



My Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

Zoë Howe

WRITERS EXPERIENCE COUNTLESS precious moments in the process of our work: we sculpt stories from our experiences – or tenderly draw out and frame those of others – and the moment we commit our ideas to the blank page always feels momentous. But that’s just the start. We attract a publisher, approve the cover, clutch the first copy. A kind review, a signing, a message from someone who is giving your book to a loved one as a gift: all of these moments are treasured and rightly so. They are hard won.

The moment I saw a copy of my first book in a shop window is etched on my heart — and this wasn’t just any window. I was living in Soho at the time, and the nearest bookshop was the Original Soho Bookshop, opposite the notorious Raymond Revue Bar. The establishment was essentially a sex shop but it also stocked some excellent pop culture books on the ground floor. I used to spend a lot of time there. (On the ground floor, I should add.) To see my *own* book displayed in their illuminated window, one minute from where the book was written and the interviews conducted, was an unparalleled thrill.

Being largely a biographer means that many treasured moments come from simply being with people, and seeing how the work we are doing together is making a difference, whether raising awareness, instigating a creative resurgence, reuniting old friends, healing wounds or busting myths. Words have power, and now they reach further than ever. With power comes responsibility, and I am always conscious that, once the work



is in cold hard print, there is no going back. ‘Words have wings and can never be recalled’, as the saying goes, and we must always remain conscious of that. This can be stressful but when you are assured of the positive effect of words – specifically *your* words – there is nothing like it.

My experience of writing fiction has brought treasure on a personal level in terms of a kind of catharsis: writing alchemises our memories, our experiences and our pain, transforming them like a spell working backwards in time. We can make sense of things, summon up different endings, or write things just as they were – according to our own perception – setting ourselves and our secrets free, as obliquely or plainly as we wish.

Those of us who make a living from words generally feel very fortunate, although, of course, there are difficult days. But when you do have moments that feel special, write *them* down. To echo Oscar Wilde’s quip that he kept a diary so he’d always have something sensational to read on the train, *you* need to keep a notebook to remind you that there is more good than bad in this writing life. All of these moments amount to something that is ultimately uniquely *yours*, created from your hard work, your character, your efforts, focus and personal magic, and what you bring out of people, situations, life. *That* is something to treasure in itself.