

# What I've Learned from Writing

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When I was in school -- in India in the 70s -- my teachers were quite confident that "literature" was written outside the boundaries of the subcontinent, and that anything written in India was "only writing." I have learned from writing that the distinction is irrelevant. Writers don't write because some of us live outside India where writing is magically elevated to the status of "literature." Writers, whether we use narrative or not, write because it helps us make sense of the world, contribute to it, rail at it with a non-violent socially-acceptable weapon -- language.

You would not attend writer's conferences if you did not believe in the power of the written word to transform your life, to raise your thoughts above the mundane tasks of working and cooking, sleeping, washing, cleaning, to offer some explanation, some semblance of meaning to the rhythm of each day. We writers begin as readers. At writer's conferences, we come to study the craft, we come to ask one another how we can pry open the door between our conscious and our subconscious, we come for reassurance that all our solitude and our word-wrestling is worthwhile.

I wanted to "be a writer" when I was eleven years old. But to be a writer, I thought I must have some experience to express, something I wanted to say that no one else had said. I wish I had known then, there is no original thought, because all we humans think and feel has been thought and felt so many times before, by so many generations. There is only original perspective, there are only permutations of scenarios. As I grew older, the cacophony of the world grew ever louder and soon it seemed all the things that needed to be said were being said by others, all the interesting stories had already been told, told so much better than I could tell them. I now know from other writers that even my experience in this is not unique. But at the time, I felt silent like a child who stops singing because the singers on the radio are so much better.

The challenge of the adult writer is to recover that child who was so confident, ask it what it still needs to say, and find out what shape to give its thoughts that will hold a reader's attention.

There is an old saying I've heard attributed to many famous writers, "Writing is when you sit before the typewriter and bleed." It is the cheapest form of therapy, but no one tells you this: you perform it on yourself, unattended, alone, and you suffer the consequences alone. I'd like to start a campaign to put warning labels on pens, pads, word processing software, and especially post-it notes!

When the urge to scribble turns coherent, it's really difficult to know where to begin. I kept a writer's journal sporadically through my teens converting personal angst, pain and

fun times to text; I'm glad it was something no one read but I. But the habit was a good one and today I am never without my writer's journal. A writer's journal is different from a diary, because you fill it with description, not merely with events, but with thoughts, with the texture of the present. It becomes a treasury of moments when words sang.

I wrote poetry -- who doesn't? -- through school and college, and it wasn't till I was thirty that I attempted my first (non-fiction) book: *A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*. I wrote it with a coauthor, who gave it balance in perspective and gave me confidence. When we began, it was from an artless confidence that we had something to say, that there was a gap in the universe where this book should be, and that we were the ones who had both the lived experience and the research capability to do it.

By the time we'd finished, we were amazed at how much the book had taught us: about ourselves; about our friendship; about our values; and view of the world; about the need for accuracy in word choice. When an editor challenged our ideas we had to agree upon and stand behind each word in that book. By the end of the process when we had internalized the *Chicago Manual of Style*, we knew we would never have written that book if we'd known how arduous the process would be.

So, what did I learn?

Begin with the desire to speak into silence, begin from passion.

My next book, *English Lessons and Other Stories*, is about Indian women in my three countries, India, Canada and the U.S.A. I began it in 1992 and it came to publication in 1996. In it, I began to move past my lived experience and personal problems to enter the earliest form of role-playing-game, the virtual reality game that predates computers: the world of fiction. In doing so, a new question rose. No longer "what is writing," but "what makes writing memorable?"

To answer this I returned to dog-eared friends whose words were more likely to be highlighted than not, and I read and reread their wonderfully-scented yellowing pages to find the answer that worked for me: Writers we remember are those who set aside their egos, moved from the purely personal to address the human condition, writers who help us all with this daily business of living, to give us inspiration past entertainment, past culture, past their times.

I also had to find an acceptable answer to the question -- for whom do you write? I'm a hybrid of three cultures, Indian, Canadian and American and I write from the perspective of all three. Today my answer is: I write for the people I love, a hybrid, global audience, for people interested in the process of becoming human, the ways in which we live, the influence of history, philosophy, culture, tradition and memory on our sense of self.

After my book of short stories, a novel came to me slowly. I call it ***What the Body Remembers***. This novel moved into my life about two years ago and is still in residence in our home. It has to be fed in the morning and cleaned up in the evening. It began shyly, revealing itself in snatches: strange people were talking and I would write down what they said first and then ask myself, "which character is this?"

I now had to appreciate the distinction between a poem, a short story and a novel: Most poems without narrative are likely to be static, where the poet comments on a situation or presents a problem and solution but does not show change in setting, or events. In a short story, the writer's job is to open a window into a situation and let the reader be a voyeur of sorts. The reader's job is to find the significance, tie up loose ends -- in short, the reader has the responsibility to imagine. A novel, on the other hand, allows a writer room to stretch, place to expound, philosophize, and here the worst sin the writer can commit is to lose sight of the story and the characters. The reader has far less responsibility to imagine in this form of writing. In the short story and in the novel, the writer is confined only by the first rule of drama: causality. In both short stories and novels there must be conflict, but for there to be drama, the reader must be able to see cause and effect -- coincidence in narrative is not appreciated, it's too real. So in writing my novel, I found that it felt like coding a good piece of software, designing a system, building a house -- in other words, it's like any other creative endeavor— every detail, every word, should be there for a reason.

Now I began to truly appreciate writers through the ages who wrote without wordprocessors, all those writers who did their research without the Internet, the Milwaukee Public Library system and interlibrary loan, all the writers who travelled miles to interview their sources, instead of sending out an email or picking up the phone.

I hope you will not believe mine is the usual progression. Some writers are comfortable with novels immediately, some enjoy the short story form always, some stay with poems. There are pitfalls along the way: some people enjoy being writers more than they enjoy writing. Others prefer to have written than to write. Some of us get perfect manuscript syndrome. Some of us walk into bookstores and realise we're competing for limited shelf space with every writer who has ever written and we go home and get writer's block for a month. But it's all part of the game -- we write because we need to. And if it were really that easy, wouldn't everyone be doing it? We take from the world and give back, hopefully with beauty and philosophy or entertainment value and our own unique perspective added along the way. .

Though we may all hear the same words at this writer's conferences, we each learn something unique. I think that's because each of us is at a different stage of readiness to receive from and give to the world.

I'm still developing as a writer, letting the process teach me empathy as I venture deeper into the minds and hearts of selves I might have been if I wasn't me. I'm no longer quite as concerned about who will read my work, or even if anyone will. When it's published, my novel will sit on an overloaded bookshelf and invite some seeking soul to read it, and I hope he or she will find my characters good company. For myself, I hope I will have moved on by then to another book.

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