



Famous authors confess all (okay, a lot) in 'Why We Write'

Like, Michael Lewis' sex drive goes up while he's working on a book

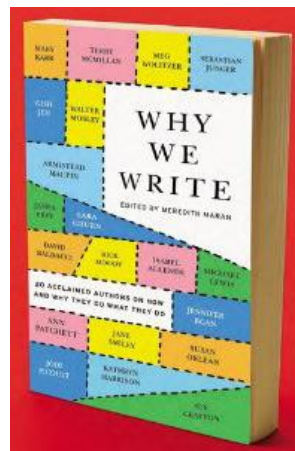
By [Mary Pols](#) 30 minutes ago

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Every author who has left her or his cave to meet readers in public has been asked the question "How do you write," as in, what's your routine, morning or dead of night, in yoga pants or in a business suit, on a laptop or with a Mont Blanc fountain pen on yellow legal pads? But in her new anthology "Why We Write," Meredith Maran, asks an unusual question--Why?--of 20 famous writers ranging from major bestsellers (Jodi Picoult and Michael Lewis) to the prize winning elite (Mary Karr and Jennifer Egan).



This is one of those obvious-but-hard questions and you can see the writers grappling with it. "I don't think about why I'm writing any more than I think about why I'm breathing," Gish Jen writes. "Its absence is bad, just as not breathing would be bad." Many of them mention the altered state writing brings them to, a loss of consciousness that feels good, a sense that time passes without notice because they're that inside their heads. "When it's good," writes "The Perfect Storm" author Sebastian Junger. "It's like going on a date that's going well."

Bing: [More on Michael Lewis](#)

Maran convinced all these famous writers (including Meg Wolitzer, Walter Mosley, Armistead Maupin, Ann Patchett, James Frey and Jane Smiley) to participate because a good cause is involved; part of the books profits go to 826 National, the nonprofit writing centers for young people. Given that these are freebies, there is a surprising amount of genuine soul bearing in this book. "I write because it's the only thing I know that offers the hope of proving myself worthy of love," writes memoir and novel writer Kathryn Harrison. That's...wow, a huge, hard admission.

Other tidbits from "Why We Write."

The nitty gritty on advances (how much an author gets in advance of publication): Terry McMillan got \$7,500 in 1987 for her first novel, "Mama," and five years later, \$250,000 for "Waiting to Exhale."

Who has day jobs, who can afford not to: Rick Moody teaches writing, part-time at NYU, Mary Karr at Syracuse University but for the first time ever can afford to teach only one course a semester (because her son graduated from college and is self-supporting). Isabel Allende, Jennifer Egan and Wolitzer don't have day jobs. Sara Gruen, who wrote "Water for Elephants" in a closet, worked as a technical writer until 2001, now she writes full time. (I'm sure Reese Witherspoon helped with this.)

About the hardest moments in a writer's life: Susan Orlean was several years late with "Rin Tin Tin" and had a young child at home. Yes "The Orchid Thief" was turned into a movie and she had steady work from The New Yorker. But her publisher kept asking where the book was. She writes: "Frankly, that moment was one I'm not sure a lot of men would have experienced: *I can't do this all.*" I don't know how to be a writer with the demands of having a kid." She ended up switching publishers and paying back her advance in order to take more time with "Rin Tin Tin."

Even the big shots have bones to pick and bills to pay: Jodi Picoult is still pissed about director Nick Cassavetes changing the ending of the movie version of "My Sister's Keeper" without telling her and she has every right to be because that was a terrible ending. (Now she demands creative control from studios.) She also considered getting a job at Home Depot to support her family after she had published "multiple books." It ain't easy folks.

Although it does get easier: "When I started, I was paid nothing for what I wrote," Michael Lewis tells Maran. "Now I'm paid vast sums for the worst crap...Someone will call me up and ask me to write three hundred words. I dash off something in the morning, and I get paid a hundred times what I used to be paid for a piece I'd spend weeks on."

Lewis is such a fluid, smart, driven writer that it's not exactly surprising that his sex drive goes up while working on a book. But that he tells Maran that? I like him even more now. Honestly, my usual take on anthologies is that they are good for stashing in the bathroom and placing by the bedside in the guest room. But its the confessional that makes "Why We Write" special. Maran, herself a novelist ("A Theory of Small Earthquakes") and a critic, elicits material from these writers that goes beyond the business of Why and into How, What, Where and When. It gives invaluable insights into both authorial insecurity and flying in the face of that, their certainty about the importance of books. For the curious bystander and the aspiring participant, "Why We Write" is a must have.

Bing: [More on Terry McMillan](#)

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