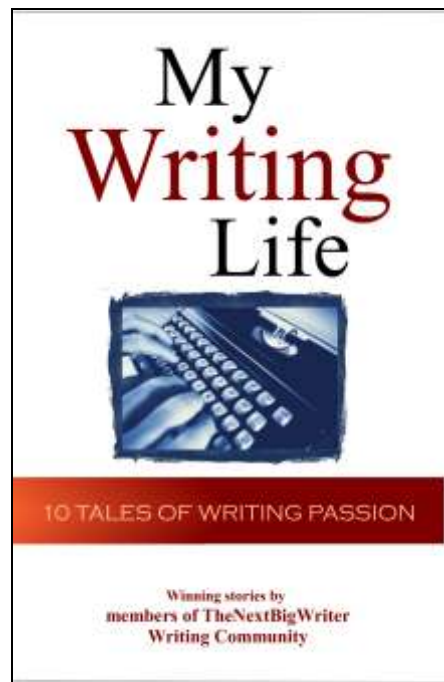


My Writing Life

10 Tales of Writing Passion



Presented by
THE NEXT *Big Writer*
h e l p i n g m a k e i t y o u

My Writing Life

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For every writer who dreamed...

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Introduction

Why do you write? Is it to become famous, to give life to the characters in your mind, to get revenge on someone, or to tell a story that's important to you? Do you write for yourself or for others? Do you want your words to be read or do you guard them? Do you write to escape the pain of a past event or to recapture the happiness of the past? Do you want to get rich?

Over the last three years I have watched tens of thousands of writers on TheNextBigWriter.com and our online publishing site Booksie.com and realize there are many reasons why we write.

Last May 2008, we launched the My Writing Life contest on TheNextBigWriter.com to explore these reasons. In the contest, we asked writers to remember when they first realized they wanted, or even needed to write. The response was enormous and the site's members not only enjoyed writing their own personal stories, but also enjoyed reading the work of others.

From all of the wonderful submissions, ten diverse, honest, and moving stories were chosen to appear in *My Writing Life*.

If you're a writer *My Writing Life* will provide insight into others that are like yourself. You are not writing alone.

If you're the friend or family member of a writer, the book will give an idea of why someone significant in your life spends so much time at the keyboard.

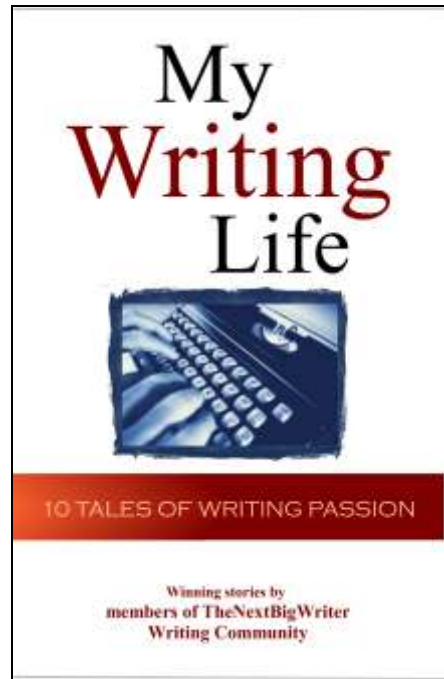
And if you're a reader, *My Writing Life* will provide you with an idea of what lies behind the stories you enjoy.

For thousands of years, humans have told their stories. First on stone walls, then on papyrus, paper, and now on computer screens. Today, tens of millions of men, women, and children put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, and write out the thoughts in their mind. What is it about writing, or storytelling that has so captivated humans through the ages? Why do we write? Read on to find out.

Sol Nasisi

Founder, TheNextBigWriter.com

March, 2009



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I Ought To Send That Bitch a Thank-You Note

By Molly Ringle

Revenge inspired me to start writing novels.

Maybe I ought to call it justice, the need to write down the truth, make the world see the wrongs done to me. I mean, when you're twelve and some other girl crashes your party and dazzles the boy you like, you can't just sit back and take it. You have to do *something*. So I wrote a novel.

A novella, really. Maybe a long short story. I think it was about sixty pages, typewritten, single-spaced. I don't actually have a copy of it anymore; if it survives at all, it's somewhere in a box in my parents' house in Oregon. That's probably for the best. If I were to read that old story now, all my amateur writer tricks would only make me want to die.

Trouble is, without reading my pre-adolescent masterpiece, I no longer remember what exactly happened.

I asked my younger sister Peg, who also experienced the traumatic event, whether she remembered anything.

