

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Invitations to the Writing Life: A Study of Popular Writing Books.

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Lisa Ede

The field of composition studies has concerned itself with the way in which people learn to write and the role schooling plays in writing development. Recently a trend has developed within the field towards exploring writing development outside of the classroom, termed the extracurriculum. Much of the scholarship thus far has focused primarily on popular literacy through community writing groups, which does not take into account the writing development of individuals outside of these organized groups. There are still tools available to people who want to be writers and these would include popular books on writing. This category of books has become quite popular with readers and is having an undocumented effect on beginning writers. It is the intention of this thesis to identify the books within this category and explore the possible benefits to both scholars in the field of composition studies and beginning writers.

Chapter One serves as an introduction to my personal development as a writer and the role that both schooling and reading popular books on writing played in that development. In Chapter Two I introduce the general category of popular books on writing and coin a more accurate descriptor - writing life books. This chapter is meant to give a general flavor of the continuum of books falling within this category, and is where I introduce the key terms of authority and identification. In Chapter Three I analyze three specific writing life books to demonstrate how the characteristics work together to promote identification and authority within beginning writers. Chapter Four serves as a review of scholarship within the field of composition studies that is concerned with the elements of authority, identification, and the extracurriculum.

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Invitations to the Writing Life: A Study of Popular Writing Books

by

Devon Finley

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Devon Finley, Author

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Invitations to the Writing Life: A Study of Popular Books on Writing

Chapter 1: An Introduction

Because for some of us, books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet or excite you. Books help us understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die.

- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

This is what I learned: That everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say.

- Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write*

Writing is a consuming passion for a great many people, and there are literally hundreds of books that cover a complex continuum of approaches to writing. Books vary from specific “how-to’s” to correctness manuals, to autobiographical narratives, and encompass a wide variety of approaches, styles, motivations, and goals. In this thesis I will discuss a very specific sub-genre of books that falls within the larger category of writing books. This sub-genre, which might broadly be characterized as popular books on writing, has played a very compelling role in both my own development as a writer and within the larger scope of my schooling in the field of composition studies. To appreciate the impact these books had on my writing development, I will briefly give an account of my own history, my process, and my experiences with writing. I will make clear what my own approaches to writing were, at what stage I was mired when I first discovered these books, and their subsequent impact on my writing process. I have turned to these books again and again throughout the course of writing this thesis and in my personal writing efforts. I want to introduce these popular books on writing so that others can see their potential, especially beginning writers. After I’ve done so, I will show that these books,

which are enlightening, supportive and *fun* to read, are closely related to and practical applications of theories and ideas circulating within the field of composition studies. I want to show their potential for teachers, beginning writers, writing groups, and composition researchers. I want to plant a banner and call attention to a group of popular books that are having an impact among aspiring writers and writers outside the academy, books which richly deserve to be addressed by scholars.

* * * * *

So many people are moved by the desire to write. Perhaps this desire is borne from a love of reading, a need to share or create, or just a hunger as indescribable as the necessity to love. Whatever it is that draws someone to writing, to *be* a writer, it is much easier to know the craving and the desire than to actually produce the writing. I speak, or should I say, I write, from experience. What I can say with certainty is that my whole life there is nothing I have been so passionate about as writing - just not always my own. Nothing has stimulated my thinking, thrilled my imagination, or inspired my dreams as much as the words found in the countless books I have read. The writers of those books have always existed as small gods to me. Writers create people and actions, convey thoughts and ideas, bring to life loves and hates, wars and worlds. My whole life I have wanted to be like them, to be a writer. Easier desired than done.

My whole life nothing has scared me to the point of immobility and made me feel so insignificant as writing. The actual act of writing, of committing thoughts to a permanent medium for others to read, is often terrifying. To me, the words never come out quite the way I imagined them in my head. They are too flowery, too immature, too simple, too abstract, or just plain not good enough. Not good enough when compared to the words of the "little gods" I have always cherished. And yet I endure and I persist, because somewhere behind the fear and beyond the cruel indictments of my inner critic I have tasted the exhilaration of writing. My fingers have run away and left me gasping for breath, wondering where that last sentence came from which captures so completely what

I tried to say ten pages earlier, or six months ago. It took me a long time to get this far, to understand about writing and the necessity to stick with it long enough to get to the good stuff. I persist, I endure, I swear, I try again, I revise, I believe, I doubt, I cry, I scribble, I edit - sometimes I'm sure I sweat blood - and I eat unhealthy amounts of oreos because my whole life I have wanted to be a writer.

I have now reached a place where I can start to consider myself a writer, but I did not make it this far alone. I finally found the support I needed to beat down the fear that was for too long the sole dictator of my writing attempts. But I get too far ahead of myself. This fear I've always had of being "not good enough" shaped my writing process and my entire approach to writing projects of any kind very early in the game. That I expected too much too early is clear; that I gave up too easily, and that I had a naive perception of writers and writing is obvious. If I make little sense, or seem to contradict myself, understand that this is apparent to me also as I continue to write. I find upon reflection that I allow myself mistakes and learning in all aspects of my life but writing, where I expect that if I am not producing perfectly balanced and thrilling sentences then it is because I was just born without talent and was not meant to be a writer. That I have operated under this assumption my whole life, and only recently begun to question its validity, is evidence of the struggle to allow myself to be named writer, a struggle I have to remind myself I've overcome. Perhaps I can better illustrate through an alternative example.

I love to cook. I do not call myself "chef," but I call myself cook. I like to cook for people and experiment with new recipes. At times I am frustrated, and at times I am in a "zone" that makes me feel like a super hero. But I do make mistakes, and I live with them and learn from them. After I have over-sautéed the mushrooms, I make a mental note to do better next time, perhaps wait until the last minute and then delicately toss them. I have yet to curl up into a ball of shame and announce that I was simply not born to sauté mushrooms. I have not declared myself unfit to attempt further cooking. I keep

trying. Why? Because they are only mushrooms, or it is only rice pilaf, but next time, it will be melt-in-your-mouth-golden-rice-pilaf with beautiful flecks of green onion. Capers were a good idea, but they lent the dish a bite I didn't really enjoy. They were a good idea, and they were *my* idea, but next time I'll leave them out -- is this not murdering my little darlings? There are times when I whip together tremendous dishes with the ease of breathing. And then there are times when I create soggy, grease-laden potatoes that should have been light and crispy, times when I just have to walk away from the kitchen and say to myself, "Ok, today you are to avoid sharp knives, boiling water, and cheese graters or you may incur grave bodily damage." I have often used cooking terms as metaphors for writing, and my approach to cooking should also be a useful tool when approaching the written word, but it is not.

Why have I not allowed myself to make mistakes and learn in writing? This is the fear I have of being "not good enough," a fear that won't allow me to experiment and make a better rice pilaf. In school, I somehow learned after the 7th grade to write in the academic voice, and none other. Historically, and ironically, it has been easier for me to hide in academic papers filled to the brim with neutrality, a lack of any opinions except those cited, no specific voice - and no way to become a target of mockery. Easier to hide than to try to write something I believe in. Having no personal investment in my writing felt safer. For a long time I convinced myself that the "special" people, the "lucky" people, were born with the gift of golden prose. I just didn't have the gift. I was not born to sauté mushrooms. No one in school had the time to guide me, and where do you turn for mentoring and encouragement at such a tenuous beginning? What resources are there available to the beginning writer? School is the obvious answer, and sometimes it is, for those lucky enough to have a special teacher who takes the time to encourage students to write creatively, or to take risks. Unfortunately, the higher up you go on the education continuum, the more writing is an expected skill in a class that focuses on its own

specialized subject matter. School generally teaches students to write merely as a means to an end - to fulfill an assignment and earn a grade.

Students are often taught to write with grammatical correctness, as a skill and a means of conveying information. All this is important, of course, but there is more - and it is at this tenuous time that too many would-be writers are stifled, or corrected into hating writing. Critical marks often have the unfortunate consequence of crushing beginning writers before they've had a chance to start. I wrote my first short story when I was in 4th or 5th grade. It was about two neighbors who competed every year in a rose garden contest. One of the ladies won every year and boasted that it was due to her secret fertilizer. The other lady was quite jealous and swore to get revenge the next year. On the day before the judges came round, the jealous lady stole her neighbor's cat and ground it up. (I was obsessed with the spooky and macabre as a child.) She sprinkled it in her neighbor's rose garden and left the cat's head under the prize-winning rose bush so that all the judges could see what the secret fertilizer was, causing horror and revulsion in all. The formerly winning rose lady was drummed out of town. The teacher thought it was gruesome but "quite imaginative." My classmates loved it. I felt fantastic. I was prepared to write scary stories for the rest of my life. Then, as I went further in school, imagination was not a requirement. I learned to write reports and only dabbled infrequently in the creative. Somewhere during that time, I forgot the excitement I felt after sharing my story. I forgot that writing could be fun. I learned to write what was required.

As school went on I was expected to write many reports, the occasional short story (based in real experience), and, every now and then, a poem. Most of these "creative" efforts were one-time occurrences: I received the draft back with red marks, a grade, and no desire to experiment again. The ultimate turn off to writing came in high school, when I had to write a 10-12 page paper on World War II. I was interested in the subject because my grandmother lived through the war as a child and young woman. I worked hard trying to introduce a personal viewpoint, to introduce my grandmothers'

experiences and to place these experiences in the larger context of war politics. It was my first long paper, and I got it back with a B grade, many critical comments, and a feeling of having let down both myself and my teacher. It wasn't just that changes needed to be made; it was that I had no positive direction and no opportunity to try. So I decided not to. I left for college, and I mastered the academic voice. I figured out what it was the teachers wanted from me and, with minimal effort, I learned to turn in an A/B paper that fulfilled their posted requirements and contained nothing of myself. I wrote poetry at home that I shared with my closest friends (with great reluctance), but I never considered that it was at all worth anyone else's time because it just didn't compare to Blake or Cummings. It wasn't until after college, when I had time to read for pleasure, that I felt the urge try writing again. And I did not encounter teachers who encouraged me to write for myself as well as an assignment until I reached graduate school.

But I was not entirely mentorless until then. After graduating from college, as I re-discovered a desire to write, I also discovered the mentors who made me feel like I could write, who made me feel like I could try. They were not mentors in the traditional sense; they were books, books about writing by writers - and it felt like they were written for *me*.

* * * * *

Once I read a quote by author Kurt Vonnegut that said, "When I write I feel like an armless, legless man with a crayon in my mouth." I had often felt this way myself, but it was electrifying to know that a published writer could also feel that way. I suppose I was almost ridiculously naive, but I truly believed that *real* writers sat down and spewed out almost perfect prose anytime they felt like it. I wanted to do that. At the same time, I almost didn't believe that it could really be true - but even if it were true, I still couldn't get it through my thick skull that it was ok if *I* had a hard time writing.

Recently I tried to write another short story, my first one ever since the rose garden story. I immediately compared it to some of my favorite authors, like Maupassant,

Hoffman, and Poe, and - what a surprise - it fell really short of the desired result. Well duh-uh. I wonder why I thought it sucked; I didn't even bother to write a second draft. As usual I was expecting instant results (don't *real* writers get instant results?) but - big surprise - getting none. I just told myself that I wasn't a writer. Yet apparently that didn't sink in either because I keep coming back to writing. As I said earlier, if this sounds like a contradiction, it is. When it comes to writing, everything about me and my process seems to be a contradiction. After the failed short story, I re-read Kurt Vonnegut's quote. At first I thought he was a liar, and that he was just trying to sound complex and literary. That passed, and I began to consider that maybe writers don't spew perfectly formed prose, perhaps they had to write drafts and they got just as frustrated as me, but they kept trying. It was a new thought. It was a new concept. I liked it.

I read the Vonnegut quote in a book by Anne Lamott called *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, the second popular book I had read about writers' experiences with writing. The first was Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*. After reading these books, and giving myself the time I needed to believe them, it slowly dawned on me that most writers don't have it easy. From Dillard and Lamott and, later, others, I learned that most writers experience dry spells, feelings of fear, self-destructive impulses, and thoroughly neurotic behaviors. Writers also have good days, and these writers (like Dillard and Lamott) shared with me the triumph of a finished piece, the rush of a good day, and the pleasure of savoring an especially good sentence. As light filtered into the dark cave inhabited by my writer-self, I realized that I didn't feel completely alone anymore; more than that, I felt like it was within the realm of possibility that I could be a writer. If they, Published Writers, felt the same things I felt, perhaps they were more like me than I ever thought before. Perhaps I was more like them. It was at this time that I dared to dream again, the secret dream that has been in my heart since I read my first book.

