



Loneliness and the Writer

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WRITING IS BY DEFINITION a lonely process. Being a novelist, or a poet, requires thousands of hours hunched over your desk or kitchen table, shunning all forms of company. No one would choose the writing life unless they loved the slow, meditative process of creating a fictional world. It's not surprising that many writers give up before getting published. The process of creating a novel often reminds me of a film from the nineteen-sixties, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. I feel like an exhausted athlete in the final stages of a book, when tiredness and self-doubt can be overwhelming. It's then that I question if writing is a vocation or a punishment, before dragging myself past the finishing line.

I'm lucky that several factors stop me becoming desolate while I complete each book. I feel a strong sense of community with other writers, living and dead, who have all mined their own psyches for the sake of a good story. The company of like minds is a good way to stay sane. I ration the amount of time I spend on social media, but messages from fellow writers are always welcome. When I'm shoulder-deep in a book, with waves crashing over my head, that contact can be a lifeline. It reminds me that I'm part of a creative community, and we're all on the same journey, despite aiming for separate destinations.

My husband is also a writer, so he never complains about my reclusive lifestyle. We always eat breakfast, lunch and dinner together, giving our imaginations a break at mealtimes. The concept of loneliness remains an



abstract one for me, while he's engaged in the same task, in his self-built studio in our small back garden. When I look out of the window, I see him at his desk, and his body language always lets me know if his words are flowing. On a good day he's bowed over his computer, hands flying over the keyboard, which encourages me to get to work. I like knowing that we're separate, but united by the same creative goal, which banishes any sense of loneliness.

I'm always interested when famous writers are honest enough to admit that writing, with all its knockbacks and critical judgements, can be a lonely road. Nick Hornby gave up writing novels for a while, claiming that he was sick of his own company, but he couldn't walk away completely. He became a screenwriter instead, allowing him to work in a group, with producers and editors always on hand.

I love the solitude of writing, but that state of mind is different from loneliness. Isolation feels like a punishment to me, while solitude can revive my energies. It feels like sitting alone in a rose garden, in high summer. I know some writers begin to see their characters as real companions, but that's not my view. Spending time with them can be a joy, but they will never replace my friends and family.