

## Cambridge Library Creative Writing Group

Your journal is one of your most crucial tools as a writer. You can keep your journal in any form- a paper notebook, voice memos, a list on your phone, an online blog, a document on your laptop. Many writers have been journal keepers, from Virginia Woolf, who used to chronicle her daily word counts, to Victor Hugo who reportedly kept his on his knee under the table at dinner parties. Susan Sontag kept copious lists of books to be read, important dates, symphonies and paintings she liked.

The wonderful thing about a journal is that it is not meant to be read by anyone other than yourself (at least in your own lifetime!) It is the place where you can write down bits of dialogue that you overhear, or describe a character who pops into your head. It can be the place where you try and work out what exactly it is you're thinking about, or where you keep track of what you did over the holidays. You can write whatever you like in your journal, and you never have to show it to anyone. Going back to old journals when you are trying to write about a time in your life, or if you're looking for inspiration on what to write about can be a great way to kick start your projects.

From a historical perspective, journals are also a rich source of primary evidence. Museums, historical societies and community history collections will all contain journals in their archives and displays. A person living one hundred years from now might use a journal someone has kept today for a project outlining what life in 2019/2020 was like.

Journals can also be a plot device. Think about novels you might have read in which a contemporary protagonist is connected to a family member, or a person from the past through their journal or diary. Some novels are told completely in the form of journal and diary entries.

Remember that creativity creates creativity. The more you write in your journal, the more ideas will start to come to you. Elizabeth Gilbert in her book *Big Magic* talks about ideas as if they are living things. An idea which is ignored by one writer eventually moves on in search of someone else who might have more time to write it, so if you think of something that you're excited to write about, make sure you write it down, even if it's on a napkin or a receipt that you later stick into your journal.

### Reading recommendations:

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker

*Daddy Long Legs* by Jean Webster

*The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Bronte

*Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks

Inspiration can come from anywhere but as writers, we need to learn to recognise it. J.K. Rowling has said that the idea for Harry Potter came into her head while she was sitting on a train from Manchester to King's Cross Station. Haruki Murakami thinks up his books while exercising. Ransom Riggs started a collection of old, strange photographs and this inspired his book *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*. In her book on creativity, *Big Magic*, Elizabeth Gilbert has a lot to say about the nature of creative ideas. When her partner told her a story about a Brazilian rainforest, she experienced feelings of great excitement:

'I'd experienced these symptoms before, so I knew immediately what was going on. Such an intense emotional and physiological reaction doesn't strike me often, but it happens enough (and is consistent enough with symptoms reported by people all over the world, all through history) that I believe I can confidently call it by its name: inspiration.' (Big Magic, 2015, p.31-34)

However, life got in the way, and Liz was unable to work on the project that excited her so much. Eventually, she says, the idea realised that Liz could not devote her time to it and moved on. She details in her book the way that the idea then sought out another writer who would write it-- that author was Ann Patchett, and the novel was *State of Wonder*.

Whether or not we believe Liz Gilbert's magical story, we can take a few things away from it:

\* Inspiration is not an exact science AND

\* If you do not devote your time and energy to topics that inspire you, that inspiration will fade

So this is where your journal comes in. Write lots and write often, even if it's only snippets.

Where have you found inspiration for your creative writing in the past? Where might you find it in the future?

### **Time to write! Some exercises for you to do at home.**

- Write a diary entry from the point of view either of yourself or from a character in your work in progress, describing the world they or you live in. Think about a day in the life – it could be an ordinary day or an extraordinary day. What might a historian be interested in about this world in one hundred years' time?
- Start a notebook in which you write down your observations. If you prefer not to write out longhand accounts, you might try writing a list of 3 interesting things for each day.
- Choose a news article from a paper or online that sparks your imagination, and use it as the basis of a story.