

## On Writing while Living

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As a writer, you're supposed to draw on all sorts of things for inspiration. Songs you heard years ago. Stuff you've read. Stuff you see at the movies. The old cliché: conversations overheard on the bus. Right?

Right.

But you're also supposed to draw on your own experience. What you need, darling, is your own *voice*, your own authenticity. And of course, that must be true, and not just because all the how-to books say it. Why should anyone read you if the way you string words together is just like anyone else, or somebody else? Right?

Right.

So here's the thing: writing from your own experience necessarily brings in elements of autobiography. Some of it is morally neutral – you give your heroine the same sense of pleasure in yellow roses that you have, or you give the bad guys the same terrible teeth your old school bully had. You're channelling sense impressions and imagery that needn't identify anyone to the reader in a way that portrays them badly without any right of reply.

But what about drawing on Big Things that happen to you, like divorce? This is where things can get murky, because anyone who knows you, or about you, is going to think that what you write draws on things you felt and experienced exactly as you write them. Perhaps that's because we live in a time of confessional culture. But perhaps it's because...it's true. My own divorce has been the major event of my life over the last four years, and it's been a total thing that Germaine Greer told ladies to love. It shapes everything from where I live to what I do to support myself to how my psyche's holding up. So it's bound to shape what and how I write.

To some extent, that's helpful. It's given me new insights into human nature that I now know viscerally rather than just in my head. It's given me scars that will never heal completely. And all that means I can write from that particular wounded place in a way I couldn't have before. It means I can speak about it to people, to use the phrase du jour, authentically.

But to a great extent, it's also not helpful at all. Because when the pillars of your life are smashed so completely there's not much emotional space for anything else. And even now I can't face going really deep down into that fetid pit of wretchedness for too long.

So, Reader, if you have a gander at the short story I uploaded called 'Happiness in a bowl', you can take it as read that some of it is based on things that happened to me, or that I thought or felt or observed in my own life. Some of it is an amalgam of different events, fused into hard nuggets of fiction. And some of it never happened at all – for instance, my ex did not steal from my PhD dissertation. Right?

Right.