When I finally made the decision to go to graduate school, I was practical and selected a program that would let me develop in an area where I had some talent and

confidence, but also allow a practical chance for employment. This decision was reached after I spent a visit at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and made the acquaintance of Dr. Charlie Hollister. Because I felt so comfortable writing in the academic/technical style and because I had an obvious love of the environment, he introduced me to science writing and talked about the need for better writing and communication within the scientific world. With his words ringing in my ears, I searched the west coast for a school with a science writing program and found it at the last place I looked, 11 miles away from where I lived, at Oregon State University. There I applied for and was accepted into the Scientific and Technical Communication program. Although my loves have always been literature and art history, they always seemed to be impractical. I thought science writing would be as close as I would get to the writing I had always wanted to do, and would be infinitely more practical.

I cracked out the first few writing assignments the way I always had: planning in my head and writing at the last minute. I assumed that I knew what my teachers were generally looking for and that I was a fairly strong academic writer. Figuring out the basic requirements and expectations of the teachers was half the battle - except the expectations had changed. Somewhere along the line, mimicking an academic voice of neutrality and spewing facts, figures, and arguments had become "ghost writing," and I was suddenly expected to write in my own voice, make my own arguments, and voice my own opinions. Not only that, but I was expected to share early drafts of my papers with classmates and conference with the teacher on my writing process and drafts.

I found it frightening, frustrating, risky, and altogether challenging. I had to not just think ahead, but write ahead, discuss drafts and plan revisions. The academic voice I had learned so well in high school and college did not seem to be adequate. Teachers talked about the writing process and asked me how I compose, how I approach revision, and how I actually write the first word. Comments on papers included suggestions on structure, encouragement, as well as elaborate questions about my own meaning and

direction. Mistakes were simply marked for my notice, while the overall meaning and presentation was the focus of teacher response. Teachers often gave students the option to revise, and some required it. For the first time since college, when I convinced myself that I could never be a writer, I began thinking that perhaps I could. I also began using the books I had discovered outside of class, such as Lamott and Dillard, to support what I was learning in class.

I finally began to invest in my writing - and this was still academic writing. I didn't think of it as investing at the time, but I began to try again, for myself this time, and my writing began to develop. I began to refer more frequently to writing books outside of class such as Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*. These books provided support and encouragement, and unexpected reinforcement of things I was learning in my classes. My teachers taught me to freewrite and to separate editing and composing, and so did the books. The caper came when I switched my major to composition studies and began to study what scholars in the field were saying about writing and the composing process. What I found is that many of the things the scholars were positing and theorizing about writing process were also discussed in the popular books on writing I was using for support outside of class to further my own development as a writer, and as motivation whenever I had those inevitable crises of self-doubt.

I can still remember reading an essay by Glenda Bissex called "Growing Writers in Classrooms," where I was happy to see a scholar noting that children need to focus on meaning before form. "Teachers who grow writers in their classrooms also regard pieces of writing as growing things to be nurtured rather than as objects to be repaired or fixed" (37). I was transported back in time to the response I had received on the rose garden story from both my teacher and my classmates. By responding to the meaning rather than to any internal or grammatical problems, my classmates and teacher made me feel like I could write anything - while more objective and analytical responses I received from later

teachers effectively ended my attempts at creative writing. Other research studies by scholars such as James Moffett, James Britton, Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, and Ann E. Berthoff also re-emphasized the need for writers to be positively supported and to develop through response to their writing.

I have always hated exposing my writing efforts to others, especially in the early stages, but I found that with a “safe” audience I could respond to helpful response rather than be crushed by criticism. After reading “The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing,” by Peter Elbow, I reveled in the new perspective he offered of speech as indelible and writing as ephemeral. “Speech is inherently more indelible than writing also because it is a more vivid medium . . . precisely because speech is nothing but temporary crowdings in air molecules, we can never revise it” (70). I had always thought of writing as a permanent example of my mediocre strivings, but Elbow suggested that whatever is written can be revised and improved, whereas spoken words can never be recalled. I went home and flipped through Anne Lamott’s book, *Bird by Bird*, reflecting that she was talking about the same thing: “the first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later” (22). This happened again and again. Terms I discovered from composition studies like writing process, authority and identification, self-sponsored literacy, recursive writing, revising, writing groups, finding one’s voice: all these things were present in the popular books on writing too. They were not always referred to in the same way, but they were there. For instance, in “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” Linda Flower and John Hayes suggests that writing is a recursive rather than linear process:

A Cognitive process theory of writing, such as the one presented here, represents a major departure from the traditional paradigm of stages in this way: in a stage model the major units of analysis are *stages* of completion which reflect the growth of a written product, and these stages are organized in a *linear* sequence or structure. In a process model, the major

units of analysis are elementary mental *processes*, such as the process of generating ideas. And these processes have a hierarchical structure . . . such that idea generation, for example, is a sub-process of Planning. Furthermore, each of these mental acts may occur at any time in the composing process (286-287).

Natalie Goldberg structures her book, *Writing Down the Bones*, around this same premise, "Learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer" (3). Peter Elbow refers to the same ideas in his books, *Writing With Power* and *Writing Without Teachers*. Scholars like Peter Elbow, Mina Shaughnessy, James Moffett, and Glenda Bissex are concerned with students being granted authority over their writing in order to develop as writers.

As I continued to read scholarship in composition studies, I also continued to buy and read popular books on writing, and I turned to them intermittently yet regularly as I wrote both for myself and school. The more I read of work in the field of composition studies, the more I expected to run into some mention of books like Lamott's because they seemed to be covering the same material, but surprisingly, I found none. While there was a new emphasis on studying writing outside the academy, as demonstrated in the research of Anne Gere, Deborah Brandt, and others, it seemed to be focused primarily on community writing groups. I felt increasingly sure that popular books on writing had a great deal to offer researchers and writing students within the academy, so I began to look at the books I was finding *outside* of class as a genre that seemed to encompass practical application of what I was learning *in* class.

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Now I am writing a thesis covering these outside "popular" books that have been such a great help to me. Before I began researching both scholarly and popular books on writing, I had no idea of what was available outside the writing manuals I had been instructed with in school. There are literally hundreds of different kinds of books, as I alluded to at the very beginning of this chapter. There are popular "how-to's" devoted to all kinds of writing: from how to write poetry, how to write screenplays, and how to

master homicide fiction, to how to write and get published, and how to write a resume. There are handbooks which focus solely on the rules of style within a writing discipline, as well as proper grammatical structure and usage. There are textbooks written for in-class use at all writing levels that teach basic organization, themes, and writing styles. Most of these textbooks are intended to be used as part of a curriculum rather than independently. There are also scholarly books about writing and the writing process, books in which the process of writing is the object of study. These books explore how people learn to write, what role writing plays in every day life, and what role the academy plays in this process.

The popular books on writing I am introducing have another primary purpose: to present writing as a way of living in which anyone can partake. The books which make up this sub-genre are part "how-to," part textbook, part biography, part self-help, and part pop-psychology. They are books written by writers to an audience of people who are, or want to be, writers. They operate primarily outside academic institutions and are sold under a variety of subject headings including: biography, authorship, reference, language arts, writing, new age books, self-help, and writing & literature. Currently, there is no overall, established descriptor which covers these books and makes them easy to identify. They are all about writing, from writers *to* writers, and include books like Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*, Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, Nancy Slonim Aronie's *Writing from the Heart*, Sophie Burnham's *For Writers Only*, Bonnie Goldberg's *Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer's Life*, Kenneth Atchity's *A Writer's Time: Making the Time to Write*, Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*, and Rosemary Daniell's *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself*. These books are reaching an audience, and a large one. I think it is important to explore the impact these books may be having on popular and self-sponsored writing, literacy and the writing process.

Although these books are located outside the academy, they seem to have a place within it as well. The books address issues relevant to work being done by scholars in the

field of composition studies in a way that occurs outside the venue of the field. I used the books to complement what I was learning about writing within my classes; it seems natural to me that they could be used by other students to complement their own writing efforts. While I began to share these books with fellow students, I also began, simply out of curiosity, to check to see what scholars in the field had to say about them. I was unable to find anything, but to be honest, I wasn't looking very hard. When the opportunity came to cover popular books on writing in my thesis, I again looked to see what the literature had to say. This time I made more thorough and extensive searches. I still came up with nothing - which I found very surprising. The more popular books on writing I read, and the more connections I was able to draw between the books and issues in composition studies, the more I also began to sense a possible resource and a subject of study for scholars within the field. I felt that these books were affecting an audience of writers and that impact should be studied.

Opportunities also exist for scholars within the field, teachers, and beginning writers if these books were used in conjunction with current curriculum, or even just studied for their effect on writing efforts outside of school. Work outside the classroom, the extra-curriculum, has been addressed by scholars such as Anne Gere and Peter Elbow, and these books speak to their efforts at looking beyond the classroom walls. These books potentially offer just such an opportunity: to study the implementation of some of the ideas about writing process outside of the influence of teachers and/or the academy. I can't help wishing that these books, or excerpts, could be used to complement existing writing programs, if only because I believe that they encourage the identification of beginning writers with published writers, and they encourage the development of authority. These terms, identification and authority, are terms I learned from studying scholars in the field of composition studies, and they are absolutely necessary in order to successfully develop as a writer. As I learned about these terms from scholars in the field, I also learned to identify myself as a writer and to feel authority over my own work in

practical ways from these books. I think that a lot of other beginning and aspiring writers are doing the same thing, right now.

The trend towards exploring the extra-curriculum continues, though the focus seems to be on self-sponsored literacy groups, such as community writing groups. In a way, writing groups and other self-sponsored literacy groups are still classrooms away from classrooms. They have an existing support group and structured arenas for response. Though these kinds of groups may also be using these books as well, it would be interesting to find out the impact these books are having on individuals pursuing an interest in writing outside of the academy.

What started out as a personal desire to share books with which I'd had very positive experiences became much more. I saw a need for these books to be shared with and studied by scholars in the field. There is so much to learn about and from them. Who writes them, who buys them, and how are they being used? How does their use impact the writing process of beginning writers outside the classroom - or inside the classroom? How do these books broach the very issues and strategies that composition studies concerns itself with, and how do readers respond to them? Is the more personal/intimate format these books use more persuasive - and to whom? The research could, of course, be problematic, but there seems to be a potential wealth of information about the writing process outside the academy that would be timely and pertinent to research being performed by scholars right now.

My purpose here is to perform basic research on popular books on writing. I will introduce these books, explore how they work and what makes them successful. The books, which I will discuss in Chapter 2, form a sub-genre of writing books different from text-books and how-to manuals. They provide advice, practical suggestions, and a supportive environment for beginning writers. They focus on the recursive nature of writing, and on the importance of making meaning over avoiding mistakes and self-editing. I will cover the continuum of books in general just to give a sense of what characteristics

they share, how they differ, and why these books stand apart as a distinct and recognizable sub-genre of books. In Chapter 3, I will take three books, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, and Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, and explore them in detail. I want to use them to illustrate the qualities of the group and to show how their structure provides the identification and authority that beginning writers need to develop their own writing. In Chapter 4, I will give a brief account of work in the field of composition studies that is relevant to the practical function of these books and demonstrate why I think scholars should take their use into account for research on the writing process.

Chapter 2: An Invitation

There are so many different kinds of writing and so many ways to work that the only rule is this: do what works. Almost everything has been tried and found to succeed for somebody. The methods, even the ideas, of successful writers contradict each other in a most heartening way, and the only element I find common to all successful writers is persistence - an overwhelming determination to succeed . . . they will not be thrust aside!

- Sophie Burnham, *For Writers Only*

Now I come to the difficult part: a chapter on popular books on writing in general. It is hard to know where to begin so that I can impart not only a description of the books in general and how they fulfill the criteria I have laid out for a membership, but a flavor of the books as well, an invitation to read them. I am so afraid of writing in circles. Do I start by describing the characteristics of these books and how other books are almost like them, but different? Do I start with a broad overview of books that are about writing by writers that are not “how-to” manuals, correctness handbooks, textbooks, or studies of writing? A vocabulary of exclusion seems like it may detract from the significance of these books. And what do I call them, these popular books on writing? The phrase is more vague than descriptive; shall I coin my own descriptor for them? At what point do I introduce the terms “authority” and “identification” and explore the role they play in these books? Are the books best presented as a continuum of books, or as a core group with existing satellites? It has been a challenge to discover how best to introduce an entire group of similar but varied books. I want to cover a range of books and approaches, establish commonalities and differences, criteria for membership, and introduce a distinctive sub-genre that is flourishing outside of the academy, a group of books well worth investigating.

