

FROM SUSAN'S BACK YARD:

Writers on Writing & the Creative Life /2

Excerpted from *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

GETTING PUBLISHED...

► "I just try to warn people who hope to get published that publication is not all that it is cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do—the actual act of writing—turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward.

► "...people want to be published. They *kind* of want to write, but they *really* want to be published. You'll never get to where you want to be that way, I tell them. There is a door we all want to walk through, and writing can help you find it and open it. Writing can give you what having a baby can give you: it can get you to start paying attention, can help you soften, can wake you up. But publishing won't do any of those things; you'll never get in that way.

► "Almost every single thing you hope publication will do for you is a fantasy, a hologram—it's the eagle on your credit card that only seems to soar. What's real is that if you do your scales every day, if you slowly try harder and harder pieces, if you listen to great musicians play music you love, you'll get better."

GETTING STARTED...

► "Start with your childhood. Flannery O'Connor said that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life.... Remember that you own what happened to you.

► "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You



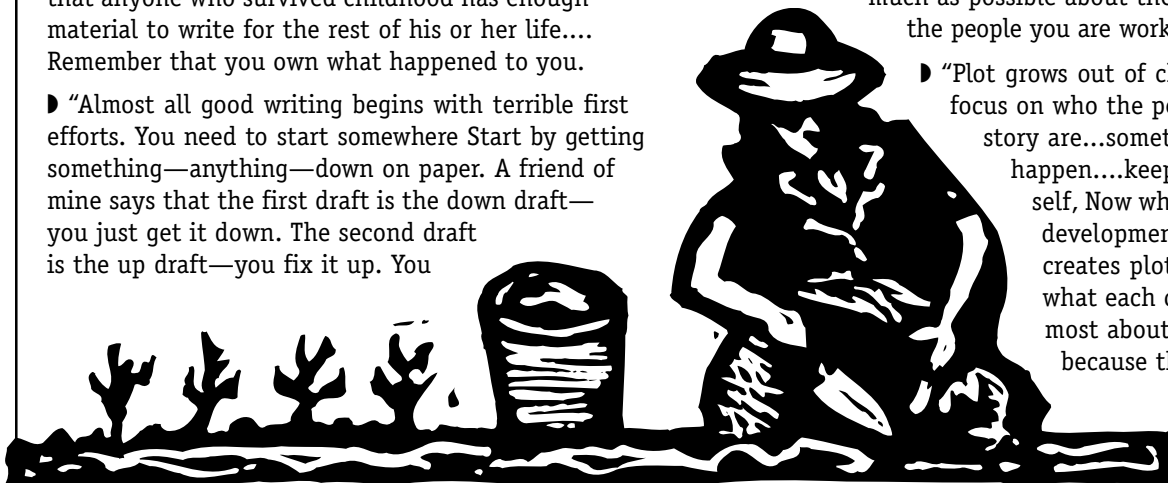
try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

► "Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up. But clutter and mess show us that life is being lived. Clutter is wonderfully fertile ground—you can still discover new treasures under all those piles, clean things up, edit things out, fix things, get a grip. Tidiness suggests that something is as good as it's going to get. Tidiness makes me think of held breath, of suspended animation, while writing needs to breathe and moveSo go ahead and make big scrawls and mistakes. Use up lots of paper.... messes are the artist's true friend."

BUILDING CHARACTER & PLOT...

► "...every single one of us at birth is given an emotional acre all our own...And as long as you don't hurt anyone, you really get to do with your acre as you please.... There's a fence around your acre though, with a gate, and if people keep coming onto your land and sliming it or trying to get you to do what they think is right, you get to ask them to leave. And they have to go, because this is your acre. By the same token, each of your characters has an emotional acre that they tend, or don't tend, in certain specific ways. One of the things you want to discover as you start out is what each person's acre looks like. What is the person growing, and what sort of shape is the land in? This knowledge may not show up per se in what you write, but the point is that you need to find out as much as possible about the interior life of the people you are working with.

► "Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are...something is bound to happen....keep asking yourself, Now what happens? The development of relationship creates plot...Find out what each character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's



at stake. Find a way to express this discovery in action, and then let your people set about finding or holding onto or defending whatever it is.

