

## How I Got To Be A Writer by Beulah Gross

It began when I decided to attend a Creative Writing course at one of the local high schools. I was motivated by a need to do something different in the evenings other than watch the box and listen to my husband snore. I wanted to utilise and expand my fast-thrombosing mind before I vegetated totally and took root in my armchair with knitting stuck to my fingers.

I chose the writing course for a number of reasons. As I work full-time, including Saturday mornings, any classes I attended had to be in the evenings. This narrowed the field. I wanted to do something I could do anywhere at any time, so Conversational Japanese, although tempting, did not foot the bill. I certainly didn't want to do anything as mundane and housewifely as specialty cooking or floristry, nor did I want to contort my body doing Yoga or T'ai Chi. I am definitely not the active type and I find exercise, especially the fiercely organised kind, abhorrent. I cannot drum up enthusiasm for the mechanics of motors nor for building houses, although I suppose I should if I want to be one of today's women. However, I think that is going a bit far in self-liberation. I was just about to give up and return to my knitting when I saw the listing for Creative Writing. It filled every criterion. Besides, I'd always wanted to write but somehow never did, telling myself I didn't really have the time. Now I realise it was because I was afraid of exposing a secret, inner core for all the world - and maybe even myself - to see. I enrolled at once.

The first night I was one of twenty-three would-be writers, all eager to learn from the pearls of wisdom we expected to flow from our tutor's experienced and knowing lips. We sat there, pens poised in anticipation over pristine notebooks as he wrote something on the blackboard. Alas, it was only his name but we bent our collective head and dutifully copied it down. At last we had written something; surely fame and fortune would follow with this talisman at the top of the page! Unfortunately, from then on it was down-hill all the way. He couldn't spell and week after week he repeated pointless, rambling anecdotes about people long dead. His idea of the perfect author was Jack London and he had never heard of Frederick Forsyth. He never once brought the correct spectacles so couldn't see to write on the board or read any of our work, his false teeth didn't fit which made his speech unintelligible and he watched the clock frequently and impatiently. He was quite clearly bored with the whole thing.

Each week he gave us homework - a humorous story, a descriptive passage and so on - but the following week he either denied setting it or stated we had misunderstood him. Although he assured us he had earned a good living for some years from writing, he never showed us any of his work nor would he tell us where we could find it. We never did find out what qualifications, if any, he had for teaching anything, let alone writing.

Why did I persevere? Well, for once I had undertaken something for myself and I wanted to finish it. Also, I couldn't believe that the course could be so bad. I truly expected it to improve so kept giving him the benefit of the doubt. After a few weeks I suppose I continued attending just to see if he could get any worse.

However, there were some advantages, the main one being the feedback we students got from one another. Every Tuesday night we took turns reading out loud what we had written during the week and the rest of us would offer comment. We learned by listening to different styles, ideas, opinions and of course, from the criticisms themselves. Our tutor hardly ever commented on anyone's work, partly because he was hard of hearing and partly because he was too busy shuffling little bits of coloured paper in and out of a tatty briefcase. After a couple of lessons most of us ignored him as much as possible without being actually rude, although I was sometimes hard put not to comment loudly on his increasingly bad language.

Each week the group diminished but the remaining members became a happy, nicely integrated unit. We learned to respect one another's work and no one was ever upset or annoyed at criticism, recognising it for what it was - unbiased, helpful and pithy.

Writing to a deadline awoke a long-forgotten self-discipline which in turn stirred up my imagination. I found words leaping off the end of my pen onto every available bit of paper. Characters, complete in every detail, jostled for position in my mind trying to be first to appear on paper. I kept pen and notebook on my night-table and in my handbag and jotted down every little thought and idea immediately. Writing became less of a time-filling, enjoyable pastime and more of a full-time obsession.

My confidence grew. Ideas for stories flowed fast and furiously and I was delighted with my new-found ability. I was sure that I could write and decided that if I could sell something it would be marvellous; if I didn't, what the heck did it matter! I enjoyed writing and that was all that was important.

By the last night of the course the group had dwindled to a hardy seven. We exchanged addresses and telephone numbers, promising to keep in touch with a view to forming our own little writing group, but of course nothing came of this. Perhaps the reason is that everyone guarded their own work more jealously than necessary. In a way I miss the group as the feedback was fun and vital, and belonging to a small, select group was helpful and pleasant.

I wrote furiously for some while and sent stories for consideration to magazines. Then suddenly I ran dry. No words dripped from my pen; no characters begged for recognition and immortality; my typewriter no longer beckoned beguilingly. Was my spark of inspiration dead? Had the fire of my imagination been quenched after such a short, unacknowledged flare? I was worried and despondent and the harder I tried to resuscitate my muse the further it eluded me.

Then this morning it all changed and I'm once again bursting with ideas and enthusiasm. You see, I've just received my first rejection slip, but such a nice, friendly, encouraging one, that I feel revitalised and am spurred on to try even harder.

I am a writer again.



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