

SUNDAY BLDY SUNDAY

On the (regional) writing life

Elizabeth Smyth

Dear Reader,

I write to you from New South Wales, where I have settled into an interior I have been striving, all my life, to quell. That is, I am a grumpy old man in a girl suit. I have a thousand complaints to tell you in the vague hope that you'll one day look me up, hand me a glass of red, and laugh with me at the lunacy of it all. So please, stop reading now if you'd rather read something positive.

My complaint goes something like this: People who want to be writers and live in the tropics have less chance than those in metropolitan centres. I say this because of this kind of commentary: 'Do you belong to a writers centre?' Yes, but it's easier (closer and quicker) for me to go to the highlands of PNG than to the Queensland Writers Centre. 'You have to ask for more online programs.' Yes, but how warm and engaging is your computer at the best of times? 'You wouldn't be here if you didn't have something to offer.' Yes, it's called cash. 'If you study at a metropolitan university (post-grad), you will become known.' Yes, but the one you suggest is not taking new students. 'What about your local university?' Good idea, it has a lecturer in creative writing on another campus, four hours drive from my house.

And so I do my best at the local writers group, listening to some old codger reliving his boring life in excruciating detail, and I have a sense of belonging to absolutely nowhere. If only I could waste away in a mindless job and not have the urge to write. At least then I'd have air-conditioning. Without it, I swelter in the monsoon, sweat streaming over my churning gut, all because we retain a jungle in our back yard and consequently have too much shade for solar panels at a time when electricity from a company in a death spiral is expensive. Other returns for this good old-fashioned form of carbon sequestration are a glutinous mass of maggots in the printer, shoes that rot for no reason, and paperbacks that curl like the sheaths of dead palm fronds.

And things get worse than this. On occasion I meet an educated person from the South who complains to me about the lesser mental capacity of the North (giving me, at least, increased empathy with Indigenous Australians over the horrendous, never-ending crap they have had to put up with). These people from the South, the ones who criticise our colonial past without realising they share the same outlook, seem to think that we regional throwbacks have the same access to government coffers as the voting

millions at *their* place. And they never question why there is no decent conversation at the boat club midmorning when it should be obvious that the kind of person they prefer is locked indoors wishing *they* were at the boat club midmorning. In this perfect storm of misunderstanding, the only explanation for what shocks in the regions—poor architecture, chopping of trees, lousy local ads—is a lack of intelligence in the primitive skulls of the inhabitants. Regional people, they generalise, cannot comprehend, let alone make, beautiful things.

So when you write something and admit to living in the boondocks, what will your readers for publishers think? What do they expect? Will lack of access be confused with lack of potential? And if it is, will you never be allowed into the school ground of writers where someone might see you being cool and ask to be friends? Do the sweat on your midriff, the bowls club for a classroom, and your rotted footwear make you an imbecile? Maybe.

It hardly matters, then, that I cut my ideas short for the school run. As I go, I secure myself to the safety line of ABC Radio National—just in case. But what's this? Funding cuts? Program changes? Now all I hear for school pick-up is the kind of music I would listen to if I dropped out altogether (which could be next week). The cheerful reporter says, 'You can download a podcast of this program ...' Yes, I can, but that's pushing the job back onto me, and I've turned on the radio precisely because I am isolated and time-poor (like every other middle-aged Australian who wants to be a good parent and child), and I really do need—rather badly now because I've been alone all day writing—to hear the voices and expression of intelligent souls.

So. (Please take a moment to observe the blatant use a sentence that now belongs to Tim Winton.) Writing has to be good, of course. But let's not pretend we are all in

the same boat. Don't even begin to tell me to try going to a café to read my work to like-minded writers. There's no café small enough in this town for those who aspire to be published in a literary journal or by a traditional publisher. And we'll be reduced to eating the smallest one (me) to survive without nourishment from the outside world.

And as much as I like the guy with the story of the starfish who takes over the world, fantasy is not my thing, and I have no idea whether the story he is telling me is brilliant or not. Where are the judges of such things? Oh yeah, that's right—Sydney and Melbourne (and of course, the Other Metros). I added the Other Metros because the biggest crime of a writer's life, I am told, is to offend (and possibly also not to refer to capital cities by their proper names, especially your own). If you offend someone in the writing game, they say, it's over. Well, to hell with that. Writers are supposed to be brave and honest. And if Geordie Williamson can write about Craig Munro writing about Peter Carey saying he didn't want to be a full-time writer because 'I think writing's a f..king boring insular silly occupation' (*Weekend Australian*, 5–6 September 2015), then I think it's fair for me to say I feel deranged and hard done by because I live in the sticks with sweat staining my T-shirts and geckos crapping on my hard copy (never the reaction an aspiring writer needs).

There's also the classic line (perhaps stolen from a cult manifesto) 'Just enjoy the process.' Yes, I'm loving it. Yeeesh! There's nothing like working for no pay and sending your writing into an internet black hole to make you feel like you are making a meaningful contribution to society. And this is where the value of walking comes in. Far from a mysterious connection of physical movement with the subconscious, it is equally valuable for the sense of having at least done something worthwhile before dinner, like exercise or walking the dog.

