

WRITE

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When Software Changes Your Life... or at Least Your Writing

BY CRAIG TERLSON

The writing program Scrivener was released in 2007, and for a lot of writers this brilliant piece of software was a game-changer.

When asked what has had the biggest impact on our work, writers rarely answer, “a piece of software.” But perhaps that was in the time I now refer to as B.S.E. (Before the Scrivener Era). Most likely you’ve heard writers on social media talk about Scrivener and wondered how an inexpensive piece of software (\$67 for the full version) could make such a difference. I’m one of those writers.

When I started writing my first long narrative, which a decade later became my first novel, like most of us I used MS Word. If you’ve worked on a long narrative, or a book-length nonfiction piece, you know the buckets of information that has to be gathered, including research, outlines, character sketches, chapters saved, and chapters dumped. As well, you probably have multiple drafts and versions with names like: Greatnovel.2a.final.seriously.reallythisone.docx.

As I built that first novel, the hierarchal list of folders and files compared in complexity to the building of the great pyramids. But as opposed to their beauty and wonder, my pile was a mess — picture a giant recycling blue box where nothing is properly sorted.

Along came Scrivener (A.S.E.), and everything changed. If you’ve dipped a writerly toe into this program, you might opine, okay,

instead of a bunch of files and folders, I get everything on one screen. What’s the big deal? It turns out that for both fiction and nonfiction writers, it’s a very big deal. For starters, Scrivener’s creator, Keith Blount, designed the program because he was so frustrated with the constant shuffling and reordering of files with the construction of his own novel. In other words, he knew how writers think.

Rather than going into long tutorials and testimonials (there are plenty available on the web), I’m going to hit a few of the many features that Scrivener offers. Don’t think of this as a tutorial, but more like a revival tent sermon.

THE BIG RED BINDER

Along with chapters, scenes, and sections, structuring a book includes organizing bits of news items, interviews, outlines, or research on twelfth-century samurai. So where to put it all? Back in the day, you might have had a big ring binder — mine was red. Scrivener beautifully arranges all these folders, breaking the book into smaller, more manageable chunks, and puts them in the, aptly named, *binder*.

The manuscript is kept separate from the research notes, character studies, or whatever else you need to build the work. Chapters can be broken down into scenes, or gathered in sections.

You can build a Scrivener structure from scratch, or use their helpful templates for various types of writing: novel, short story, nonfiction proposals, stage play, and screenplay.

WHERE DID I PUT THAT?

Whether your book is one long document or a series of files and folders, trying to find certain details is a huge challenge (*what colour was that rocking horse?*). Instead of searching and then scrolling through hundreds of pages until you get a blood blister, Scrivener highlights all the chapters, sections, and scenes in the manuscript where the word or phrase appears. This allows you to skip through the book, and along with a robust find-and-replace engine, solving those nasty continuity errors in revision is incredibly easy.

Speaking of revision — Scrivener's split screen feature allows different parts of the book to be viewed at the same time. This can be used in all sorts of ways: research notes on the bottom, manuscript on top, or notes from an interview, or a map of the area showing the best taco stands in Puerto Vallarta. While writing this article, I had notes from various blogs in one of these screens. MS Word also allows you to arrange files on your monitor, but I can hear you screaming as you try to line them up just right.

Bonus points: when you open Scrivener, you land on the exact spot you last worked on, with all your notes in place. If you've ever closed a three-hundred-page manuscript by mistake and then had to find your place, you know what I mean. Oh, and Scrivener is always saving. Always.

SO MUCH RESEARCH

No matter the subject matter of your novel or nonfiction work, you gather a lot of research. As mentioned, you can place material such as maps, notes, long cut-and-pastes from Wikipedia, and even audio and video into a folder in the binder section. A few years ago, while researching a novel set in Upper Michigan, I drove down there to immerse myself in the landscape. As I drove, I made recordings into my iPhone (*safely in the cup holder*). On my return, I dumped all those recordings into a research folder, and like everything in Scrivener, it was easily accessible on one screen.