I had a terrible time coming up with a better way to refer to popular books on writing, which need a more accurate descriptor. They are obviously not manuals,

textbooks, how to's or handbooks, but they are more than just books on writing. There are two words that immediately come to mind when I think of them as a group: writing and living. In fact many of the books incorporate these two words into their titles: *The Writing Life*, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself: Writing and Living the Zona Rosa Way*, and *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*. All of the books in this category also refer to writing as creative effort, which it is, and while some may focus on some types of writing more than others, they don't exclude any. While this designation of writing as creative effort may seem obvious, I find that many people link the words "creative writing" solely to poetry and fiction writing. However, every sentence, each carefully constructed paragraph, *all* writing efforts are potentially acts of creativity, whether personal essay, academic argument, journalistic writing, poetry, fictional short story, or autobiography. All of these books serve as invitations *from* writers *to* writers and aspiring writers to enter the writing life - to promote inner creativity through writing - to create through wordcraft. No matter how they're packaged, that invitation is at the essential heart of each book - all of which does nothing to promote a concise descriptor for this category of books because "invitation to the writing life" books is just too much of a mouthful. Besides, they are set aside from manuals, textbooks, handbooks, etc. in another very important way: they are popular books - both engaging and "fun" reads - not something you typically think of when heading to the writing/reference section. For lack of divine inspiration demonstrating itself through lightning bolt, guardian angel, mythical creature, or other heavenly courier, I shall settle for the term writing life books.

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So what is it exactly that these books offer to the new writer? If writing is an ocean, and writers are in the middle of that ocean struggling to keep their heads above water, then these books offer a boat complete with captain's hat and navigational tools. The books provide the following: the identification of writing as tangible and

“masterable,” the shared experiences and personal voice of the author, providing an empathic link to the reader; practical advice on getting started, practicing, writing blocks, etc.; the advocacy of writing for writing’s sake and not as a skill, a product, or for a reward. In addition, they offer metaphors for writing and practice; they remind readers of the “creative font” and the importance of creative energy and expression; they offer freedom from anxiety, correctness, and pre-editing; and they provide a basic view of writing as a part of life, one with intrinsic personal rewards. The books are written in a very personal voice to any and all people who want to write. The authors share their personal experiences with writing, their own drives and ambitions, some practical advice for starting, unblocking, and revising, and the need for beginning writers, especially, to keep on writing. They blow apart the myth of writers spewing immaculate prose and share the real life work that writing involves as well as the satisfaction it brings.

The writing life books use several techniques for making writing “masterable;” one of the most potent is the use of metaphor. I’ve noticed while sharing my own writing experiences with teachers and classmates, fellow writers and friends, that almost everyone develops a metaphor for the writing process that gives them a firmer, more tangible grip over what is essentially an abstract process. It is a way to take the intellectual, instinctual, formless, and intangible process from the realm of the ether and make it real - like clay - in your hands. Through metaphor, writing develops a visible progression and set of stages with feels, smells, tastes, and sounds - real things for writers to identify with. It somehow gives writers a little more control over the process - or at least the illusion of control, which is sometimes all that is needed. When I was asked by a teacher to describe my own writing process (one which involves heavy planning), I described it as mulling and stewing. When I was ready to write the words just came out. “But,” my teacher persisted, “What does that mean? What does it feel like? How do you know when you’re ready?” I didn’t. My process was so unknown to me that I didn’t have a clue how it worked. I developed a

metaphor that suits my writing process exactly, and it does provide me with a map of sorts to see where I've been, and where I'm going. This is my writing metaphor:

I begin with a basic structure for the story, or paper, or whatever (the sauce). I fill a pan with ingredients (ideas). I slowly move the ingredients (ideas) around in the pan (my mind) and work from instinct - what feels right, what sounds are pleasing, what smells arouse my interest. A little garlic, a little more basil, but stop right there with the olive oil. Then I've finished; there's nothing more to do right now. I have to wait for the sauce to slowly warm and meld and merge on the back burner for several hours before it begins to take its natural shape. Forcing it to make its appearance any sooner will only result in frustration and poorly crafted sauce. I wander off, maybe grocery shopping or paying bills or jogging, but the sauce is always being monitored by a portion of my brain. After the appropriate time has passed, all of which depends on the sauce and the ingredients, the lid starts rattling and tipping, the steam starts seeping out around the edges and little red spurts of sauce start plopping out onto the stovetop. At once, all other thoughts are forgotten. Nothing in the outside world can faze me because the sauce is boiling over right now, and the stove is hot and the sauce is ready now - and that's all that possibly can exist. Get all of it down as quickly as possible and voila: sauce (the basic recipe). At least, that's what its like for me. And while my sauce doesn't come out perfect every time, the basic structure always does. What I discover along the way is that some ingredients stand out as the ones that need to be kept, while others need to be tossed. The more you cook, the more you garner a natural instinct for ingredients that blend well - and then you can get adventurous. But before you leap off and make history with an extraordinary sauce you have to experiment and figure out for yourself what makes a good combination, like garlic and basil, and what makes a bad one, like garlic and vanilla.

Sharing metaphors and personal experiences is key among the writing life books. All of the authors bare their "writing souls" to pass on a piece of their own hard-won knowledge - an anchor - to new and aspiring writers. Each one offers up a metaphor that

works for them as a way of “seeing” and “living” writing and the writing process. Natalie Goldberg makes a comparison between writing, and the commitment necessary to develop as a writer, and jogging:

This is the practice school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Some days you don't want to run and you resist every step of the three miles, but you do it anyway. You practice whether you want to or not. You don't wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It'll never happen, especially if you are out of shape and have been avoiding it. but if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance. You just do it. And in the middle of the run, you love it. When you come to the end, you never want to stop. And you stop, hungry for the next time. (11)

It's easy for me to blow off the idea of writing every day. It's too easy: perhaps I had a sleepless night, I'm running late, I have other plans, or I'm just not in the mood. What I don't see is how this can possibly affect my writing ability because writing's not like running - or is it? With a concrete comparison it becomes much easier to see the strength in practice, and practice every day whether it feels good or not. Brenda Ueland encourages beginning writers to attack writing through metaphors: “Write like a lion - like a pirate”(63). Later, she compares teaching writing to music lessons. She stresses that teachers must never tell students they are playing the wrong notes, because they already know it, “when they are thinking so vividly about the bad notes that they are warned to avoid, they play them again and again, just as a man learning to ride a bicycle goes into the tree he is afraid of. To play a note *truly*, as the simplest person knows, your mind must be on the true note, your Imagination hearing it as you want to play”(65).

Beyond metaphors, beginning writers like to know they're not alone in their struggles. There is something empowering (at least equalizing) in hearing about the similar hardships and trials of other writers. Nothing makes me feel better about my own meager attempts at writing than hearing about famous writers who suffered the same feelings. *For Writers Only*, by Sophie Burnham, contains quotes from famous writers referring to all aspects of the writing process, and anecdotes from Burnham, her friends, and some very

well-known artists. At one point she writes, "I have heard that an eagle misses seventy percent of its strikes. Why should I expect to do better? And when he misses, does he scold himself, I wonder, for failing at the task?"(130). Burnham quotes William Gass as saying, "Much of the stuff which I will finally publish, with all its flaws, as if it had been dashed off with a felt pen, will have begun eight or more years earlier, and worried and slowly chewed on and left for dead many times in the interim"(128). My favorite quote from Burnham's book is another of her revealing personal anecdotes:

When I am happiest, I write almost every day. For long periods, however, my time is taken. Days Pass . . . weeks. Then I forget all over again how to write. I forget I can begin. I forget I ever once began. At times like these, then, fear and doubt must be fought with all the weapons in our arsenal. These include: affirmations, prayer, silence, stillness, trusting, trying, waiting, walking, reading, not reading. Writing about my fear, and writing this book now to remind myself of how creation comes. (47)

These kinds of anecdotes both inspire beginning and aspiring writers to try new kinds of writing, and remind them that the difficulties don't mean that they can't do it, but that they must persevere.

Practical advice in getting started and staying motivated is another main element found in all of these books. Beyond the basic advice - write every day - each author suggests writing exercises to prompt the muse. In *Wild Mind*, for instance, Natalie Goldberg closes most chapters with a brief writing exercise. Here is an example of the exercises she suggests:

Raymond Carver said in *Fires* that once he had the first sentence of a short story, he made the rest of the story as he made a poem: "one line and then the next, and the next." Now find a sentence you like that comes from you. Don't be picky with your mind; instead, feel the sentence's integrity with your body. It can be a simple line. "I fell in love with my life one Tuesday in August." Now go ahead and lay down the next line and the next. Don't think further ahead than the next line. Don't think back. Just build that story. let the structure of the story unfold, one sentence after another. Place those sentences down, as if you were laying bricks. Keep each one true. (18)

Nancy Aronie encourages writers to play around with what they've already written to show how little changes can alter the entire story. For example, in her book *Writing From the Heart* she suggests, "take any story you have written using the past tense. Then change all the verbs to the present tense. Or write a brand new piece in the past tense and then make the changes. Read them both out loud and see which you like best"(89). Then she demonstrates with some of her own work to really illustrate the difference. Little ideas like these can make it possible for beginning writers to think about their own writing in a very different way.

Bonni Goldberg's book, *Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer's Life*, is written so that each page may be read and used independently of the entire book. On each pages she writes a brief paragraph about an aspect of writing - either a daunting aspect, or implementing a new idea, for example - then she suggests a writing exercise and offers a quote on the subject spoken by a famous author. Some exercises have to do with lists, such as writing 101 places you've been, or 101 ways to dance. The object is similar to free-writing - just keep writing and let whatever wants to come out to come out. Similarly, Ray Bradbury tends to turn to word games and lists to stoke his creative fires. Bradbury is one of those authors I try not to compare myself to - he is one of the few, rare, extremely prolific writers who *seems* to have never had a block or dry spell in his life. I absolutely love his stories. In his book, *Zen and the Art of Writing*, he claims that many of his story ideas came from his habit of making lists and playing word association games:

The lists ran something like this: THE LAKE. THE NIGHT. THE CRICKETS. THE RAVINE. THE ATTIC. THE BASEMENT. THE TRAPDOOR. THE BABY. THE CROWD. THE NIGHT TRAIN. THE FOG HORN. THE SCYTHE. THE CARNIVAL. THE CAROUSEL. THE DWARF. THE MIRROR MAZE. THE SKELETON. I was beginning to see a pattern in the list, in these words that I had simply flung forth on paper, trusting my subconscious to give bread, as it were, to the birds. . . I went on making lists, having to do not only with night, nightmares, darkness, and objects in attics, but the toys than men play with in space, and the ideas I found in detective magazines. . . Where am I leading you?

Well, if you are a writer, or would hope to be one, similar lists, dredged out of the lopside of your brain, might well help you discover *you*, even as I flopped around and finally found me. (17-19)

As Goldberg, Bradbury, Aronie, and other writers began sharing their secrets and doubts with me, I felt some of (what I considered) the “magic” slip away - at least the illusion of the “automatically appearing brilliant text” - which was undoubtedly a good thing. The magic - the ideas, the text, the passion - comes out of the writer, but it takes work and practice. It is such a basic truth, but a truth that needs reinforcement on a regular basis. These books can enlighten, entertain, motivate, and ultimately teach beginning and aspiring writers what can only be learned from fellow writers. That is the intimacy that these books share between themselves and the reader - there is an invitation and an inclusion into a fellowship of writers.

* * * * *

Sometimes the invitation to the writing life includes permission to take an intimate look into the lives of the authors. Two books with strongly autobiographical natures are *The Writing Life*, by Annie Dillard, and *The Woman Who Spilled Words All Over Herself*, by Rosemary Daniell. Now I’d like to introduce them in greater detail. Rosemary Daniell’s book reads primarily as autobiography, illuminating her own lifelong struggle to find her voice, and to name herself *writer*. The work is written in very intimate detail, which makes her better able to make the connections between what happened to her personally and how that influenced her writing. Some readers may be turned off by what doesn’t read at all as a guide or manual to writing. Others readers, however, will find that the gems of experience, which are her gifts to the beginning writer, are hidden within the larger text, the story of Rosemary Daniell. She emphasizes her drive to write, her agonizing blocks and self-inflicted barriers to better writing, as well as what she learned along the way, and suggestions for new writers. What was most important to her was being able to express who she really was, her place in the world as a woman, and how she came to be there. To

find her voice and validate her writing, she had not to be granted authority, but to take it. She did that by starting a writing group.

