



## The Writer as Outsider

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**B**EFORE YOU WERE A WRITER, you were an outsider. At social gatherings of any description, you'd rather drift around the fringes than press towards the centre. Isolation was voluntary. You didn't feel neglected, rejected or excluded, had no wish to belong any club, hub or clan, to be a member of any gang, crew, coterie or clique, to be one of the in-crowd, the set, the pack. Unnoticed or disregarded, you stayed close but apart. Beyond the mysterious, metaphorical barricades, or the literal rings of interlocked arms, you'd loiter (with or without intent), to pick and choose whether or not to participate in whatever it was that was going on, linger as long as the mood took you, or take yourself off to roam.

Every so often a head would turn, a voice would call your name, exclaim it as if you'd just that moment arrived on the scene; a hand would beckon you into the throng. Some took your refusal to join in personally, perceived it as a snub, branded you aloof. You'd explain it away as shyness, but this may not have been the whole truth.

Mostly, you'd consent to dip a toe into the teeming pool of community. Gladly, obligingly, or perhaps because it was the best thing to do at the time, you'd take part, play whatever game was on the go. For a while it was good to be on the inside, looking out — but too much time in the thick of things and you'd be gasping for air.

Outsider as stranger. You were a willing stranger, a keen bird of passage seen in nearby or far-flung destinations — when funds and circumstances



allowed. You travelled alone, without a plan – or one which changed along the way – and with a thirst for the new, the unexpected.

In the slow stravaig that becoming a writer entails, it could hardly be said that you'd changed your ways. Self-isolation has become so ingrained as to be virtually indistinguishable from addiction. You still gravitate to the periphery, outside but always looking in, close enough to discern the moving parts, the context, the pressure points, anomalies and weak spots, distanced enough to have, with any luck, some sense of the whole.

You note an old man on a bench, how the evening light glances off his highly polished dress shoes, how two young women press together their cheeks together as they walk; how the air holds a tang of imminent snow.

You depend on being able to step back for better focus, or to step to the side for a different take on what's going on around you. Only after a back step and a side step are you ready to step forward, and into the limitless world of fiction.