

6 Misconceptions About Writing

by Rebecca McClanahan

Misconception # 1. Writing gets done without writing.

I usually don't answer the phone during my writing hours, but when I do, it's often a friend or family member calling, and the conversation goes something like this.

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Writing," I answer.

"Really?" she says, as if this were news, as if it weren't the same answer I've been giving for years now. We talk a while, she tells me about her day, I complain about the essay that's tying me in knots or I exalt in the final revision of a poem that's been eluding me all summer. We say goodbye and hang up.

A week or two later she calls again.

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Writing."

Again she seems surprised. We talk a while, say goodbye, and after a few minutes of sharpening pencils (I don't even use pencils) or fantasizing about a six-figure advance on some book I'll never begin, or staring out the window where people with real jobs and leather briefcases are hurrying to meetings, I get back to work. Later in the week while I'm getting a haircut, my stylist asks if I'm still writing, as if it were a bad habit, like smoking, that I surely must have kicked by now. It occurs to me to ask him if he's still cutting hair, but I decide it would be mean-spirited. Besides, it takes energy to talk, and I need all my energy for the chapter revision that's backing up in my head. So I just look in the mirror and nod politely.

Occasionally even writer friends seem surprised to find me writing, just as I'm sometimes amazed to catch them in the act. I realize this makes no sense. How else do I suppose their poems, stories, essays, songs, lectures and journal entries get written? Yet the fantasy that writing gets done without writing is so appealing, it's a hard one to release—like the notion of babies being delivered pain free, via stork or cabbage leaf. Watching the freshly polished baby asleep in a blanket beside his exhausted mother, it's easy to forget that just hours ago he

was a squirming sack of blood and skin and primal scream. And reading someone else's published novel—or a finished poem, short story or essay—it's hard to imagine the often tedious, painful, messy, sometimes joyous, always life-changing process by which it was delivered, kicking and screaming, into the light.

Like sex or childbirth, writing is almost always a private act. Others don't see us doing it, and the popular media do little to dispel the notion that writing gets done without writing. In movies about writers, the writers do everything but write. They sit in dark cafes, dance on tables, smoke one thin black cigarette after another, slap their lovers, drive too fast or drink too much. In the few scenes where they're actually writing, the camera doesn't linger. Who would pay seven dollars to watch someone sit at a desk and write? So the camera seeks out something more interesting—the bottle of Scotch, the unmade bed, the cocktail dress dropped on the floor—and moves on. One quick shot of the writer's hand on the keyboard (typing, what else, "The End") and he's heading for the door, grabbing the finished manuscript and cigarettes on his way out.

No wonder we imagine writing gets done without writing. And no wonder we believe anyone can write a book. The truth is, anyone can't write a book. Only the person who writes the book can write the book.

Misconception #2: Writers have time to write.

For many people on this planet, writing is not an option. Those who are locked in the jaws of war, illness, poverty, violence, illiteracy, starvation, natural or unnatural disasters don't have the luxury of writing. Getting from one day to the next is all they can manage.

On the other end of the scale are those for whom life affords every luxury. Blessed with health, talent, opportunities and material resources, their only responsibility is to the blank page or canvas. Some are born into wealth and privilege; their days are and will always be truly theirs, to use as they will. Others, through cosmic collisions of luck and fate, are granted uninterrupted time and space in which to work. If they chose to write their hearts out, nothing can stop them—or so it appears. (We'll talk more about this assumption later.)

The rest of us fall somewhere between these extremes. And though we cite plenty of reasons for not writing, lack of time seems to be the biggest factor. Listen in on any group of writers long enough, and chances are the subject of

time will come up. “If I just had more time,” someone sighs aloud, and everyone around the table nods agreement: the poet/single mother of three, the essayist/computer programmer, the novelist/college student, the mystery writer/nurse, the memoirist/carpenter.

The challenge of making time to write is not new nor is it trivial. For centuries, writers have felt time’s weight pressing down upon them, and many have collapsed beneath it. Books, journals, diaries and interviews are filled with their struggles. In Tillie Olsen’s meticulously detailed *Silences*, which ironically marked the end of Olsen’s own twenty-year literary silence, she tells of famous and unknown writers alike whose work was interrupted, postponed, abandoned, or, in some cases, barely begun. As Olsen explains, time wasn’t the only pressure bearing down on these writers, but it was one of the heaviest. Heavy enough to silence Melville’s prose for thirty years while he wore himself out at the customs dock trying to make ends meet. Heavy enough to force Katherine Anne Porter to spend twenty constantly-interrupted years writing *Ship of Fools* rather than the two years she estimated it would have taken had she been able to write full time.

