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The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work
Marie Arana
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Students often speak of wanting to "be a writer," glossing over the vast amount of doing required to occupy that particular state of being.

The contributors to this volume agree that writers don't necessarily choose to be writers; they simply write. In fact, several of them say that writing chose them. This splendid collection of fifty-five essays, first published in The Washington Post's Book World, was assembled and edited by Arana, the editor in chief of Book World, who previously worked fifteen years as an editor for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and Simon & Schuster. She introduces each essay, offering color and detail to the authors' biographies and insights into their work.

For students and beginning writers, the essays are rich in useful advice and examples, albeit much that may be discouraging-repeated rejection and menial jobs in publishing houses. Of course, writers don't learn their craft by reading books such as this one, however instructive; this is a book for readers who want to learn more about a favorite writer or about writing in general.

To them the authors speak with unwonted intimacy and candor of their methods, their concerns, their aspirations, their frustrations. Barbara Mertz, an Egyptologist with a Ph.D from the University of Chicago, who is the author pseudonomously of numerous lightweight romances and mysteries, defends herself and her fellow writers of "lowbrow fiction" by citing letters from readers "telling us that our tales have given them enough pleasure to let them forget, if only for a few hours, that something in their lives has gone badly wrong… . I can conceive of no higher compliment."

Murial Spark remembers her "meager life" as a young writer in London when the cost of postage for submissions was "a pressing part" of her budget and the bad days when rejection slips appeared in multiples.

John Edgar Wideman speaks of his indebtedness to the communal African-American

experience of waiting and silence, of “the dream space where what is awaited is imagined,” and of the space where imaginings “dissolve again into silence.”

Nadine Gordimer talks about her role as a South African writer who dared to write about racism during the years of apartheid, when her works were banned by the South African government.

Among the other authors whose essays are included in Arana’s collection are Francine du Plessix Gray, Joyce Carol Oates, David Halberstam, John Keegan, Anita Desai, Patricia Cornwell, Stanley Karnow, Donald Westlake, Dominick Dunne, and Carl Sagan, a multifarious grouping of whom every one has something interesting to say.

Harold Cordry