

Untitled Scrawl

By

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I have no idea what to write about. Seriously. I have been asked to write about writing and I am not at all certain that I know anything about writing. I write. I do. But what do I know about it? My thoughts come out on paper. Sometimes they are of interest to others. Most often, they are never read by others so I have no way of knowing. In terms of structure, I spend most of my time resenting it. I use one word sentences. Really. I use way too many commas, and in the wrong places, as you will learn. I am not particularly fond of English because it is too rigid when it comes to putting it on paper. Tom Stoppard's character of the Actor in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* said it best: "You must remember that we are tied to a language which makes up for in obscurity what it lacks in style."

Not at all like those wonderful far eastern languages where one may concoct structure at one's whim. If one spoke any of them. This one does not. But it's a beautiful dream. Someday I might create an entire novel from a singular word. It's finding the right word that is the difficulty.

So, yeah. Anyway. I like to write the way I speak because my words are surrounded not by an endless blank white vacuum but by a human with some experience and quirks and an awareness that the way that things are said is just as important as what is being said. I try to put that into my writing. Okay. That's enough about writing.

Let's talk about reading. Which, I suppose, is like writing backwards! Or in the future! Think about that. It's not true, but it sounded really cool. I love to read! I do so voraciously. I can readily bookend (no pun intended) periods of my life by the books that changed me. I am a product of those books and nothing and no one else, not my father, my mother, my friends or mine enemies had more to do with the manufacturing of the person sitting at this blackened keyboard trying to peck out seven hundred and fifty words for Niki Ballantine than did the books I have read repeatedly. Do I even know seven hundred and fifty words? 750?! I must repeat myself. Be redundant. Use many of them over and over again.

So that is why I want to talk about reading. Not all of us write for pleasure, but many more of us read. In my mind's eye I still recall sitting at the tiny pinewood desk my father made for me and reading book upon book while leaning with my left arm against the faded gunpowder Remington Rand typewriter. My memories are generally in black and white but the lustrous red of the ribbon was like blood pulsing through that machine. I could almost hear the words being pecked while poring over my most recent tome. But I digress.

Early on, there was Poe, and he has stayed with me forever. I like writers that cry against the heavens and Poe did so with a rage and a rhythm that many decry--piss off, Harold

Bloom!--but few have even attempted to replicate. As Allan Ginsberg said, "It all goes back to Poe." Then there was Ginsberg and Kerouak and Bukowski and their whimsical ways appealing to the anarchist in me. I still long to destroy civilization but only after I finish my latte. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* gave me the freedom to lie on a bed and think about nothingness. Peter Straub's *Shadowland*, which I read seven times in high school, made me believe in magic, and the works of HP Lovecraft taught me to fear it. My favorite of his stories is *The Rats in the Walls*. That's all you need to know. The very title is horrific. RATS!! IN YOUR WALLS! Now just try to sleep.

I discovered women writers before I discovered women. Shirley Jackson was the original alcoholic pill-laden maternal figure for me and her *Haunting of Hill House* has the best opening and closing passage in all of literature. Vicki Covington's *Night Ride Home* made me care about other people. No small feat, that. Jeanette Winterson made me wonder about the psyche of women and, ultimately, to understand I had no chance in understanding but that it was all in the effort. And Ann Coulter constantly reaffirms the looming threat of free speech. Joke, there. No, really, her hair is naturally that color. And her fangs that sharp. [See Lovecraft, HP. bg]

Two books stand alone, finally, in my literary DNA, one that formed me more than any other and one that has impacted me greatly in the past few days. The latter is *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. I won't say too much about this except that I have read it three times in the last month and every time I try to move on to another book it calls me back in, taunting me with its' proximity on my nightstand. I feel brutalized, horrified and uplifted at every sitting. It is simple and elegant and biblical in force. It is the harshest, kindest, ugliest, most beautiful book I think I have ever read. Read it. You probably won't agree, but read it and then tell me you don't.

The second is a play: *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmund Rostand. Yes, it's the finest romantic story of all time, the quintessence of unrequited love, much more so than *Romeo and Juliet*. But more importantly, Cyrano made me believe in human potential, in my own potential, in ideals, in the unlikely possibility of greatness. Outwardly callous and inwardly timid, Cyrano was the embodiment of my fragile yet armored psyche and his personal ideal is one that I adopted and for which I still strive. When asked what he is trying to achieve through his romantic displays and self-deprivation, Cyrano replies simply: To be admirable in all things. He doesn't say to be the best, to dominate others, to separate himself from the pack. Only to do his best and have others admire his efforts. Cyrano was an avid reader himself.

In searching through books I found tiny little pieces of myself. You might find some of yours as well.

And in all things, be admirable.