FOR THE COLOUR-CODED FOLK

In what's called the *Inspector*, there is an area for notes, which can appear in every chapter or section. I found this very helpful while making various passes, noting which parts need more work, or demand further research.

If you frequent the office organization aisle in Staples looking for another set of colour stickers, then the *Outliner* feature is for you. This section has a range of tools that help you get organized, such as colour labels, word-count targets, revision-status markers, and progress bars. As a novelist, I use this feature as a motivator — but I think the Outliner is even more key for nonfiction writers because it is perfect for comparing the lengths of different chapters or sections and checking off which topics have been covered.

THE BIG PICTURE

One of the biggest challenges in working on a long narrative is getting the whole book in your head. Two of my favourite Scrivener features are the *Synopsis* and *Corkboard* sections. Similar to a set of recipe cards, the corkboard allows you to view the entire book in

small squares that contain either the synopsis or the first few lines of the chapter or scene. With this big picture view of the structure, I can easily swap whole chapters by a click and drag, and bam... the visit from the mysterious aunt happens in Chapter Three, and the evil chemistry teacher doesn't show up until Part Two of the novel.

PUBLISH THAT THING

One of the most powerful features of Scrivener is its ability to output to a number of file types. This is incredibly useful if you are interested in indie publishing print or ebooks. I've used this for both my self-published titles and for getting work to beta readers and editors. I can easily output for Kindle, Kobo, PDF, or a variety of MS Word formats. This level has a steeper learning curve, but as you get deeper into the possibilities, you discover ways to create chapter heads, drop caps, running heads, and all the stuff that make books pretty. Scrivener helps you create a beautiful, professional-looking book, complete with uploaded covers and front and back matter.

THE ULTIMATE FOCUS BUTTON

I've left the best for last, and this is the reason I would spend five times as much on this program. There is a little button in the upper right corner called *Full Screen Composition* mode. When engaged, how can I explain... everything drops away. Think of it as your partner just took the kids to the grandparents for the day, the traffic outside is silenced, and someone, perhaps Jonathan Franzen, soldered the Wi-Fi connection on your laptop (*yes, he did this*). All the other screens fade, and you are left with a blank page... and you simply write. Yes, yes, my MS Word lovers (*are you still reading?*) you probably can do this, but there is something so lovely about how Scrivener does it. Like I said, Scrivener knows writers. They know that we love nothing better than for someone to bring us a cup of tea and a biscuit, adjust the room temperature, and take the dog out for a two-hour walk, so we can just write.

Craig Terlson has written five novels and a bucket of short stories, which have been published in Canada, U.S., U.K., and South Africa. His new crime novel, Manistique, is out this summer and was written, like all the others, in Scrivener. He tweets, probably too much, @cترلson.

TWUC Note: All opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, who is not employed by Scrivener. The Writers' Union of Canada does not endorse or recommend any commercial products, processes, or services.

HOW TO GET STARTED

There is a bit of a learning curve with Scrivener, and I am mindful that in my day job as an illustrator/designer I've had to learn much more complex programs. Still, I think the best way is to get the software and dive in. The creators have a ton of excellent tutorials on their website (literatureandlatte.com), including a ten-minute overview that shows you the basics. Another resource is Gwen Hernandez, who has an excellent book in the Dummies series, and offers tips and advice at her blog (gwenhernandez.com). If you're still stuck, shoot me a tweet, I've probably got Scrivener open.



Why Write?

BY WAYNE GRADY

Unlike my two least favourite questions — “What are you working on these days?” and “What’s your novel about?” — “Why do you write?” is a question writers often ask themselves and to which we try to come up with plausible answers.

