

Introduction

I've been a writer for as long as I can remember. When I was in grade school I wrote stories about pigs and birds – neither of which I knew anything about, really. I wrote poems about clouds and colors. I kept a diary to record noteworthy events such as the night my parents ordered a pizza for dinner and the delivery guy took over an hour to show up. (I know, right?!) When my little sister got sick once, I wrote and illustrated a book for her about an entire town of pistachio nut people. I wrote because I didn't know how to not write. Writing was the easiest way for me to express myself.

It still is. Sometimes it's the only way.

Throughout my 40-odd years, I've tried on all kinds of writing to see what fit – short stories, novels, plays, articles, poems, I tried my hand at haiku, even limericks, at which I am embarrassingly good. I gradually carved out my specialty, which is what's now known as creative non-fiction.

That's the writing that I love the most. It lets me soak up the world around me and send it back out into the universe. I find inspiration everywhere. And that is the basis for my website, for this book, for my entire life. I'm never happier than when I'm opening myself up to the gifts the universe is proffering.

This book focuses on the places I've traveled and the remarkable people I've encountered along the way. There are a few short stories and writing experiments thrown in, but mostly I've written about writers I've met, writers I've long admired, things I've seen, memories from my childhood, even glimpses into those dark moments that still led me to joy or deeper understanding.

The stories are varied, but they all let me share with you what makes my soul sing. I hope your soul joins in the chorus.

Thoughts from my first Zumba class

Zumba has been around awhile and hasn't killed anyone that I know of. My friends' moms do Zumba. How hard can it be? I'm going to try it. And anyway, I have a coupon.

I'm early. Excellent, I'll get a good spot. Wow, a lot of these women are older than me. I'm in my black workout pants and form-fitting stretchy gray t-shirt, I'm feeling good. Young. Hot. Except for her... and her... and oh crap. What is she? Fourteen? Is that a thong?

Okay, ignore them. This is ME time, let's get moving. Let's feel good! Good music. Hot Latin music. Lively. I can do this. Arms up, side step... so far so good...

The instructor is adorable, she's so smiley. And so good! Wow, look at her go! Her feet are just a blur, haha... wait, I'm supposed to be doing that too. Except... my feet don't go that way... I can't even see her feet, what is she doing? She's pointing to her shoulders, okay, shimmy shimmy shimmy those shoulders... Hmm. It looks sexy when she does it. I just look like I have the dry heaves.

It's getting warm in here – that's a good sign! Means I'm working hard! Burning those calories! Yeah baby, yeah baby, yea- okay, it's a LOT hot in here, why isn't there a fan? Arms, so many arms in the air, the woman next to me, Little Miss Thong, is dancing like she's on Solid Gold. Which I was watching before she was even BORN, she's never even heard of it, I'm sure, wow how much more could I hate her?

I can't look at her anymore, she's going to think I'm weird. Eyes on the instructor. She thinks she's so cute, look how she's still smiling and not even sweating. My t-shirt is getting wet under the arms and at the neckline. I'm sucking in my gut while I dance, things are getting a little clingy around here.

Now she's shimmying her HIPS, wow, what can't this chick shimmy? She's shimmying while turning in a circle and tapping out with her right foot. Okay, I can do that... No wait, I can't. I can shimmy, and I can turn in a circle, and I can tap my right foot, but doing them all together just looks like I'm drunk-ly trying to stomp out a campfire.

Focus. Just focus. Just watch her moves and copy them. Arms, arms, legs, legs, slide to the side, slide to the side... I'm getting it now. I've got it! I've got it now! And... she changes the move, DAMN. IT. My hips don't move like that, do you think if this body knew how to shimmy and shake like that I'd have been single until I was 28?! My t-shirt is now completely soaked and I can't breathe enough to suck in my gut anymore, screw it, I don't care, HOW THE HELL IS SHE STILL SMILING?

The cool down, finally. Love the cool down. The softer moves, the gentler stretches, the easy swaying, and that greatest of all post-workout gifts: the feeling that comes about 20 minutes later and says "That was actually pretty awesome. I'll do that again!"

Of course, that's replaced early the next morning by "Ow ow ow ow ow..."



I admit the deed! . . . It is the beating of his hideous heart!

Starting in 1949, every January 19, a solitary figure has visited the grave of Edgar Allan Poe. It is always in the early morning hours on the date of Poe's birth, and the routine is always the same. The visitor drinks a toast of cognac and leaves three roses before silently departing.

There is much rumor and local lore surrounding the "Poe Toaster," and sadly, the mystery and tradition seem to have ended. On January 19, 2010, the visitor did not appear, leading to speculation that whoever it is has died. He has not shown up since. I am very taken with the whole idea of this ritual. There has been talk over the years of it being a hoax, of course, because everything interesting and creative has to be called a hoax at some point by those with limited creativity.