"I remember Annie was cute," she said. "And Chris and Matt liked her. Therefore we hated her."

"But what did she *do*?" I asked. "What actually happened?"

"I have no idea. Maybe we were just that petty."

(Writing lesson: Make your plot memorable, the kind of event that the people who actually lived it can remember a couple of decades later. At least I can pull lessons out of my first foray into the novel, even if I didn't get all the lessons right.)

In any case, for context, here is my best recollection of that terrible, fuzzy event:

Peg was ten at the time. I was twelve. Though like most sisters we fought from time to time (Peg was the biter; I was the scratcher), we hung out together

during almost all our non-school hours, enjoying a blend of girly and tomboyish pastimes. We owned Barbies, but we sent them cliff-diving off the creekbank in our backyard. We played with make-up and gossiped about our crushes, but around the maple-shaded creek we also invented an alternate universe full of ghouls and pirates that would have satisfied any adventure-loving boy.

In fact, our favorite playmates were two brothers—also ten and twelve—who lived near us. Matt, the younger, was blue-eyed, thin, and moody. Peg had dibs on him. Chris, the older, had freckles, big brown eyes, and a carefree grin. He was mine.

He had no idea he was mine, but only because boys are supremely dense. At the very least, I owned him by default, since he didn't belong to any other girl.

One Friday night, Peg, these boys, and I arranged a clandestine, pseudo-slumber party. The brilliant plan was that Peg and I would sneak out of our house and visit the brothers during their slumber party with another guy, who lived a few houses down from us. That boy's folks were out of town, or maybe just guaranteed not to care if we showed up; I forget exactly. We figured we'd do wild things like eat piles of sugary food and watch movies with swear words and sex scenes. Who knew what might go down with crazy, badass kids like us?

Then a malevolent god threw a twist into our plans in the form of Annie. I don't know who invited this eleven-year-old squeaky-voiced girly-girl with the perky brown curls (it was the 1980s and I'm spiteful enough to suggest that her hairstyle was a perm), but we might have met her through the third boy, the slumber party host. Or maybe Peg invited her, in a moment of social weakness. Peg had many such moments—all her life, she has always impulsively reached out and drawn in new friends easily, a feat I still haven't mastered.

Then again, such skills sometimes land you an Annie. For that night, whichever way the invitation took place, Annie unrolled her (probably pink and polka-dotted) sleeping bag at our house and joined us in the visit to our boys.

(Writing lesson: Don't start your novel with an average day; write about the day something changed for the worse. I got that one right, at least.)

Since we three girls were naive, and thought sexy clothes were cute and fun, we rummaged through the costume box and pulled out see-through lacy

nighties, tight black corsets, and similarly inappropriate attire for middle school children.

(Writing lesson: You probably don't want to have your middle-grade novel's characters dress like this unless you want the PTA to burn your books in a big pile.)

We put on these scraps of indecency before climbing out Peg's window in the dark and dashing over to the other boy's house, where we slipped in via the sliding glass door and joined the little party.

Again, I don't remember what exactly happened, except that Peg and I ended up hating Annie with a passion. She flirted, giggled, whined, and flopped onto the boys' laps, which totally charmed both Chris and Matt. (The third guy, the slumber party host, was always more like one of the girls, if you follow me, and thus not a subject for conquest on our part.)

(Writing lesson: Does this third guy really need to be part of the story? You don't even give him a name.)

The day after the party, we argued with Chris and Matt about their Annie-inspired drooling, and then we all pouted for a while. Eventually we made up, the brothers admitted they still liked us better than her, none of us played with Annie again, and at some point Chris, Matt, Peg, and I played Spin the Bottle and gave each other our first, inept kisses. (Let's just say drool was still a problem.)

Nonetheless, the Annie episode bugged me. Finally, I decided to write the whole sordid saga down—bitter arguments, Lolita nighties, and all.

Why a novel? Why didn't I paint a mural about it or compose a song? Or sew together a little rag doll that looked like Annie, burn it in a vacant lot, and consider myself purged of the incident? I don't know, except that writing probably seemed the easiest choice. Like most writers, I read all the time as a kid. Though I couldn't draw, sculpt, sew, or play music particularly well, I did have a talent for spelling and vocabulary, and I knew my plot already. So I thought, "Hey, how hard could it be?"

(Writing lesson: If only you knew, young self.)

I typed the story on an old green-keyed manual typewriter cast off by my mom. One draft was all I needed.

(Writing lesson: One draft is not all you need.)

I drew the cover art myself, featuring a cartoonish, flat picture of me being pulled in five different directions by my supporting cast.

(Writing lesson: Leave cover art to the professionals. Seriously.)

