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The movie and the diary

Angela Bensted

On New Year's Eve a fellow reveller asked "why do you write?" and the answer eluded me. It's been a few days since the party, but I'd like another shot at the title.

On a recent international flight I watched a film about American novelist Thomas Wolfe and his editor Max Perkins.

Despite Jude Law crowding the screen with his overblown Wolfe, Colin Firth quietly gets on with the job of portraying an intelligent and insightful Perkins. A man of letters with a keen eye for the lyrical, the editor is central to Wolfe's success, working with the prolific writer over months and sometimes years to slash his word count to something readable.

Perkins doesn't simply rip through Wolfe's manuscript with a red pen, he sits with him, teasing edits and redrafts out of the manic writer through discussion and persuasion. It's a collaboration. Perkins is like a wise teacher pushing a favourite student to do better, to reach his full potential.

"...verbal fluency is the product of hours spent writing about nothing, just as musical fluency is the product of hours spent repeating scales."

Long after the plane landed this movie lingered. It left me measuring myself against Wolfe and longing for a Perkins. Even the greats (and I'm not great) are better with a polish. Who knows how my prose might shine if only I could work with someone to buff and tidy and nip and tuck (slash and burn?).

But if Thomas Wolfe is the archetypal writer, with a daily word count in the thousands, then editing is the least of my concerns. In the movie, Wolfe is a feverish, compulsive wordsmith; a poet for whom scribbling thoughts and observations and stories is like breathing. The first manuscript for his second book *Of Time and the River* fills two crates.

If this is what defines the vocation then I'm doomed. I don't feel any burning compulsion. I can go weeks without writing more than perfunctory emails and half-formed texts. If the correct answer to the question "why do you write?" is "because I must", then I'm a fraud.

Coincidentally, when rooting about in a closet looking for Christmas decorations last month, I found a diary I started in 1979. The eleven-year-old me is engrossing reading. The entries are short and matter-of-fact, detailing what I did with my time, especially what I ate. Just these bare facts, without analysis or introspection or adjectives, catapult me back to my childhood. I can smell the chlorine and feel the polished cork. And it gets better as the days go by. I stopped after six weeks, apparently consumed by study once school resumed. I wish I hadn't.

French artist Eugène Delacroix also regretted the gaps in his journal.

"I feel as though I were still master of the days I have recorded, even though they are past, whereas those not mentioned in the pages are as though they had never been."

Watching the movie and reading the diary have led to a revelation. Compulsive writing might not define what it is to be a writer but a daily writing habit will likely mold one.

Stanley Fish loves a good sentence. So much so that he wrote a *New York Times* bestseller on how to craft one. He promotes form over substance. It doesn't matter what you say, he advises. Just write.

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The notebooks and diaries of many literary greats touch on the importance of journaling to their writing. Virginia Woolf observes

"The habit of writing thus for my own eye only is good practice. It loosens the ligaments. Never mind the misses and the stumbles."

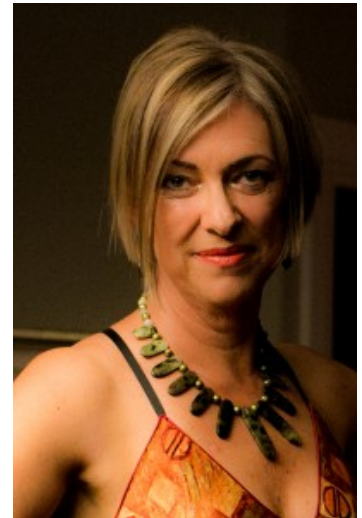
It's ironic that something written in private, intended for Woolf's 'own eye', has now been published and is widely quoted. In fact diaries have become a literary genre in their own right. (Although I doubt my 1979 effort is headed for the printer any time soon.)

While Woolf and others relished the freedom a private journal afforded them, a fledgling writer might benefit more from discipline and restraint. It's not enough to scribble away in private like Virginia. The entreaty to 'just write' is persuasive, but until there's a Max Perkins in my life it's important to set some parameters.

So I'm publishing my daily efforts online, not because I expect people to read them but for the discipline of having a deadline. And knowing that someone might read my work engages the editorial reflex. Despite what some might say, that's no bad thing.

This new journaling habit – my informal, online notebook – gives me confidence to answer the question “why do you write?” The answer is “I'm practising. I want to be a writer”.♦

(http://www.writingqueensland.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Bensted_pic.jpg) **Angela Bensted** is a freelance writer living in Brisbane, Australia. She contributes to *Your Time Magazine* and blogs at www.twothumbs.net.au (<http://www.twothumbs.net.au>). She has degrees in arts, law and public policy, recently adding a journalism qualification to the vault. Her ambition is to have a more impressive writer's bio.



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