

1994

Why I Write

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Recommended Citation

Gooneratne, Yasmine, Why I Write, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/34>

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Why I Write

Abstract

Primarily, I'd say that I write because I enjoy it. The sheer act of writing is a source of great pleasure for me. In the process of writing poetry or fiction I begin to discover what my deepest concerns and desires are, and I have found to my delight (like a secret gift built into the medium I use) that I have the technical ability to explore them. This is not to say that I write in order to 'express myself' because, frankly, my way of life gives me plenty of opportunity to do that. When I come across 'self-expression' in a book or an article- it's easy to recognize, it's the literary equivalent of posturing before a mirror - it's an instant turn-off as far as I am concerned. I become extremely suspicious of the author's pretensions and motives. The book becomes boring. I abandon it.



Yasmine Gooneratne holds a Personal Chair in English at Macquarie University, New South Wales, and is also Foundation Director of the University's Postcolonial Literatures and Language Research Centre. Her books include *Jane Austen* (Cambridge UP, 1970), *Alexander Pope* (Cambridge UP, 1976), *Silence, Exile and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (Orient Longman, 1983), *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* (C. Hurst & Co., London and New York, 1986); and, most recently, a novel, *A Change of Skies* (Picador Australia, 1991), winner of the Marjorie Barnard Award for Fiction in 1992.

YASMINE GOONERATNE

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By reacting in this way, I've left a fair number of bestselling, even prize-winning books half-read and therefore unreviewed and undiscussed. My conscience, I should add, is perfectly clear on this matter. Life, as I see it, isn't long enough to allow one to read all the good books there are in the world, so why waste precious time reading bad ones?

A second reason for writing is, that I hope one day to create work that will do for its readers what my favourite books do for me: become life-companions, and be frequently re-read by them for the sheer pleasure of it. A third reason is, that as a teacher and lover of the English language, I want to explore its creative possibilities as fully as I can.

The writer who works in English, as I do, has what is potentially one of the largest audiences in the world. I am concerned to see my medium kept as healthy, clean and vigorous as possible. However, a language is shaped by the history of the people who use it, and over many centuries of colonial and patriarchal exploitation the English language has become stained by a vocabulary of denigration unmatched, probably, by any other in the world. Writers who oppose racism or sexism face the intellectual challenge of cleaning up a contaminated medium and, until it is cleaned up, of finding ways to let the spirit of literature breathe within that contamination.

In my homeland, Sri Lanka (as in India), the art of composition is still believed to be a gift of the goddess Sarasvati. In ancient Greece nine Muses were believed to preside over the arts. The old gods may be thought to have lost their power to influence contemporary life, but any one who has had the good fortune to compose an original poem must

have some inkling of what it means to be touched, however fleetingly, by forces that are beyond explanation, a power that our ancestors would have called 'inspiration'.

We have different ways today of explaining the process of composition, we might say our writing springs from the memory or the imagination. I have heard some writers describe the moment when imagination takes over from logic and the words flow free as being 'on a roll', of being in 'free fall', or in 'full flight'. But in the end, I think, the experience is the same as it was in the ancient world. There comes a moment when thought and feeling fuse, when memory and the imagination work in harmony, when all five senses are alive and singing, and all of this comes together, flowing through our pens or our fingers on to paper or a computer screen.

There are few moments to match it, I imagine, outside religious or sexual ecstasy. Maybe some active individuals approach it when they are abseiling, hitting a six, winning Olympic gold or climbing Mount Everest. Writing, however, gives you more than a medal or a memory, it results in something permanent, words on the page. In that moment of 'free fall' writing, a writer can transcend what had been previously thought to be his/her capabilities or limitations, can 'snatch [as the poet Pope put it in his *Essay on Criticism*] a grace beyond the reach of art'. It is probably the desire, once we have experienced it, to recapture that moment of supreme achievement, that keeps authors such as myself chained to the pen or the computer screen endlessly working towards the moment when diligent labour turns into enchanted flight.