Any piece of writing requires time, and a sustained, artistic, well-crafted creation requires not only actual writing time but time for imagining, thinking, feeling, dreaming, revising, reconsidering, and beginning again. The circumstances of our lives eat up that time; that’s why we call them “time-consuming.” Some time-consuming circumstances are welcome: playing with our children, making dinner for friends, planting a flower garden, taking a trip to the mountains. Other circumstances, if not always welcome, are nevertheless necessary: going to work, filling out tax forms, changing the oil filter, making out the grocery list. But whether welcome or unwelcome, pleasant or unpleasant, necessary to our physical survival or to our emotional well-being, these circumstances use up time, time that is not being used for writing.

When day-to-day circumstances absorb the time that could/should/might be used for writing, you may get a little edgy. You might even get angry or envious, imagining living the life of a Real Writer, someone who doesn’t have to work at another job, or two or three, to make ends meet, who doesn’t have to mow the lawn, call the plumber, take out the garbage, clean the chimney, make breakfast, grade papers, feed the kids and the cat. I’ve wasted whole afternoons

doing that old two-step, The Sulk & Carry. (The steps are simple: You just sulk a while, then carry it with you all day.) It's just not fair, I tell myself. In addition to everything else they have, Real Writers have time to write.

Or so it appears on the surface.

In actuality, no person, however rich or free of outside constraints, has time to write. True, some people have more money, energy, opportunity, or freedom from day-to-day duties than the rest of us. But nature abhors a vacuum, and each life, however privileged, must fill with something. And fill it does. All the time in the world, by itself, will not make writing happen. Or, as we've said before, writing only happens by writing, and only the person who writes the book can write the book.

Okay, so maybe it won't be a whole book. Not this year, anyway. Maybe what you'll manage is a poem a year, one long letter on each grandchild's birthday, a handful of travel essays or short stories, a stack of editorials written to your local newspaper, song lyrics for your daughter's wedding, one wild and crazy screenplay, or a locked diary filled with your secret fears and wishes. Whether you end up publishing a body of work that makes Joyce Carol Oates' output look paltry, or whether you write one story that no one but yourself ever sees, is beside the point. The point is, you're writing.

As the Rolling Stones song says, "You can't always get what you want...but if you try sometime, you just might find you'll get what you need." If you can make time to read this book, you can make time to write. If you can make time to watch the evening news or your favorite sit-com, you can make time to write. True, you may not be able to make the time you want, but you can make the time you need. You may even find that time limits actually feed the writing process. (We'll discuss this in the next chapter.)

Most of us already have everything we need to do the kind of writing we need to do. And if we don't yet have what we need, there are ways to go about getting it. We can change the external circumstances of our life to allow more time for writing, we can wait for our circumstances to change, or we can learn to work within the restraints imposed upon us. But one thing is certain: If we spend time complaining that we have no time, we'll have even less time to write.

Misconception #3: Writers know in advance exactly where they're going, and they get there.

Some writers claim to carry whole books in their heads the way Mozart carried whole sonatas, releasing the finished composition in one swift, turbulent flourish. Some say they know, even before the first word is written, exactly how the story will open, the plot thicken, the theme develop, and all the loose ends tie together on the last page.

As for me, and for dozens of writers I know personally and hundreds whose journals, letters, interviews and memoirs I've studied, writing appears to be an ongoing act of discovery, or, as John Updike says, "a constant search for what one is saying." Some writers begin in the dark, with only a word, a phrase, a cloudy image or emotion to guide them; they feel their way to the light. Some, like Katherine Anne Porter, who said she always knew where she was going and how her stories would end, write the ending first and then, in Porter's words, "go back and work towards it," thus making a kind of backwards discovery. Still others map out a plan but quickly discard it when the road unexpectedly veers off in a more intriguing direction.

The idea that writers always know in advance exactly where they're going is linked to the first idea we discussed—that writing gets done without writing. Since most writers publish only their final, edited version of a piece of writing, if indeed they publish it at all, readers are rarely able to glimpse a writer's path towards a completed draft. We can't see the crumpled pages, the cross-outs and deletions, the discarded chapters that were fed to the fire or used for lining the parakeet's cage. Because we see only the finished product of a writer's labor, it's easy to assume that everything happened according to plan. Thus, the myth is perpetuated: Writers know exactly where they're going, and they get there.

Misconception # 4: Writers have something important to say.

There's that phrase again: Writers have. In our earlier discussion, what writers have is time; now, what they have is something important to say. This notion is a doubled-edged sword. The first edge—that writers have something—suggests that writers already possess something whole and complete in itself, before any word is written. Since this something (call it an idea, concept, character, emotion, story, vision) is already fully formed, the writer's job becomes simply putting this something into words.

