



## Why I Write

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**I**T CAME, LARGELY, OUT OF reading, and that must be true of almost every writer who's lived. Books were an escape from the sometimes less-than-thrilling life of a nineteen-seventies schoolboy. They were comforting; they offered a kind of companionship. But if books – stories – were a refuge, they were also places I came back from, a little changed, a little readier to deal with what surrounded me, to understand it. And that coming back – the rebound, the advance into life through reading and the imagination – became, in teenage years, the dominant theme. At school we read Shakespeare, Hardy, the Brontës. I fell in love with sentences, and when we read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* around the class I longed for my turn to read just to have that language in my mouth. I also longed for Sally Lee's turn, and Hardy and Sally Lee, literature and desire, all became joyfully entangled in a way I've never wanted to unpick.

At eighteen, finishing my A levels – this time reading Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, the wonderful music of its last pages – I decided – my life's one true epiphany – that I would be a writer. It was as sudden, and in some ways, as simple, as that. Writing would be my rock and roll, my politics, my religion. What better way to spend a life? I didn't question my fitness for it. I didn't see why I *shouldn't*.

My plan was just to do it. It turned out that was exactly the right plan. I left home the day I left school, began a new life in a bedsit above a hairdresser's shop. I lived on glucose tablets, Saveloy sausages and chips. I wrote stories and poems. I was very happy. If I'd had to sum it up in a



word – the motive force behind my writing – I might have said ‘freedom’. That, I think, was the feeling of it.

And now, forty years on, freedom still? Yes, that’s in there somewhere. How, when you write, you’re less nailed down, less trapped by the particularities of your circumstance. Also the sense that this is what I’m here to do, that when I write I am fulfilling my quantum of purpose on this earth. It is the most comfortable, uncomfortable place I know. It’s not very healthy (though I’ve given up the Saveloy sausages). It’s not a life I would recommend to anyone. There used to be a regular newspaper advertisement that asked in bold **Why Not Be a Writer?** One reason might be that cirrhosis and penury beckon (I suppose that’s two reasons). But I’m still in love with sentences, and still, on most days, believe what I believed at eighteen, that to write, to be in it with all your heart – as D. H. Lawrence was – is a heroic thing to do, a heroic task. And with writing, whatever happens to you, good or bad, you have a place to sing about it. Nothing is wasted, nothing is uninteresting. As I get older I’m tempted by silence, the seamliness of not adding my voice to all the others. Let the page stay blank like a field of snow no one has walked in yet. Let peace and birdsong descend. But the moment I have such a thought I want to write about it, I’m off again. The world is a troubling and beautiful place. Writing is my way of meeting it — part shield, part embrace. Mostly embrace.