



WRITE

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WRITER'S PROMPT /

Writing Alone... Together

BY PHILIP MOSCOVITCH



Monday afternoon, 1:05 p.m. I click the Zoom link in my calendar, just as I've done almost every Monday for the last 14 months. A half-dozen familiar faces in little boxes fill up my screen.

In early 2021, The Writers' Union of Canada launched a series of virtual writing groups across the country, called "Write Now." TWUC set very few rules for the sessions: they had to include a land acknowledgement and at least one silent writing period of 35 minutes or so as well as a social component. The rest was up to the individual hosts.

Some offered open-ended groups, while others were more specific. Georgia Webber, for instance, offered hour-long sessions "for those curious about the comics medium." Neil Aitken hosted "a virtual writing space and social gathering intended for BIPOC writers."

I had an idea for a novel, and joining one of these groups seemed like a good way to see if it might go anywhere. I joined Pam Bustin's group simply because she was offering the most sessions.

Bustin, who is based in Chapleau, Ontario, has experience hosting online sessions through a website called the Oasis. She figured she could easily host one of the TWUC groups too. But she had no idea how it was going to go.

"I didn't know if anyone would be interested, especially when I saw what the other groups were offering," Bustin said in an interview. Each session starts with 10 minutes of guided meditation, as a way for participants to feel grounded. (Bustin always tells people if meditation is not their thing to feel free to just dive into the writing.)

Over time, the sessions have developed their own rhythm: group members check in with each other and talk about what they plan to work on in the session, Bustin leads a meditation and reads a poem, and then there are two 30-minute writing periods separated by a 5-minute break.

The sessions were supposed to end May 31, but Bustin said she was happy to keep showing up every Monday if others wanted to continue. "Everybody was into it, and that made me so happy because it's like, now we're really a group that's all in it together, you know?" she said.

Neil Aitken decided to host a Write Now group because he "knew the value of being able to meet together with other writers, especially other BIPOC writers," he said. In 2019, Aitken returned to Canada

from the U.S., where he did a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing at USC. He said he figured he would "come back home, spend time with my family, and see what the writing life is like in Saskatchewan."

For Aitken, the group represented an opportunity to meet a personal need and be of service to others. "In Canada, we are often extremely scattered across the country. And for me, living in Regina, the odds of me finding a community of other BIPOC writers living locally who want to meet and talk about the professional side of writing — I didn't think that was going to be easy to discover."

Aitken's sessions drew a core of four or five participants, and sometimes got as high as nine. Sessions began with a check-in, maybe discussion of a particular issue someone was facing, and about 40 minutes of independent writing, as well as some social time. The group ran until the summer, when, Aitken, said, it seemed to naturally wind down.

In addition to being a writer and translator, Aitken is also a writing coach. He said one of the valuable aspects of the group was the opportunity for BIPOC writers to speak in confidence. "If something goes awry in the publishing process, or you feel like you're being misread or misinterpreted by an editor, or by a publisher, or an agent, sometimes you don't feel like you have a safe place to talk about that. And having sort of a private space to do that with other people who have likely encountered something very similar is liberating."

Bustin said when she started the group she kept a spreadsheet. "I had everybody's names, and I was checking people off when they showed up. I don't do that anymore because we are who we are, right?"

Philip Moscovitch is the editor of Write, the author of Adventures in Bubbles and Brine, and co-host of the books podcast Dog-eared and Cracked.

WRITING GROUP DOS AND DON'TS

Licia Canton is a veteran writing group host and participant and has led sessions for several organizations including TWUC. Here are her tips for hosting online writing groups:

- Set times and stick to them. She recalls a session in which some participants wanted to keep talking. She recalls saying, "I will mute you all, and we're going back to writing. We can continue this discussion at the end."
- Be responsive to circumstance. If someone is sharing something emotional between writing sessions, that's not a time to bring down the hammer. "There is a human aspect," she says.
- Cap the group size to something manageable.
- Be skilful in ensuring everyone has an opportunity to be heard. "It becomes like a family... We all have that person that does all the talking and that person who doesn't get enough space. So there's some juggling going on."
- Her most important tip? "It should be fun. If it's not fun, stop doing it because you don't want to be having bad dreams about your Zoom participants."



Writers in Peril

BY ANNA PORTER

Saying their names

Tyrranical governments always try to silence writers: writers represent the uniqueness of the individual human voice, and that is what dictators of all kinds wish to erase. They are Job's messengers, escaping from catastrophes to tell us what has happened. They are Dantes, bringing news of the Inferno. Now, more than ever — in an age of burgeoning autocracies, when democratic norms are under attack — these endangered human voices need our help.”