I titled it *This Is a Difficult World*.

(Writing lesson: That title sucks.)

My dad took Peg and me to his office after hours, and let us use the photocopier to make copies for Chris, Matt, the host guy, and a couple other friends. I'm pretty sure we didn't give one to Annie.

(Writing lesson: Always give out promo copies, especially to those instrumental in inspiring the novel. Also, it helps to know someone in the printing industry. Or at least someone with free access to a photocopier.)

Peg and the boys loved the story. There they were, on the page, in print! Even the unflattering stuff—hey, it still bathed them in the limelight.

(Writing lesson: People like reading about characters who they can relate to. Or characters who are, in fact, themselves.)

Pride puffed me up. I quickly wrote another novel featuring all of us, though this time, I introduced some new characters—"original" characters, as they say in fanfiction—and created entirely new situations too. My friends loved

this, since they still got to be the protagonists, but now in new and more dramatic adventures, like car chases and make-out scenes.

(Writing lesson: Truth is honorable, but in fiction you might as well go overboard and do stuff you can't or won't do in real life.)

As the years ambled by, I inched away from true-to-life characters. My newly invented cast took over more of the scene, and eventually I dropped my friends from my stories entirely. By then, they had lost their enthusiasm about reading them, but that didn't matter to me. Chris and Matt had moved to another state not long after the Annie fiasco, so I sent the stories, and they sent their reviews, via postal service anyway. Peg still read my stuff and gave me useful feedback. But we were teenagers now, with plenty of real-life drama absorbing us.

The point was, I loved writing. All that real teen drama only made me cherish my stories more. They were the sanctuary where I ruled the world, where the only things that happened were things I controlled. Even when I killed off a beloved character, I enjoyed it deep down, because for once I was the almighty being directing life and death, rather than a subject of the unpredictable, cruel forces in the real world.

(Writing lesson: People read for escapism. It's okay to write for the same reason. Any upsetting event, from a party with Annie to the death of a classmate in a car crash, becomes more emotionally manageable if you write about it and let the characters suffer for you, or at least with you.)

I don't remember anyone saying to me, back when I hammered out my first novel, "You ought to become a writer." It seems the kind of thing I'd remember. But somewhere along the line, by the end of high school, I was comfortable in telling most people exactly that: "I want to be a writer."

And here I am, still writing, despite the toddler wheedling for my attention, the dishwasher that needs unloading, the house that needs cleaning, and the bank account lifting its eyebrow at me as a request for more income.

(Writing lesson: I've heard writers make, on average, eight hundred dollars a year. Find a good day job.)

I make it work, despite life, but also because of life. I get better with time because, as in life, I make ridiculous mistakes and learn from them.

In high school I wrote this one story about a hooker with a heart of gold who didn't dare run away from her murderous pimp because she had signed a contract with him, so naturally she couldn't *break the law* by quitting her job (and no, it wasn't even set in Nevada)...but I'm too embarrassed to talk about that.

(Writing lesson: Prostitution is probably not a good choice for that day job. Though it would provide interesting fodder for a novel.)

Molly Ringle has written fiction since middle school, and thinks the practice is starting to pay off. Her novel *The Ghost Downstairs* is coming out soon from The Wild Rose Press, and she is at work on many more stories. She lives with her family in Seattle, and yes, she does enjoy the rain, actually. Say hello by visiting www.mollyringle.com

I never think when I write. Nobody can do two things at the same time and do them well.

~ Don Marquis

Chapter Two
Diary of a MAD Scribbler
By Greg Crites

This is a story of birth, rejection, first love, loss, death, rebirth, and monumental bullshit.

Writing? I was never fond of that word. A misanthropic lawyer-turned politician is ‘writing’ when they scrawl out some harebrained legislation that will adversely affect ten percent of the population while earning themselves some quantity of brown-paper-bag-cash.

I prefer ‘storytelling’.

My infatuation with storytelling stems from humble and unremarkable origins. It was second grade I believe. I dimly remember spending quite a bit of my school day writing things on a blackboard one-hundred times. Things like: I will not throw worms on the girls, I will not jump off the see-saw while someone is on the other end, I will not push the spin-go-round at psychotic warp speeds in an attempt to make others puke (author note: I use ‘psychotic warp speeds, puke, etc’ as an example of creative license and because of my inability to remember the exact words the teacher made me write). There were many others, but you get the point. These early exercises strengthened my wrist, and acclimated my world view to accept scribbling long strings of words as—inevitable.