The question isn’t “Why bother?” — it’s more a matter of what we’re trying to achieve by writing. In his 1961 essay, “Writing American Fiction,” Philip Roth wrote that the task of American fiction writers was “to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality.” This task, he said, was made difficult by the fact that much of American reality was already so “ridiculous” that “the actuality is continually outdoing our talents.... The daily newspapers fill us with wonder and awe; also with sickness and despair.” How does a writer sift through “the fixes, the scandals, the insanity, the idiocy, the piety, the lies, the noise?” And that was in 1961, the year after Kennedy defeated Nixon, when neither El Salvador, Iraq, Afghanistan, nor Donald Trump had happened. What on earth would Roth think about American reality now? Well, we

know, because in a 2017 *New York Times* interview he more or less threw up his hands: Trump was “a massive fraud” and his presidency “the most debasing of disasters.” But what would he make of it in a work of fiction? That we’ll never know because Roth died in 2018.

There are many reasons not to write (lack of talent, lack of ambition, nothing to say) and only a few good reasons for writing. In “The Professor’s History,” a short story published in 1995, Claire Messud goes some way to providing one of those reasons. The story concerns a French historian living in Algeria during the Second World War. In his research, he comes across evidence that French soldiers stationed in a remote part of Algeria a hundred years earlier had massacred a group of Algerian rebels. The professor travels to interview villagers to see if what he read was historically accurate. When he explains his

There are many reasons not to write (lack of talent, lack of ambition, nothing to say), and only a few good reasons for writing.

mission to the administrator of the region, the official dismisses it: “Tell me,” says the official, “what good is it? What difference will it make, to tell your story, even if it is true?”

In other words, why write?

The professor is coldly infuriated by the question and doesn't even try to respond to it. He continues into the hills, talks to herders and villagers, and discovers the evidence he seeks. The incident took place as described in the journal. On June 19, 1845, a French regiment had rounded up 500 Algerian villagers, sealed them in a cave, built huge bonfires at the cave's entrance, and suffocated everyone inside.

Vindicated, the professor returns to his library in the city, determined to begin work on “the book.”

Before he gets very far, however, his project stalls. Perhaps the administrator's words have weakened his resolve — it doesn't take much to paralyze a writer with self-doubt. Whatever the cause, the professor stops writing. Again, there is that withering question: “Even if he were to finish his book, who would read it?” So, why write?

Earlier in his research he had discovered, in the library basement, a large jar filled with “tinted liquid, in which swam a swarm of pinkish, shrimp-like creatures.” These were the severed ears of the Algerian rebels that the French soldiers had cut off and preserved in 1845. Who knew why they did it and why the jar had been kept for so long. Restlessly roaming the streets of Tangiers, the professor thinks again about what is in that jar. When he first found it, “unable to confront this horror, he had chosen to ignore it: it had been as easy as shutting a drawer.” But now the image haunts him.

The story ends with the professor, hunched in the dusty library basement, reading his book to the jar of ears: “For them, the professor decided at last, he would tell his story.”

And there we have a possible answer to the question, “Why write?”

For them.

Now that I, too, am writing fiction, I think the reasons we write embrace both Roth's public and Messud's private motive, includes both Stephen Daedalus's pompous “to forge, in the smithy of my soul, the uncreated conscience of my race,” and Edwidge Danticat's intensely personal “writing has been the primary way I have tried to make sense of my losses, including deaths.” Both of those, yoked together, form one reason.

In a hamlet down the road from where I used to live, there

were twin brothers; one was named Tim and the other, Tom. They were in their forties when I knew them, living alone in a house on the main street, and surviving by doing odd jobs about the village. No one, not even they, knew which one was Tim and which one was Tom, and so they were both called Tim'n'Tom. When they were five years old, some wag had put a firecracker in either Tim's or Tom's ear and lit it, and thereafter that Tim'n'Tom was “not right in the head,” as the hamlet put it. The other Tim'n'Tom looked after both of them as, indeed, did the whole hamlet.

