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# The 6th Floor

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## 'If You Can Do Anything Else, Kids, Do It'

By [ALICE MCDERMOTT](#)

*The author of last weekend's [Lives](#) essay shares the best writing advice she has ever received.*

The novelist Thomas Williams was my first teacher in the graduate writing program at the University of New Hampshire. Tom was a gentle soul, thoughtful, kind — a marvelous line-by-line editor, with, at middle age, a solid body of critically acclaimed work to his credit. He appeared one evening at a graduate-student party looking like a man washed up on shore. He had just received an early copy of a major review of his latest novel, which was based on stories he once told his children. He'd been "eviscerated," he said, by another, more famous, fiction writer — a writer he considered, until this moment, a friend. We, his students, carried him cups of beer. We gathered around him. He was stunned, angry, mournful, brokenhearted. He told us that at this stage of his career, there was no recovering from such a review. We, knowing nothing, tried to reassure him. He looked at us — I think of how young and earnest we must have seemed — and everything in his face and his manner and his pained smile said, "If you can do anything else, kids, do it."

My first literary agent, Harriet Wasserman, was Saul Bellow's agent. Harriet regularly collected from the various literary sources any slights or jibes or whiny critical assessments directed at her most famous client, in part to shield him from them, in part to be offended by them on his behalf. She would always share these with me. I remember asking her, only half facetiously (I had by then, just one novel published), "Shouldn't there be a statute of limitations on snide comments about wonderful writers, some rule that says that after so many great novels, or after a Nobel Prize, no dissenting views are allowed?"

"The idiots," Harriet said, "will always want the last word."

Once, she had me sit with her in her office while we listened on speaker phone to a lawyer who was grilling Bellow on a short story he had written, sniffing for any possible case for libel. The lawyer went through every line of the story, every character, every incident, asking over and over again: "Is this true? Is this a real person? Did this really happen?" Bellow answered patiently, politely, even graciously — "No, that didn't happen. Yes, I had a cousin once" — while I grew angrier and angrier. This great man, this great writer, this

artist and his art being subjected to the indignity of such banal nit-picking. I looked across the desk to Harriet. She shrugged and pointed to the phone. Bellow, his voice weary now, betraying his age, was thanking the man for his time, when surely it should have been the other way around. *If you can do anything else*, I heard. *Do it*.

As an adjunct at the University of California, San Diego, I was delighted with the prospect of encountering Robert Stone, who was a visiting writer that year. He proved elusive, until one afternoon toward the end of the semester when I stepped out of my office at the same moment that Robert Stone stepped out of his. The corridors of the building that housed us were long and bleak and starkly white. It was late in the day and there wasn't another soul around. Nervously, I introduced myself. "What are you working on?" he demanded. I said I had just finished my second novel. He shuddered — physically shuddered — and threw up his hands. "Second novel," he shouted. "The second novel's a killer." And then he turned and went back into his office. I stood alone for a moment in that bleak corridor, utterly bereft, terrified.

If you can do anything else, I tell my students now, if you can do anything other than pursue this literary fiction thing and still sleep at night and wake joyful in the morning and know that the hours of your days have been well spent, then you should do that — that other thing. The beauty of the advice, of course, is how quickly it clarifies, for some of us, what we've always known: we can't. We can't.