

INSPIRATION

The Others

When can you call yourself a “real” writer? A fellow scribe shares how a series of ordinary encounters transformed her point of view.

BY JESSICA ALLEN

When you grow up revering books, as I did, you grow up revering writers. I remember the first author I ever met: Patricia MacLachlan, who spoke at my junior high school shortly after winning the Newbery Medal for *Sarah, Plain and Tall*. Even now, decades later, I picture her as having a halo. In reality, she was probably sitting with her back to a window. No matter. In my mind, she glowed. Still does.

Writers were *other*, to borrow a phrase from graduate school. They were as magical as unicorns, as unusual as \$2 bills, as impressive—and imposing—as Niagara Falls. I knew they existed, that they were dreaming up the books I consumed and cherished, but I couldn’t fathom that we lived in the same world, or that I could join their ranks.

I stared at author photos and wondered what it took to get one. I went to readings and offered my hardcover for signing, careful to direct the writer in question toward the non-sweaty part of the book. Even as I began to write and get published, I hesitated to call myself a writer. There always seemed to be yet another goal to achieve before I could do so.

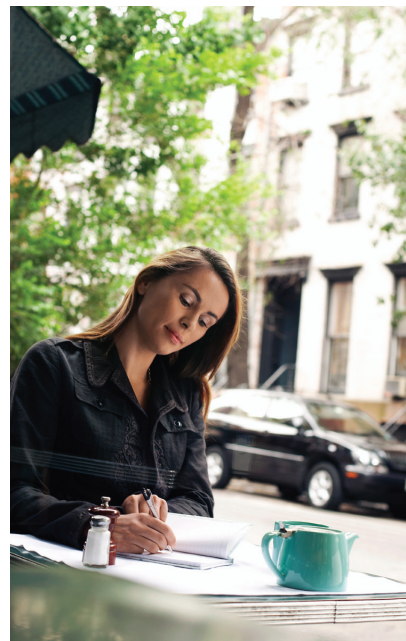
Real writers wrote novels; I wrote reviews of novels. Real writers published work in magazines you held in your hand; I published pieces online.

Real writers made a living as a writer; I had a day job. Whatever I did, it was never enough, in my eyes. I had the arrogance to think that readers would care about what I had to say—the audacity to put fingers to keyboard in the first place—but not enough to say “I’m a writer.” That’s what some might call irony.

Everyone has bouts of impostor syndrome. But in a field that demands attention to meaning and nuance, using the word “writer” can be especially fraught—particularly for those of us who toil away without a bestseller or a byline or an agent. Of all the words I’ve written, “writer” has given me the most trouble.

And then one day I walked by Daniel Mendelsohn carrying his dry-cleaning. Another time I saw Helen Phillips waiting to cross the street. I’ve overheard both Tony Kushner and A.O. Scott talking on the phone. Michael Musto and Emily Gould have lapped me on bikes. Rivka Galchen once sat behind me at the movies (because I’m short, it wasn’t a big deal).

As the years have gone by, I’ve seen Colson Whitehead and Francine Prose corralling kids, Gary Shteyngart walking his dog, Adam Gopnik arguing at the Museum of Modern Art, Nora Ephron splitting a pizza with Nicholas Pileggi. I’m ashamed to admit how badly I freaked out Jonathan Franzen



by stalking him stalking birds in Central Park.

The longer I live in New York, the more writers I bump into. The more I bump into, the more I see that they’re people too. They go to the movies, they pick up dry cleaning, they have dinner with their spouses. Just like me. They’re famous, of course, but they’re famous for doing the hard, hard work of messing with words. Just like me.

Who knows how many writers I’ve stood behind at the grocery store or sat next to on the subway? Who knows how many writers *you* have encountered, wherever you are? Living in New York taught me that you don’t need to live in New York to be a writer. You need only to write.

Recently, I was talking with my toddler’s pediatrician, as new parents do, about bowel movements: “It was kind of like freshly mown grass.”

She paused. “I’ve never heard that before. You must be a writer.”

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

Jessica Allen (jessallenica.com) writes about food, culture, travel and New York, where she lives with her husband and son.