We did not have to turn to patriarchal culture, academia, or even the *New York Times* for our credibility as writers; we could turn to ourselves, to women like ourselves. Unabashedly, we would (in Erica Jong's words) 'wear our ovaries on our sleeves,' for as long and as openly as we wished. On the other hand, we would openly discuss the feelings that went against the ideal of ourselves as long-suffering nurturers and, at last, even creatively transform them. We would give one another courage, I told them. (79)

Daniell shares the anxieties that she feels, and that most other writers feel. She is concerned with the same things that Peter Elbow addresses in much of his work: starting, producing, and editing text. "Revision is also a necessary part of writing, along with the view that both our original ideas and language are malleable - that we can mess around with them and try them different ways" (100). She captures the feelings of many beginning writers when she quotes one of the members of her writing group, "I always felt stupid when I didn't write it right the first time. I didn't know that language was something you could just play around with" (101). That final thought is one that is a recurring realization among almost all writers at some point. I found it again and again as I read through more of these books. It is observations like these which encourage beginning writers to identify themselves with accomplished or experienced writers. These shared fears, hopes, and dreams are what allow beginning writers to finally think, "well I must be able to do it too, because that's just how I felt."

Annie Dillard's, *The Writing Life*, is structured in a similar way; it is, at heart, an autobiography of one writer's life. Dillard shares her experiences and the experiences of other writers to challenge the myth of natural born writers. She also shares the desire, the frustration, and some of the strategies that helped her through the process.

At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. you search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then - and only then - it is handed to you.

From the corner of your eye you see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed your way. It is a parcel bound in ribbons and bows; it has two white wings. It flies directly at you; you can read your name on it. If it were a baseball, you would hit it out of the park. It is that one pitch in a thousand you see in slow motion; its wings beat slowly as a hawk's. (75)

Dillard's vision of writing and the writing life seems to be one without illusion. Writing is hard work, and writers will encounter blanks and blocks, voids and inertia. It is the act of writing and the mystery of writing that makes it worthwhile. "But you are wrong if you think that in the actual writing, or in the actual painting, you are filling in the vision. You cannot fill in the vision . . . The vision is not so much destroyed, exactly, as it is, by the time you have finished, forgotten. It has been replaced by this changeling, this bastard, this opaque lightless chunky ruinous work" (56-57). What you envision in your mind is not always what you will end up writing. Similarly, many composition studies scholars encourage freewriting, which is premised in the idea that what you are truly writing about is hidden, even from yourself. What you end up writing about can sometimes be a surprise.

Both Dillard and Daniell have a great deal to offer to the beginning writer, especially in terms of creating an empathic link to foster identification between themselves and beginning and aspiring writers. They allow the reader into their heads and hearts, sharing the intimate details of their on-going struggles with the writing life. They reveal their highs and lows and bare their innermost fears and secrets. Each time I read even a section of one of these books, I feel I can identify with them, and identify myself as a writer as well. Other readers, I feel sure, make this same connection. We all share at least some of the same anxieties and frustrations and hopes.

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There are other books for writers that fall under the larger category of writing books that are not manuals, textbooks, etc. These are books about writing not easily categorized; some deal with specific aspects of writing, and some are collections of essays written at one time period, or over a lifetime. These include books like *Zen in the Art of Writing* by Ray Bradbury, and *The Courage to Write* by Ralph Keyes. Ray Bradbury's *Zen*

in the Art of Writing is a collection of eleven essays written at different times during his career about writing in general, as well as the specific stories he has produced. Through these essays, Bradbury shares his enthusiasm for writing and some tricks of the trade he has learned through experience. In one of his most motivating essays (to me), he tries to emphasize the need for life in writing, and writing in life. According to Bradbury, writers must fill themselves up with other words, colors, sounds, experiences, with *living*; to write well, and to always have something to write about.

Thomas Wolfe ate the world and vomited lava. Dickens dined at a different table every hour of his life. Moliere, tasting society, turned to pick up his scalpel, as did Pope and Shaw. Everywhere you look in the literary cosmos, the great ones are busy loving and hating. Have you given up this primary business as obsolete in your own writing? What fun you are missing, then. The fun of anger and disillusion, the fun of loving and being loved, of moving and being moved by this masked ball which dances us from cradle to churchyard. Life is short, misery sure, mortality certain. But on the way, in your work, why not carry those two inflated pig-bladders labeled Zest and Gusto. With them, traveling to the grave, I intend to slap some dummox's behind, pat a pretty girl's coiffure, wave to a tad up a persimmon tree. (9)

Ray Bradbury says he tries to write every day of his life, in fact, that it is necessary to his sanity. And that he fills himself up so full with books and experiences and life that he has never had a dry spell in his life. "You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you" (xiii). As prolific and successful as Bradbury has been throughout his career in writing, from beginning in pulp magazines all the way to the silver screen, he really *seems* to be one of those natural talents that the rest of us detest so much. As Anne Lamott says of one of her inordinately talented writer friends, "We do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her" (22). It's hard to identify with someone who writes with apparently effortless ease, but Bradbury does offer practical suggestions that are basic to every writer or aspiring writer: live and write every day.

One of the most powerful books I came across in my research about the fear of writing, the fear of beginning, the fear of sustaining, the fear of digressing, the fear of finishing, was called *The Courage to Write*, by Ralph Keyes. Talk about identifying with people who feel the same way as you. And what made me feel even better is that I'm apparently not half as neurotic or anxious as many of the "masters" we study in literature classes. Keyes combines essays about the source of fears, the different types of fears, and practical ways to overcome those fears with anecdotes about famous writers and their own sometimes paralyzing fears. One of my favorite passages describes how writers feel about baring their work to the public.

Most adults enjoy the privilege of keeping their private lives private. Writers forgo that privilege. One author I know compared writing novels to dancing naked on a table. (She'd done both.) Other writers have their own metaphors for feeling exposed. Most involve some states of undress. 'A person who publishes a book willfully appears before the populace with his pants down,' said Edna St. Vincent Millay. E.B. White thought essay writing called for taking off one's trousers without showing one's genitals. When his letters were about to be published, however, White said he felt like a nudist with only bare skin between him and the reading public. (39)

The way that Keyes describes, invokes, and then unmask fears make them humorous, and perhaps a little less dangerous. All writers face innumerable fears. Sometimes just knowing that you're not the only one out there afraid can be empowering. And it's always nice to know that the great ones had their fair share of knee-knocking tremors. I find myself laughing at my own fears when I see them in print, shared by so many others. "Whenever I start writing a book, my fears follow a predictable path. First I'm scared that I won't finish it; that I'll be exposed as a fraud who conned a publisher into thinking he could write a book. When I do complete a manuscript, I'm afraid my editor won't accept it. If my editor does accept the manuscript, I'm worried that critics will hate it" (16). And so on, and so on, and so on. If I finish writing this thesis, I'll have a Master's degree and I'll have to move into the real world and get a job. Sigh. Fear is

something to which all people can relate, yet we somehow persist in thinking that we're the only one suffering from it. We're not.

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Writing exercises appear in almost all of these books in some form or another, but some books seem to provide a great variety of exercises all designed to get the beginning writer to put pen to paper and *start*. Natalie Goldberg includes a list of topics for writing practice to help writers on a cold morning - when it feels like nothing is coming out of the tips of your fingertips. The blank page can be intimidating to all writers of all experience levels. The trick is always to write the first few words. Like Ray Bradbury, Natalie Goldberg suggests lists as a way to readily find a writing topic and cut through resistance. Some of the topics she suggests are as follows: "What is your first memory? Write about 'leaving.' Approach it any way you want. Write about your divorce, leaving the house this morning or a friend dying. Take something you feel strongly about, whether it is positive or negative, and write about it as though you love it - then write about it perfectly neutral" (20-21). Almost all writers turn to these kinds of strategies to start writing at some point because all writers must face the blank page and begin.

Bonnie Goldberg's *Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer's Life*, is a helpful book because in it she offers her own personal experiences with an aspect of writing and then practical writing assignments designed to get the ink flowing. Each page of her book can be read and used independently of the whole. I find that each time I read her thoughts on a subject or her suggestions for writing exercises, the wheels in my head start turning. Sometimes I don't even end up writing about what the exercise suggested, but the exercise itself got me started in a direction - sometimes that is the whole point. Because her book differs in structure so much from the books I've already discussed, I want to reproduce one of her pages in full. All the other books run as a complete narrative with suggestions and exercises worked in, but Bonni Goldberg's book is structured differently. The page this section is from is entitled "Lies," on page 20.

Everyone lies. We're not supposed to, but we do anyway. All of us have lied in the past and are likely to lie again in the future. Some people profit from their lies, while others get into trouble. Nobody likes to be lied to unless they themselves are hiding from the truth. The power derived from most lies is the ability to withhold, to trick someone else, to control reality. But lies aren't always bad. What was the last lie you are glad you told? Why was it a good lie? What motivates a character to lie is often more telling than the lie itself. You can incorporate the lies that your characters speak more convincingly by beginning with your own motivations for lying.

Today write only lies. They can be absurd ones, such as, last night I had dinner with the President in Honolulu, or the lies you tell yourself and/or others. Without judgement, be a total liar. Or, write down lies you have told and, in retrospect, what motivated you to withhold the truth. Or, write a scene in which one of your characters considers telling a lie.

The past is not only that which happened but also that which could have happened but did not.

- Tess Gallagher

One structure is no better than any other one, but each has something to offer. Bonni Goldberg's book can be picked up and flipped through randomly for brief pep talks and ideas, whereas Rosemary Daniell's must be read as a whole. There is something for what each individual writer may need.

Writing in a New Convertible with the Top Down employs yet another structure, that of a series of letters sent back and forth between the authors, Sheila Bender and Christi Killien. At the end of an exchange of letters, they offer advice on specific aspects of writing and exercises to get past potential blocks. This book is not specifically an exercise book, but the structure exists as an exercise between the two authors to work out their own difficulties and serendipitous discoveries having to do with writing. Because the structure so closely follows suggested writing exercises and advice, I felt it should be included, if only to call more attention to practical application. In the following quote, they suggest exactly what their book, and others, offer as advice: look to other writers.

"Writers often read in a state of hunger for something delicious. They want to admire, eat

and digest the elegant strategies of other people's writing. Christi has a giant appetite for novels since that's her genre. She notices how books often present a metaphor to sum up a character's situation: In Betsy Byars' *The Pinballs*, three foster children have bounced from home to home"(46-47). This advice is then followed by a writing exercise designed to transform major concerns or life issues into metaphor. Bender and Killien also share the strategies of their own families and students in hopes that some will work for other writers who may be encountering difficulties with their writing.

There are other books available that provide helpful writing exercises. Beth Baruch Joselow's *Writing Without the Muse* is filled with good suggestions for getting started. I did not include this book and others like it because, as helpful as they are, they are not really a part of this sub-genre. They do not offer the personal voice and shared experiences of the author, or provide any of the other characteristics of the books found within this group which isn't to say that they aren't helpful - exercise suggestions are always practical ways to get the ink flowing, but as far as this sub-genre goes, they exist on the periphery.

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All of these books share certain characteristics (in different proportions) that work together to provide beginning and aspiring writers with a leg up - allowing them to attack their writing projects with new enthusiasm. I believe the reason these books are successful is that through the combination of these characteristics, such as personal voice, shared experiences, practical advice and suggestions, and exercises, both authority and identification are promoted. Briefly, I'd like to discuss these two terms which are key to developing writers. As has already been observed, most beginning writers have a difficult time imagining themselves as "real" writers. They imagine that it is harder for them to write, that they don't write as well as their favorite authors, that they are fooling themselves by even trying to be a writer. Through the process of identification, beginning writers are able to establish an empathic link with the author. They are able to identify emotionally and intellectually with a writer, therefore providing themselves the ability to

step into the writer's circle. Beginning writers need to realize that writing can be a frustrating and difficult process and that all writers go through blocks and make mistakes, but they also need to be able to identify themselves as writers in order to make serious investments in their writing, to believe that they are on their way.

