

[Nicole Simonsen on Writing](#) [1]

November 20, 2013 [Becoming a Writer](#) [2]

Interview by Kelcey Parker

TW is pleased to join author Kelcey Parker in co-publishing interviews with some of our featured writers. Kelcey's "How to Become a Writer" series appears on her website [Ph.D. in Creative Writing](#) [3], where she's been running interviews with authors since July 2011. Each writer answers the same five questions.



Nicole Simonsen teaches English at a public high school in Sacramento and lives nearby in Davis, California, with her husband and children. Some years ago, before starting a family, she received an MA in writing from UC Davis.

["Her Third Baby"](#) [4] which appeared in TW's Fall 2013 issue, is her first published short story. Here's an excerpt:

Something was wrong with our mother. This I had pieced together from bits of whispered conversation. Like the baby, she cried too much, but unlike the baby, her crying was inconsolable. I didn't know what that word meant, so I looked it up in the dictionary. *To be heartsick, heartsore, wretched.* Something was wrong with my mother's heart.

1. Why did you want to become a writer?

NS: When I was eleven years old, I came across a copy of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I was a girl in love with animals, and so Billy Coleman's relationship with his dogs was one that I understood. Every time I opened that book, I stepped into a dream world full of courage and loyalty and what seemed like the best love of all—the love of a good dog. When Old Dan and Little Ann died, I was devastated. I could not believe it. I came home from school every day for two weeks and read and reread the ending and cried until my eyes swelled.

One day, spent from crying, I looked at an open page, at all the hundreds of letters and words. They were nothing more than little black scratch marks, and yet there I was, crying again. How did Wilson Rawls do that? How did any writer

arrange words and sentences in such a way that they could reach across time and space and grab me by the throat? It seemed a form of magic. It's a question I still wonder when I read something amazing. How on earth did the writer do it? For the last twenty years, I've tried wielding that magic myself.

2. How did you go about becoming a writer?

NS: I went to journalism school is the short answer. By high school, I knew I wanted to be a writer, and getting a degree in journalism seemed like the best way to become one. Actually, what I wanted was to become a “foreign correspondent.” In my fantasy, I would work for a newspaper, travel the world, and have all sorts of adventures. Mostly I just wanted to say I was a foreign correspondent, sort of like George Costanza on *Seinfeld* telling attractive women he was an “architect”. Foreign correspondent...who wouldn't be impressed?

But then a funny thing happened in journalism school. As I was learning to write stories for the school newspaper and my classes, I was often tempted to make things up: quotes, facts, details. It was so much easier to make it up. In fact, I'm pretty sure I crossed a few ethical boundaries. In a history of journalism class, we learned about Janet Cooke, the writer who won the Pulitzer for a made-up the story about a little boy addicted to heroin. It ruined her career, of course. Her story scared me—I understood that impulse so well. I realized that I would probably get into enormous trouble one day and bring shame on my family if I pursued a career in journalism.

It took me awhile to figure out that the impulse to make things up wasn't the problem. The problem was the medium. The impulse was bad for journalism, but it was great for creative writing. I took classes with Susan Taylor Chehak and T.C. Boyle and double majored in English. Boyle introduced me to literary writers like Louise Erdrich and Richard Ford. *Love Medicine* and *Rock Springs* still astonish me. So, it wasn't until in my junior year of college that I realized what kind of writer I really wanted to be: a storyteller.

3. Who helped you along the way and how?

NS: Though I never became a journalist, the classes I took at USC were formative. Most of my teachers were working writers. They edited all their students' work. I'm so grateful to them now, though at the time I was often dismayed to get my story back covered in their vicious red-pen marks. They would cross off whole sentences, combine sentences, rearrange paragraphs; it was like butchery. But because I wanted to be a better writer, I spent a lot of time analyzing the changes they made. I began to see redundancies, wordiness, or even just lazy thinking. I didn't want to be a lazy thinker or writer. And so I worked really hard to write better sentences, to find the most compelling image, to say what I needed to say in the least amount of words.

Anne Lamott's “shitty first drafts” [from *Bird by Bird*] has given me enormous comfort and courage over the years, too. The blank page is not as scary if you accept its inevitable shittiness and move on from there. Sentences and stories are malleable. This was counterintuitive to me at first, because when you read a great book, it doesn't seem as if it had ever been a malleable thing. Every word and phrase seems destined, inevitable—how could it ever have been otherwise? And yet, the writer, like all writers, had to wrestle and sweat and hack a path through the forest.

I had great teachers—Chehak and Boyle, Lynn Freed, Max Byrd, Pam Houston. I have a friend from graduate school who still reads my work. I have another friend who is a dedicated reader. She's always honest with me. I also go to a writers' group. I give stories to my husband, too, but I cannot be in the house while he reads them. I value his opinion; he has good instincts.

4. Can you tell me about a writer or artist whose biography inspires you?

NS: Flannery O'Connor inspires me. She suffered from lupus for years and died young. She managed to write despite—or through—her physical ailments. I find that admirable. Actually, I don't read too much about the authors themselves. I want to read their work. I do like to read author interviews, mostly because I want to know how they do it and am hoping they'll reveal all their secrets.

5. What would you say in a short letter to an aspiring writer?

NS: Has anyone ever given better advice to a young writer than Rilke? When I've been disappointed in my own work, when I lack inspiration, when I've had a terrible day in which the work I've produced does not rise above the level of chicken scratch, I pull out *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

This is good advice for how to live.

On a more nuts-and-bolts level, I would tell an aspiring writer to develop a disciplined practice, whatever that may look like. The only way I can get any writing done is if I get up at 4:30 a.m. and write while my kids are asleep. That gives me an hour and a half to work, or two if the kids sleep in. Though I often wish I had more time, I've gotten a surprising amount of work done that way. After that, it's off to work and school and the rest of my day is a blur.

That time frame works for me because I'm the daughter of a farmer who claims that people who get up after 5 have wasted half the day. But if you're the type of person who can't imagine getting up before 8, find the time of the day when you are more likely to be creative. Protect that time, build a fortress around it. Guard it like the dragon guards his pearl. Breathe fire, if you have to.

This interview originally appeared as ["How Nicole Simonsen Became a Writer"](#) [5] in Ph.D. in Creative Writing on November 18, 2013.

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