— Margaret Atwood, March 2022

I was born in Hungary, at a time when writers were imprisoned or killed for writing stories that the governing regime thought were not sufficiently submissive or failed to support the approved narrative. My grandfather, a publisher who had already lost his publishing company, was jailed for speaking his mind in old-world coffee houses and being overheard. The charges (yes, there was a trial) were something else, but everyone knew why this charming, somewhat anachronistic older man — Olympics contender, football player, dueller, magician — had been sentenced to 18 months at hard labour.

Obviously, he was not the only one. Renowned poet George Faludy was in the same labour camp. As was George Gabori, whose book *When Evils Were Most Free* recounts his time, first, in

the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, and later at the Recsk labour camp in Hungary. He joked that he viewed himself as an “equal opportunities internee.” Novelist Sandor Marai was forced into exile. He wouldn’t allow his books to be published in Hungary under the Soviet dictatorship. He mourned the loss of his homeland but continued to write in poverty. When the German (2001) and English (2002) language editions of his brilliant novel, *Embers*, became international bestsellers, he was no longer here to enjoy the success. He had killed himself in California, mere months before the Berlin Wall was dismantled in 1989. (*Embers* was translated from the German edition, *Die Glut*, by Carol Brown Janeway, and published by Vintage in 2002.)

Marai considered that being deprived of hearing his own language in his own country was more painful than death. No wonder that driving writers into exile is favored by dictators. Exiled Chilean novelist Isabel Allende wrote in *Island Beneath the Sea*, “We all have an unsuspected reserve of strength inside that emerges when life puts us to the test,” as she had been put to the test. Poet and Nobel Prize laureate Pablo Neruda returned to Chile in 1973 and died there a few days later under circumstances that are still debated today. His funeral was attended by thousands who risked imprisonment for disobeying curfew.

“Being in exile is harder than being a prisoner.”

Elsi Erdogan and Ahmet Altan are just two of the hundreds of Turkish writers jailed after the 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Elsi Erdogan, one of the best-known Turkish writers, disappeared without charges into Bakirkoy Closed Prison in 2016. After her release, pending trial, she went into exile. Altan’s books have sold more than seven million copies worldwide, and he won literary prizes in France and Germany while he was behind bars. Released after 5 years, at the age of 71, he chose to stay in Istanbul. He said he would rather spend the rest of his life in a Turkish prison, where he can speak his own language, than in exile. “Being in exile is something I believe is harder than being a prisoner,” he said.

I write this as Russian forces have invaded Ukraine. I read messages from Ukrainian writers caught in the maelstrom of bombardments against civilians. Stanislav Aseyev, who had been tortured by the occupying Russian forces in his native Donetsk, published his book, *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*, even as Russian forces gathered at the border. Poet and novelist Serhiy Zhadan, whose devastating novel, *The Orphanage*, was recommended by the *New York Times* as one of six books to read for context on Ukraine, was coordinating relief efforts in Kharkiv. Andrey Kurkov, author of *Death of the Penguin* and eighteen other novels, was sending messages to the *Today* program from Kyiv; novelist and filmmaker Oleg Stentsov, joined the territorial Defense Forces.

When I was researching material for my book, *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys Through Central Europe’s Troubled Past and Uncertain Future*, I discovered that 80 percent of Ukraine’s published writers had disappeared during the first 10 years of the Soviet Union’s existence. The post-war regime continued to wage war against writers — some were beaten to death, many were jailed, more were forced into psychiatric hospitals. Their books were banned, as were books by Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, and Polish writers. I remember visiting the Library of Prohibited Books in Prague. Those cramped dark rooms hold 27,000 different books and 2,200 periodicals, of which 14,000 are *samizdat* publications — unpublished, copies made and circulated illegally by writers and sympathizers. They are novels,

essays, short stories, poetry, philosophy, translations, mysteries, even humour, and they have nothing in common except that they were all banned during Soviet times. There is Solzhenitzen’s *Gulag Archipelago*, Bohumil Hrabal’s *Closely Watched Trains*, Vaclav Havel’s *The Beggars’ Opera*, and books by Czeslaw Milosz and Josef Skvorecky, whom I had the privilege of publishing in Canada. After 1968, his name could not be mentioned in public. The librarian, Jiri Gruentorad, had spent eight years in a forced labour camp.