Authority is just as important and very closely related to identification. Authority over writing has been identified in different ways: as responsibility, as ownership, and as power. I believe that authority embodies all of these elements and more, and that developing authority is not only necessary but vital to progress as a writer. Authority has many connotations: it means power to many, it points to an unspoken hierarchy, and it implies mastery. An authority is an expert in a given field. To authorize means to grant power or authority, and if something is authorized it is "official." At the root of the word is "author," from the Latin word *auctor*, which means "creator." An author is the original generator of text, and an authority. All of these meanings imply a responsibility, an ownership, and power within the writer. Developing authority in writing will lead to greater confidence, greater investment, more effort, better writing, and ultimately, satisfaction in having truly conveyed a message effectively to an audience.

There is a total formula that I am interested in pursuing. Books that fall into the popular books on writing group must share some combination of the characteristics I have gone over. It is through these characteristics that the reader is able to identify with writers and identify *themselves* as writers. They also work to allow the reader to gain a sense of empowerment and authority over their own writing. In the next chapter I will analyze three books to show specifically how these characteristics work together allowing beginning writers to achieve identification with writers and authority over their work. The three books I have chosen are representative of fairly different styles, but they also contain most or all of the characteristics I have discussed so far.

Chapter 3: Perchance to Write

Out of a human population on earth of four and a half billion, perhaps twenty people can write a book in a year. Some people lift cars, too. Some people enter week-long sled-dog races, go over Niagara Falls in barrels, fly planes through the Arc de Triomphe. Some people feel no pain in childbirth. Some people eat cars. There is no call to take human extremes as norms.

- Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

After looking at the general characteristics of the books which comprise the larger category of writing life books, I found that while an argument could be made that they all promote some degree of identification and/or authority, a smaller, richer group of books seemed to promote *both* identification and authority through the use of personal voice/shared experiences, the identification of writing as tangible and masterable, practical advice and exercises, the freedom to make mistakes and get past the inner critic, and the reminder of the creative font and advocacy of writing for writing's sake. I devoutly believe that to develop successfully as a writer you must be able to identify yourself as a Writer (capitalized), and gain a sense of authority over your own writing. The books that fall into this smaller group, I feel, are most successful at doing just that. These books include Sophie Burnham's *For Writer's Only*, Nancy Aronie's *Writing From the Heart*, Annie Dillard's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*, Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, and Kenneth Atchity's *Writers Time*. To me, these books are particularly rich in what they have to offer the beginning writer because they combine the best qualities or characteristics of the entire sub-genre.

I have selected three books to analyze characteristic by characteristic in order to see how they ultimately work to provide the beginning writer with both authority and identification. It was hard choose which books to analyze, but I chose these three in an

attempt to get a cross-section of what is a recognizable but varied group of books. Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, and Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write* are representative of the different styles and approaches to writing. Anne Lamott's book is, to me, most representative of an autobiography, humorous and touching, and includes a great deal of personal experience and advice on writing. She tends to focus on writing fiction, and provides more general advice than actual exercise suggestions. She provides many examples of strategies that work and things that don't work quite so well, in order to let the reader pick and choose. Natalie Goldberg's book is also very autobiographical and contains a great deal of personal experience. She provides many ideas for writing exercises to "get the juices flowing." Her advice and strategies are more to prompt any kind of writing just to get going than to provide help on specific kinds of writing. Brenda Ueland's book is very different from Goldberg and Lamott's, providing the experiences of her students rather than herself. She is very focused on empowering the reader with his/her own abilities as a creative being and has less practical exercise suggestions and concrete advice than either of the other two. I think the strength in this book is in her drive to imbue new writers with the confidence to begin writing.

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Throughout this chapter I will discuss the ways that they cover the same things, and look at the interesting ways in which they differ. The level of personal experiences shared, the tone of the narrative, and the voiced ideas about writing are all different, but they all invite the reader into the intimate life of the writer and provide differing levels of authority and identification. I thought it would be clearer if I presented and contrasted the first paragraphs of the three books, both for a basic flavor of their personal styles and to showcase their basic similarities and differences. It is clear that the personal voice is present in all three paragraphs, but the tone, level of intimacy, and set-up are all different. It is the personal voice which works to immediately draw the reader in. The following excerpts have been taken from Chapter One of each book:

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*:

The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth. We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are. Sheep lice do not seem to share this longing, which is one reason they write so very little. But we do. We have so much we want to say and figure out. Year after year my students are bursting with stories to tell, and they start writing projects with excitement and maybe even joy -- finally their voices will be heard, and they are going to get to devote themselves to this one thing they've longed to do since childhood. But after a few days at the desk, telling the truth in an interesting way turns out to be about as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat. Some lose faith. Their sense of self and story shatters and crumbles to the ground. Historically they show up for the first day of the workshop looking like bright goofy ducklings who will follow me anywhere, but by the time the second class rolls around, they look at me as if the engagement is definitely off.

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*:

When I teach a beginning class, it is good. I have to come back to beginner's mind the first way I thought and felt about writing. In a sense, that beginner's mind is what we must come back to every time we sit down and write. There is no security, no assurance that because we wrote something good two months ago, we will do it again. Actually, every time we begin, we wonder how we ever did it before. Each time is a new journey with no maps.

Brenda Ueland, *If You Want To Write*:

I have been writing a long time and have learned some things, not only from my own long hard work, but from a writing class I had for three years. In this class were all kinds of people: prosperous and poor, stenographers, housewives, salesmen, cultivated people and little servant girls who had never been to high school, timid people and bold ones, slow and quick ones. This is what I learned: that everybody is talented, original and has something important to say.

The introductions to three of these books serve as a brief taste and preview of what is found in the whole. The opening paragraphs detail the extremely personal, almost intimate conversation that the authors begin with the reader. This drawing in of the reader happens immediately, and in a very subtle manner causes the reader to identify with the author. Anne Lamott, Natalie Goldberg, and Brenda Ueland live in the mind of the reader as writers, actual published writers. The reader, generally, wants to be a writer. From the beginning the authors use very personal voices and write directly to the "you" of the

reader. As noted earlier, beginning writers are able to identify themselves as writers through empathy with the author of the book. Empathy is defined as the projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him better, intellectual identification of oneself with another. Through the use of personal voice, anecdotes and experiences, the reader shares the joys and frustrations of writing, shares the drive and the passion. Slowly, the readers see less difference between themselves and the authors of the books, and soon come to identify themselves as writers as well.

The authors do this in different ways. The most direct way comes through the use of a very personal voice to share their own experiences. In different yet related ways, Lamott, Goldberg, and Ueland share with the reader their desire to write, to *be* a writer. Then they share the bumps and potholes that always appear in the road. By talking about the good and bad times, by sharing honest thoughts, feelings, and neuroses, they draw the readers in and allow them to see that the feelings are the same. Anne Lamott writes about being inspired by her father, who was a writer and teacher. She describes his teaching her, and his students, to be bold and original and make mistakes. But while he taught them to discover all the things they wanted to share, "we all ended up just the tiniest bit resentful when we found the one fly in the ointment: that at some point we had to actually sit down and write" (xiii). All new writers have experienced this moment, and all new writers believe on some level that the famous published writers never had this problem, that the words came flowing out. Lamott recognizes that all beginning writers feel this at some point:

People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. (21)

The beginning is the hardest, and a published author who shares these thoughts, up front, with the new writer, gives the impression of closeness, of identification.

While Lamott emphasizes her personal experiences, Brenda Ueland shares with the readers her experiences as a teacher. Many beginning writers identify themselves as “students,” whether formally or not, and look to mentors and other writers for guidance. By sharing the efforts, mistakes, and outcomes of her student’s writing, Ueland encourages readers to identify with specific cases. But Ueland also describes her own experiences as a writer; she shares a story of her own writer’s block and the things she did to get past it and kick her writing into gear. Unfortunately, as she discovered, willing does not always work. The imagination needs time and space to offer up something true and interesting to be written down. “It was Tolstoi [sic] who showed me this. I used to drink coffee all day and smoke two packages of cigarettes. I could thus pump myself up to write all day and much of the night, for a few days. but the sad part of it was, what I wrote was not very good. It came out easily, but it wasn’t much good. It was interlarded with what was pretentious, commonplace and untrue” (34). By passing these experiences on to her own students, she hopes to pass the importance of writing from the “real” you. She wants all writers to realize that sometimes writing is not immediate. Sometimes writing means wandering around and thinking - not willing and not forcing.

Natalie Goldberg also shares personal experiences of writing highs and lows. She tells a specific story about a friend of hers who was able to identify with her and understand her after reading several of her notebooks. “I have a pile of spiral notebooks about five feet high that began around 1977 . . . I want to throw them out - who can bear to look at the junk of our own minds that comes out in writing practice?” A friend wouldn’t let her throw them away, and instead read them herself. “She said it was empowering to read my notebooks because she realized that I really did write ‘shit,’ sometimes for whole notebooks. Often I tell my students, ‘Listen, I write and still write terrible self-pitying stuff for page after page.’ They don’t believe me. Reading my

notebooks is proof of that” (16). The response of Natalie Goldberg’s neighbor is the response of many new writers: “If you could write the junk you did then and then write the stuff you do now, I realize I can do anything” (17). Just being able to identify with the shared feelings and frustrations and venting and idiosyncrasies and joys gives more power to the reader/writer. If I share the same feelings and processes and neuroses of this writer, I must be able to write too.

* * * * *

Writing can sometimes seem like a mirage in the desert, or an incredibly vivid dream that evaporates like mist in the morning sun. It’s hard to make that leap from the idea to the physical act of putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. The first steps are the hardest, and sort of like diving into cold water; you have to just hold your breath and jump in. After a while, it even starts to feel good. New writers who aren’t in school, or have no actual mentors or guides, can rely on sources like these books to get motivated. The authors of these books understand how hard and frightening it can be to write the first few words, and they share their own experiences to make writing seem more tangible and “do-able” for new writers.

Mastering writing and bringing it down to a workable size is what inspired the title of Anne Lamott’s book, *Bird by Bird*. She tells a story about her brother trying to write an assignment for school: “Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird” (19). Sometimes writing can seem overwhelming and insurmountable. Anne Lamott writes that she sometimes tries too hard to start. She wants so badly to communicate, preserve, edify, or entertain that she is overwhelmed, “but you cannot will

this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work. So you might as well just go ahead and get started” (7).

Natalie Goldberg tells a story in her book about reading a poem written by Erica Jong. She opened a book of poems and read one about cooking an eggplant: “You mean you can write about something like that? Something as ordinary as that? A synapse connected in my brain. I went home with the resolve to write what I knew and to trust my own thoughts and feelings and to not look outside myself. I was not in school anymore: I could say what I wanted” (2). It is with common experiences like this that writing becomes “do-able.” You’re *not* in school anymore and there are no “grades;” as Goldberg suggests, sometimes you have to keep reminding yourself of that. It just takes once for a beginning writer to say, “That’s writing? I can do that!” Then writing doesn’t seem so out of control and divinely inspired. One of the ways Natalie Goldberg makes writing surmountable is by focusing on her writing tools and then sticking to the rules. She writes that everyone experiences trauma at the jumping off point, so be prepared. Find what works for you and use it.

Brenda Ueland writes that it is normal to start slowly, or to be afraid to start, but that it is imperative to *know* that it is normal. Brenda Ueland does not allow the reader to believe that writing is overwhelming because in the first chapter she proves that “everybody is talented, original and has something important to say.” Writing is just an extension of writers and of their creative powers. She writes that the fear and seizing up of the writer come from “willing” rather than allowing time for quiet thinking and imagining. She would like all writers to sit in front of their papers, typewriters or computers and know that some of the time will be spent staring out the window and twirling their hair, but that, “you may not be conscious, when you sit down, of having evolved something important to say. You will sit down as mentally blank, good-natured and smiling as usual, and not frowning solemnly over the weight of your message. Just the same, when you begin to write, presently something will come out, something true and interesting” (38). It

seems to be asking a lot, not to will - not to force yourself to write - but trust me, something will come out.

