

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Writers Who Inspire Me

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WHERE TO BEGIN? So many writers, for so many reasons.

There are those who inspire me with their sentences. Chandler with his descriptions, for example (tropical fish with ‘telescope eyes, froglike faces and unnecessary fins, waddling through the green water like fat men going to lunch’); Dickens’s comic turns (‘he had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two’). Hemingway’s deadpan style opening unlooked-for vistas of emotion (“How’s everything?” “Good. How’s everything with you?” “Not so good.” They were both silent.) Henry Green’s dialogue (“All right then I’ll learn you something,” Edith said and she panted and panted. “I love Charley Raunce I love ’im I love ’im so there. I could open the veins of my right arm for that man,” she said.) Thomas Hardy’s group conversations, T. S. Eliot’s phrase-making, Marcel Proust’s penetration (and mastery of the extremely long sentence), Lee Child’s speed, Georges Simenon’s secondary characters, Evelyn Waugh’s comic timing. You get the point. Every writer’s list would be different but probably just as long.

The inspiration is not to write like any of them but to work harder at my own sentences.

I can think of other sorts of inspiration too. Writers who inspire me with their unstinting effort, T. E. Lawrence for example, who lost the only copy of his massive *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* on a train and immediately began to write another version. Shirley Hazzard, who wrote thirty drafts of her masterpiece *The Transit of Venus*.

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If extra work improves my writing I think it's worth doing. God knows it's hard. I need the example of others to keep going.

Then there are those inspirational writers who risked criticism or scorn or, worst of all, total negligence, by daring to do something different. James Joyce, for instance, living in poverty while writing a book that no mainstream publisher would touch.

Finding your own voice requires courage as well as hard work.

Writers who keep going in spite of adverse circumstances inspire me. Naturally this includes many (most?) women writers, who have generally been expected to bring up children, do the housework and cook their husbands' teas before writing. I think of Jane Austen disciplining herself to write just a few more sentences before the next domestic interruption, or Virginia Woolf, or Elizabeth Taylor, or Rachel Cusk, or...so many others.

I think of Thomas Hardy, ignoring the snobbery about his upbringing, and Keats ignoring the critics, and Robert Louis Stevenson writing on, despite terminal illness.

And I think of the writers all over the world who have literally written in fear of their lives, those Russians living under Communism, for instance, Isaac Babel or Osip Mandelstam, both murdered by Stalin for what they wrote.

My life is ridiculously easy by comparison. What a waste it would be not to make the most of my enormous opportunity, without complaining about the little difficulties, all too easy to exaggerate.