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Why I Write

Bonnie Burnard

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Why I Write

Abstract

I am guilty of allowing myself to become distracted by issues about which I can do very little. The foremost of these issues is practical: the inability to make much money as a Canadian short story writer. Tied directly to this is the extraordinary amount of quiet time I need in order to write anything which holds my interest. By quiet time, I mean the kind of time where, for days and nights running, the world of the imagination takes hold. I would not want (would be afraid of) a life filled with this kind of time, but I do need substantial chunks of it to get to the place where I can make a piece of fiction. All of this is further complicated by a middle class determination to raise my children well (to accommodate their potential, creative and other) and to live in something other than squalor. In short, I want it all. I want enough money to service my middle class family needs and to free my imagination to write, but I need a full time job to get it; a full time job precludes writing. If I were young and beautiful I would marry for money. If I could water down my own puritanical literary code, I would write potboilers full of greed, lust and violence to subsidize the work I care about. The romantic concept of artistic struggle is pretty much lost on me.



Bonnie Burnard grew up in Southwestern Ontario. She has lived in Northern Ontario and British Columbia and moved to Saskatchewan in 1974, where she now lives with her teen-aged children.

Her first collection of short stories, *Women of Influence*, received the Commonwealth Best First Book Award in 1989. Recent publications include a story in the anthology *Soho Square 111*, published by Bloomsbury, edited by Alberto Manguel and in *Canadian Short Stories*, published by Oxford, edited by Robert Weaver. She was the editor of *Old Dance*, a collection of love stories, published in 1986 by Coteau Books. One of the stories from *Women of Influence*, 'Music Lessons', was adapted by the writer and televised on the C.B.C. She is one of ten Saskatchewan writers profiled in the video series *Through The Eyes of a Writer*, produced by Gordon McLennan and has been an active supporter of literary art in Saskatchewan.

BONNIE BURNARD

Why I Write

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The foremost of these issues is practical: the inability to make much money as a Canadian short story writer. Tied directly to this is the extraordinary amount of quiet time I need in order to write anything which holds my interest. By quiet time, I mean the kind of time where, for days and nights running, the world of the imagination takes hold. I would not want (would be afraid of) a life filled with this kind of time, but I do need substantial chunks of it to get to the place where I can make a piece of fiction. All of this is further complicated by a middle class determination to raise my children well (to accommodate their potential, creative and other) and to live in something other than squalor. In short, I want it all. I want enough money to service my middle class family needs and to free my imagination to write, but I need a full time job to get it; a full time job precludes writing. If I were young and beautiful I would marry for money. If I could water down my own puritanical literary code, I would write potboilers full of greed, lust and violence to subsidize the work I care about. The romantic concept of artistic struggle is pretty much lost on me.

In a country like Canada, I think it is absurd to tie an imaginative writer's income to royalties. Our most esteemed poets sell very few books (500 to 1000 is usual) and therefore make little income (\$500 to \$1000). Things are only marginally better for short story writers and novelists. Artists (and I take imaginative writers to be artists) are shackled to a free enterprise market system. Literary publishers, subsidized by government grants and still very conscious of the recent time when there were few Canadian literary books published, have limited their dreams to the publication of more and more books rather than to the possibility of offering decent payment (which could be as easily subsidized as the managing editor's salary) to the writers (literary artists) they do publish. There is a Writer's Union in Canada, but its membership is a mix of everyone who writes books; the Union is not likely to split its membership over this issue.

Grants for artists are available here in Canada, both from the federal government and the provincial government. We line up and go after this money, armed with our publication records and with the support of people interested in our work. Juries of peers decide who, among thirty,

forty, or fifty worthy candidates, will get the ten grants. I've been lucky sometimes, but there is no reason to believe this will last; every time I get a grant, someone else whose work is equally good doesn't.

All of this is pretty much useless prattle. I don't expect change. And I am hampered by guilt: it's all relative. At least I have the freedom to imagine what I want to imagine and there are publishers. At least I have three healthy kids. People elsewhere are not so lucky. But the freedom to do something allows only possibility. Time and energy get the writing done. (Could this all be related to my being a single mother?)

The qualms about the actual writing are much more illusive. They hang around the periphery, gumming up the imaginative works.

I have been thoroughly conditioned by my time and place to be dazzled by the intellectually tough, the sophisticated and the worldly, by black humour and nihilistic vision; to be repelled by the sweet, the hopeful, the sentimental slop which is the usual alternative to the aforementioned. And yet.

If the short story is about memory, and I think at its best it often is, then I am at cross purposes with myself. What I remember (from just last week, for instance), what moves me, what remains locked into my psyche, are small, sweet bits of hope, of strength or simple tenacity. Who the hell wants to read a book of stories full of small, sweet bits of hope, strength and tenacity? The bits have to be buried (as they are in reality), made almost invisible in a mundane and merciless chaos. It ain't easy.

I want to give evidence of what I suspect (need?) to be true, without trashing it. It is like wanting to touch something beautiful, knowing you could foul it with the touch.