* * * * *

As I mentioned earlier, getting started and keeping the momentum going can be the hardest part of writing. Goldberg, Lamott, and Ueland all know that, and they have some practical suggestions to get started. They share what worked and didn't work for them, and what worked for other people. The great thing is, there's one thing that they *all* say: write every day. Practice. Practice every day whether you feel like it or not. Ray Bradbury says, "I have learned on my journeys, that if I let a day go by without writing, I grow uneasy. Two days and I am in tremor. Three and I suspect lunacy. Four and I might as well be a hog, suffering the flux in a wallow. An hour's writing is tonic"(xiii). Ray Bradbury has tried to write at least a thousand words a day since he was twelve years old. Practice. The authors of these books suggest writing for at least an hour every day, and they provide some ways writers can trick themselves into doing it. They also offer suggestions on ways to get the ink rolling, what to write about, and how not to think about what you want to write about so the real stuff comes out.

Natalie Goldberg encourages beginning writers to try short timed writings. She introduces some basic rules for the writing exercise: keep your hand moving, don't cross out, don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar, lose control, don't think, don't get logical, and go for the jugular. "It is important to adhere to the rules because the aim is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel" (8). Goldberg feels it is very important that inexperienced writers not constrain themselves. Instead of setting high or even medium expectations, she suggests beginning writers give themselves "permission to write the worst junk in the world" (11). Often the gems in writing come out unexpectedly in the process of writing what you thought was the main idea. In between

chapters recounting personal writing experiences, Goldberg offers some concrete ideas for writing exercises to get the creative juices flowing, from simple observation exercises to using feelings, to re-building older pieces. She also shares some of the tips and ideas from writers she has worked with.

Anne Lamott's book is set up a little differently. For beginning writers, she also suggests short exercises and practicing every day. She recounts her own neurotic and somewhat self-destructive problems with beginnings in a humorous way designed to create a bond with the new writer who has experienced some of those feelings as well. When faced with a block in getting started, Lamott encourages writers to turn to the enormous amount of material found within them, especially memories. "So you might start by writing down every single thing you can remember from your first few years in school. Start with Kindergarten. . . If this doesn't pan out, or if it does but you finish mining this particular vein, see if focusing on holidays and big events helps you recollect your life as it was" (4). But how to start? Many of her students have told her they don't know how to begin. "You sit down, I say. You try to sit down at approximately the same time every day. This is how you train your unconscious to kick in for you creatively . . . You put a piece of paper in the typewriter, or you turn on your computer . . . and you stare at it for an hour or so. You look at the ceiling, and over at the clock, yawn, and stare at the paper again . . . Yet somehow in the face of this, you clear a space for the writing voice, hacking away at the others with machetes, and you begin to compose sentences" (6). Lamott then slowly works through the major points writers should cover for a story: plot, dialogue, character, set design, etc., and provides tips and pointers for covering these basics.

Brenda Ueland also acknowledges the slow beginnings of writing and the difficulty of actually starting, but instead of dwelling on it, she merely acknowledges and brushes it aside. "Say you want to write. Well, not much will come to you the first day. Perhaps nothing at all. You will sit before your typewriter or paper and look out of the window and begin to brush your hair absent-mindedly for an hour or two. Never mind. That is all

right. That is as it should be,- though you must sit before your typewriter just the same and know, in this dreamy time, that you are going to write, to tell something on paper, sooner or later" (28). Instead of driving yourself to write, she encourages writers to be idle and think. Moodling is what she calls it: long, in-efficient, happy idling, dawdling and puttering. Ueland believes that imagination needs time to muddle, but that it must not be an excuse to put off writing. She also believes that writers must write every day and that they should write everything that comes to them, "Be careless, reckless! Be a lion! Be a Pirate when you write!" (63). Ueland thinks that everyone has something creative to express and that writers should be true to themselves. But there has to be time for moodling and time for practice.

* * * * *

Every writer faces the moment when "just start writing" doesn't "just" happen. Sitting in front of a blank paper or screen can be nerve wracking and self-esteem shattering. Many times it is the critical self editor which stymies or sets out to destroy what writers are attempting to put onto paper, often before it has even been written. Writers are always their own first readers, and self-editing is part of the writing process, but only to the point that it is constructive. The minute the self-editor keeps a writer from writing, it becomes counterproductive and must be gotten rid of. Editing and response from external sources is always a good idea, but there too, criticism must be constructive or else it may rob the writer of self-confidence. The authors of these books all frown upon excessive self-editing and detrimental external advice. Writing, like gardening, has to be done in a supportive and nurturing manner: too much pampering is as bad as pulling everything that could be a weed or a sick leaf.

Anne Lamott puts the inner editor in its place by squelching all the inner voices that have negative and confining things to say. Writing is a safe place to just pour out what is on one's mind, and do the editing later. If writers try to edit as they write, they may miss some great moment that they didn't even know was there. If it takes several pages of

garbage to get to the good stuff, it's still ok; it's always possible to just throw the other pages away before anybody else sees them. Burn them, feed them to your dog, whatever, but no one will have to see them. To Lamott the process of writing cannot be inhibited by the inner editor. She calls the first attempts, "shitty first drafts," the ones nobody sees. "The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later" (22). Whenever Lamott gets blocked and can't get past the first lines that have been crossed out over and over, she would remind herself that all she had to do was right a shitty first draft, and see what came out.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something -- anything -- down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft -- you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft -- you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy. (25)

Giving yourself permission to write "garbage" can free you, take the pressure off just enough that sooner or later, the good stuff comes out.

Natalie Goldberg separates the writer into two beings: the creator and the editor. She feels that both play an important role in the writing process, but they must balance each other out. It is not good if the creator runs amuck without any kind of restraint, but even that would be better, if caught by an external editor, than when the internal editor becomes so tyrannical that the creator is afraid to write. The creator needs the freedom to explore and express; it cannot be overpowered by the voice of the editor, a voice which say things like, "whoever said you could write, this is lousy, that's a stupid way to begin." She feels that beginning writers must learn to really know the inner editor. "The better you know the editor, the better you can ignore it. After a while, like the jabbering of an old drunk fool, it becomes just prattle in the background. Don't reinforce its power by

listening to its angry words” (26). The time for the editor is after the creator has had its way; even then, the editor must be kept on a short leash.

Brenda Ueland is the most forthright and vehement against the critical editor, be it self or otherwise. She feels so strongly that everyone is creative and intelligent and filled with potential that she hates anything which stymies that growth. Ueland says that writers must feel free and not anxious, that the only good teachers are those whose attitude is, “tell me more, tell me all you can . . . let more come out” (8). She absolutely detests criticism, especially, “the usual small niggling, fussy-mussy criticism, which thinks it can improve people by telling them where they are wrong, and results only in putting them in strait-jackets of hesitancy and self-consciousness” (8). She hates critical editing not for herself, but because of the, “potentially shining, gentle, gifted people of all ages, that it snuffs out every year. It is a murderer of talent” (8). Ueland believes that beginning writers often constrain themselves with their own inner critic which causes them to hesitate at every word, to write what they believe is expected rather than something really from them, and to self-consciously correct something that probably does not need correction. According to Ueland, it must stop immediately. Period.

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These books all make reference to a creative font, a place that everyone has inside them, bursting with creative energy. They assert that all people are creative and show it in different ways. Writing is a way of tapping into that creative font, and a way of living more creatively. Writing is a natural outlet for many people who feel a need to create, or to delve inside themselves. One of the best books I’ve read about creativity, *The Artist’s Way* by Julie Cameron, uses the daily writing of morning pages as a way for people to get past the inner judge and all the reasons they “can’t” be creative to get to the good stuff. Writing for its own sake, writing for its own reward - this is something many people can identify with. None of these books, not in this smaller core group, not in the larger sub-genre, are written for people who want to get published or make money. Rather, they

are written for people whose primary motivation is they simply want to write. That is ultimately why I am personally drawn to these books - they speak to my own inner need to be involved in writing on a very personal level. These are not books that tell you how to write a novel, how to get published, how to write homicide, or how to avoid dangling participles. They are about writing and the need to create through writing - they are about a basic way we communicate with each other. In this is their strength.

I truly love Anne Lamott's book because she so honestly and unabashedly represents her own neurotic fears about writing - and why she continues to do it anyway. Paragraph after paragraph she describes herself sitting like a half-wit in front of the empty page trying to figure out if she has meningitis, or if she needs orthodontia. Anything to keep from scratching the first words. So why write? Because at the same time, she loves it. She makes it very clear that in spite of all that she goes through to get to the writing, it's always worth it. Many of her students still want to know how to get published as much as they want to become better writers, and while she understands, she also tries to educate them. "I just try to warn people who hope to get published that publication is not all that it is cracked up to be. But writing is. Writing has so much to give, so much to teach, so many surprises. That thing you had to force yourself to do - the actual act of writing - turns out to be the best part. It's like discovering that while you thought you needed the tea ceremony for the caffeine, what you really needed was the tea ceremony. The act of writing turns out to be its own reward" (xxvi). What she says about writing and the act of creating is a basic extrapolation of the way life should be lived. "You have to give from the deepest part of yourself, and you are going to have to go on giving, and the giving is going to have to be its own reward" (203). Everyone needs to be reminded that the act is often more important than the product.

Brenda Ueland believes that imagination, or creative power, is divine and found within each one of us. Writing is a way to get past the mundane-ness of everyday life and to learn to be creative again. "We have come to think that duty should come first. I

disagree. Duty should be a by-product. *Writing*, the creative effort, the use of the imagination, should come first, - at least for some part of every day of your life. It is a wonderful blessing if you will use it. You will become happier, more enlightened, alive, impassioned, light-hearted and generous to everybody else. Even your health will improve. Colds will disappear and all the other ailments of discouragement and boredom" (14).

Ueland emphatically wants people to live and work creatively, and feels that writing is accessible to anyone who feels the urge. Creative thoughts come slowly, after a person has given themselves the time necessary rather than just willing. "And how do these creative thoughts come? They come in a slow way. It is the little bomb of revelation bursting inside of you" (45). Her word for it which I mentioned earlier, moodling, has become a regular part of my vocabulary and my writing process. It all comes back to writing for ourselves first, not some external end, not for grades, not for money, not for fame.

Natalie Goldberg discusses another of the intangible benefits of writing for oneself in a chapter titled, "Living Twice." In it she describes the mundane parts of life that the writer inside is always watching and taking notes about - the silent observer - such as living a scene from an afternoon again as it is being written and seeing little details emerge that you may not have noticed consciously while it was happening. Writers train themselves to start noticing the little things and to really pay attention. She describes the writer as practicing being dumb - not coming in out of the rain because only in the rain can you experience it and later write about it. "You're more interested, finally, in living life again in your writing than in making money. Now, let's understand - writers do like money; artists, contrary to popular belief, do like to eat. It's only that money isn't the driving force. I feel very rich when I have time to write and very poor when I get a regular paycheck and no time to work at my real work" (48). Time, she says, is the basic commodity - we all need the time to be creative - to do our "real" work. Sounds to me like she thinks we all need time to muddle. Like Lamott, she also recognizes the drive to

live creatively through writing for the sake of writing alone, not for money and not for publication.

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What I have tried to do in this chapter is give a very specific flavor of these books and how they work. I've provided examples of the shared characteristics of the writing life books to show what they have, at their very best, to offer the beginning writer. I chose to present the writing life books in the most flattering light in order to spotlight those qualities which set them apart from other writing manuals. Of course, it could be argued that some of the qualities which set them apart and make them both appealing and popular, may be the qualities most problematic to the beginning writer. For example, having the writing advice and strategies embedded within a larger narrative text may be frustrating to the writer who wants to focus on a specific area of writing - or one who works better with a specifically laid out set of guidelines. Unlike most writing manuals or academic textbooks on writing, the writing life books do not provide an index so that readers can flip to page 46 for freewriting tips or Chapter 2 for editing advice.

Because the writing life books are somewhat autobiographical in nature, they provide the practiced suggestions of only one writer - supported by personal opinion and personal stories. This can be quite helpful to beginning writers, or it can base writing and writing strategies solely in the experience of the individual. Instead of providing a solid structure of writing and writers, anything seems to go - depending on which book you happen to be reading. This kind of freedom may inhibit some writers who need more structure. Every author makes claims based in their personal experience - and some of those claims may seem unrealistic to beginning writers. It may be easier for beginning writers to outline a paper in the style of a five paragraph theme than to write a paper simply because Brenda Ueland says they can because they are inherently creative. It's not any easier to write every day because Natalie Goldberg says to and it doesn't make writing the first word any less excruciating just because Anne Lamott also describes herself as a

neurotic mess during the composing process. There are no secrets involved in these books. The author's do not pass the cloak of wisdom to new writers in a reading-based initiation process. They simply share their own experiences. Each reader, each beginning writer must take and use what they can from the books, individually.

