



The Writer as Outsider

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THERE IS A PRICE TO PAY for being a writer. You are inevitably an observer, a watcher of the world around you, and not fully immersed in day-to-day events and relationships. While you construct your novel or short story, or your poem, or your play, you will be keeping the rest of life at a certain remove. The work of art, and probably your personal psychopathology, will demand that of you. Likewise, if you're a nonfiction writer, the same may well apply — yes, you're involved in the world about you, but while you're writing you have an internal narrative that must take precedence. It has to be this way.

The relationship between the writer and the world and those nearest to her or him can be fraught. It's a commonplace that writers are often a little strange. So many drunks, so many addicts, so many melancholics... Are writers born that way? Probably in part. But circumstances do also seem to contribute. A huge number of writers had difficult or disrupted childhoods that do seem to have given them that necessary disconnectedness and slight dislocation from the present. Ask yourself this: would John Le Carré have been so successful at describing deception and double bluff, if his father hadn't been a conman? And would Charles Dickens and Jack London have had the same fire under their belts if they hadn't spent time as child labourers in factories?

Of course there are writers who are hugely gregarious. Scott Fitzgerald was a great party animal. So too, apparently, is Salman Rushdie. But they are exceptions. Most writers spend the most meaningful parts of their



lives alone, sitting on their haunches at a desk. That in itself precludes intimacy. And then the corollaries — the heightened feelings, the thin skin, the self-obsession, the microscopic scrutinising of the motives and desires of others, the sinking into self-created worlds of fantasy — all of these will distance you further.

Writers often talk of an inner compulsion, of *having* to write. Rachel Carson was big on this. So too was that old showman Ernest Hemingway. But I think there's always an element of choice for a writer — there is a secret (or not so secret) pride to any writer. It's an inner toughness, an icy shard of *goddamn-you-all-I'm-in-it-for-me*.

As I write this, I have a magnificent winter view over snow-covered mountains in the Scottish Highlands. In the foreground stands an elm tree, and sitting on a top branch is a crow. He, or she – you can't tell with crows, but somehow I feel he is a *he* – perches very still on a top branch of the tree. The other crows have flown off. He could fly off too, but he has instead decided just to stay and watch, and as he does so maybe he'll be constructing some wonderful inner crowsong.

Maybe my crow is utterly absorbed in this crowsong. And maybe he doesn't much care for the company of other crows, and maybe they aren't so keen on him as he isn't quite crowish enough for them. So he's just sitting there. If he stays too long he will freeze to death and fall off the branch. But he has decided it's worth it — that last plummeting fall will be a wonderful thing.