I have a photograph of one of the Tim'n'Toms: a thin, middle-aged man straddling a bicycle beside a highway, grinning at the camera. The photograph was taken by a photographer who lived in their hamlet and who often visited ours to sit on a bench in the shade beside the river. When she was younger, she'd been in a car accident, and had lost a leg, and when she sat on the bench in our village, in the shade beside the river, she sometimes took off her artificial leg, leaned it against the bench, and went to sleep. One afternoon, when I and my four-year-old daughter were walking along the river, my daughter ran off and came back carrying the photographer's artificial leg. By the time we reached her bench, my daughter carrying the leg under her arm, the photographer was awake, sitting calmly watching the river flow by, and when she saw us, she started laughing. We all laughed. The three of us sat on her bench beside the river and laughed. My daughter watched the photographer reattach her artificial leg, and we walked with her up to her car and said goodbye. It was shortly after that that I bought her photograph of Tim'n'Tom.

I included Tim'n'Tom as two characters of that name in my novel *Up From Freedom* as a pair of trappers who seem to be living simply at the fork of a river in northern Kentucky, a place I called Twin Forks. They change my main character's life in a profound way: They alter the nature of his search for his son from a private endeavour to a public mission.

Buried somewhere in that anecdote is the reason I write.

Wayne Grady's third novel, The Good Father, was published in April by Doubleday. His first novel, Emancipation Day, won the Amazon.ca First Novel Award in 2013 and was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. His translation of Yara El Ghadban's novel, I Am Ariel Sharon, was published earlier this year by Anansi, and a translation of his second novel, Up From Freedom, translated by Catherine Ego, will be published later this year by Mémoire d'Encrier. He lives with his wife, Marilyn Simonds, in Kingston, Ontario, and, when travel resumes, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

WELLNESS /

At the Entrance of a Dark Alley

BY CAROLE GLASSER LANGILLE



“Do not feel lonely, the entire universe is inside you,” the poet Rumi says.

Though we don't fully understand the conflicting voices inside us, when we record these voices, we begin to better understand ourselves and others. This is why I wanted to give writing workshops in a prison in Nova Scotia and why I handed out poems by Rumi and other poets.

In one of the workshops, I read the poem “Two Songs” by Campbell McGrath in which he talks about the burden but also the necessity of letting black, silent trees into our hearts. I asked participants what they thought these trees represented and why we must allow them to enter. One man said, “Black, silent trees, that's the blues. Once you feel something, you can't unfeel it.”

The blues, which originated in the southern U.S. by African Americans, is certainly a conviction to sing in the face of great burdens. His analogy was powerful. We talked about vulnerability and how, paradoxically, being vulnerable can make us stronger. I quoted Lao Tzu: “Nothing is softer than water, but it wears away rock. To compel the unyielding, it has no equal.”

When we began the workshop, several women said they didn't understand poetry. However, as we talked about specific poems, they responded with enthusiasm and realized they knew more than they thought. Often they had insights I did not have though I'd read the poems many times. This is why I love poetry: We glean something new each time we read a great poem. Its surprising language wakes up the reader. Sometimes a hidden voice inside us reveals itself as we identify with the poem's narrative or theme.

In one of the women's writing workshops in prison, we read “On the Nature of Understanding” by Kay Ryan. It's a tall, thin poem

with three or four words on most lines, as if it were a snake about to attack. The poem, about thinking you've tamed a wild thing, ends

So it's
strange when it
attacks: you thought
you had a deal.

“That poem says a lot; like being here in prison, thinking you've come to terms with it, and then you get so frustrated and feel miserable and trapped,” one woman said. She was in her early twenties, and like many others in the workshop, had been in jail before, was from a historically marginalized community and poor.

In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, a character says, “In scattering ... your kind deeds, you are giving away ... part of your personality and taking into yourself part of another ... a little more attention and you will be rewarded with the knowledge of the most unexpected discoveries.” This is also true of poetry. Discovering hidden parts of oneself when reading and writing poems helps us connect to others. Sharing discoveries is generous.

