



Loneliness and the Writer

Mark Illis

THERE'S A CAR PASSING OUTSIDE. Someone on the way to work perhaps, to an office with people in it, where there might be a meeting and then after that lunch in a canteen with tables full of colleagues, clattering cutlery, a hubbub of chatter. The car goes on its way. A bird tweets. Otherwise...silence.

But silence is fine, because I don't want meetings and colleagues, I like being alone. I need this quiet and solitude to properly focus. I don't even like music playing, so I certainly don't want to hear chatter, and all the noises of people getting on with their lives. Occasionally I think of Jack Nicholson playing Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, feverishly typing *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy* before he starts chasing his wife and son with an axe. Occasionally. But for the most part, I'm happy being alone.

In fact, I used to feel a guilty pleasure at the end of the summer holidays, when the kids went back to school and my wife went back to work, and I had the house to myself again. September meant I could focus on my work without distractions. And you're never lonely when the words are flowing, when your characters are jostling for attention, when a world is developing on the page sentence by sentence and you're in that elusive, magical zone. In those moments, that fictional world feels more real than the one outside the door.

All of that is true, but still... Other people might sometimes be hell, but you do need to interact with them, at least occasionally. Writing has to



engage with the world, and I think that means the writer has to engage with the world too. You don't need to be gregarious, but you do need to be curious. As Seamus Heaney suggested, we should be vulnerable to delight. So it's about balance. I find being alone essential, and I'm happy to stray along the border of loneliness, but now and then it's good to have a change.

And I'm lucky, because my TV work provides that change. It sometimes takes me to a room full of writers all discussing storylines, or to a meeting with a producer to chat about a project over coffee. And the RLF sometimes sends me off to a hospital, for instance, to run a workshop with a group of mental-health professionals. Or I'll visit a school to talk to a class full of excitable Year Sevens. When I'm going out, I'll put some thought into the clothes I'm wearing, I'll put some notes in a bag, I'll use public transport and I'll buy a sandwich from a Costa. I'm passing as a normal person, and I'm happy to be back in the world of professional relationships, chatter and clattering cutlery.

But after that, when the meeting's over or the workshop's done, then I'm eager to return to my room at the top of the house where it's peaceful, where it's quiet, where it's just me and my characters.