At times I reflect on my progress to date. I see the workshops of last year designed, it seems, to advance the career of the teacher by keeping the name of an established writer in lights, connecting them with buyers of books, and allowing them to suck fresh brains to offset a decision to give their own heads to bureaucracy. I don't blame them for that. But the idea of aspiring writers supporting established writers, financially and intellectually, makes me sick. How nuts is that?

On top of this, while I sat in one of those workshops and prayed that someone would come in with a vacuum cleaner and suck all the unwritten novels from my head so I could pay attention with a blank mind, the teacher (in concession to non-thinkers, or else from a colonial attitude towards the intellectually poor of the regions) dealt with writer's block. I gave some lame excuse and walked out—fearful again of offending someone with a key to an industry that I have as much chance of joining as Tattersalls (if anyone is a member, please take me in as a guest).

And then, in this age of giving, guess who's buying the self-published books from the poor suckers who can't get in and will never know why? Me. Because it's sad, and they made a good effort, and that could be me in a few years time. And as much as I say I'd rather never publish than launch my work into the world without a tick from those in the know, who can say what I'll be driven to if I never meet the person who can give me the tips I need to bring my novel to fruition? It's definitely not likely to happen up here in the shadow of that 'old buzzard Xavier Herbert' (Williamson, *WA*, 5–6 September 2015). My mother knew Xavier. Yeah, I'm in that camp through no fault of my own, troppo from the get-go. These days I know that hugging trees, literally (and I know it's okay to use that word here), is not a norm and never has been. And that the *Australian Society of Authors* is in Sydney, and the *National Writers Conference* is in

Melbourne, and it would be silly for me to pay an airfare to speed-date a publisher, so I never will.

But there is a word that helps—given to me by a man who never fails to say what is right, and whose name I cannot admit here lest I be accused of a flagrant sucking-up. The word is: persevere.

What else is there to do? My only hope is that someone somewhere can address the inequity of support and engagement for aspiring regional writers. Maybe those programs of the past that the now established 'regional' writers from the Other Metros say 'were great' can be resurrected. But this and any other initiatives that might help are out of my hands. All I can do is let that grumpy old bugger inside me have his day in the sun, and hope that afterwards I can get back to my positive writing self. We'll see.

In closing, please remember, the panoramas of beach and rainforest are a marketing material of the tourist industry. Life isn't really like that. Some people have to write!

Elizabeth Smyth

The morning after

Dear Reader,

I'm home now. The sun is shining. I've kicked off my boots and jeans. I can hear someone mowing and the yip of the dog next door. But that's okay. I hear them because the windows are open, and the humidity brings me back to life.

On the way home, I talked to a man on a train who had no front teeth. He knew the closing times for pubs in every state of Australia. The man was happy. More than happy. Someone on the Gold Coast had given him 700 dollars for his birthday (must have been around closing time). He used it to buy a few cartons of cigarettes—and other things, I suppose. I talked to him not because he would make a good character for a story,

but because he was a drifter and the joy that defied that rotten gob was compelling.

At the airport I picked up two dollars because I am an aspiring writer with no income and I know about the problem of women having insufficient super. On the plane I sat next to a retired judge who was kind and clutched a copy of Scott Bevan's biography of William Dobell, while I watched a movie about Stephen Hawking.

Now, I am disappointed in myself for what I wrote yesterday. I might as well have kicked Stephen Hawking off his wheelchair. I am so dumb, so ungrateful. Just look at what I have gained from ABC Radio National for a start—free access to the thoughts and ideas of the sharpest of minds, and the only download that has ever made jogging feasible: *Midday* with Margaret Throsby. And the writing industry hasn't locked me out. I have a hand-painted ukulele (for a six-word story: 'He disappeared. The sharpening stone remained.'), support from the Regional Arts Development Fund for professional development, the pleasure of writing, and the support of my peers—all of us dragged this way and that by the force of ideas.

Whether my writing will ever be published, who knows? I may well be aspiring

for the rest of my life. But that's okay. Truly. I can at least put my luggage away, brush the teeth I still have, and spend my money on something better than cigarettes. And I know in my heart that my novel *will* finish. I will not give up.

Peter Carey may be right. Writing is an insular occupation. Even more so for those embedded in the regions. But maybe, just maybe, when all else fails, you can send a message to some of the minds you once met on the ABC airwaves—by writing.

Cheers,
Elizabeth Smyth

PS: Apologies to self-published authors, teachers of workshops, good people from the South and the Other Metros, harmless members of cults and anyone else who may be offended by this message. It was written while visiting a place called rock bottom—on Sunday bldy Sunday. ●

Elizabeth Smyth lives and writes in Cairns. She was awarded a 2016 Varuna Fellowship to complete her first novel, *Higher Education*. She is now working on her second novel, *Fitzroy*.