



The Writer on Her Work

Janet Sternburg (Editor), Margaret Atwood (Contributor)

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Seventeen novelists, poets, and writers of nonfiction explore how they have become writers, why they write, and what it means to be a woman and a writer.

The Writer on Her Work Details

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Paul says

A collection of essays and talks (even an extended poem from Ursula Le Guin) by women on writing. It covers what, why and how they write and what the obstacles are. The contributions are variable in quality, but they are all worth reading. Contributors include Margaret Atwood, Joan Didion, Erica Jong, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, Anne Tyler, Diane Johnson, Mary Gordon and others. None are more than a dozen or so pages and provide an insight into the minds of the writers. Some are very personal, others more didactic.

Of course there are insights into the attitudes of society and of men. Mary Gordon's anecdote is particularly horrific as she reports a story told to her by a famous male writer in 1971. Sadly she doesn't say which writer it was.

"I will tell you what women writers are like. Women writers are like a female bear who goes into a cave to hibernate. The male bear shoves a pine cone up her ass, because he knows if she shits all winter she'll stink up the cave. In spring the pressure of all that built up shit makes her expel the pine cone, and she shits a winter's worth all over the walls of the cave. That's what women writers are like."

That sort of left me speechless. Gordon goes on to say she stopped writing for two months after that. However she also argues that there is much more of a community of female writers who are mutually supportive than there is of men. Alice Walker writes powerfully about being a writer and a mother and also about being a black writer amongst white writers, even white feminist writers. Margaret Walker's essay entitled *On Being Female, Black and Free* foreshadows the Black Lives matter movement.

This is the virago edition, a collection put together from the two original volumes published ten years apart. It is a fascinating insight into the art of writing and into its challenges.

Meredith says

Honestly, I don't have much to say about this. It might be because I haven't fully processed some of the essays I read to the point where I can sufficiently talk about them. A lot of the essays acted as a balm to my soul. It was interesting to see that a lot of the struggles women face today are almost the exact same. I wasn't exactly surprised, but it made their words feel even more pressing.

Bettina says

Wonderful essays by women writers (suitable for co-ed reading, of course). My favorite essay, "Still Just Writing," is by one of my favorite authors, Anne Tyler, who aptly describes the challenges of fitting in writing time while raising kids. Tyler was picking up one of her daughters from school one day when someone asked her if she'd gotten a job yet or if she was "still just writing." Amusingly, she describes her characters as extra kids. One gaunt, elderly male character (unnamed, but a typical Tyler mainstay) waits anxiously to be heard, moving in and out of Tyler's peripheral imagination while in real life, her daughters develop one crisis after another.

Since the famously reclusive Tyler, a Baltimore native, almost never gives interviews, the insight into her

background (raised in a commune-like atmosphere 'til age 10, for instance) and process are particularly treasured. There are some other great essays in this book as well, but it's worth it for that one alone.

Maria Marsello says

Given this book when I graduated from High School by an important teacher. I still cherish it...

Ana Alvarez says

Essential for any writer whose experiences as a woman inform their practice. This book illustrates how writing transforms from a hobby or pleasure into an identity, a form of living.

Isabelle says

The five stars are without a doubt for Anne Tyler's Essay and the heart-wrenching , moving diary entries of Michele Murray. The introductory pages are also motivational and inspiring. A great collection but those two above-mentioned authors are the ones I felt closest to. Their perspective and experience were relatable.

Jan says

A couple of the essays were good (Anne Tyler, Joan Didion) but others were rather tedious. Writing's work and modern life not designed for it. Check.

Anne Marshall says

A good collection of information on women writers. The diaries were the best sections.

Lori says

Are you a writer? Are you a woman? Get a copy!

Rae says

A motivating selection of essays written by prominent authors including Anne Tyler, Alice Walker, Erica Jong, Gail Godwin, and Nancy Milford. They discuss what, how and why they write.

Helen King says

I don't know why this took me so long to read - lots of insights and different perspectives on the question 'why I write' from a range of women writers. I particularly enjoyed Margaret Atwood's take (9 different perspectives, depending how the question is understood, Anne Tyler's practical approach of managing to write while focusing on home and child rearing (taking the time available and also how that approach enriches her writing), Josn Didion's reflections (and why I should really look up her work, which I've never read), Margaret Walker, Alice Walker (actually, they all have great things to say). Give it a go!

Tristy says

This is a great book from the feminist archives that (more or less) holds up today. The collection contains some fantastic writers. It was so wild to see Alice Walker's bio, so early in her career - she'd only published 2 books when this anthology was released! I was really moved by so many of the pieces, which give perspectives on what it is like to create and write, when living the life of a woman. I was so moved by Muriel Rukeyser's piece, in which she describes a very different New York City than we are used to - one with horse drawn carriages and slaughterhouses - on the Upper West Side! She was born in 1913, and it was very powerful for me to realize that someone who was alive in 1980, could remember Manhattan, pre-skyscrapers. The diversity of the collection is admirable and does not feel forced at all. Truly a great read.

Kristy Dallas Alley says

This is an excellent book of essays by women writers. Although ostensibly an answer to the question "Why do you write?" many of the essays feel more like memoir, with a few humorous ones thrown in.

Colleen says

Published in 1980, this book has a lot of focus on the women's movement and the challenges of women writers that seem dated when being read 34 years later. No doubt books by more contemporary writers are available. Still some of the entries were very fascinating. The last entry, by Gail Godwin, quotes a passage from Iris Murdoch's novel The Black Prince, in which a writer says, "Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one has only one life. If one has a thing at all one must do it and keep on and on and on trying to do it better."

Jessica says

Joan Didion's essay was brilliant (but it wasn't written for this book, just borrowed for it). I enjoyed Anne Tyler's and Gail Godwin's and a few others, but actively did not enjoy quite a number of these pieces for their self-consciousness and preciousness.

