

NINETEEN

THE PLACE TO GO IN YOUR HEAD: EDITING THE “TELLING MY STORY” ANTHOLOGY

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Many successful writers seek isolation. The creative-writing MFA program at the University of Wyoming is sold as “time to write,” that is, time free from any other occupation. Writers can also apply to residencies in remote locations around the country. Some of these are part of an estate – a cottage on a sprawling acreage or a cabin up some woodsy hill. If you win a place, you can strand yourself there for a summer or a half-year and write.

Our program offers a short-term residency at a grasslands research facility. Most who apply go during the winter break. When our director emailed to remind us to reserve a slot, he said that you could get a lot done staring out at the icebound prairie. To fill a blank page you must surround yourself with blank space.

Writers who can’t go away for months at a time must cordon off hours or days free of distraction. Advice to aspiring writers is stern this way: separate yourself from temptation, plant yourself at your desk, draw up a plan and stick to it. Most recommendations for a durable routine have to do with restriction and retraining – lock the door, shut the browser window, cut off the phones. Establish a time and a time limit, even if it’s just fifteen minutes a day.

In “The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life,” Ann Patchett the novelist tells aspirants to treat writing like a regular detention: “Sit for two hours a day. During that time, you don’t have to write, but you must stay at your desk without distraction: no phone, no Internet, no books. Sit still quietly. Do this for a week, for two weeks. Do not nap or check your email.

Keep on sitting for as long as you remain interested in writing. Sooner or later you will write because you will not longer be able to stand not writing, or you'll get up and turn on the television on because you will no longer be able to stand all the sitting. Either way, you'll have your answer." To write, you must break yourself to writing.

In another essay on the writing life, "Do Not Disturb," she imagines prison as a place of harsh but productive seclusion: "Prison: dreadful, horrifying, surely, but the phone would never ring, and couldn't you get an awful lot of writing done?" She's kidding, and I'm not quoting her in order to scold her for her insensitivity – but for writing, for Ann, monasticism is best.

I was part of a group of MFA students who worked with the "Telling My Story" class remotely. I had been interested in participating in the class itself, but couldn't scrape together the funds. The tuition credit offered as part of our MFA scholarship package didn't extend over the summer session, and my own tuition credit evaporated when I graduated in May.

So I and the rest of the MFA cohort wound up working from a distance, as editors. I never met any of the women in the class except through the essays they created during the three weeks the workshop lasted. I didn't hear the initial conversations they had with the university students paired with them as readers and interviewers. I didn't see any process documents alongside drafts, or read freewrites, or hear class discussions. We didn't see the women's work directly, either – the women wrote on paper, each with a university student as amanuensis, and their longhand drafts were removed to the hotel each night where they were transcribed and sent to us.

The critiques we sent back were similar to the ones we exchange in our workshops. We used a letter format, opened with "Dear" or "Hello." What we noticed, what we liked, what we thought could be expanded. The women had three weeks to write and polish fifteen pages, so most of our feedback was about adding more descriptive detail, more context, the next segment of the story. One of my writers needed connective tissue between one

vivid passage and another; one began with an action sequence but didn't reveal the end of the story until the final draft.

The university students who did attend the workshop in person said that the discussions were lively, always engaging. They spoke about the eloquence of the women, about their passion for their work. They mentioned their gratitude – to the students who visited them, but as well to each of us who were involved, to me.

Implicit in “time to write” – and in all this advice to cut the outside lines and clear the calendar – is the idea that writing is a discipline, not a treat. In order to write, you have to spend hours and days coaxing your mind to write. So many things compare favorably to writing.

Prison is not a retreat into solitude. Even segregated housing units – solitary cells – are a honeycomb of trapped noise. Prison is not a place of privacy or serenity – prisoners are under surveillance. Prison isn't a place of rest. Most prisoners spend their time at work, and many prisons include the expectation of work in their accounts and sparse amenities. Prison is a mill for grinding tedium out of the day.

How do you write in prison? What does it mean to write in a place that does not intend you to have space, peace, solitude, or privacy?

How do you offer writing advice to women in prison? *Sit for two hours a day....*

The women in the class did not need to be pushed to write. Writing wasn't a chore, and so they didn't have any need for this elaborate structure to compel adherence to a writing routine.

The work that I wound up doing wasn't much different from the work I would do for my undergraduate students taking their first college-level writing course, or for the aspiring creative writers in my MFA workshops.

The women in the class were natural storytellers – they knew how to put events in order such that readers would want to follow the thread of the narrative. They were always present in their stories, and frank about their emotions and actions. Their

descriptive language was rich without being pretentious. They didn't try as hard as we sometimes do to use a word that had never been used in precisely that way before.

There's no reason the women in this class shouldn't be good writers. They're all smart and self-possessed. They're proud and resilient. They're all good at making jokes and conversation.

As a discipline, writing can be raised through many levels of contemplation. As a talent, it's sustained banter with someone whose face you can't see. The women in the class made an extraordinary dialogue through which to cultivate their drafts. The women are wonderful to talk to.

They are also highly motivated. They are passionate about their stories, and just as passionate about refining their essays until they ready for publication.

They're also stuck. The doors are shut, the outside lines are cut, the afternoon stretches out unimpeded. Their time is laid out for them, and the blank space surrounds them and their work.

Most of their essays focus on the time before conviction and sentencing, but a few of them talk about the dimensions of life in prison. Prison silences inmates. Visits and phone calls with the people they love are restricted. In wintertime, season of blank pages, the roads are sometimes impassable so that visits are stopped altogether.

The women have limited access to programs like our workshop even within the narrow seam of education and rehabilitation programs, and limited access to materials. Their library is small, and donors cannot give hardcover books for fear the women might use them to cosh each other.

At least one woman in the class is serving multiple life sentences. Her life, then, has been resigned to time.

These women are not sent to prison so that they may be heard. They have not gone away so that they can produce, in silence and peace, some masterwork of insight and lyric beauty. The myriad symbolic and effective constraints bound up in incarceration are not meant to free their minds for some more poetic endeavor. Their voices have been culled.

Taking part in this workshop meant helping to build a platform for these women – to facilitate their work and promote their writing. I'm not a writer who prefers solitude or isolation, but I am a writer granted the privilege of select time – two pleasant years' worth in a setting designed to teach me to value my talent and my vocation. As an editor for this anthology, I have had the opportunity to transmit some of that recognition to a talented, dedicated group of authors. Like I wrote at the end of each critique letter, I hope that my contribution has been helpful.