But Poe. To be a writer with that kind of far reaching loyalty, that kind of influence, is something I can only dream of. What is it about Poe? As a writer, there is no disputing his brilliance. He is best remembered for his tales of the macabre, like *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Raven* (the publication of which earned him, are you ready for this? Nine dollars.). But he also wrote satire and humor, and is credited with reinventing science fiction. He wrote hugely, extravagantly, exaggeratedly, often trying to shake people out of what he saw as cultural conformity.

Poe was a writer, a real writer, and believed in himself enough to attempt to make his living solely through his writing. He went broke, of course. (*Nine dollars! For *The Raven!* There isn't a font that's indignant enough for me right now. Nevermore indeed.*) But the point is, he wrote. And he wrote and he wrote and he wrote. And he moved around and battled his demons and he lost his wife and he kept writing. He wrote, like most writers, because he couldn't stop.

He was hardly glamorous. He was a heavy drinker and fairly unstable. Just before he died, he was found wandering the streets of Baltimore, sick and disoriented and wearing clothes that weren't his. He was taken to a hospital where he died a few days later, never becoming coherent enough to tell anyone what was wrong or what happened or whose clothes those were. He was

40 years old.

Today, it is Poe's mystique as much as his writing that keeps his legend alive. He horrifies and fascinates us. We love to read between the lines of "Annabel Lee" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" to try and catch a glimpse of the tortured soul who wielded the pen. There is a little Poe in all of us.



Reflections on a maudlin mood

The sun comes up, but its slow unveiling of the day shows only piles of dirty snow and an endless slate sky. The coffee is bitter, my mood even more so. It's one of those days when I am hard pressed to find beauty and inspiration anywhere.

It's just a barbaric little mood, the one that Holly Golightly calls the Mean Reds. Capote understood - this one of those days when it's somewhere between difficult and impossible not to dwell on wasted opportunities, wasted money, squandered time, the one who got away, weight gained, wrinkles gained, how many people actually achieved Something by the time they were this age. All I know is I feel like F. Scott Fitzgerald, hunched over the keyboard and feeling maudlin, until I remember that he published *The Great Gatsby* when he was 29. Then all I feel like is screaming.

I used to try and rush myself out of these funks. I'd drink too much caffeine, listen to happy music, laugh and talk as though nothing was wrong and eventually I'd feel better for having stifled the Mood. At least I thought I did, but today, right now, sitting here watching the sun come up, I wonder if I did myself a disservice all those times. Is it okay to wallow in a mood like this?

There is a fine line, I'm aware, between a melancholy mood and true depression. My toe has been on that line more than I care to admit, and I have no desire to flop over to the darker side. But is it healthy, maybe even useful, to allow myself to wander back over my life and grieve a little?

I am a zizzer zazzer zuzz. . .

You know who childhood would not have been the same without? Dr. Seuss. Seriously. What's not to love about brilliant lines like these?

"I am a zizzer zazzer zuzz, as you can plainly see."

"And today the Great Yertle, that Marvelous he, is King of the Mud. That is all he can see."

"When beetles fight these battles in a bottle with their paddles and the bottle's on a poodle and the poodle's eating noodles... they call this a muddle puddle tweetle poodle beetle noodle bottle paddle battle."

Dr. Seuss gave us some of the most endearing and enduring gifts of our childhoods. He gave us the Grinch, Thing One and Thing Two, The Lorax, Sam I Am and his Green Eggs and Ham. He gave us words like Oobleck, Sneetch, boom-pahs and schloppity-schlopp... the list is endless. He made us want to read. He made us love to read.

We had fun with Dr. Seuss because he had fun with us. He was once quoted as saying "Adults are just obsolete children and the hell with them." And we all nod and laugh and agree because he isn't talking about us. We're still kids. We're kids who can quote entire passages from "Horton Hears a Who" and "The Cat in the Hat." Most of us still have our graduation-gift copy of "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" on our shelves.

We felt like Dr. Seuss believed in us. He believed in all of us. Lines like "A person's a person no matter how small" and "Things may happen, and often do, to people as brainy and footsy as you" only reinforced our belief that we absolutely could do anything. Of course we could - Dr. Seuss said so. Even in 1971's "The Lorax," an eerie foreshadowing of environmental things to come, he writes "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." We were just children, and he was telling us we could change the world.

Thank you for making childhood wonderful, Dr. Seuss. You're missed. You're loved.

Tomatoes, feet, rain, Heathcliff, gratin... what?

I don't think I'm going to write today. I'm just not feeling it.

