

WRITE FOR YOUR LIFE, Part I.

By

Jo-Ann Power

Copyright 2006

First published by THE EDGE, Boerne, TX.



Ah. You want to write. A novel, a short story, a poem, a column, a history of Texas, a memoir, an autobiography. Whatever it is, it seems that you have always wanted this, could taste it, really, oh, since you (*pick one*) read your first Nancy Drew mystery or your first Tom Clancy and decided to be the next author on the *New York Times* list, or since your tenth grade English teacher told you that you were really very gifted.

If you are like most who are so inspired, you have not started. If you are like some, you have told no one of your dream, to you so seemingly impossible. If you are like many, you do talk about your plan to write at family gatherings and cocktail parties, tell others you will begin to write “one day when the kids are grown,” or “after retirement” or “next year, when things calm down.” But things don’t change—and you don’t begin.

And that is why you should, you must start now.

And as an author who has started, oh, at least 50 novels and finished perhaps 30, but seen 18 of them sold to publishers who gave them a shelf life, I can say about writing there is a first truth you will learn over and over again: You must begin to end.

Translation? Whatever you would do, begin it. In beginning, there is power and energy. And yes, I do paraphrase Goethe, who wrote more than I and knew more than I about the art and the practice.

If you now decide to read on in this series to imbibe what lessons I have learned writing fiction for the past twenty-five years, then you can expect to hear the collective wisdom of many writers. In fact, you will hear the lessons of professional writers, living and dead, some I know and others not, all of whom have wished to write, just as you do. And they began, over and over again. They wrote a first word of a new work on the page and

they kept writing successive words, and editing more, until they arrived at a point they called the end. And then, they began again with a new work, a new inspiration.

What makes those who begin to write different from those who never do? Those, like you, who want to, yearn to, but can't quite seem to put fingers to the keyboard or pencil to the paper, want to know what separates those who do from those who do not. What is it that they know that you need to learn?

Is there for authors a key to success? A secret formula? A secret handshake for those who write, sell and making their living at it?

We who do write laugh at the suggestion. But the truth is, perhaps one does exist. Shall I shake your hand now and reveal all?

The first element of the secret handshake lies more in the attitude you bring to the work than its execution. What is that attitude? What are the elements of the writer's life that ensure the successful completion of his or her work?

The first is a willingness to be taken by the work of the work itself.

Enchanted, possessed, absorbed, enthralled. Pick a word. Writing, like acting or painting or sculpting or designing, is an art that taps your inner knowledge of yourself as a person—and encompasses you. It's a fright, a terror for your mind consumed by words, by rhymes, by facts and their articulations. It's a delight to be able to mentally leave a bad movie, a boring conversation or a tension-filled meeting, and create instead a scene, a character, a bit of dialogue that rings true. Yes, a writer often edits in her head, mad to get somewhere where a scrap of paper sits waiting for the golden words—the magic words that save the text. Yes, writers have notes everywhere, should have pens and paper with them always. They scribble at meals, on planes, in their cars (although I do not recommend this—and neither do my now adult children who for years could tell when mommy was G.O.N.E. and had to be told the light was green, she could go now.)

Last month, on a lovely sunny Sunday, I did what I now know is my mode for absorption and I bid goodbye to my husband, tolerant of me after thirty-six years of marriage—and twenty-five of writing fiction. I told him I was finished with the synopsis for my next book and ready to walk into it, the second in the mystery series that debuts this September. I told him goodbye, I would see him sometime in October. He nodded, sweet man, and smiled. Am I leaving the house, taking my car and our dog, physically moving to a mountain top somewhere? No. My body will be here, running my PR firm, going to the grocery store, cooking dinners and doing the wash, but my mind will not work in the way it usually does. I will be G.O.N.E. Absorbed into my story, my characters, the logic and illogic of what they do, how they do it, and trying to write one word at a time a novel that readers who buy it will enjoy.