Put into words. This phrase says much about how the writing process is often

perceived. Put into words suggests that language is merely the container, the holding bin, into which something is placed. If I just had a great story to tell, so this theory goes, I could tell it. If I could just work out the kinks in this idea, the hard part would be done; then all I'd have to do is write it.

When we buy into this notion, we rob ourselves of the permission to begin without knowing exactly where we're going, we rob the something of its chance to grow and change, and we rob language of its chance to help shape and reshape the something. When we buy into this notion, words become powerless. They hold no sway. They are merely the box into which we place our already perfectly complete thought, story or vision.

Is it any wonder we despair? Some of us, having decided in advance that our words will never be able to carry the weight of what we want to say, never write the first word. And even those who do manage to break through the wall of initial doubt often get no farther than a first draft. We have failed to capture our grandfather, the yellow kitchen, the black dog. We haven't written the poem that seemed so clear in our mind or the story that appeared in our dream. If only I could find the right words, we think, as if the dictionary were at fault. Or we blame ourselves: We are just not up to the task. Someone else would be able to put into words this vision I have. We may begin to question whether what we have to say is worth the paper it's written on.

Which leads us to the other edge of this double-sided sword: Writers have something important to say. What do we mean by important? Well, it depends on whom you ask:

Tolstoy, in *What is Art?*, suggests that in addition to its other qualities, art is a new idea which is important to mankind. Yikes, I think. That's one big shoe to fill. Maybe I shouldn't even try.

Commercial publishers would have us believe we have something important to say if someone is willing to buy it.

And some writers believe what they have to say is important simply because something of import—by which they mean unusual, strange, horrible, or noteworthy—happens to them. But if this is the case, why do we abandon, often after only a few pages, a book written by someone who sailed around the world or broke an Olympic record or murdered her husband or had affairs with three presidents, yet keep going back to that same little story on our shelf, the one

about an old woman who does nothing more than take a walk to town?

“Wait a minute,” you might be saying. “I’ve read ‘A Worn Path,’ and you’re not playing fair. Eudora Welty could write about a shoelace and make it seem important.” Well, maybe you’re right. Maybe a great writer can nudge a seemingly trivial something to the ranks of greatness merely through the force of her words.

Or maybe, just maybe, the process is a group effort, a three-headed committee composed of Eudora, a something, and the words. Maybe no one is totally in charge, maybe they all just sit around the table and listen to one another. Really listen. The something talks for a while, then language comes in and mixes things up, then Eudora comes in to smooth out the wrinkles, but while she’s talking, the something pipes up again, and this goes on all morning and into the afternoon, but by the time the three of them knock off for the day, a plan is in motion. And if they keep at it, by the next day (or week, or year), the business will be accomplished. Perhaps not in the manner any of the three might have imagined beforehand. Still, the work gets done. And it’s none too shabby, they agree, walking out the door together, turning off the light. None too shabby at all.

Misconception # 5: Writers publish their work and get famous or rich or both.

When people ask me what I do for a living, I try to change the subject. If they persist, I tell them that I teach writing, judge writing contests, edit manuscripts, and give lectures and readings. These are not lies; I do all these things. They are, in fact, what I do for a living—that is, to pay the rent and health insurance. What I do for a life is write, and that’s the part that’s hard to explain. I feel the way Louis Armstrong must have felt when he was asked to define jazz. “If you have to ask,” he answered, “nothing I say’s gonna help.”

One of the problems with admitting that you’re a writer is that people invariably want to know what you write. Or maybe they don’t want to know, but at least they ask. It doesn’t work to answer “words.” Sometimes, if we’re lucky and if we keep putting words on the page, poems or stories or novels or essays eventually emerge, but we don’t really write them. What we write is one word, then the next, and the next. Seen this way, writing is a very democratic pursuit. It’s like the old line about how the president puts on his pants: one leg at a time,

just like you, just like me. Seen this way, a Nobel laureate writes the same way a first grader does: one word at a time.

But as I said earlier, this answer doesn't go over well at cocktail parties. So you mumble something like "poems," hoping to put an end to it.

"Oh really," they say. "What kind?"

Now you've done it. What are you supposed to answer? Long poems? Short? Serious? Free verse? Poems about wilted lettuce, dying dogs, rivers? "Very bad poems," I might answer right now, thinking of the draft I'm currently struggling with.

The conversation can go anywhere from here, but usually it moves in one of these directions:

"My wife (or daughter or son or second cousin) writes poems too. It's a great hobby, don't you think?"

