



Sarah Selecky
WRITING SCHOOL

How To Do a Self-Directed Writing Workshop (part 1)

I read widely and pleasantly, always making my way through a nice fat stack of books of all genres. It's an easy way to put myself on a self-directed writing workshop, with no end date. The goal: to learn all that I can from everything that I'm reading.

My only rule is that the process of the reading itself sparks a feeling for me. If I read the sentences and don't feel anything, then I permit myself to put the book back on the shelf, and promise to pick it up again in a few weeks, to redo the spark test.

*If I feel a spark when I'm reading,
it's asking me to pay attention.*

This is how I can tell that I'm writing when I'm reading: I feel more attentive, like I'm watching for clues. I then take notes in my journal about any sparks of feeling I have, and I try to work out the writing mechanics and possible lessons from there.

Sparks of feeling may include: ideas, thoughts, aha moments, bewilderment, coincidences, delight, desire, distaste, wonder, fascination, and jealousy (ooh, *especially* jealousy).

Noticing my response to the writing feels different than simply "liking" or "disliking" the book itself. I'm watching myself read, watching how I react to the story, the writing, the characterization, etc. One part of me is reading and having reactions to the book, and another part of me is simultaneously making note of why I'm reacting to it.

I thought I'd share some of my notes on the books I've read, to show you what I mean.

Reading Notes

Note: these are actual quotes, copied verbatim from my journal. They might not make perfect sense, but that's because I didn't think they'd be read by anybody else! Lilian is the name of my novel's protagonist.

Elizabeth McCracken. *Thunderstruck*.

I see the beauty of detailed description — slow down to capture the breadth and expanse and atmosphere of a space. Try to do it in a few deft strokes. Details!!

Sarah Henstra. *Mad Miss Mimic*.

I feel the power of language and syntax here. Don't forget syntax. Occasionally I also feel how deeply she has immersed herself in the world of this novel — London, England, over 100 years ago — because she describes the streets and the clothing as if she were living it, as if she were there. It's the magic of imagination and research and trance-mission. A solid reminder for me.

Both *Thunderstruck* and *Mad Miss Mimic* teach me to go deep into the low point of my scene. If Lilian is sad, BE LILIAN and write from that consciousness. Get down on the floor and lie there and feel powerless. Be Lilian feeling powerless. What does she see from the floor?

Rachel Pastan's first book, *This Side of Married*, reminded me that writing about the feminine experience is a time-honoured joy and pleasure, that of course women's lives are worth reading about, duh, *Pride and Prejudice* is so beloved precisely because of this. Love and marriage, trust and betrayal, women's friendship, domestic life are all crucial to our lives, and we never tire of reading about them. Never feel shy about writing a novel about the female experience.

Alena — also Rachel Pastan. ART. Reminded me to write about art, and colour, and about Lilian as an artist. Lilian, of course, sees her life with the eyes of an artist! Write from that place.

From Tim Burkett, [*Nothing Holy About It*](#) — remember that writing is a practice, that keeping an open heart even (especially) when it feels difficult, brings relief. Also that my story, the trueness of it, is always right there for me. It is my own thinking and storytelling over top of it (worry, doubt, preparation, and rehearsing) that clouds my experience of it as it unfolds. The mystery is always there.

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