

## Some Reading for Writers, Especially Hesitant Ones

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Aspiring writers ask me out to lunch all the time, seeking my advice. I'm always happy to go, because encouraging other writers is a big part of my identity. But in fact there are some terrific books that say a lot more than I can say over lunch. I hope you find what you are looking for here.

Baldwin, Christina. *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives Through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2005.

In some real way, this book finally explained to me who I am. I'm grateful for that. Baldwin made sense of how I can be a lover-of-literature, a scholar who keeps stopping her explanations to tell stories, and someone whose major role in life is to listening to other people talk. And getting them to write.

Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. New York: Tarcher Putnam, 1992.

Cameron describes a 12-step program for getting past all of the usual excuses for not doing whatever sort of art one feels called to do. In and around that task, she has unexpectedly good things to say about creativity and God. Her sidebar quotations on that topic are marvelous. Her confidence that we can earn a living from our writing is naive. And perhaps dangerous to newbies.

DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999.

DeSalvo leads writing workshops that have a specifically therapeutic intent, which I think is quite hazardous if one is not an experienced therapist well-trained

in leading therapy groups. I would never in a thousand years do in my writing groups what she does in hers. That warning aside, however, I found her exercises were often intriguing and in some cases quite healing for my own painful memories.

Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life into Fiction*. Cincinnati: Story Press, 1994.

Fabulous book: witty, specific, helpful. Also out of print, although I found a copy recently on alibris.com. It's a useful resource for turning one's experience into sermon anecdotes without creating an uproar.

*Going on Faith: Writing as a Spiritual Quest*. Ed. William Zinsser. New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999.

This is a wonderful collection of lively autobiographical talks about the spiritual experience of writers. Look for other collections he has editing too: the man has a gift for it.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (2 ed.). New York: Vintage, 2007.

A utterly stunning little book on what it means that our essential verbal skills is a gift. Especially read it if you or someone you know has been unduly influenced by Cameron's claims that if we persist we will make enough to support ourselves and our families.

Larsen, Michael. *How to Write a Book Proposal*. Cincinnati OH: Writers Digest Books, 1997.

There are plenty of guides for writing book proposals, all of them quite opinionated and of course disagreeing with one another especially about how to handle the chapter summaries that proposals must include. Larsen's advice on how do to such summaries does not work for the kinds of books I write. Nonetheless, I found this book a useful starting point on the necessary task of learning what book proposals should look like. Once you have read this book,

you can skim the proposal-writing advice you will find in many places, including sources like *Writer's Marketplace*. Please be forewarned: it will take months to research and write your book proposal.

My other standard advice for would-be authors is to read as widely as possible in other books on your subject-matter before you begin serious work on your own, because you are joining a conversation. Listening to others will help you sharpen your understanding of what you have to add that's unique in some way. In your book proposal, you will need to be able to explain in detail how your work is different from other books on the same subject. Knowing that—knowing about book proposals before you start work—will also prompt you to think carefully about the needs and identity of your readers before you do too much actual writing. That's crucial too.

Lerner, Betsy. *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers*. New York: Riverhead, 2000.

This is the best overview of the publishing process I've ever read. The single biggest adjustment one must make as a writer is to go from seeing a manuscript as *This Is My Baby* to seeing the manuscript as *This Is a Product To Be Packaged and Sold*.

Peacock, Molly. *How to Read a Poem and Start a Poetry Circle*. New York: Riverhead, 1999.

If you have always secretly yearned to understand poetry, or you love it and have had all too little of it lately, here's THE place to turn. She's a poet, not an English teacher of any variety, and that makes a huge difference. She sees poems from the inside.

Sands, Katherine, ed. *Making the Perfect Pitch: How to Catch a Literary Agent's Eye*. Waukesha WI: The Writer Books, 2004.

Read this book cover to cover, even the essays by agents representing works very different from yours. You will discover that agents are looking for wildly

different things even within a given genre. That's liberating. There's no way your work could appeal to some of these agents. Figuring out what *you* want in an agent is part of figuring out what you want in a publisher. You will have more luck finding what you want if you know what you are looking for. Maybe the frenetic New York scene is what you want, and if so this collection will help quite a bit. Other very fine writers will come away deciding that this hustle is not for them.

Schneiders, Pat. *Writing Alone and with Others*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

A brilliant and very down-to-earth book on how to run a writing group. This is how I run mine.

Sher, Gail. *One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1969.

On writing as a spiritual practice--a terrific little book! I have given away so many copies that I should get a cut of her royalties. Bottom line: if you are a writer and you're not writing, you are going to be both crazy and miserable. This should not be news. And yet all too often we do need *permission*, somehow. She offers it.

Weldon, Michele. *Writing To Save Your Life: How to Honor Your Story Through Journaling*. Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 2001.

This is a chatty, friendly, unthreatening book. It tries to help you get going remembering your own stories and thinking to yourself about writing them down in the privacy of your journal. That's all. It's an excellent starting point for most mid-life adults trying to decide whether or not to begin writing their own experience in their own voices. Weldon does not assume you are now on fire with literary ambition and planning to spend four hours a day writing. She makes writing feel do-able.