

How to Write a Book

By Michael Ventura

February 21, 2014

If you think you have a book in you, it's important to find out if you really do

The faith of a writer is that every person's story matters. (That is also the faith of a democracy; when that faith is lost, so is the democracy.) Even writers with pretensions of cynicism admit, by the very act of writing, that the reader matters. Why open your heart to, or share your ideas with, people who don't matter?

Every person's story matters and is somehow connected. This is no abstraction. Thomas Wolfe: "Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas."

(A democracy fails when its citizens cease to believe that their own stories are important and that the story of the stranger on the street is just as important. For that is to fall into fantasy: All our stories connect.)

The topic is "How to Write a Book," but first I had to say where I'm coming from. It is important to tell our stories – how we got from there to there to here – to give our inheritors maps. It is important to generate ideas. (A few ideas in one century can become a form of government a century or two later. That's not idealism; that's history.) So if you think you have a book in you, it's important to find out if you really do.

Writing a book is difficult, but not special. Across the ages, all sorts have done it well, many with no more formal education than the ability to read and write.

The first important element is time. Writing a book is something you do every day, or as close to every day as you can make it, and for at least two hours a day, sometimes for several years. (Most people throw up their hands right there. They don't really want to write a book after all.)

Next, place: A folding TV tray will do fine (that's what I'm writing on). But nothing else happens there; you use it only for your book.

Next, implements: A computer is not necessary. Mr. William Shakespeare did pretty well with paper, a jar of ink, and a feather.

Next, and most important – the very most important: When you make an appointment with yourself to write, be it at 5am or 11pm, keep it. Always. You are trying to grow a part of yourself that will actually do the writing; think of it as a workshop within yourself, in which elements of your psyche will work all the time on your project, though you work but two hours. That workshop needs to trust you. It can't function unless it trusts you. And the only way it learns to trust you is if you keep your word.

So, say you sit down at your TV tray at 5am or 11pm and nothing comes, you can't think of a fucking thing, not for the first hour, not for the second. Stay for your allotted time. Pace up and down, rest your head on your arms – do not lie down! – but: Put in the time. Your workshop loves that. Cross-my-heart-and-spit, on one book I put in more than two months of six- and nine-hour days almost every day and got a lot of nothing until one day the book told me what I was missing.

Oh, that takes patience. You're writing the book, you thought of the book, it's your book, but the book knows more about itself than you know about the book. That's a paradox you must accept. Some sessions of work are simply two or three or four hours of listening for what the book wants. Some weeks of work are just that. Being there with the book. Listening.

Idiots call that "writer's block." There is no such animal. Okay: *The* most important thing about writing is the integrity of the relationship between the writer and the subject. So-called writer's block is static or empty space between the writer and the subject. Have faith. Lots of it. If you hang in long enough, the book will speak and guide you. Or – it's testing you. Waiting for you to give up. See, the book is a being. Once you begin it, once you give it life, it takes more life from sources not readily named. Writers who stick it through to the end are writers who trust the book.

There, the big secret is out: The book is a being. You're writing a book – but you're not only writing a book. You're engaging a being. If it's a novel, and if it's worth writing, the characters will do all manner of things you never thought of. If it's a book of ideas that are not mere opinions, ideas will suddenly appear that surprise the shit out of you. If it's a memoir, a moment of your history will open like a flower or a maw and your memory will grow facets that are true but that you can't swear in court you actually remember. No one has explained this aspect of writing, but it is so.

Sometimes something comes up and you can't be there for the book. The workshop expects you and you're not going to show. That's when I visit with it. There's always time to say hello to it, have a cup of tea with it, just sit with it and let your mind wander. Ten or 15 minutes will do. The book will work for you as long as you never take it for granted.

Don't be intimidated by language. If you can express yourself verbally enough to be understood by your peers, you can write a book. Tell your story, relate your history, or explain your ideas in the language you'd use with your peers. After you get a first draft you can work it – polish, heighten, add, cut, correct spelling, spruce up grammar, whatever. You won't know what you have until you get that first draft.

As to grammar and punctuation, get a first draft before you fuss too much over that stuff. Those elements are far more flexible than is allowed for in the present bible of editors, *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Over the decades, rules change; masterpieces of the 19th and 20th centuries could not pass a grammar or punctuation test today, yet they remain masterpieces. Don't let today's grammatical fashions limit you.

If you're writing a novel, don't concern yourself about form. Tell your story as you see and hear and feel it. If *Naked Lunch* and *Great Expectations* are novels, what's a novel? A novel is the most open artistic form in existence. Tell your story as it wants to be told.

Here's a big one: Let the book teach you how to write it. If it's really a book and it's really yours to do and you stick with it, it will teach you all it can, according to its lights and yours.

You may doubt yourself every step of the way. Most of us do. You must learn to live with that.

And what if you try and try until you've hit one dead end too many and you quit? That's fine. Just be honest about it and don't feel sorry for yourself. You've tried to do what is exceptionally difficult. You've explored. Sometimes explorers come up with nothing but the experience of finding little. They learn about the nature of their own character, but have nothing else to show. Well, some of us would say that's a lot – and some of us wouldn't. Anyway, it is better than daydreaming about the journey, but never setting sail.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.