At some point around post-fourth-grade summer vacation I met my grandmother for the first time. She was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian and lived in some strange faraway place called West Virginia. She played wild tunes on an old piano, sent me out to streams to get water, coaxed me under dilapidated wooden shacks to collect eggs, advised me on the evil nature of the white man, and gave me the thing that planted the seeds that grew into the dense canopy of cynicism and sarcasm that shade my outlook to this day. She gave me a stack of MAD magazines.

By the time I trudged dejectedly into the school for fifth grade’s opening bell, those MAD magazines had fertilized a newfound tendency for what polite society calls smart aleck remarks. This tendency resulted in my advanced instruction in two additional experiential lessons: violent confrontation with peers, and continually angry authority figures. The first required I learn to fight; the second required I learn to act penitent.

I learned the first well enough, and I seemed remarkably adept at the second. Unfortunately, I did not realize penitence required at least some effort to discontinue that behavior one was acting penitent about. My first books began to appear during this period. Small, primitive illustrated tomes full of crude drawings and scathing poems comparing this or that teacher to toilets and other more repulsive objects. These invariably found their way into the hands of whatever teacher served as the main antagonist and resulted in my spending non-voluntary extra time in school—after hours.

This punitive reward system only solidified my adversarial relationship with the school's ruling oligarchy.

In sixth grade the practice of writing book reports and long, focused pages of text became a routine requirement. Having absorbed several thousand comic books, all of Doc Savage, Mike Shayne, Elric, Conan, Tarzan, John Carter, and every other cheap, penny-a-word pulp paperback I could lay hands on, I had unwittingly absorbed a vast and comprehensive vocabulary.

This mental lexicon proved invaluable in keeping me in a never-ending state of perpetual probationary punishment. (author note: I cannot resist alliteration). My book reports during the sixth grade are likely right now part of some pencil-necked sociologist's doctoral thesis on the 'Seeds of Rebellion in Maladjusted Individuals'.

I created conspiracy theories before they became a de facto standard for life on the rat wheel. My first was an unflappable belief that school reading curriculum was designed and optimized to guarantee no one would ever read again once escaping the oppressive corridors of the public education system. So bad, so laughable, so poorly written were the dreck we were forced to not only read, but construct reports on, I was absolutely certain it was some insidious plot. And I did not hesitate to say so, in most savage terms, within each report I submitted for its predictably poor grade.

Seventh grade was some sort of turning point in my development as a storyteller. I became aware of the powerful joys associated with sexual fantasy, and a teacher who actually assigned something decent to read and expound upon.

That this teacher was maybe thirty, short, extremely well made, with beautiful long reddish hair, and abysmally screwed-up eyes, may have had something to do with that year's accelerated reading, learning, and writing

schedule. Did I mention the eyes? She had big brown eyes, but one of those beautiful eyes seemed to wander around on its own unpredictable path. She stared straight out at you with that one eye full of intelligence, and depth, and respect, while the other focused up at the ceiling, or on the floor, or disappeared altogether taking inventory somewhere inside her head.

This bothered me not at all, for I believed she was the most beautiful woman in the world. I now know I possess some skewed disdain for the perfect symmetry others find beautiful, while I derive great visual pleasure in those who possess some distinctly overt flaw in their facial makeup. She was the princess spurring on the hormonally charged warriors assembled for battle on the field of my first sexual fantasies. A field upon which I stood triumphant, invincible, my lance of hardened steel aimed before me.

No less important was the fact she made me read Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Gregory Benford, James Tiptree Jr, Samuel R. DeLaney, Phillip Jose Farmer, Fritz Leiber, Joe Haldeman, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Silverberg, and a host of other science fiction masters whom I had somehow bypassed. This was a whole new galaxy of worlds into which I could slip and escape the hellish reality of my personal creation—a reality wherein no one over thirty appreciated my wit and verbal eloquence. A harsh landscape of disdainful elders who spent an inordinate amount of effort thinking up ways to punish me for some errant sentence.

This lovely and divine teacher assigned Heinlein and Asimov to the entire class. Illustrated Man, I, Robot! Actual interesting stuff! It was amazing. I cornered her at every opportunity like a stalker, both to solicit recommendations on further notable authors of Science Fiction, and to admire her stupendous beauty. I stared into her eye, and even stared along with her other eye, following it like a tennis fan seated at center court. I now know this is called a wandering eye, and to this day in my mind she remains a beauty beyond reproach; though others in my class that year, crude, oafish, unimaginative cretins, took every opportunity to make fun of her eye. An eye that was the solid framework supporting the engine of lust she became in my mind each night.