Is it any wonder that Ukrainians, as fellow Eastern Europeans, tend to disagree with Russian president Vladimir Putin’s assertion that the loss of the Soviet Union was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century”? During the Stalin era, neither fame nor international awards could save you from persecution if the dictatorship didn’t approve of your work. The state took over control of literature through the Union of Soviet Writers. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* spent 12 years in hiding, and was published only in a heavily redacted version in 1967.

Anna Akhmatova, the 20th century’s most significant Russian poet, continued to write even as her work was banned in Stalin’s Russia; her husband and many of her friends were executed, and her son was imprisoned. Her fellow poet, Osip Mandelstam, was sentenced to a labour camp for the sin of criticizing Stalin in his poem “The Stalin Epigram.” He died in transit.

Sadly, Russia under Putin’s autocracy has returned to the repressions of the Soviet era. Since 1990, the number of murdered Russian writers has grown alarmingly, but not surprisingly. A regime that does not allow free speech, or a free press, will silence independent voices. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Anna Polytovskaya, known for her writing about corruption and human rights abuses in Chechnya. She was assassinated in the elevator of her apartment building. The person who ordered her killing has not yet been charged.

Russian-American writer Masha Gessen has written extensively about the harassment and beating of journalists and the persecution of LGBTQ+ Russians. Gessen, who is trans and non-binary, now lives in the United States. After their interview

Since 1990, the number of murdered Russian writers has grown alarmingly, but not surprisingly.

with fiction writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya was published in the *New Yorker*, they were branded a traitor for speaking out about brutality of the police and for their opposition to the war on Ukraine.

Dictators, my grandfather used to say, imprison or kill the writers first, because words can be more effective than weapons. Writing in the *New Yorker* in 2014, Gessen said, “A book can be an inspiration or a murder weapon.” It depends on whose hands it falls into.

How many works of literature will never appear because their authors were jailed?

PEN Canada campaigns on behalf of persecuted, imprisoned, and exiled writers throughout the world. At home, its Writers in Exile program helps writers who are forced from their own countries. In the face of tyranny, it has had some successes.

Ethiopian writer Martha Kumsa was tortured and imprisoned for 9 years without the formalities of even a sham trial. In prison, she taught geography and mathematics. She was released in part because of pressure from the international PEN community and now teaches in Canada. “Ethiopia is in freefall into carnage once again,” she wrote in PEN’s 2021 annual report. “Hope raised is miserably dashed. Hundreds of thousands are suffering in its dark dungeons...”

PEN had something to celebrate on March 11, 2022, when Saudi Arabian writer and blogger Raif Badawi was released from jail. PEN had been agitating for his release since he was sentenced to a decade behind bars and 1,000 lashes, fifty of which were delivered in a public square in Jeddah. Ensaf Badawi, his wife, now lives in Montreal.

On arriving at Los Angeles Airport, where he was greeted by a crowd of supporters, Vietnamese writer and blogger Nguyễn Văn Hải, known as Dieu Cay, said that the best message to all political prisoners is: “Have faith, you are not alone.” He had been jailed in April 2008. International human rights organizations, including PEN Canada, had worked for his release.

Poet Hernando Gonzales was released from prison in Cuba in 2010. He had served 7 years, much of it in solitary confinement.

“I have been beaten, caned, and starved.” But he was one of the lucky ones. The youngest of the seventy-five writers and human rights workers who had been rounded up in March 2003, known as “Black Spring,” he survived his incarceration.

Rashad Ramazanov, an Azerbaijani writer and blogger, was arrested in May 2013 and served 6 years of his 9-year sentence before being pardoned with 400 other prisoners in 2019. He had been beaten and tortured. He suffers from tuberculosis contracted while in jail. The author of 7 books and numerous articles, he has remained an outspoken political commentator after his release. He is an honorary member of PEN Canada.

Maung Thar Cho, who uses the pseudonym Zargana, a writer, poet, editor, and member of PEN Myanmar, author of over seventy literary works crossing multiple literary genres including poetry, essays, and short stories, was jailed several times. A professor of Myanmar literature at the Yangon Training College, Maung Thar Cho gained a reputation for his use of satire to address contentious political and social issues. After his release, he was banned from performing in public. He was rearrested in 2021 together with many other writers and journalists.

Military dictatorships are notoriously lacking in a sense of humour.

Executed Nigerian environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa spoke about a writer’s duty not only to “x-ray society’s weaknesses, its ills, its perils,” but also to be “involved in shaping its present and its future.”

