

The Literary Ladies' Guide to the Writing Life: Inspiration and Advice from Celebrated Women Authors Who Paved the Way

Nava Atlas

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The terrain navigated by women writers has both gender-specific pitfalls and advantages. A new compilation by Nava Atlas, *The Literary Ladies Guide to the Writing Life*, explores this varied landscape using the letters, memoirs, interviews, and diaries of twelve exceptional authors from different eras.

The fascinating women drawing Atlas's focus were in part determined by who left behind sufficient commentary regarding their careers. Virginia Woolf, Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, and George Sand are all included. From Jane Austen, the oldest, to Madeleine L'Engle, the youngest, much of their writing may have been deemed "commercial" and suitable for women only during their lifetimes, but all of it is classified as literature today.

Each writer is revealed as having approached her profession with a personal motivation, a characteristic attitude, and a desire to write that surpassed the majority of her peers. "Writing to me means thinking, digging, pondering, creating, shattering," said Anais Nin. "It means getting at the meaning of all things; it means reaching climaxes; it means moral and spiritual and physical all in one." Of imagination, Willa Cather had this to say: "Imagination, which is a quality writers must have, does not mean the ability to weave pretty stories out of nothing. In the right sense, imagination is a response to what is going on, a sensitivity to which outside things appeal. It is a composition of sympathy and observation."

Backed by extensive sources and notes, this guide is divided into eight chapters that investigate the development and nurturing of the writer's voice. Atlas provides her own commentary throughout, discussing practical matters such as money and "tools of the trade" alongside more sensitive subjects such as doubt, rejection, and forms of self-sabotage that impact a writer's psyche and ego. That these women are shown to have been vulnerable not only brings them to life, but suggests that the path to writing well lies in the very risky process of actually doing it, not in the over-reaching goal of landing in the literary archives.

Nava Atlas is a cookbook author and a visual artist known for limited edition books and "text-driven objects and installations." She lives in New York's Hudson Valley. Superbly illustrated with 130 images—color & black-and-white photos, drawings, and memorabilia—her latest effort is as enjoyable as it is informative.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (February 10, 2011)

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