

BOOK REVIEW

‘Why We Write’ by Meredith Maran

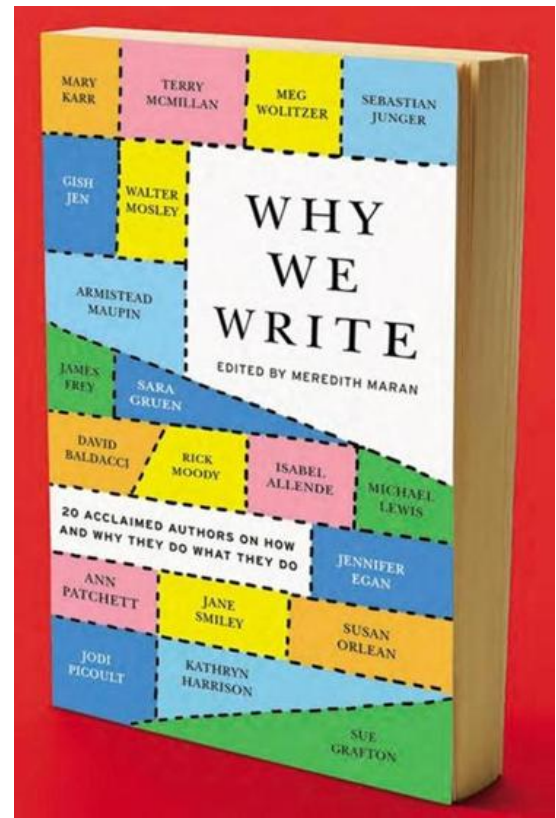
By **Chuck Leddy** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 08, 2013

In “Why We Write,” edited by Meredith Maran, author and Globe contributor, 20 famous writers take us inside their literary worlds to see how the magic of writing takes place and to explain why otherwise sane people would engage in an activity that, Maran argues, “promises only poverty, rejection, and self-doubt.”

First, the mystery of creation. For novelist Isabel Allende, stories begin inside her and then grow onto the page: “Each story is a seed,” she explains, “that starts to grow and grow. . . . When I start writing a book, I have no idea where it’s going.” Like many of the writers here, Allende says she has difficulty separating her real life from the lives of her fictional characters. “I carry the story with me all day, all night, in dreams, all the time,” she says.

Jodi Picoult speaks of hearing her characters’ voices in her head as she’s writing. The novelist from Hanover, N.H., calls this “successful schizophrenia” because “I get paid to hear those voices.” Like Allende, Picoult doesn’t always feel in control: “Characters seem to pick their own paths. They have an agenda that I don’t even know about.”

Ah, yes, but why do it? To begin with, all agree that writing is difficult. George Orwell compared writing a book to “a long bout of some painful illness.”



MEREDITH MARAN

Moreover, while the wages of sin may be death, for writing they are only slightly better, especially at the beginning. Sebastian Junger describes his hardships as a young freelance writer in Boston: “In a decade of writing I might have made five thousand dollars. I learned what it feels like to work and work” for almost no reward.

Memoirist Mary Karr agrees, recalling her days as a young writer in Boston who taught to make ends meet: “For the five years I was teaching in the academic ghetto around Boston [doing stints at Emerson, Tufts, and Harvard], I couldn’t live on my earnings.” Karr believes that anyone writing primarily to make money is delusional.

Journalist Michael Lewis (“Moneyball”) has achieved a level of material success that eludes most writers, but even that comes with a price. Lewis notes that money “changes things.” “When I started, I was paid nothing. . . . Now I’m paid vast sums for the worst crap. That’s a reason to write now that I didn’t have before.” Lewis possesses a unique ability to take complex topics (such as the financial meltdown of 2008) and make them accessible, but while his books may read easily, they’re awfully hard to write, he says.

So why do they do it? Joan Didion says her goal is “to find out what I’m thinking . . . and what it means.” For Allende, the choice is more directly a matter of survival: “I’m unemployable. What else would I do?” Novelist Jennifer Egan writes because it allows her to live a double life “without destroying my marriage.” So intense is Egan’s immersion that “[s]ome-times I forget I have children, which is very strange.”

Mystery master Sue Grafton began writing because of anger during a difficult divorce. As Maran explains, “Grafton found herself fantasizing about murdering, or at least maiming, her soon-to-be ex-husband. . . . [S]he turned those fantasies into a novel.”

You need not be a fan of all of the writers interviewed to enjoy this absorbing look into

WHY WE WRITE: 20 Acclaimed Authors on How and Why They Do What They Do

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the literary life. “Why We Write” is also filled with practical tips on writing, surviving, and thriving for anyone who works with words. My favorite comes from the pragmatic Picoult: “There is no muse. It’s hard work. You can always edit a bad page, but you can’t edit a blank page.” As literary kick-starters go, that one’s tough to top.

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