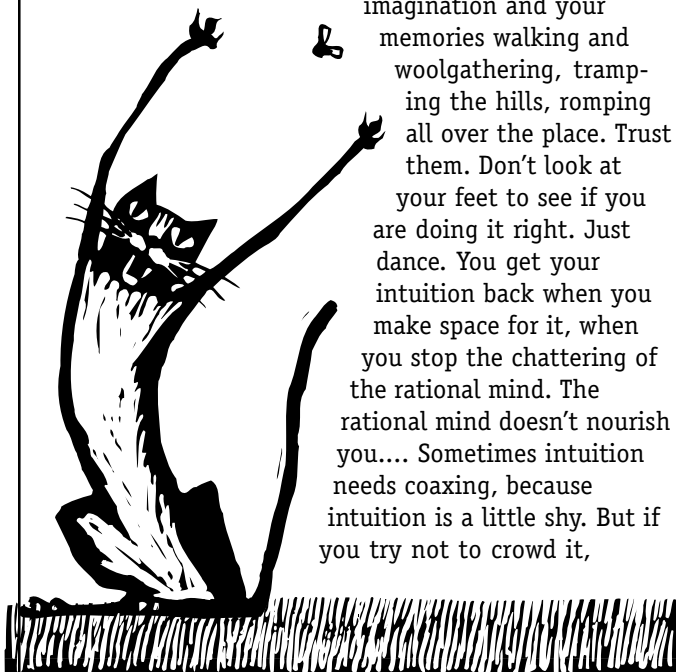
▶ “Your plot will fall into place as, one day at a time, you listen to your characters carefully, and watch them move around doing and saying things and bumping into each other. You’ll see them influence each other’s lives....And this process of discovering the story will often take place in fits and starts. Don’t worry about it. Keep trying to move the story forward. There will be time later to render it in a smooth and seamless way. John Gardner wrote that writing is creating a dream into which he or she invites the reader, and that the dream must be vivid and continuous.”

THE ‘I’ IN WRITING...

▶ “Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on....Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein....Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others....There is ecstasy in paying attention.

▶ “When we listened to our intuition when we were small and then told the grown-ups what we believed to be true, we were often either corrected, ridiculed, or punished....So you may have gotten into the habit of doubting the voice that was telling you quite clearly what was really going on. It is essential that you get it back....You get your confidence and intuition back by trusting yourself, by being militantly on your own side. You need to trust yourself, especially on a first draft, where amid the anxiety and self-doubt, there should be a real sense of your

imagination and your memories walking and woolgathering, tramping the hills, romping all over the place. Trust them. Don’t look at your feet to see if you are doing it right. Just dance. You get your intuition back when you make space for it, when you stop the chattering of the rational mind. The rational mind doesn’t nourish you.... Sometimes intuition needs coaxing, because intuition is a little shy. But if you try not to crowd it,



intuition often wafts up from the soul or subconscious, and then becomes a tiny, fitful little flame. It will be blown out by too much compulsion and manic attention, but will burn

quietly when watched with gentle concentration. So try to calm down, get quiet, breath, and listen. Squint at the screen in your head, and if you look, you will see what you are searching for, the details of the story, its direction—maybe not right this minute, but eventually. If you stop trying to control your mind so much,

you’ll have intuitive hunches about what this or that character is all about. It is hard to stop controlling, but you can do it. If your character suddenly pulls a half-eaten carrot out of her pocket, let her. Later you can ask yourself if this rings true. Train yourself to hear that small inner voice.

▶ “I don’t think you have time to waste not writing because you are afraid you won’t be good enough at it, and I don’t think you have time to waste on someone who does not respond to you with kindness and respect. You don’t want to spend your time around people who make you hold your breath. You can’t fill up when you’re holding your breath. And writing is about filling up, filling up when you are empty, letting images and ideas and smells run down like water—just as writing is also about dealing with emptiness.

▶ “Don’t be afraid of your material or your past....Be afraid of not getting your writing done....Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don’t worry about appearing sentimental. Worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent.

▶ “In this dark and wounded society, writing can give you the pleasures of the woodpecker, of hollowing out a hole in a tree where you can build your nest and say, ‘This is my niche, this is where I live now, this is where I belong.’ And the niche may be small and dark, but at last you will...be dealing with the one thing you’ve been avoiding all along—your wounds. This is very painful. It stops a lot of people early on who didn’t get into this for the pain. They got into it for the money and the fame. So they either quit, or they resort to a type of writing that is sort of like candy making.

“To participate requires self-discipline and trust and courage, because this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer, is ultimately about asking yourself...How alive am I willing to be?”

