

WHY I WRITE

ELLE MCNICOLL

I think there is this really romanticised idea of the writer with their crumpled-up pages and their drafts strewn all about a room. Usually a big room, like an unaffordable warehouse. I grew up and started learning about writing as an occupation around the same time computers became mainstream, so there was still such an emphasis on handwriting being perfect. You know "print perfectly, cursive has to be just right, now we're using fountain pens". "Get on board". All of that.

Writing with a pen or pencil has never felt natural to me. I feel so disconnected from the physical act of writing, it's very alien to me. I was constantly told as a young person that I was doing it incorrectly. I was having work ripped up. I was being criticised at the blackboard and I was internalising all of that. I can see objectively how it frustrated the teacher, I understand. It didn't make a lot of sense why I wasn't improving. But we came to understand that it was because of an underlying condition. Being neurodivergent, my hands tremor and I have great difficulty holding a pen and with motor skills in general. I had tutoring, I had therapy, I had workshops before I was finally diagnosed. Not one single part of that entire process made me think enthusiastically: "Yes. Writing. That's an occupation I can do!".

It was... it was humiliating.

I enjoyed being creative, I enjoyed storytelling but when you've had your work ripped up in front of you you internalise that. As a neurodivergent writer, I like to stress that without modern technology, I could never do what I do. That memory of holding a pen is not one that conjures up visions of being talented and discovering passion. It's still a bad feeling.

Writing and creativity for me started in a much more physical space, in theatre and live story telling. I liked to read lots of plays rather than great novels. I was very involved in theatre. I started writing prose for myself as a young adult, because the sudden boom in books for girls my age turned me into a compulsive reader. I would spend hours in

bookshops looking for that next hit. I never expected to see myself in any of those books. It wasn't even a question. I didn't think ND girls like me belonged in any of those books.

So, I started writing. But I want to be clear, I wrote stories about nice, neurotypical girls. It never occurred to me to write from my own lens. To access that lens.

As an adult, my reading diversified but my writing stopped. I decided I wanted to be in publishing. I didn't think I could be a writer and publishing seemed like the next best thing. And I was in editorial and trying to make it work but I could not ignore the lack of disabled voices in the room. In the books. The lack of access. The sort of invisibility of us in those rooms and that kind of sense of voicelessness and I realised that what happened to me as a young person was happening all over again to another generation.

With a bit of distance from my younger self I saw her with more objectivity. I saw what compassionately written fiction with the right lens would have meant to me. So I wrote it.

I first started writing for my own enjoyment, but I picked up my metaphorical pen again when I realised I had a point of view that I could steer and understand. I don't like hard and fast rules about writing, they tend to list into gatekeeping. But I do think the one thing every writer needs to have is a point of view. Suddenly I had one. I wanted there to be unapologetic narratives about and by disabled people, that didn't prioritise the abled gaze.

This informs everything that I write now. It's made going back much easier. Yes I write books for children and about children. But I like to think that they're universal. And a lot of the responses I get from adults have been incredible because they were readers like me. They were young people like me. They've now discovered a completely new point of view. Something inside of me just refused to die and I think I realised the only way to resurrect it was to be fully authentic.

All of my years avoiding that lens never led me anywhere. But the lens is real, it's truthful, it's what resonates with people. Even though what I write is fiction, it's imaginary and it's not real, the lens is true and that's what people respond to. I write work that is for young people but I always try to be universal. I'm very lucky to have a lot of great adult readers but I have a very clear audience in mind when I write. I write for the unrepresented.

My aim now is to just do the work. To continue to visit those spaces and those genres that we haven't been able to access. To take that lens there. To have that point of view and tell those stories. If I can somehow be a part of changing the literary landscape, making it more accessible and more inclusive, that's something I will be forever proud of.