

Creativity: A Moveable Feast

by Lucy Sieger

“Ah, but why must you go to Paris to be creative?”

My friend Dino asked that question over dinner here in Knoxville, interrupting my meanderings on whether or not to return for a fourth extended stay in France. My response: “I just do!” In Paris, I was Lucie, not Lucy. Somehow the two letters made a profound difference.

But Dino was from Sarajevo, and even after twenty-five years in the United States, he was still the product of a socialist regime. In his mind, you don’t commoditize creativity—or personality—by tying it to an expensive location.

Of course I didn’t *need* to go to Paris to be creative, but like many artists and writers before me, I traveled to Paris in search of inspiration, and yes, even identity. The Parisians consider fluency in *culture generale* (both classic and contemporary arts, music, film, literature) an essential component of being French. Brilliant philosophers, artists and intellectuals shine with wattage that the U.S. grants to sports heroes and reality TV stars. The Parisian vibe made me *feel* more like a writer—or at least that the pursuit was worthwhile.

Yes, I did write in Paris, even while working my portable corporate job and maintaining a hectic sightseeing schedule. It helped that I took writing classes and had to produce pieces for the workshops. And I wrote fledgling Facebook posts that were well received—touchingly so. A former colleague I hadn’t seen in years asked if his teenage daughter could friend me, because he wanted her to read my descriptions of a woman traveling alone. Still others, infrequent Facebook users, logged in just to see what I was up to. I didn’t want to disappoint this small group of followers, and many Facebook posts served as foundations for my Paris essays.

But pithy social media bits and bytes seemed ephemeral next to the iconic names etched on discreet plaques around the Left Bank-- for example, *L’ecrivain Marguerite Duras 1914-1996 a vecu dans cet immeuble de 1942 a 1996*. Simone de Beauvoir hung out at a nearby café. I wondered: What were their lives like as women? How did they find the time—and courage—to write?

And eventually this: where are the Parisian writers now? The sixth arrondissement, where I was haunted by literary ghosts, had grown achingly upscale. (My rental had sold for 270,000 euros in 2000, and by 2013 was worth 800,000.) Sure, sometimes I’d see tourists sitting in cafes, scribbling away in notebooks. In the mornings, bourgeois Parisian women dawdled over their espressos and cigarettes, jotting on loose sheets of paper. Were they drafting poems—or grocery lists?

One afternoon, I took a tour of the Latin Quarter titled “Hemingway’s Paris.” Back in the 1920s, this was a working class neighborhood, short on glamour and long on grit. I asked the guide about the area’s residents now.

“Well-off people,” he said. “And if they’re not well off, they’re here because their apartments have been handed down for generations.” He lived on the Right Bank, near the Bastille in a gentrifying area. Apparently the Latin Quarter was too expensive for the likes of writers, artists—and tour guides. Today’s

creative spirits have migrated to the east of Paris, outer arrondissements like the nineteenth and twentieth, where rents are still affordable. I promised myself one day I'd forego the convenience and familiarity of the sixth and stay in one of those arty areas – *today's* arty areas, not affluent relics of a long-ago literary heyday.

After the dinner with Dino and his wife, I pondered the connection between creativity and location. I do a fair amount of writing in Knoxville, of course. Yet often creatives—especially ones with day jobs and families—fall prey to idealizing other locations, other circumstances. If only I lived *there*, I'd be more fully a writer.

Do you need an iconic city and inspiring surroundings to be creative? An impressive array of contemporary writers call Knoxville home. I can think of four offhand who've been reviewed in the *New York Times*. One author wrote her critically acclaimed account of NASA sitting a few tables away from me at our local Starbucks. My Homebucks, as I call it, sits in the parking lot of a strip mall that boasts a Kroger's grocery, Suntan City and Firehouse Subs. It's not glamorous, and neither was the Parisian neighborhood where Hemingway lived and wrote—when he lived and wrote there.

I'll always love Paris. It's where I feel my truest self, but let's face it. No matter where we live, we can find reasons not to pursue our art. It's scary to reveal our deepest selves. In a money-obsessed and economically precarious society, it feels frivolous to pursue a creative endeavor with scarce prospects of remuneration. I know people who quit jobs, moved, burned through savings, and totally realigned their lives so they could write. And then didn't. The fear was just too much.

My friend Dino was right. The creative life requires more effort, more imagination, than simply hopping aboard a transatlantic flight and pretending to be Parisian. Sitting down and getting to work is the hardest part, no matter where you are. The good news is, Paris is not the only moveable feast. Creativity is a moveable feast as well. It's not limited to Paris or Berlin or Brooklyn or whatever elusive mecca shimmers in the distance, it's where you actually plant your backside and start writing—even if that place is Knoxville, Tennessee.