



## The Writing Life

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**E**VERY DAY, I RISE at 5 am, put on my silk dressing gown over my fine cotton pyjamas, insert my feet into fleecy slippers, and descend to my book-lined study, where a discreet, silent servant has ensured a warm fire and a breakfast of a lightly poached egg and coffee. Here, undisturbed, I work at my enormous, tidy, leather-topped desk, pouring forth my muse for two straight hours with an ink pen, until 7 am, when I return upstairs to have a brisk bath. A pad of paper is perched ready on a chair at the side for me to jot down my bon mots and brilliant plot ideas, a fluffy white towel warmed and ready for me to come out...

If only that were true. The writing life is a messy business, and it is also paradoxical. There is a strong urge in any writer to retreat from the world, to inhabit a tower, or some bothy in Scotland, or, more plausibly, a shed in the garden, and simply write.

And yet we must also be fully paid-up members of society — because otherwise, how could we learn and observe? We must walk our dogs, feed our children, try not to annoy those nearest to us. Muriel Spark had it right, I think, spending most of the year in a whirl of social engagements, and retreating to a hotel where she would live undisturbed for months whilst writing her books. Unfortunately, that option is not available for most of us; although sometimes I like to pretend I am living in a hotel, calling down for room service before serving myself a cup of tea.

I know a handful of authors able to live solely from their advances and



royalties. This means that you must have a job that pays. And the difficulty lies in what that job is. Do you work within the creative industries – teaching creative writing, putting out journalism and reviews, editing manuscripts and so forth – or do you become a zookeeper or a fighter pilot? The former means you become partly institutionalised; the latter means you might have an interesting life, but you have no contacts in the publishing world.

What does it really mean to be a writer? So many factors must be considered: deadlines, contracts, the market; what readers want, and what you want to give readers. Forging a path through all these competing, conflicting demands is a job in itself.

People ask me if I have a routine. Routines are what, in my wildest dreams, I imagine being able to have. More often than not, it's a question of working out where I can cram in an hour or two of straight writing. And what that means is complex, too. Does it mean editing? Does it mean plotting? Some weeks, caught up in the throes of one urgent task or another, I don't write at all.

Thinking time, in my view, certainly counts as writing. Even if that does mean staring out of the window — or dawdling in the bath. I just wish that others could be persuaded of this.