Her stimulus never waned. Even as I moved on, I read constantly. Things accelerated, I grew to six-feet-four inches and became a wild adventurer of sorts. Others would disagree with adventurer and use the word

troublemaker...semantics.

There was a long stretch of years wherein I wandered the earth, drank a lot, fell in love a lot, did some vigorous self-medicating, and did no writing at all. A disagreement with a small newspaper caused me to start one of my own, which became popular, and caused the powers that be to buy me out and put me to work reporting. It became apparent that I could describe a pecan auction, livestock show, or a plain rock with as much fun and flavor as a patrol officer scandal. It also became apparent that my ability to piss off authority figures was genetic and inescapable.

I bounced from paper to paper, started a comedy magazine, then quit writing. Just stopped.

Around 2004 I dropped everything and drove north to watch over my uncle, one of my favorite people, and a truly larger-than-life character with whom I shared many profligate adventures. I was there to watch over him as he died. We reminisced, he bedridden, weak, a shell of his former huge and virile self, and me, a first time nurse and observer of that final scene. When he died, I spent ten or twelve seconds contemplating my own inexorable march to the same lowering curtain and decided I should share all the fun I've had.

I wrote a book. It took six months. Then I wrote another, it took three months, then ten more in the next two years. I decided it was fun to write stories and fun to make others laugh, and I could do it while seated next to a cold bottle of rum, and even... horror of horrors...(I unveil here a truly embarrassing and egotistical thing) I could read my own story and laugh!

That's right, I laugh at my own books and I don't care if you know it. As I hurtle toward that final gasp, I know I am only a few pages away from making myself laugh again. And you can stand me in a corner, with access to zero stimulation, and I can and will amuse myself with some good old-fashioned lying...er, I mean, storytelling.

I was raised by itinerant vacuum salesman along the rim of the dustbowl territories in New Guinea. I grew up large and strong achieving some notoriety as

a cattle wrestler. I then settled into an occupation as a wood tradesman and have been known to whittle entire oak trees down into a life-size replica of an acorn. These fetch upwards of ten dollars and can be seen inside display cases in finer truck stops across America.

I am also a humor writer with numerous short stories published out there in the void, ten novels available on a website called, for some strange reason — veinarmor.com. Four of those novels are available as audiobooks, read aloud by myself, on iTunes. Just search Greg Crites. At the time of this submission, I have a legitimate inquiry about movie rights for one of those novels. I am not holding my breath. Heh! I have somehow amassed a legion of fans, and downloads of my crap is nearing the 120,000 mark. I also perform a podcast, or clodcast as I like to call it, titled 'Literary Lugwrench' where we have fun and I hawk my crap like an old school snake oil salesman.

By the time you read this, my liver will have surrendered or I will be out on a sailboat somewhere along the coast of Florida, flailing from waterside tavern to waterside tavern. Email from veinarmor.com if wish to buy me a beer.

*I hold any writer sufficiently
justified who is himself in love with
his theme.*

~ Henry James

Chapter 3
The Dandelion Muse
By R. A. Keenan

The voice of an elderly woman answered my knock. I waited, staring at my reflection, a ghostlike image on the surface of the beveled glass pane.

She opened the entrance door. Eighty-plus years of wear rested comfortably on her face. Laugh lines at the corners of her eyes softened the blend of anticipation and uncertainty in her expression.

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Bob. I called earlier—Bob Keenan. The Commission for the Blind contracted with me for training."

She stared at me. Unlike her voice, no slight quiver lurked in the depths behind her gaze. A strong intellect shone through, undefeated, almost defiant. Macular degeneration assaulted her sight, not her vision.

"Oh, yes, of course. Come in. Please, come in."

"Thank you." Wishing to assure her, I added, "These stained glass panels around the doorway, they're beautiful. Are the flowers on them daffodils, crocuses?"

The panels were the width of a hand-span and climbed to the height of the door on either side of the entrance. I later learned that the motif of her publishing imprint incorporated the style of the flower.

"Whichever you prefer. Beautiful, aren't they?" she said. "One of the reasons I bought this house so long ago—more than fifty years—that and the porch."

I glanced around me. Plants overflowed with flowers in stands and hanging baskets. Typical outdoor furniture flanked, of all things, a less typical indoor sofa, facing the street and the sidewalk.

"I could enjoy a mint julep or two out here, for sure. Peaceful."

"And friendly," she added. "When my neighbors walk by, we greet each other and talk, the children especially—so many over the years, all grown up now. Some still visit and bring children of their own, all grown up. Time passes by my porch too. Come in, please."

Charlotte Zolotow's interest in the neighborhood's children did not surprise me. She was one of America's foremost authors of children's books. The

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