



## Why I Write

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**W**HATEVER I WRITE *will* usually end up as a story or novel, but that's not why I write: I don't write in order to produce books. I don't hanker to see a book of mine on any shelf; quite the contrary.

This feels unsayable for a writer, but I have an uneasy relationship with what might be termed the world of books and reading. It's not that I don't love books – of course I do, or at least some of them – but I am unnerved by a sense of a club of which I am not a member, even as I'm aware that this discomfort is of my own making and I should get over it. Plenty of people who, like me, grew up in a home without books nevertheless find their way gladly into that world and make it very much their own. For me, though, when I think about why I write, my reading experiences don't figure, nor the prospect of any book that might result from my work in progress.

So, if not books, what am I thinking of when I write? Why do I think I am doing it? It seems to me that I am bringing my attention to lived experience — be that my own or how I imagine that of others to have been. I'm focussing on the many and varied shades and textures of experience, and which words might best be used to re-create experiences in another's mind. Not books, then, but words. But how did words become so important to me – unbookish me – that I have dedicated my working life to finding the right ones?

Well, there were no books in the house where I grew up, but there was an



abundance of words: my mother's. Tales from her own life and those of friends and family, along with harmless gossip and speculation, all made for stories of a kind – compelling and intriguing, funny or touching – if not the kind, I was becoming aware, that tended to find their way, at least back then, into books. But those books, I was beginning to realise, were missing a trick.

Nor were there many books in my inspiring, engaging sixth-form English Lit classes, but there were reams of banda sheets, individual pages on which would be poems or passages of prose or extracts from plays. And with the encouragement and guidance of our charismatic teacher, we spent hours picking our way across and down those pages, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence. We learned to weigh up words, to appreciate their resonance.

With hindsight, I understand that my teacher – close to retirement at that time – had been educated in the heyday of practical criticism. As for why his painstaking, forensic approach should have appealed so strongly to me, I don't know; but ever since then, I have made it my life's work to pick my way forward word by word.