minding the long row of produce hurries over to us, lectures the woman, hands her the scoop that has gotten buried among the apricots, and orders her to scoop. I don't know what the two of them are saying, but it's perfectly clear what he intends to communicate. *At these prices*, he is telling her, *you don't get to pick just the good ones. You take the bad with the good. That's the deal.*

The woman doesn't agree. She makes a *Go away, don't bother me!* Gesture, utters some choice words of her own, and keeps selecting the good fruit. He chides her some more and, confronted by her stony indifference, throws up his hands. Then he turns to me. I scoop. But it isn't simply to avoid a scene. The idea appeals to me tremendously, as it is an antidote to the more usual idea that the good should arrive without flaws and blemishes.

Taking the bad with the good is a principle that writers need to learn. The victims of endless advertising, we have been brainwashed into fully misunderstanding basic ideas like good and bad. As one example of this malady, we are taught to expect *only the best*. What does *only the best* mean? It means that we feel we are entitled to something like perfection in our goods and services, that it is unseemly to talk about the failures and mistakes that were part of the process, and that things get our stamp of approval based almost entirely on how they appear.

In a modern supermarket, everything looks perfect. Nothing is ever ripe, but the displays look so good. In a modern movie, the production values are beyond belief. The movie may be silly and beneath contempt, but it certainly *looks* splendid. Where and when are we taught to take the bad with the good? We aren't! Instead we are bombarded with the opposite message: *This is shiny! This is new! This is perfect! This is good! And nothing bad happens along the way!*

In order to create, you must take the bad with the good. You are bound to write many bad paragraphs along with the good ones. That is the eternal law. You can get rid of those bad paragraphs later, but first you must write them. Otherwise you won't write anything. If you try to write only the good paragraphs, you will paralyze yourself. You

will fall victim to perfectionism, even if you aren't consciously trying to be perfect. Understand that the good *requires* the bad, that getting to the good is a process that includes mistakes and messes.

It doesn't seem to matter how many well-respected authors confess to needing twelve drafts to get their novels right, or three years of false starts to get their stage plays on solid footing. Even when a Nobel Prize winner announces that his first three novels stank, still the millions of would-be writers listening to these remarks do not hear what's being said. They do not hear that a writer can't avoid the bad, even if his life were to depend on it. They do not hear – that is, they deny – that they *must* take the bad with the good because the bad is part of the process.

If you want to understand the concept of denial, just visit with a writer not writing his novel because “it isn't going well”. Say to that writer, “Isn't the best plan to get a draft of your novel written – whether that draft is good, bad, or indifferent – and then see where you are?” Just watch his reaction. He will demonstrate one textbook example or another of psychological defense. His unstated fear is that a bad draft will mean that he is a bad writer, that he is a phony, that he has no chance. It doesn't. It never has meant those things and it never will. A bad draft does not possess that meaning at all. But he thinks it does.

Everything changes the instant you accept that you are bound to do lots of inferior work. Then no particular piece of inferior work is much of a blow. You just burn it and get on with your masterpiece. How wonderful can your writing be if you are tied to the idea that only gems must emerge from your pen? Imagining those gems is like imagining those perfect tomatoes piled high in a frigid supermarket, impervious to harm because of their genetically engineered leather skins. Don't let them impress you!

Paris is a golden opportunity to make messes. It is the perfect place to write the pitiful along with the wonderful, the short story from hell that becomes the short story from heaven, the screenplay with no plot that becomes the epitome of the muscled narrative. Forget about masterpieces! Just come ready to write. Come with ideas, hop, and a genuine willingness to take the bad with the good. Take your cue from that bin of apricots, filled with rock-hard fruit, perfect beauties, and rotten leftovers. Just scoop! It's a real character builder.

Apricots

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By Eric Maisel

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