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Why I Write

Isabel Huggan

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Why I Write

Abstract

I started with stones. Smooth stones heavy to my eight-year-old hands and shining black with the cold water of Lake Huron still dripping through my fingers. Wet, the stones gave up their fossil-secrets more easily- back home dry and dull, in bushel baskets stacked behind the furnace, they mumbled and murmured, mysterious and vague, until I spit on them and brought to life those ancient fragments of shell and half-remembered fern. Rubbing my saliva on the stones I would feel sad, for although I loved keeping these stone treasures I didn't know what to do with them. I simply needed to have them.

ISABEL HUGGAN



Isabel Huggan was born in Ontario, Canada, in 1943, and spent her life in that province until 1987 when, with her husband and daughter, she moved to Kenya, and then to France, where she now lives. A writer of short stories whose work appears in magazines and anthologies, and a teacher of creative writing, Isabel also writes occasional book reviews and a regular newspaper column. She happily confesses that her daughter has *never* been a Brownie. *The Elizabeth Stories* was published in 1984 in Canada by Oberon Press, and in 1987 in the USA and Britain by Viking-Penguin, and in 1990 in France (as *L'Echappée Belle*) by Gallimard. It won the 1987 Book-of-the-Month Club 'New Voice' Award. Her most recent book is *You Never Know*, published in Canada by Alfred A. Knopf and in the USA by Viking-Penguin.

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I started with stones. Smooth stones heavy to my eight-year-old hands and shining black with the cold water of Lake Huron still dripping through my fingers. Wet, the stones gave up their fossil-secrets more easily – back home dry and dull, in bushel baskets stacked behind the furnace, they mumbled and murmured, mysterious and vague, until I spit on them and brought to life those ancient fragments of shell and half-remembered fern. Rubbing my saliva on the stones I would feel sad, for although I loved keeping these stone treasures I didn't know what to do with them. I simply needed to have them.

Real fossils are time's shorthand, abbreviated geology, the world contracted, something to hold in the hand – compact, concrete. Memory compounded, knowledge condensed into this – the texture of wet stone beneath the tracing fingers of a child.

Around the time I was so enamoured of fossils, some adult friend of the family gave me another rock, a small chunk of iron pyrite. Fool's gold. I am holding it now and it sits like a dense gleaming toad in my palm, its jagged metallic surfaces catching the light – but it doesn't shine like real gold, does it? (Me, innocent, worrying I might be taken for a fool by all that glitters.)

Now, no longer naive but still sifting through words to find the real ones, on the lookout for those which seem, even for a moment, like something else. Corners of my brains stacked with baskets of words, treasures to be lingered over and examined, lessons to be learned.

The face of a stranger in an underground train passing mine in the station, the flash of what? who? it could have been, it might well be ... the beginning of a story not true until it's written, not real until it's read. Grasping the quick moments, making them into something else more lasting...

I have always been a loyal sentry and merchant of nostalgia, setting up my souvenir stall on the road to the wharf by the River Styx. 'Here now, madam, a little something to take with you? A line of poetry smooth as a pebble, a phrase bright as an insect's wing, a sweet clause shed as easily as a snakeskin in the grass. Embrace my words, madam, and keep them, even as you go into the final darkness. You cannot take your fossils, you cannot take your jewels ... but read my pages before you get in the boat