"Doesn't anyone believe in rhyme anymore?"

"I have this great idea for a poem. All I have to do is write it."

Or my personal favorite, "Would I know your work?" Another Louis Armstrong question: If they have to ask, nothing you say's gonna help. At this point in the conversation, it's probably best just to shake your head No and try once again to change the subject. At this point, it doesn't really matter whether you've published five well-reviewed books, one recipe in your church newsletter, or nothing at all. Though the questioner probably means well and is only trying to make polite gestures, it's hard after one of these conversations not to feel devalued. A man at a dinner party once suggested that, since no one really reads the kind of things I write, maybe I should write a novel instead. I didn't tell him that I had done just that—that in fact I'd written three and that I'd had a great time writing them and one of them was pretty good if I do say so myself, though the other two, well...

I didn't tell him, because what he seemed to be saying wasn't that I should write a novel, but that I should publish the kind of novel that lots of people would read, a book that would make oodles of money and/or make me famous. The man was a nice guy, probably a good husband and father, maybe even someone with a passion for painting or gardening or woodworking or sculpting, who pursued his passion privately, intensely, the way I pursue writing.

Even so, I felt it best not to tell him about the novels. When we stand outside

a process, when we're on the outside looking in, it's impossible to imagine what goes on inside. The man was on the outside looking in, and, corny as this might sound, my memory of writing the unpublished novels was just too precious to share with him. Only I knew what those years had meant to me. What if he brushed those years aside as if they were so much lint? I wanted to keep the memory of each writing day inside me, the way I keep each unpublished essay and poem, even the most flawed, warm and safe within its folder or box. To those standing outside the process, only writing that gets published and makes the writer famous and/or rich, matters. To writers living within the process, every word matters, even if no eyes but our own ever read those words.

Misconception # 6: Writers are smarter, more sensitive, and more creative than other people.

Hm. This is a tricky one. Since, for the moment at least, I am the writer and you are the reader, I would very much like for you to believe this. But I have to admit that it just isn't so—in my case, or in the case of most of the writers I've met.

Let's start with the intelligence issue. When you judge intelligence solely by academic criteria, writers don't always fare well. Most writers, so research studies show, were B, not A students; my educational experience bears this out. Maybe this is because writers tend to be more interested in questions than in answers. Granted, it takes a keen mind to ask interesting questions, but this doesn't mean that writers are necessarily more brainy or intellectual than other people. Perhaps they are simply more curious, less afraid of venturing into unknown areas, and more willing, as Proust said, to "become stupid before the canvas."

As for the claim that writers are more sensitive than the rest of us, while it's true that some writers are sensitive people, the same can be said for non-writers. Sensitivity is a human trait, not necessarily a writerly one, and it manifests itself in any number of ways that have nothing to do with writing. Perhaps the only area in which writers are more sensitive than other people is in the area of language. Just as musicians are sensitive to sound, painters to color and sculptors to form, writers are sensitive to words.

When people tell me they're just not creative enough to write, I usually answer, "There is no such thing as a creative person. There is only the created

act.” This is not my original idea; it comes from Rollo May’s *The Courage to Create*. “Creativity,” May writes, “is basically the process of making, or bringing into being.” As such, “creativity can be seen only in the act.”

This theory may get your hackles up. You might argue that this just isn’t so, that creative people do indeed exist. You might cite your nephew, who, in your opinion, is one of the most creative people on the planet. “Okay,” I’d say, “I’ll go along with that. But first tell me how you know he’s creative. What evidence do you have?” For without evidence of something made, something brought into being, there can be no creation. Even the God of Genesis wasn’t creative until he created the heavens and the earth. Your nephew, or mine, isn’t creative simply because he daydreams a lot, likes weird movies, or has fluorescent tricolored hair. Unless, of course, his hair is a created act, a work of art.

Those of us who aspire to art—writers, painters, sculptors, designers—like to think of ourselves as creative individuals. The truth is, we are creative only because we create. Even if our creation never comes into the public eye, even if it never reaches completion in terms of what the world considers complete, nevertheless it is the process of its making that makes us creative. And only that process.

How does one become creative? One creates. What freedom exists in that thought, what possibility! Yet, as our parents warned us as they handed over the car keys, along with freedom comes responsibility. If creativity resides only within the process of making, we must toss aside the excuse that we aren’t creative enough; we’ll have to find a new excuse not to create. But if, on the other hand, we’re still basking in the haloed memory of some grandfather or teacher telling us how creative we are, we must ask ourselves what we’re waiting for. The playing field’s been leveled; we’re all chosen for the team.

Excerpted from [Write Your Heart Out](#)