

What a Creative Memoir

The other day I went to the bookstore to look for a book on writing. Nagging parents, pushy counselors, and expectant teachers have been surrounding me with talk about scholarships and grants and synonyms for scholarships, and I have to write a memoir that is totally not an essay and I have no idea what to do. My thirteen years of public school and one very special year of private kindergarten squandered! I did some quick calculations and I realized that I have spent at least an hour sitting in English classes learning the exact form and structure of “the perfect paper” - how to get graders to appreciate my mastery of the England language.

And I was taught; I know all about allegories, anastrophes, and alliteration. I also know how to string these things together to discuss my opinions on the meaning of Hamlet’s monologues and who the *real* monster is.

Or do I?!

The aforementioned not-essay and my inability to write it has me pondering about how much I really have been taught, or educated, if you will, about writing. Any two-bit AP student worth her crust knows how to get graders to pass her. But I don’t think that I’ve ever learned how to write something that I mean.

As I perused the shelves of the store I began wondering how someone could become so good at writing that they’re able to write a book about it. Did they read a book? Who taught that person? What qualifies someone to write a book on writing? It’s questions like this that make me take so long to write non-essays.

Why wasn’t I taught how to be creative? I took a creative writing class that consisted of a semester of writing a page in a journal everyday and analyzing other people’s writing. I guess the idea was that seeing similarities in good stories was supposed to inspire us, and they say that the best way to be a good writer is to read good writers. I certainly learned about implementing anecdotes and how good James Joyce was at not getting to the point, but I don’t think I learned how to make something beautiful or impactful. Isn’t that how good writing is supposed to be?

I understand that education is supposed to prepare students for the real world, and that the real world requires real skills like counting and reading. Not to be a typical teenaged nihilist, but few professions require creativity. But this isn’t an essay.

“Do you need any help?”

“No thanks, just looking.”

“Okay because you’ve been staring at the same shelf for about five minutes.”

“Yes.”

The saleswoman walked away, leaving me again with my thoughts.

I learned how to play the guitar. I taught myself for a few months and figured out the basics and then I began going to a teacher. I have learned every scale, music theory, dozens of chords and hundreds of songs over the past six years. I would say that I’m pretty good. But I wouldn’t call myself a musician. To me, a musician is the same as a writer in that they produce marvelous creations using nothing but sounds and scribbles on paper. Aside from being able to string a few chords together to make a parody version of *Achy Breaky Heart* (*Screechy Squeaky Cart*, about the pain that comes from pushing a broken shopping cart) I wouldn’t call any of my creations marvelous.

But I know how to play! I was taught! Educated! But if I really *learned* it, shouldn’t I know how to make something as great as one of Beethoven’s symphonies or the original *Achy Breaky Heart*? Shouldn’t I be able to write intelligent, creative essa- I mean, memoirs? Not essays. That’s not creative.

I settle on the book *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott. At the check-out, the cashier remarks that the book taught her a lot.

“That’s good,” I reply. I’m not good at small talk.

I start reading as soon as I get home. In it Lamott gives us the same lessons she gives her own students. She says that the best way to start writing is to plunge in. She suggests writing a story about one’s childhood, so here it goes.

Once upon a time when I was but a wee lass, no more than six, my parents took me to the Land of Disney (Please don’t sue me). It was twilight, and as I was waiting with my guardians to get on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, a passing bird - uhh- *relieved* itself on me. I was mortified, and a nearby pirate laughed at me.

That wasn't creative. It was just a sad fact about my life. I did exactly as I was told, as I was taught, but I don't think I learned anything more about being a good writer. Maybe I should finish the book someday.

What's a little sad to me is that I love learning. I was the weird kid who would be off to the side during recess with my nose in a book, learning the names of every character in every wonderful world the likes of which I can't replicate. I will waste hours that should be dedicated towards school work pouring over Wikipedia articles from every corner of knowledge. But no matter how hard I try, I can't learn how to be creative enough to write an interesting memoir. Maybe it's me. Maybe my life is too boring for memoirs and just lends itself more to essays. Too bad this isn't one.

I put *Bird by Bird* on my nightstand and vowed to continue it soon. I haven't yet. I don't have many flaws, but I would say that I am a bit flighty.

Perhaps some things can't be taught. The intangible things like optimism, kindness, creativity. They can be encouraged, as they certainly have been in my life, and they can even be enforced, depending where you are. But I don't think that any amount of self-help or introspection can truly teach people things they are born without....

No. I don't believe that. That's depressing. I am a creative person, I know that. Just because no one has ever cried beholding my creations doesn't mean I'm not creative. I'm just not great at clearly expressing my thoughts, which is why I prefer essays. Which this is not.