

# THE CONVERSATION

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## On Writing

The craft of words

# Genius in the garret or member of the guild?

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There is an enduring story about writers — about artists in any mode — and that is what Alex Pheby calls “the myth of isolation.” This is the trope of the lone genius, shutting themselves away in garret or study or shed to pound out their masterpiece and wrestle with the muse while, outside, life goes on.

We see it in the movie version of *The Wonder Boys*, where Grady Tripp — a once-successful novelist — is unable to progress his manuscript while he is living in his wonderfully chaotic city home. Not till he moves out to a house in the woods does he get his groove back.

This solitary artist is a character more celebrated in fiction than recognised in everyday life. Few writers have the sort of resources required for much solitude. For most of us, the best we can do is score a month's residency at Varuna; cultivate the habit of early rising to snatch a couple of hours before family and employers intrude; or treat ourselves to an occasional long weekend in a hotel, alone with a laptop: that's as good as it gets.

That doesn't mean the myth of isolation is pure myth: novelists and poets do tend to preserve a discrete authorship over their work. (There are of course examples of novels and poems written collaboratively, but they vanish under the vast libraries of sole authored work.)

At workshops and in university programs, emerging writers learn to develop their own voice, and to take on board the “anxiety of influence” Harold Bloom described years ago.

And after all, writing is not easily performed in the midst of busyness: the phone rings, “a person from Porlock” knocks on the door, your partner calls you to come and see something on the television, the soup boils over.

Yes, Jane Austen apparently coped fine, writing in the family living room; JK Rowling apparently coped fine, writing in the café; but most of us need a degree of seclusion to maintain our concentration and develop the lines and sentences that will become our published works.

Most writers are indeed solitary creatures: at least while they are writing. But as **Martha Woodmansee** observes, the notion of the solitary author is of fairly recent origin (she dates it from Wordsworth's 1815 Essay, supplement to the Preface); and a close examination of any

author's life is likely to uncover networks of association, interaction and even collaboration.

Pretty well any writer who is making any sort of fist of the profession (or trade, or art) of writing will occupy a position within the community of writers, and will benefit from participation with others. So despite the Hollywood representation, and despite the stories authors themselves may tell about the writing life, we are a pretty connected group.

In a recent ARC-funded research project, my fellow investigators and I interviewed poets from around the world, at varying stages of their career; one of the questions we asked was "Is it important to you to feel that you work in a community of poets?" Most of the poets (82%) provided an answer, and those answers were very instructive.

Initially, very few said they saw themselves as part of a community; but as the conversations continued, all described relationships with mentors, poet friends, editors and others who give them feedback.

All also continually read other poets — not purely for pleasure, but also to see how those practitioners have managed image, gesture, rhythm, metaphor and music: another sort of connectedness.

What is perhaps more instructive is that, while the analysis shows that over half of the poets who responded did acknowledge that involvement with other poets is, or has been, important to them, this response varied across the categories of poets we interviewed.

Of the respondents who are most successful as poets — winners of major international prizes, widely published and translated, writers who are "household names" at least in literary circles — nearly 90% emphasised the importance of being engaged with the poetry community.

By comparison, only 40% of the mid-career and emerging poets either saw themselves as part of this community, or identified it as being of value to them.

We can infer from this the importance of encouraging newer writers to join writers' groups, participate in workshops, build friendship networks, and exchange drafts with other writers: to become part of the community of practice.

Not only is this useful in crafting a writing career, but it also provides someone else to talk to about the vicissitudes and delights of writing — someone who lives in and understands the field.

It helps to break the loneliness of the long distance writer. And, as the poets in our study insisted, it allows writers to present a collective face to a world that (in economic terms at least) barely notices our existence.

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