

Segue

Writing  Writing

BAN WRITING

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As a writer and a reader, I think that people should, on the whole, be discouraged from writing. Everywhere I turn, I see advertisements for writing courses, writing workshops, writing weekends, writing holidays, promises to help participants polish their prose and carve out their characters. I think it should all be stopped. The only people writing should be those who *must* write (I scrawl in a notebook as I sit on the side of the running bath while my young son makes duck noises at me).

There is no shortage of individuals who can, with a little encouragement, write. Lots and lots and lots of skilled craftspeople. Even more say that they want to write, although not all of those do, and not all of those that do are any good, as my university thesis supervisor informs me, and as I've heard for myself in the classes I've attended. And for those with an interest, the myriad courses and instructional opportunities promise a way forward, possibly a way into print.

But desire and training don't equal genius, or that *je ne sais qua* that allows a writer to connect, to slip refractive glasses over a reader's eyes, to say "see this." They don't give the writer something to say that can be said in no other way. They provide a toolbox, that's all, and with those toolboxes, the only vaguely talented often turn out the equivalent of high school carpentry projects: a procession of easy-to-construct, by-the-numbers breakfast trays and carved wooden animals.

Do I expect the geniuses, though, to spring forth untrained, with no access to guidance? No: I recently read somewhere (I don't know where, I'm a writer, not a librarian) that most of history's great geniuses have had mentors at crucial moments in their development. That's mentors, not teachers. Possibly, up to a point, writing can be taught. But that point isn't the point where you'd want to read the writing, where it would enhance and enrich your life, even change it. Writing is not a good-in-itself that everyone should be encouraged to attempt, like, say, cycling, or eating more vegetables. It's a specialised art that, if practised, adds to billions of existing published words. Training and encouragement are not the things that will bring out the real writers. The threat of not writing, though, is.

By the age of 35 I had attended half a dozen university-level writing classes, receiving high marks and high praise. I was a journalist, so at least I could spell and take editorial advice without bursting into tears (once I was past my cadet reporter years, anyway). I wasn't worried by the idea of producing a couple of thousand words a day; it was what I did for a living. I thought I wanted to write, in the literary sense. I had plenty of free time, being childless and independent, and I'd even once bashed out a 30,000 word document I called a "novel." But I wasn't a writer.

Then I had a child and I despaired, amidst piles of nappies and from under a crushing weight of exhaustion, of ever writing anything longer than an email or incoherent blog entry again.

And *then* I got cancer. Death threatened, if merely statistically. Suddenly, I wrote. I left the dishes undone, let the washing pile up, declined social invitations, turned my back on my husband in the evenings, ran to the computer the second my child was asleep. I scribbled plot outlines in the radiotherapist's waiting room, wrote dialogue on the tram, jotted down two-word ideas in a notebook while my car idled at the traffic lights. In the fourth month of cancer, on a holiday designed to give me relief from the relentless treatments, I had an epiphany: it didn't matter if I was any good, as long as I wrote. The realisation was like a starburst in the middle of a hot, sleepless night in Thailand, and it's stuck with me ever since.

Now, two years later, I'm a writer. I have had a few stories published, won a single, minor, literary prize, and have had many more pieces rejected. Hundreds of thousands of words live on my hard drive, or are out in the post moving to and from editors, fulfilling my mantra of "write and send, write and send." I don't know if I'm any good; I'm not saying I am. But I am a writer, and the reason I'm a writer is that I was suddenly faced with not being one. If I could only do one thing, this was it.

I still fight obsessively for every free minute. I balk at paid work, I lie to friends about other activities to free up time; I even enrolled in a university writing course to give a socially acceptable face to my odd new compulsion. I try not to neglect my son, but I scheme and plan and look forward to my writing times, free of him. Tired, not in the mood, it doesn't matter: I sit and write and soon enough the muse pops by to see what I'm doing.

If writing were forbidden, the stories that were written anyway, in secret, against the rules, would be the ones we needed to read. It's not writing that should be compulsory and encouraged, but reading. Magazine editors, publishers and writing competitions are groaning under the weight of the output of all those writing courses and I want to say: stop. Stop if you can, and if you can't: write.

Jenny Sinclair is a former journalist and writer based in Melbourne, Australia. Her work has appeared in various Australian literary magazines, on the website www.slowtrains.com, in the anthologies Under Our Skin and Best Australian Stories 2006. She does not really believe all writing should be banned: just bad writing.