These books are not the end-all answer to beginning writers. They are, however, a source on information and inspiration to beginning writers. They stand apart from other writing texts and manuals, and they provide something very different: they foster both a sense of identification with other writers, and a sense of authority over one's own writing projects. The writing life books make use of a very different format to reach out to an audience of writers outside the academy. Although they are not academically based, they come from a voice of authority - the voice of a published writer. They also concern themselves with the same issues the academy is actively interested in: issues involved in the writing process. As relevant, as prolific, and as popular as these books are, it would be a sad mistake for the academy to miss out on what they could contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of composition studies. In the next chapter I will cover the terms identification and authority more explicitly and show examples of scholars who also believe that these ideas are very important for beginning writers in order to develop. I will also point to the call for a study of the extracurriculum of writing development and discuss how these books could become a part of the research into the extracurriculum, and perhaps even be integrated into classroom teaching.

Chapter 4: Back to School

The power of boys sometimes sink under too great severity in correction; for they despond, and grieve, and at last hate their work, and, what is most prejudicial, while they fear every thing, they cease to attempt any thing. There is a similar conviction in the minds of the cultivators of trees in the country, who think that the knife must not be applied to tender shoots, as they appear to shrink from the steel, and to be unable as yet to bear an incision.

- Quintilian

I spent most of the first chapter of this thesis discussing the effect that popular books on writing - the writing life books - have had on my own life as a writer. I introduced the books in general and defined the qualities and characteristics which set them apart from more traditional academic and scholarly writing books. What I would like to do now is turn from a personal justification of the importance of these books to show how the scholarship in the field of composition studies has already established the importance of writing process development and how elements such as authority and identification are an integral part of that development. I have briefly mentioned the shift scholars are attempting to make in looking at writing development outside of the academy towards the extracurriculum; now I would like to look at some of this work in detail and use the words of these scholars to point to the importance of these books and their potential for research. Beyond research in extracurricular writing development, I would like to suggest the possible benefits to integrating these books into the classroom as supplementary material.

At their very best these books foster the process of identification with successful and published writers, and authority over one's own writing. Scholars within the field of composition studies recognize that these issues are important and have spent a great deal of time studying them within the academy. As I mentioned in the introduction, scholars such as Glenda Bissex, James Moffett, Peter Elbow, Linda Flower, and Mina Shaughnessy

have focused their work on the importance of making meaning before correctness, and the effect empowerment has upon student writers and their increasing confidence levels. The more empowerment, or authority, beginning writers feel, the more they feel inclined to try something new and take risks. Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Rick Evans discuss the importance of both identification and authority in their book, *Small Groups in Writing Workshops: Invitations to a Writer's Life*. In discussing what they see as the essential elements in a writer's life they point out that the best teaching of writing emerges out of a sympathetic awareness between teachers and students. "We teachers teach best when we understand our own past and present lives, when we understand something of our students' pasts and imagined futures, and when we've reflected enough on the differences between our lives and theirs to understand in what ways writing might support each of us in those lives"(12). This can be read to support the need for an empathic link between students and teachers, much like the one that I suggest is necessary to exist between a beginning writer and successful writer for identification.

Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans also discuss four specific elements which they find necessary for students to develop as writers. These are time, ownership, response, and exposure. The element most relevant to my own discussion is ownership. They define ownership in the following way:

Writers maintain ownership over their uses of writing. By and large, they choose the topics they will write about during their writing time. They decide when a piece is worth continuing, or when to crumple it and throw it out, or when it needs to sit in a drawer and gestate for five years. They decide what the purposes of their writing will be, from the self-help purposes of private journals to the political purposes of letters to their elected officials. And they decide how to fit in the writing their job requires of them among the other writing they do. (13)

The idea of ownership is roughly the same as the idea of authority. Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans may be talking about writing among students in writing workshops, but the ideas can be extrapolated to any situation in which someone is struggling as a beginning writer.

Whether called ownership or authority, it is a key element in strong writing development because writers must feel motivated and personally invested in the work they do. As Brooke states, beginning writers “feel too little ownership and lack strategies for making the writing personally engaging”(21). The lack of strategies and ownership over writing is addressed by all the writing life books. In fact, it is one of the points of the books - that beginning writers gain a sense of control over their writing and acknowledge the power they have as writers to create and change text.

One of the main focuses of composition studies is how students are taught, and how students learn to write. Unfortunately, many comments made by people pinpoint school as the place they learned to identify themselves as *unable* to write, or to identify their writing as less than adequate. Worse yet, to hate writing. Writing development outside of school is an area being explored by more and more scholars. Deborah Brandt explores the relationship between reading and writing and the perceived values of each in her essay, “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading.” She interviewed a wide variety of people on their earliest memories of reading and writing to better illuminate some of the earliest perceptions people develop about the two, and what effect that may have in the long term. She describes the memories about reading as, on the whole, happy and comfortable memories. “While it must be said that the ability to write was regarded as extremely precious to virtually everybody I interviewed, their accounts suggest that writing develops in situations and out of psychological motivations that are saliently, sometimes jarringly, different from those surrounding reading”(464). Reading turned out to be supported and motivated by adults, while writing emerged more as a response to immediate circumstances and feelings.

Memories of reading and writing were often able to shed light on how the (now) adults still thought of themselves and their relationship to writing. One of the interviewees said that even now she doesn’t encourage writing in her own children because, “I think the idea that you must be creative is sort of wrenching it out of the natural. It always seemed

to me that it was a natural thing if it was going to come. And the idea of psychologizing it and thinking, now, if a person can express themselves well, they'll have a bigger sense of themselves and this is good for them is nonsense to me, frankly"(468). Brandt notes how a cultural ideal that has been derived from literary reading, namely that of the romantic writer as natural genius, is still manifesting itself in the attitude parents have towards writing and the amount of encouragement they provide for it. The belief of the gift of the golden prose bares its ugly face yet again. Children are encouraged to be readers and to own the title, but the same encouragement is not provided for writing.

On the whole it must be said that the status of writing in everyday literacy practices is decidedly more ambiguous and conflicted in comparison to reading. Except for the dutiful thank-you notes or letters home from camp that some people recalled being required to write as children, writing does not appear to play a standard role in the activities or rituals of families, especially in the communal way that reading is. Nor is writing so readily identified as a separate activity. Rather, writing seems to be experienced more as an embedded means than a demarcated end in itself. Writing does not seem to be as broadly sponsored and endorsed by parents; nor does the identity "writer" seem as unproblematically available as the identity "reader."(470)

Whereas people interviewed by Brandt proudly called themselves "great readers" or "avid readers," there was a lack of, or hesitancy towards claiming the title of writer. Brandt states that this should not be surprising given the vagueness and ambivalence that surrounds writing as an activity (468). It makes developing an identity as "writer" very difficult. The issue of identification is one that writing life books address by the very nature of their purpose and structure. Brandt's essay provides a good take off point for research being done by scholars that is intrinsically related to the writing life books, because they focus so much on beginning writers taking and owning the title of writer.

One of the books I read during my studies that I really felt showed a connection between composition studies and the writing life books was Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*. The ideas about writing, editing, the composing process, and teaching

writing found within Peter Elbow's work are also found explicitly or implicitly in the books I was reading outside of class. *Writing Without Teachers* is written as a guide for a "teacherless" classroom, where beginning writers can turn for support and guidance. His book is written in a personal voice directed at student writers, and he offers advice both from personal and classroom experience.

I know I am not alone in my recurring twinges of panic that I won't be able to write something when I need to, I won't be able to produce coherent speech or thought. And that lingering doubt is a great hindrance to writing. It's a constant fog or static that clouds the mind. I never got out of its clutches till I discovered that it was possible to write something - not something great or pleasing, but at least something usable, workable - when my mind is out of commission. The trick is that you have to do all your cooking out on the table: Your mind is incapable of doing any inside. It means using symbols and pieces of paper not as a crutch, but as a wheel chair. (60)

This paragraph is a good example of the voice of Peter Elbow throughout the book. The voice is a very personal one, and he shares both his own doubts and writing strategies with the student writer. Elbow's book is one I have turned to again and again when I was in need of advice, or a writing strategy, and it is a name that I heard cross the lips of many fellow students who also found encouragement within his books.

Writing Without Teachers is structurally very similar to the writing life books. It is concerned with the subjects that most concern new writers: how to begin and how to sustain writing. Elbow provides advice and writing exercises, emphasizing most the necessity to practice writing, as stated in the first sentence of his book. "The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do free writing exercises regularly . . . Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing" (3). The most important aspect of free-writing, according to Elbow, is that it not be evaluated in any way. He clearly denotes a separation between the process of writing, or producing, and editing. "Almost everybody interposes a massive and

complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because schooling makes us obsessed with the 'mistakes' we make in writing . . . Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing"(5). Many of the writing strategies Elbow encourages beginning writers to make use of make their appearance again and again in the writing/living books.

Although *Writing Without Teachers* is structurally very similar to the writing life books, and his ideas are encompassed in them all, I constantly find myself locating his work on the fringes, floating just out of my peripheral vision. He is primarily a scholar and teacher and that comes through in his writing voice. It seems to come from a place of institutionalized authority, because he writes as a teacher, rather than as a voice from the "fellowship" of writing. However, Peter Elbow's work does stand out as a model of the writing life books, one that comes from the field of composition studies itself. His work is the most obvious and concrete link between some of the concerns of composition studies, and what are primarily mainstream, popular, non-academic books of the same nature: wearing different skins yet sharing the same bones.

The idea of writing existing and developing outside of the academy is certainly not a new one; it is just an area that falls outside the scope of what composition scholars have chosen to focus on and study. Most work performed in the field of composition studies is primarily based on students and school: how students learn to write, how teachers respond to writing, what techniques work with which students, how the composing process generally works, and what can be done to encourage writing development. The research necessary for this kind of study is available in controlled classroom settings all over the country - whereas writing and the composing process outside of the academy remains a largely undocumented precisely because it is performed individually or in small groups with no kind of control or way to receive feedback. That doesn't mean that this

area is going without study. There has been a recent move to focus on composition outside the academy - the extra-curriculum. This focus has, for purposes of organization and feedback, been primarily on community writing groups. Writing groups are good subjects for study because they are organized: they meet regularly and discuss their own writing process, give each other feedback, and allow researchers to view how all of this works in the "real" world.

Anne Ruggles Gere was one of the first scholars to call attention to work needing to be done in the extracurriculum. In her essay, "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," she observes that there have always been groups learning and helping themselves to develop as writers, and explores how they do this outside of an academic institution. "In concentrating upon establishing out position within the academy, we have neglected to recount the history of composition in other contexts; we have neglected composition's extracurriculum"(79). She discusses two specific writing groups: one, a women's group in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, the other, a writing group from a small farming community in Lansing, Iowa. Gere states that participants in groups such as these "represent a tiny portion of the enormous number of individuals who meet in living rooms, nursing homes, community centers, churches, shelters for the homeless, around kitchen tables, and in rented rooms to write down their worlds. These writers bear testimony to the fact that writing development occurs outside formal education"(76). People come together within their communities seeking the support and criticism from their peers that they need to develop as writers.

I once questioned why so many groups should be spontaneously occurring in so many communities. After about 30 seconds I answered myself. I have always looked to my books; within the last several years I have also looked to teachers and peers. Many writers feel the need to belong to a community: a community that understands them, a community they can identify with, a community that supports and encourages them to develop. When I first began buying the writing life books, they provided me with my first

introduction to the writing community. Community writing groups provide the same kind of invitation to belong and participate. Gere documents how powerful this identification can be: "Despite their inexperience, workshop participants gain confidence and begin to think of themselves as writers"(76). This statement represents my beliefs about writing in a nutshell. Beginning writers need to gain confidence (authority) to be able to think of themselves (identification) as writers. This section from Gere's essay sums it all up very well:

Few of the participants in the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop or the Lansing, Iowa Writers' Workshop had much formal education, and many had negative experiences with schooling. They did not think of themselves as writers because teachers had taught them they could not write. Yet these individuals wrote effectively in workshops, published their writing, and gained personal and community recognition for their work. Although it remains largely invisible and inaudible to us, writing development occurs regularly and successfully outside classroom walls. (78)

Towards the end of her essay, Gere issues a challenge to the scholars within the field of composition studies: to turn attention toward the extracurriculum. She proposes that scholars, "acknowledge the extracurriculum as a legitimate and autonomous cultural formation that undertakes its own projects. Such an inclusive perspective can lead us to tap and listen to messages through the walls, to consider how we can learn from and contribute to compositions extracurriculum in our classes"(86).

