



## Loneliness and the Writer

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Lucasta Miller

**W**HEN YOU START OFF as a writer, they don't tell you about the occupational hazards. Even if they do, you don't listen. You're not bothered, in your twenties, by the thought that you'll still be only as good as the last thing you published when you're in your fifties. Or by the possibility that you might not be earning any more. Writing offers no career ladder with an in-built upward trajectory, only snakes-and-ladders. It never gets any easier.

Of all the hazards involved in a writing career, loneliness can be the most corrosive. There are, of course, some people who enjoy their own company more than that of others, but I suspect that these natural recluses are in the minority — even among writers. Working on a book, sometimes for years without feedback, can be gruelling. The feeling that you're writing into a void can spawn an imagined readership of crippling inner critics — and can make it harder to nurture the two qualities that a writer needs above all others: self-discipline and self-belief.

That's why I've always been happiest when I've combined writing books with some other related occupation that involves regular social contact with other people. Whenever I've done so, it's not only been what's kept me sane; it's also improved my writing.

Working as an editor on the detail of other people's writing has obvious benefits when it comes to one's own prose. You can learn so much more about what works and what doesn't. But it's interacting on a human level



with the other person that, for me, really counts. Simple professionalism will mean that you'll strive to be tactful, appreciative and respectful of their feelings. In doing so, you can learn to treat yourself the same way — and to realise that self-care rather than self-laceration always has a better outcome if you want to solve your own writing problems.

Teaching is another route to combatting the loneliness of the long-distance writer. The most fulfilling experience I've had in the course of my career was running a creative-writing class for asylum-seekers at the drop-in centre of the London charity Women for Refugee Women. The experience fed into my other work because it made me feel more confident in my own powers of communication — which is, after all, the essence of the writer's task, though we do it alone at our desks. Unlike one-to-one teaching, which is more like editing, teaching a group has its own dynamic that's capable of creating an emotional bond bigger than the sum of the individual consciousnesses involved. When one student read out her work and we discussed it, something happened that went far beyond words on a page. I used to come out of those classes energised with a sense of human possibility which I'd never felt sitting alone at my computer.