2018

Writing, Motivation and Your Work in Progress: Catherine Cole on writing motivation and finding discipline in a busy world

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Publication Details
C. Cole 2018 Writing, Motivation and Your Work in Progress: Catherine Cole on writing motivation and finding discipline in a busy world The Writers Bloc https://thewritersbloc.net/writing-motivation-and-your-work-progress

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Keywords
writing, cole, world, catherine, busy, progress:, work, your, motivation, writing, discipline, finding

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

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25Jan18

Getting motivated to write

Every writer I know has their own way of approaching their writing projects. Writers’ sites such as Aerogramme Writers Studio (http://aerogrammestudio.com/) (Editors note: or Writers Bloc’s Bloc Boost (https://thewritersbloc.net/shop)), a must for writers who want to be kept up to date with the latest news about competitions, residencies and calls for work, are full of articles by leading writers, including recent advice from Anne Rice, Joss Whedon, Joanne Harris and A.L. Kennedy. They talk about their motivation, the ambience of their study or writing space, their way of triggering a new day’s writing, the prompts they use, such as photos or newspaper articles.

I don’t usually need much to keep me motivated. I always have a couple of projects on the boil, in part due to the nature of my job as an academic. I write fiction but also need to research and write academic articles. While the two styles of writing are vastly different, each keeps the other focussed. Moving between them sometimes becomes a form of escape when motivation on the other flag is low. At the moment I’m writing a non fiction work about migration and home, and also plotting a political thriller about a journalist. What I do struggle with is the intrusion of work commitments. Because I work full time I need to find my time and writing spaces as best I can. I have an office and a fair bit of flexibility in my working hours, so for me it’s more a case of not letting the day intrude too much on my plans. Motivation is never a problem, it’s more trying to keep all the daily chores out of my space. Email, in particular, is extremely pernicious.
The daily discipline of writing

Like many writers I take inspiration from my favourite writers. I like Hemingway’s practice of writing a sentence at the end of each day’s work that will springboard him into the next. It always interested me that the Australian writer, Mandy Sayer, wrote in bed for hours before entering her everyday life. As for me, well, I generally schedule set hours or times to write. I close the door and turn off the email. I always carry a notepad and pencil with me and have found that sometimes a few snatched minutes in a café or on a bus is as productive as a longer, more scheduled session. The best tip is to always be prepared and to take advantage of every opportunity. If the writing day doesn’t pan out as you hoped, finish it with a sentence or some dot points so you feel a sense of achievement even if you didn’t reach your proposed word count.

Steps to keep you writing

Ideas always keep me writing. Sometimes they take the form of a piece of prose or a poem, something short and rhythmic that holds potential in it. You see so much that is horrific on the TV or in newspapers and it’s always the human angle of these events that offers inspiration. The ways in which we treat asylum seekers has concerned me for a long time and this has found its way into my recent collection of short stories, Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark (https://uwap.uwa.edu.au/products/seabirds-crying-in-the-harbour-dark). My crime novels were inspired in part by my experiences in the trade union movement. My memoir about AD Hope was triggered by an internet search when I discovered that my letters to him were stored in the National Library in Canberra. Each book has a diverse entry point, all of them offering inspiration and ideas. I have been influenced in this way with all my writing and have also been blessed with international writers residencies in Australia, Vietnam, France and China. The residencies have taken me to different cultures and places and this provided distance from the usual rituals of home. I met writers from a range of cultural backgrounds too, and we discussed our ways of writing. I also was very privileged, in Paris, for example, to spend time in museums and archives, trawling through colonial resources and meeting with people who lived in French colonial Vietnam.
I also collect stories, keeping them in a file. I have bookcases full of old notebooks and sketches that I take down and thumb through. I have a forensic memory for overheard conversations and these often visit when I need a character to do or say something in a particular way. In Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark, I drew on experiences with friends and colleagues, particularly dinner party conversations and political debate. Contemporary Australian politics such as those relating to refugees or the marriage equality vote are important to catch in a creative way - through short stories like those in Seabirds, that attach themselves to the deeply personal elements of these politics. I have always been an advocate for human rights so I can’t imagine I’ll ever stop writing about these issues while the world is so unjust.

It’s a great thing to be a writer and I’m proud of my work. Like so many writers I was a child who loved reading and who wanted to recreate the excitement of my reading by making stories and books of my own. Writing is a tough occupation too. It takes stamina and drive and skill. Being organised, thinking through ideas, doing your best to realise them, toughing out rejection or less than enthusiastic reviews or disappointing sales are balanced by the support of writing peers and grants and residencies. If you want to write be prepared for a hard slog and a commitment to your own lifetime writing goals. A day job also helps. Writing doesn’t offer the best of financial rewards and anyway, workplaces are great sources of inspiration - you find all sorts of characters in them.

Tags: 
Building Blocks (/tags/building-blocks)

Catherine Cole

Catherine Cole is a writer and academic who has published novels, memoir, poetry and short fiction as well as critical and nonfiction work. Her work has been published in Australia and internationally and broadcast on BBC Radio. She has been awarded writers residencies in France, China, Vietnam and Australia and has mentored or supervised the writing of some of Australia’s leading writers. Her latest book is Seabirds Crying in the Harbour Dark (UWA Publishing, 2017).
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