

How to Become a Writer

Start with books.

Not the writing. The books.

Ignore anyone who tells you writers begin with pens and paper. Writers begin with books.

Visit your grandmother's house, where books are everywhere. Let them fill the shelves in the den.

Let them pile up on nightstands. Let them line the staircase leading to the third floor.

Decide that the third floor is haunted.

Find more books there anyway.

Let Granny wash you up while smoking Virginia Slims. Lean into the smoke because you like the smell.

Get fussed at for it.

Lean into it anyway.

Watch the cigarette hang from the corner of her mouth while she scrubs your armpits.

Marvel at how it never falls.

Believe Granny can do anything.

Pull a book from the shelf one afternoon. Make it the one about Helen Keller.

Read it.

Finish it.

Reach for another.

Then another.

Then another.

Decide what you want to be when you grow up, right there in Granny's den.

Think that becoming a writer will happen all at once.

Expect thunder.

Expect lightning.

Instead, let it happen one book at a time.

Read stories about girls who save the world. Read stories about girls who lose it. Read books under blankets when everyone else is asleep. Carry books into waiting rooms, onto buses, and into classrooms. Find that a person can leave home without ever leaving their bedroom.

Fill notebooks with stories that are definitely “not about you.”

Make every main character look suspiciously like you anyway.

Pretend you’re inventing worlds.

Learn how to survive in *this* world.

Grow older.

Leave some books behind.

Come back to them later.

Leave writing behind once or twice, too.

Come back to it.

Become a mother. Learn that stories sometimes have to wait until the children are sleeping. Find that some stories can be patient.

Keep a stack of books nearby.

Go back to school.

Wonder if you’re too old. Worry that it’s too late.

Notice that books have never once asked your age.

Read.

Write essays.

Write discussion posts.

Write ugly first drafts.

Make your final drafts pretty.

Learn that writing is less about inspiration and more about returning to the page. Again.

And again.

Look for Granny in your memories.

Find her near a bookshelf.

Find her in the smell of cigarette smoke trapped between the pages of an old paperback.

Realize that the books were never just books.

They were an invitation.

A map.

A gateway.

Realize how you ended up here. It wasn't the first story. It wasn't the publication. It wasn't the degree.

It was the decision to turn the page.

Start with the books.

Always the books.