I've given writing workshops to people giving up addictions, teens in crisis, homeless youth, women who had cancer, men and women serving time in prison. In all these workshops, poems have initiated the most intimate conversations. I've been deeply moved by responses to poems and insights they inspire. I've witnessed how a poem can induce the most reticent person to share their story. Often others have had similar experiences. But even if this is not the case, simply by sharing an experience, a person feels less alone. Rumi told us this would be so, and though we did not understand why, we see it is true.

Poetry: “three mismatched shoes at the entrance of a dark alley,” is how the poet Charles Simic describes the form. It's not that poetry makes the dark alleys or the black, silent trees go away. Poetry reveals that our fears and our hopes are messages, and receiving a message is a gift. We want to celebrate by giving gifts of our own.

Below are abbreviated lines from “North Carolina,” the first stanza of “Two Songs,” by Campbell McGrath:

“The more you allow the figures of black, silent trees
... into your heart, the greater the burden you
must carry ... and the stronger your conviction to sing.”

Yes, the stronger our conviction to sing. Precisely because our journey is so unfathomable and final, poetry, ultimately, is indispensable.

Carole Glasser Langille's recent book, Doing Time, is a nonfiction account of her time giving writing workshops in a prison in Nova Scotia. Her fifth book of poetry, Your Turn, will be published in the fall of 2021.

RESILIENCY /

Embodied: A Tale of Resilience

BY REBECCA DIEM



This year has challenged me in ways I did not know I could survive.

It has been a year since my partner left. Not by choice, only the best of the decisions available to us.

Jimmy is in Australia, trying to come home since last March when I put him on a plane with hand sanitizer and prayers. We are close to that epic reunion kiss, but we've been telling ourselves just a few more weeks for months now. He is always in tomorrow, while I am stuck in today. This is hard, but we continue to fall in love with each other ever more deeply. Our love is resilient, and for that I am grateful. One day he will be home, and we will write the next chapter of our lives together.

I am grateful for many things these days, but it was not always so. There was a period of time where I lost my joy entirely last year. Anhedonia, they call it. It sounds like the name of a flower. *My anhedonias are blooming nicely this year.*

Depression is now a familiar friend; I have made room to care for her. Medicines and therapy and knowing when the laundry truly does not need to be folded.

I am a gentle caretaker of my mind. I have learned to be.

In July of 2020, I posted an update for my patrons and readers. I felt compelled to share what I was going through, when I thought I was through the worst of it. At the time, I had been reflecting on recovery, on how I had managed periods of grief and stress before in my life — the shape of it that I recognized, and all the ways it was frighteningly new.

It's difficult to create when you're in a state of fear. Your sympathetic systems are activated, alert. There is no time for dreamy imaginings when your focus is on identifying and analyzing the very real threats to your own well-being and your loved ones. It's also very difficult to notice that you're having a

breakdown when the world is breaking down along with you.

Resiliency is a muscle that you exercise. It is not innate; it grows and becomes stronger with experience.

Resiliency reminds me of the muscle memory I had as a dancer. When the music would play, my limbs would flow through the movements without conscious thought. It felt familiar: I have been here before, and I have survived, and I have thrived.

Resiliency requires empathy, for yourself and for others. It is the tend-and-befriend stress response, a nurturing, caring, community-based response. We are in this together, we are isolated but not alone.

It is almost March again as I write this. Eight months (EIGHT MONTHS!?) later, I can still access a sense of peace when I read those words. We are experiencing a collective trauma, and our individual traumas are unevenly weighted by race and class and age and geography. But on the other side of trauma, there is opportunity for growth.

Exercise is hard, but I fear my muscles — my creative muscles and my bodily ones — may atrophy if I do not. I bribe myself with takeaway Americano mistos and butter tarts from my local café for my daily perambulation, walking around my block, double-masked, smiling at passersby, grateful for the laugh lines gradually etching themselves around my eyes.

I walk, I stare at the trees, I appreciate my neighbours' gardens, I listen to the cacophony of birds, I stretch my muscles against the tension and pain that haunts me, like a kettle about to boil, a keening whistle at the edge of my conscious mind.