The fact that there are so many documented community writing groups supports the belief that there are even more individuals outside the academy that are striving to develop as writers. Outside of schooling, outside of writing groups, what tools could they be using? Based on the popularity of the writing life books, I think it is fair to suggest that these books may be playing a very important role. Discovering the impact these books are having on individuals outside of the classroom could be very problematic, but it has great potential for informing the field of composition studies on the composing process. How informative it would be if individuals reported back to scholars identifying exactly which elements of the writing life books were helpful to them and in what ways. Perhaps the

personal voice/ motivational aspect of the book did encourage people to sit down and start writing, or maybe it just made them feel good and the practical writing strategies were more useful. Were beginning writers able to identify themselves as writers with the same struggles as published writers? Did learning about their own writing process help or hinder them? I wonder if community writing groups use writing life books or other more traditional writing books as supplements or guides. Does the impact of the books change when introduced to group dynamics? Even if community writing groups are using some of these books now, or they are just being used by individuals, the books are making an impact. Perhaps some of the individuals are bringing some of the ideas found in the writing life books to their group members, in which case the books are still having an impact on the writing process and the impact should be documented.

A point that has been touched on a few times is that many people are often taught by their own teachers to believe they are not good at writing, or worse, that they can't write at all. School sometimes has the unfortunate outcome of taking all the fun out of learning and experimenting. Too often the correction aspect of schoolwork nips many creative people in the bud and makes them afraid to try. It's just not fun anymore. One of the things I personally love about the writing life books is that while they acknowledge the trials and tribulations, the frustrations, the nerve-wracking feelings of exposure, and the possibility of mental breakdowns, all of the authors are sure to point out the other side - the fun. The books are engaging and fun to read; at the same time, the author is sure to point out content-wise, that writing is also engaging and fun. Lex Runciman wrote an essay called, "Fun?" in which he made a point of asking whether or not learning to write in classrooms was presented as fun.

We speak of writing as a process and by that we generally mean a series of problems to be solved. Linda Flower, John Hayes, and many others have worked and continue to work fruitfully in this regard, and in one sense that work has been tremendously positive: it has demystified writing activities. It has given students conscious and workable writing strategies, and

whenever those strategies work, the result is (presumably) satisfaction. But it is this satisfaction - the second half of the equation - that I know I have often ignored or sometime failed altogether to see. (201)

Runciman suggests that maybe within the academy - within school - maybe it is important to acknowledge the hardship and the reason for engaging in the hardship. "Maybe we do need to professionally address the question of fun, of writing's satisfactions. Maybe we need to encourage student writers to discover and even savor the range of large and small rewards which attend their own writing and thinking"(205). *It is* important to remember the fun of writing, the satisfaction. And the fun of writing is something the writing life books address.

* * * * *

As enthusiastically as I presented the writing life books, and as much as I would recommend them for beginning writers as a resource, they are not for everyone. Nor are they the only way to learn to write, or find your voice. As much as the writing life books helped in my own personal development as a writer, they were both a catalyst and a supplement to other resources and mentors I eventually began learning from. They are yet another tool for potential writers to glean as much information, advice, and spirit from as possible. I wouldn't turn to these books to write a resume, a letter to the I.R.S., or draft legislation. I do, however, turn to these books frequently for different reasons. Sometimes I am looking for an exercise to get the ball rolling on a new project, or just to while away some time. Sometimes I like to give my writerly self-esteem a boost by reading excerpts and quotes from equally self-deprecating and neurotic writers. Sometimes I enjoy the contradictions in the advice and relish the words from Sophie Burnham, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 2. Most often, I read the writing life books to remind myself that I am a writer and face the same struggles and challenges that all writers face.

This study as basic research exists as an effort to call attention to works that could teach scholars a good deal about self-sponsored, popular literacy. There is potentially very valuable information available to researchers about writing development outside the

academy if it could only be tapped. What impact are these books having on the individual pursuing an interest in writing outside of the academy? What can be learned by knowing the demographics? Who is buying the books? How are they being used? Are they ultimately helpful to the beginning writer and in what ways? In what ways could the use of the writing life books inform scholarly debates between process and product? These are only some of the ways that learning more about and paying serious attention to the writing life books could be potentially valuable to scholars. I can only hope that the basic research and identification I have provided of this category of books will act as a diving board for other studies. Through the course of preparing this material, I found I had to narrow my focus again and again. There was so much more beyond this basic introduction that I wanted to pursue.

One of the specific areas of study I was not able to pursue was that of an historical perspective. It would be fascinating to explore the historical tradition behind the writing life books. These books appear to have become quite popular, being published since about the 1970's and increasingly produced in the 1980's and 90's. There is evidence of these books appearing in the 1930's, but I was unable to find a similar kind of book published any earlier. Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, published in 1938, and Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*, published 1934, correspond to historical changes during the progressive era in psychological, social, and political fields. Perhaps it is the very nature of the books, that they tend to be part self-help and motivational, which limits the times they could have been written and published. I can only guess, for while there certainly have been guides to writing published quite a bit earlier, they seem to lack the qualities that set the writing life books apart. I would love to find even earlier examples and try to discover how they came to be written, who used them, and, if possible, what kind of response they received.

The issue of gender and the performance of gender in academic writing is another hot topic in the field of composition studies. Many feminist scholars such as Julia Kristeva,

Helene Cixous, Elaine Showalter, and Susan Stanford Friedman have written a great deal about writing through the feminine body and performing this as a feminist statement in academic writing. This is another great debate which I don't intend to take a firm stand in, yet I'd like to acknowledge the possibility of gender being a factor in the production of the writing life books. It has not escaped my attention that the majority of authors I have cited are female, and that the use of personal voice in writing tends to be located within the feminine. It has been determined that historically, "feminine" narratives tend to exist in a diminished and de-valued state. I can imagine an interesting study similar to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, in which a genre that has been undervalued and considered not worthy of scholarly interest is explored to find out exactly what readers are taking from the genre. Radway interviewed women and collected information from questionnaires to find out exactly what impact romance novels were having on the readers and what the readers were taking away from them. She discovered that the readers of romance novels are giving the books generally more sophisticated reads than they have been given credit for. Popular should not equate to "easily dismissed," just as gendered values should not be indiscriminately assigned.

I discussed earlier in this thesis my desire to see these books used as supplements to established writing curriculum. The use of the writing life books in classrooms could provide researchers with a controlled environment to study how the books are used by students and whether or not they provide motivation, support or workable strategies to beginning writing students. The feedback would certainly be different from those who voluntarily go to a bookstore and purchase one of the writing life books, but as a part of the curriculum, the feedback could be manageably be collected. Both students and scholars could benefit from this arrangement, for the students would have been introduced to another possible tool to turn to as they develop as writers. Can these books be implemented in current writing curriculum, and can scholars find a practical way to get feedback from people on how the books have affected, if they have, their writing process?

The answer to these questions could inform the field of composition studies, and maybe provide beginning writers with another resource.

In the course of working on this thesis I had the opportunity to share ideas and get feedback from members of my committee and others invested in the field of composition studies. There were many other issues and questions raised in reference to the writing life books which deserve to be paid more attention. One which I have already acknowledged is that of perspective. I wrote this thesis from the perspective of a writer and a student of composition studies. There is much to be gained from the perspective of others, including teachers, scholars, and the specialists of other fields. There are very basic questions which I may have assumed answers for that others may want to pursue: is everyone creative, or is this another version of the American dream? Do the writing life books romanticize writing and writing as an individual as a part of this dream? Are the books written to a specific audience, perhaps a specific class of people with the time and economic resources to pursue writing? What kind of assumptions do the books, perhaps unconsciously, make about their audience? What does the existence of these books as a social phenomenon and their increasing popularity say about our culture? What niche does the pop psychological aspect, or the spiritual aspect of these books fill? From what place of authority are the authors really speaking? These are just some of the more topical questions that were raised. It is my hope that this thesis will provide the basic research to lead others into pursuing these questions. There is still so much to be learned.

* * * * *

I began this thesis writing in a personal voice to show the role the writing life books played in my own development as a writer. To reach a conclusion I would like to return once again to the personal. I have never hidden my deep enthusiasm for the writing life books - what they have meant to my development as a writer and how I think they are helping other developing writers. I also am practical. I do not follow all of their advice. I do not write every day. I do not go for walks and write about every raindrop on every

green blade of grass. I am not overly philosophical about the writing life. I am simply moved to write because so many writers have moved me. My desire to write is borne out of my own love of reading. Sometimes I turn to the writing life books and never turn to a piece of paper. That doesn't matter. Like all books they contain words, information, stories, and each reader will take something different from them - what they *need*.

Sometimes I need a writing exercise, sometimes I need to identify with someone who has the dreary unproductive days all writers have. I call myself writer now, in part, because of the writing life books. They have taught me practical advice and passed on a little wisdom. Because they are reaching such a large and varied audience I can only continue to try to bring attention to these books.

To present these books, I felt I had to base this thesis in the personal - in my personal experiences of them to demonstrate their possible importance to a larger audience. My perspective was a very personal and descriptive one based both within, but primarily outside, of the the academy. A multiplicity of perspectives on these books can only provide more information. The writing life books, which may or may not be limited by their very structure to proliferation during certain periods of time, exist as social, political artifacts from which much can be learned. Every perspective, by its nature, defines certain issues and agendas. For example, the writing life books all assume that writers will want to focus on a specific type of writing: creative. An analysis written through the eyes of the academy would be very different from my own, as well as from an analysis of the books as a social phenomenon. Whether there is final agreement on the value of the writing life books is a moot point - the point is that there should be research and analysis because of the large and varied audience these books are speaking to. As Anne Gere reminds us, there is an entire population of people out there learning to write. It is our job to find out who and what is affecting their writing development and how.

* * * * *

I said earlier that every act of writing was potentially creative, and what I meant by that is this: whether the basics for a to-do list or the first chapter of the great American novel, every act of writing includes words, phrases and sentences that must be thought out and crafted in order to create meaning. The choices writers make is all a part of wordcraft and the process of writing. I have always believed in mixing, or blending, different kinds of writing, and that is what I have tried to do within this thesis. I once wrote an essay for class entitled, "Poetry and Science: Two Sides of the Same Coin," in response to an essay I read by Linda Hogan called "Hearing Voices." Hogan writes about Barbara McClintock being awarded a Nobel Prize for her work on gene transposition in corn plants - admittedly "hard" science. She said that she made her discoveries by listening to what the corn spoke to her, by respecting the life of the corn and "letting it come." (77) Hogan was impressed that McClintock chose poetic terms to describe the "hard" science of her work - and so was I. Hogan is quick to say, "But don't misunderstand me. I am not just a dreamer. I am also the practical type" (79). She simply wants to point out that strong, personal, beautiful writing can exist in any arena - it can be used in the political and the scientific. "I want my writing to be that simple, that clear and direct. Likewise, I feel it is not enough for me just to write, but I need to live it, to be informed by it. I have found over the years that my work has more courage than I do. It has more wisdom. It teaches me, leads me places I never knew I was heading. And it is about a new way of living, of being in the world" (79). Hogan puts so beautifully into words what has been a common theme throughout this thesis - the connection between writing and life.

Through the long process of writing this thesis there were many things I turned to for support and encouragement. I had my teachers and fellow students, family and friends, of course, but sitting at home after long hours of work, when even the cats stopped listening to me, I had the writing life books. I found it surprising that after spending so many hours going through them as a researcher - looking for specific things, studying them as objects, and reading them until my eyes blurred - that I could still turn to them as

a writer. They helped sustain me through this writing effort. There were countless times that I flipped through and read quotes that made me laugh or re-energized me. Sometimes I just commiserated with them. As I continued writing I came to realize that while I could justify basing this thesis in the personal and move towards the academic, I was also emulating the style of the writing life books. My thesis, the most academically-centered work I have ever attempted, is essentially the same blurring of genres; it is a blending of personal and practical, scholarship and anecdote. I am also attempting to reach a wider audience in order to call attention to these books. That the writing life books have sustained me through personal writing efforts and academic, only re-affirms to me that they have proven themselves more than useful and more than worthy of further research. It is my sincere wish that my work serve as an invitation for further participation in the writing life and further study of the writing life books.

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APPENDIX

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