



## The Writing Life

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**T**HE WRITING LIFE IS a mediation between experience and meaning. You go out and live, then you sit down and write.

Sometimes, as we all know, and too well, that process advances with the speed of a vegetable garden. To use a more artistic analogy, writing is like hitting a tuning fork for a long time and producing only duff notes. But you'd trade it all for that moment when the music comes good. And, besides the professional agony when it doesn't come good, few writers have not had to endure lean times. It's part of the *living* deal. Here we must look on the bright side and draw inspiration from those who have gone before. As Dorothy Parker put it with customary bite, 'I only need enough money to keep body and soul apart.'

And what of the rest of life, the non-writing part? Many of the greatest authors have spent the best part of themselves on the page, leaving only scraps for daily life. One thinks of Tennessee Williams. You will come up with other examples. Graham Greene famously conjured the splinter of ice in the writer's heart, meaning that *all* life is material, even the heartrending bits, and God knows there are enough of those. And isn't it true that many of the best books follow – exclusively – not the high drama of this world but the lives of ordinary people in all its minute detail? Look at Balzac, or Arnold Bennett. Anthony Powell said he would be an eager reader of *Burke's Bank Clerks* (though I find it impossible to believe him). But don't you, like me, find everyday life unbearably poetic?



Is it lonely, this writing life? In my experience, yes, in the end it is. The trick, according to Nathaniel Hawthorne, is ‘to find sustenance in the communications of a solitary mind with itself.’ If only it were that simple. Yet when I read Cyril Connolly’s assertion that the hotel bedroom is the writer’s spiritual home, I get it.

Somebody once said that writing is the disciplined sublimation of raw emotion into achieved form. In *The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing*, Norman Mailer (not one of my favourites, but he had his moments), revealed that, ‘Over the years, I’ve found one rule . . . if you tell yourself you are going to be at your desk tomorrow, you are by that declaration asking your unconscious to prepare the material. You are, in effect, contracting to pick up such valuables at a given time.’ This is the mediation I was referring to between experience and meaning. Mailer was asserting that writers must maintain trustworthy relations with themselves.

In conclusion, writing is a search to find a pattern in the messy, contradictory details of the non-writing life — yours, mine, everybody’s. You can only sit in your cork-lined room if you’ve lived a bit: we must write from experience after all, not ideas. I leave the last word to Schopenhauer. ‘The first forty years of life’, he said, ‘is text. The rest is commentary.’