Arundhati Roy, speaking of the suppression of voices critical of the government of India, said, “Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness — and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe...”

Anna Porter is the author of ten books, some of which have won prizes. She was a book publisher for 30 years.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT /

Is J-school Worth It?

BY ETHAN LYCAN LANG



A few years ago, at a party in St. John's, my girlfriend, Leslie Amminson, was talking with a couple of veteran CBC journalists.

She was just out of her undergrad, and they asked what she planned to do next. She was moving to Halifax, she told them, for journalism school. The response was not enthusiastic: J-school was a waste of time and money, they said.

Despite the discouragement, she was in class the next week, determined to prove them wrong. Or, at the very least, hoping to God they weren't right.

That's where we met. Where she told me that story.

It's now 2 years since we graduated, and we're both working journalists.

More than thirty Canadian universities have journalism programs. There are bachelor's degrees, master's, Ph.D.s, expedited programs. (We were in a one-year bachelor's program at the University of King's College.) I would argue the program is worth it if it's hands-on and forces students to study journalism mostly by practising it. It should provide dedicated instructors excited to share their hard-earned wisdom, who can be patient without coddling, who will take panicked phone calls well outside school hours, and who teach students not only how news is delivered and consumed today, but how it might be tomorrow.

Plenty of journalists have had success without J-school. Ernest Hemingway, Peter Mansbridge, and Carl Bernstein never got a degree of any kind, and they did okay.

But it's tougher now. Newsrooms don't have the staffing they once had. They can't afford to hire unproven reporters and give them time to cut their teeth and shadow more experienced staffers. News outlets are looking for journalists who've already proven they can report quickly, accurately, and on all media. And you need to be in J-school, or recently graduated, to apply for most internships, which also makes it harder for aspiring reporters without a J-school degree to find work and contributes to a lack of diversity in newsrooms.

Conor McCann is a Canadian freelance journalist based in Melbourne, Australia, who got into journalism after majoring in English and history at Memorial University of Newfoundland. After a couple of years at a St. John's radio station, he started freelancing.

"I feel like I didn't take an easy path," McCann said. Now 27, he told me J-school could have helped him learn how to pitch stories and hone skills that took a lot more trial and error to acquire outside the classroom.

"But at the same time, I've got friends who are my age or a little older, and they did their Master's in journalism. And they're only now getting settled into what they want to do."

I've said J-school's not a waste of time. Money is where it gets a bit trickier.

At King's, the master's program runs just shy of \$15,000. A four-year Bachelor's of Journalism degree at Ryerson University costs about \$30,000 in tuition. Meanwhile, the average annual income for "writing professionals," the Statistics Canada category under which journalists fall, is just over \$40,000.

And what about jobs? Ryerson takes 150 new journalism students every year. That's only one school. There aren't 150 journalism jobs up for grabs each spring.

But journalism school teaches critical thinking, communications, and problem-solving — all skills useful in other jobs. John MacLean is a J-school grad, former journalist, and government lawyer in Nunavut. In oral arguments at court, he references a page of notes at the lectern: main points written big at the top, and key facts bulleted below.

"That's exactly the same as what you'd do if you're going to do a live hit on television. It's exactly the same technique. I remember learning that in television class."

He's since used that J-school tip, and others, in front of the Supreme Court. His journalism degree sharpened skills essential to his present work. The government, MacLean says, needs people who can draft policy, analyze data, and communicate complex information plainly and succinctly.

Of my graduating class of twenty-four, only seven have full-time journalism gigs, four are freelancing while doing further studies, five are in communications, and the rest have switched gears.

I'm one of the freelancers. I'm able to support myself on my writing alone, working regularly for an online publication and a TV station, both in Halifax. Leslie is in the last year of her master's after a summer on contract for CBC's Labrador Morning. She's a recipient of the Joan Donaldson CBC News Scholarship, and heads to Toronto at the end of the semester. J-school connections gave us these opportunities.

The money can make you pause, I admit. And I think students should take cost heavily into account when deciding on J-school. You can become a good journalist without the formal education, but you might need to be more disciplined, dogged, and independent to do so.

Of course, these are also the qualities of a good journalist.

Ethan Lycan-Lang is a freelance writer from Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley. He regularly writes for the Halifax Examiner and sometimes helps research shows for Global Halifax. Ethan went to journalism school at the University of King's College in 2019 and graduated at the beginning of a pandemic.