



The Writing Life

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ONE DRAB FEBRUARY morning, when I reached the lowest point of a protracted, nearly ten-year-long, personal crisis – the worst and the deepest in my life – I blew my last twenty pounds on *Where There's a Will*, John Mortimer's quirky autobiography.

I opened it at random in the semi-darkness of the permanently empty Waterstones bookshop in Folkestone, Kent — the place of my temporary 'exile':

A writer not only has to write, he has to live in order to have something to write about. And of the two occupations, living is much the hardest.

I remember that bleak February day so well. Grey tearful skies above the harbour. Piercing, almost child-like, screams of seagulls... I was puffing up the hill to my desolate rented cottage with the hardback under my jacket to shelter it from the drizzle.

With every step up the road, I felt a little better — as if I was indeed slowly escaping from the seemingly bottomless pit of solitude and depression. I no longer felt alone, as if a good friend had put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'It will be OK, mate.'

'And of the two occupations: writing and living — living is much the hardest.'



I was a writer and therefore everything in my life at any given moment – like the annoying drizzle, and the screaming seagulls and the satin sky above my head, and my ancient Honda outside the cottage, with its screen-wipers bent and tied into knots by local vandals the other night – all of that was part of the yet-unwritten story of my life, and life itself was but a never-ending research of the book that can never be completed.

Being a writer is one of the hardest professions on earth. John Steinbeck rightly called it ‘the hell of a job’ and Thomas Mann assured that ‘a writer is someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people’.

The last axiom was illustrated by James Thurber in his 1955 interview for the *Paris Review*:

I never quite know when I’m not writing. Sometimes my wife comes up to me at a party and says, ‘Dammit, Thurber, stop writing’. She usually catches me in the middle of a paragraph. Or my daughter will look up from the dinner table and ask, ‘Is he sick?’ ‘No’, my wife says, ‘he is writing something’.

I myself have lost count of the times when I found myself in trouble with my wives, girlfriends, and simply friends, for suddenly – without any obvious reason or warning – switching off, getting carried away in the middle of a conversation, while turning over the words of a poem, a story or an article in progress in my mind; that is, writing without putting anything on paper. ‘Oh, look at him: he is miles away’, is the most frequent comment.

It can be embarrassing, for, in most cases, you don’t mean to be ‘miles away’ — it happens against your will.

I do believe that, alongside metaphors, allegories and similes, writer’s life itself is but another literary device to be incorporated into their



work, particularly when their own lives start feeling like a cluster of meaningless oxymorons.

Difficult?

Enormously so. 'Life is not meant to be easy, my child', said George Bernard Shaw. 'So why should good writing, aimed at portraying life as it is, be?'