We all must move ourselves through this Great Reset. Some will have an easier time than others, and they must do their part to ease the burden on everyone else.

If we think of our resilience as a muscle, then we must remember to feed it and tend to it like a muscle. Think of athletes, with protein-rich diets and ice baths: What will give us the energy and fuel we need? What will aid in our recovery?

We are at that point in an exercise class where you cannot possibly lift your arms again — and yet you do, again and again, breathing in time with the music as a helpful instructor shouts encouragement and praise. We cannot possibly endure; and yet we do.

This past year has been a struggle. I am doing my best. I know that you, the one reading this, are doing your best, too.

Reflect on what fuel you need for your resilience. Many of the mechanisms we relied on in the past are not accessible right now — I miss my grandparents, I miss coffee shops, I miss not-so-secret concerts in crowded lofts, I miss dinner parties with friends, and most of all, I miss my partner's touch.

Photography is one way that I fuel my recovery, taking my Instax SQ6 and my grandfather's Polaroid on adventures, playing with the imperfection and instant gratification of film photography. I love these images best for their flaws. Light leaks and purple hues. Creating tangible souvenirs of moments in a

It sounds like the name of a flower. *My anhedonias are blooming nicely this year.*

year where memory fades and time flows erratically.

I crave nature, outdoors, and inside my home. So many of us have reached for plants and gardens in this time, nurturing life and nurturing the part of us that also yearns to create. Creation is an act of rebellion against stasis. Think of all the tiny succulents now marching across windowsills in defiance of this plague, tiny sparks of life to ward off the darkness.

The greatest fuel I have discovered, however, is vulnerability and connection. To say: I am not in crisis, but I am not okay. To hold space for your own pain and the pain of others. To feel less alone. To discover new shapes of yourself in your aloneness.

My therapist is a wonderful woman who permits me to talk and talk and talk, and ever so occasionally shares insights that hit like a lightning strike. I described doing a virtual panel that I worried would be draining but was actually invigorating and fun. She asked me to notice how my energy had shifted over the course of our call.

Anhedonia. My desperation for happiness was a thirsting vampire, insatiable and predatory. I need, I need, I need, I need. The good medicine was in sharing, in illuminating the path for others, in being seen.

Recently, I led a writing workshop for a group of grade eights in Manitoba's Learning From Home School. I taught some simple practices to read like a writer, analyzing first chapters and supporting each other with helpful feedback. I showed them how to find the gems in each others' writing, to polish them until they shine. I gave them my energy and my insight and my time and my validation.

In giving, I felt my own reserves replenished, like some kind of arcane magic. Like a practice of faith.

These young dreamers gave me hope. They showed their courage, their adaptability, their resilience and determination. If you are a student, or know one, you'll understand what I mean. Despite the limitations and frustrations and setbacks, they are doing their best. They are in that beautiful space where their aspirations have not been fully tempered, and the world they graduate into will be unlike any other.

I told them to re-read the first chapter of beloved books and of their own writing. To ask: *What do we know? What are we excited to find out?*

As a community of creators, this experience is likely to infuse our work forevermore, like the net of fascia over our muscles and bones. What do we know about ourselves now, after a year of

isolation? And most importantly, what excites us as we write the next chapter?

Resilience is not just about what you, personally, are able to bear. Resilience is how our community makes it through this crisis, alchemizing our pain into our creative work.

What gifts will you nurture and share?

Rebecca Diem writes hopeful speculative fiction and poetry. Her work includes contributions to Tor.com and Kobo Writing Life as well as the indie steampunk series Tales of the Captain Duke. Born a small-town girl, Rebecca now lives in Toronto and is the resident communications wizard at The Word On The Street literary festival. She is the grateful recipient of a 2020 Explore & Create grant from the Canada Council for the Arts for her current book-in-progress, Greenlight.

COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE



"Now you know why I call it Podcast from a Closet."