It's odd, really, because it's a gray, drizzly day outside and these are the days I usually feel the most inspired to write. Not sure what's going on there, but if I'm not feeling it, I really can't force it. I did try, though. I have my usual Muse-luring setup going here – a cup of herb tea, Mozart on the stereo, sandalwood candle burning beside me. I used to think writers who said they could only write with everything set up a certain way were trying too hard to be eccentric and artsy. “Oh, look at me, I'm a writer and I'm soooo quirky!” But then one day I had a really great writing day and I had a scented candle burning beside me and Mozart on the stereo and a cup of herb tea, and the next time I sat down to write I had some cocked-up combination of lamplight and coffee and Josh Groban and I wrote like crap... so obviously this was out of my hands.

Not sure why it isn't working today, though. I would blame it on the weather but I love this weather. Rainy and gray always makes me feel as though all I'd have to do is close my eyes and I'd be in England, wandering among the misty moors, looking for my Heathcliff. Although in England they spell “gray” with an “e.” Whatever that's about. They're always doing stuff like that, like cramming a “u” in everywhere they can. They make me laugh, my Brits, saying they're “chuffed to bits” when they're pleased and “shattered” when they're tired. How cute is that? England is the only country in the world that makes me want to pinch its collective cheeks. Ooooooh! Say “tomato” again!

Speaking of tomatoes, I cannot WAIT until summer. This has been the longest winter of my life. I will probably write better when the weather is warmer and the sun is out. When the first warm day of spring comes, I always go outside and find a place that's in full sun and I turn my face upward and just let it soak right into me. It's my little treat to myself for surviving winter without going all postal from five months of closed windows and freezing feet.

Feet. Right, yeah I should have gone for a run yesterday before the weather got like this. I meant to, I really did, but then I got busy with... stuff. And I didn't go. And now I'm about to go meet a friend for lunch and I'll promise myself on the way that I'm going to get a salad since I didn't get my workout in yesterday.

But then I'll get there and they will have something on the menu that is such a ridiculous test of my will, probably with the word "gratin" in it, and I'll give in while promising myself that I'll run tomorrow. I'll promise myself that I will run tomorrow and work off all the gratin while studiously ignoring the fact that I would have to run to Albany and back to have any real hope of canceling it out.

Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah... I'm definitely not going to write today. I'm just not feeling it.



Of Somerset Maugham and hot rum punch

As a writer, I sometimes come across passages of literature that stop me in my tracks. I consider myself a good writer, occasionally I will jump up and hug myself (yes, literally) when I write something amazing. But now and then, I stumble upon something written by someone else that is so beautiful it makes me catch my breath a little. And then I usually get tears in my eyes as I get momentarily lost in its beauty, then I get irritated that I could never write anything so beautiful as that, then I fold the page over so I can go back to it whenever I need to be inspired, and I go back to my own writing a little richer.

William Somerset Maugham, who is widely considered to be one of the most successful English novelists and playwrights of all time and who, unlike Poe, made a lot of money from his writing, does that to me frequently.

His novel *Of Human Bondage* is one of my favorite books of all time. I've read it probably around ten thousand times, give or take a thousand, and every time I read it, I am stopped again by one particular passage.

The protagonist, Philip Carey, is in London with his friends Hayward and Lawson. Hayward has taken the other two to a tavern for "hot rum punch." (Which I've never had but sounds like something I need to try one of these soon days.) What moves me most about this passage is the way Maugham plays with words and sentence structure. The three men have entered the tavern, two of them not knowing what to expect. Maugham reflects this routine moment with short, dull sentences. But as the men drink the punch and become consumed with its wonderful taste, his sentences become longer, more fluid, more descriptive, until by the end he is almost comical with the grandeur of his words, and by this point the reader, like the men in the book, is almost drunk with the sheer beauty of it.

"They ordered punch. They drank it. It was hot rum punch. The pen falters when it attempts to treat of the excellence thereof; the sober vocabulary, the sparse epithet of this narrative, are inadequate to the taste; and pompous terms, jeweled, exotic phrases rise to the excited fancy. It warmed the blood and cleared the head; it filled the soul with well-being; it disposed the mind at once to utter wit, and to appreciate the wit of others; it had the vagueness of music

and the precision of mathematics. Only one of its qualities were comparable to anything else; it had the warmth of a good heart; but its taste, its smell, its feel, were not to be described in words. Charles Lamb, with his infinite tact, attempting to, might have drawn charming pictures of the life of his day; Lord Byron in a stanza of Don Juan, aiming at the impossible, might have achieved the sublime; Oscar Wilde, heaping jewels of Ispahan upon brocades of Byzantium, might have created a troubling beauty. Considering it, the mind reeled under visions of the feasts of Elagabalus; and the subtle harmonies of Debussy mingled with the musty, fragrant romance of chests in which have been kept old clothes, ruffs, host, doublets, of a forgotten generation, and the wan odour of lilies of the valley and the savour of Cheddar cheese.”

Now that, my friends, is damned good writing. If I could get my hands on some lily of the valley, cheese-and-old-clothes-flavored rum punch, I would lift a glass to Maugham and that writing.