I won't be outrageous about it. I won't act like Van Gogh and cut off my ear. Or go on a bender like Hemingway or F. Scott. Nah. But I will not respond as quickly to questions.

I may not often “get” a joke I would have chuckled over. I may have to have things repeated for me because I just did not hear them. I am, quite literally, G.O.N.E.

This kind of absorption is not usually tough on the writer. In fact, it’s really quite fun. You are mentally playing hooky. Yet, your real challenges—and yes, you must deal successfully with them to be published—are two. First, you must remain focused in what you are producing. Whatever you write must be logical. Useful. No gibberish. And, in the beginning, one work at a time, please. Why? Focus is a discipline necessary to producing volume. So you must have a plan for what you are to write. And you must have a regular means to carry it out.

This means you must run your writing life, like...oh boy, here it comes, a business. You must acquire the right tools. The means. The place. And the time. These three are vital to regular production of quality writing. Pen and paper or computer and printer are your canvass. A desk or the kitchen table is your place. And time to accomplish your task is necessary. So picking up pen and paper, to write in one place at the same time for the same amount of time, means you will begin in earnest to become a writer. Your pen need not be pretty. Your computer need not be modern. Your table need not be big or beautiful. Your time need not be long. Just twenty minutes every day in the same place will bring you the first emotional satisfaction of a writer. And that is the knowledge that you have done what you should. You have expressed yourself.

But your new devotion to your art may mean that others around you will begin to adjust to your new lifestyle. Your spouse may see you writing during a time when you watched TV together or went golfing. Your children may learn they cannot and should not disturb you when you are writing. Other challenges may occur. Your spouse may need to learn to go golfing by himself, or learn to do the laundry. Your children may learn to prepare some of the family dinner or acquire new chores around the house. They may also become enamored with your pursuit, cheer you on, and one day, yes, even imitate you. And if they do not like to write, I bet you they will at least begin to read more often.

As you write, you begin to confess to the pages what it is you really wish to write. Your novel begins to take shape in your subconscious and then appears in bits and snatches on the page. And as you read what you have written, you may be thrilled—and you may begin to see the challenges. The form may lack the necessary drama; the characters may need finer dialogue and personality. But you will begin to know the story...and at the same time, you will begin to thrill to your own capacity to create.

As you see how the work can be changed or edited, another truth will come to you at the same time. You will develop a finer appreciation for the medium in which you work, the English language. English is not only the most versatile in the world, but it is also, therefore, the one that can be endlessly edited. To death. So the more you write, the more quickly you learn how to bury your own bad prose in a deep and permanent grave. You learn to honor your ability to write any draft badly. And as you do, another truth emerges: You become a writer by putting words down. You become a professional author by editing the wrong ones out.

This, too, is a process. Rome was not built in a day. Neither was that terrific novel by the New York Times bestselling author you finished last week. Most write every day of their lives. You may not equal their volume, but you can equal their dedication and write every day. And if the work brings you joy—and if it brings you a life you desire, then why should you not begin soon? Today? Now?

There is an old saying about artists that that which you do over and over again, you will become more proficient at doing. There is another adage which says, your creator does not give you the desire to do something for which he has not given you the tools. Will you wait? Will you let those tools and that desire die of neglect? Or will you try?

What have you got to gain?

Part II: Perfecting Your Art

Copyright 2006 by Jo-Ann Power, No reproduction or excerpts without written permission of the author: jo-ann@jo-annpower.com

Beginning to write:

1. *Decide* to begin.
2. *Create* the environment to enable yourself to continue.
 - Establish a place to work
 - Do it regularly for 20 minutes until you begin to crave to do it—and do it forgetting time and place
 - Keep all your creative work in one notebook or computer or disk
 - Put pens and paper in your purse, briefcase and by your bed for those inspirations you need to record
 - Help your loved ones cope with this new artist
3. *Give yourself permission* to write badly
4. *Expect to edit* relentlessly
5. *Surrender* to the process.