

## WHY I WRITE

KIT DE WAAL

You wouldn't want a writer as a friend. We're good liars, we make things up – and try and get paid for it. We're grandiose – we think we've got something wise to say about the world. We want to be heard. We're always in our own heads and if not in our heads, then we're in yours. We watch you, listen too closely, scribble down a turn of phrase or a turn of ankle, a mannerism, a way of blinking, a twitch. And when we've finished watching you, we want to be left alone to dream, to create the perfect murder, the clever the theft, to stowaway, live another life, have adventures far from home. And then then we emerge blinking into the daylight and it starts all over again.

And we're selfish. Writing becomes an affair, becomes our secret lover, we yearn to be with it, sneak off for a five minute tryst. It becomes our north, whatever we're doing, you watch as our eyes glaze over and we drift off, daydreaming about the next time and the next time and the next time. Nothing compares.

I started writing when I thought had the time. There's never enough time. I started writing when I thought it might be easier. It's never easy. I started writing when I thought I'd grown up enough. I was wrong.

I started writing screenplays about tough guys, gangster romps with guns and geezers. I started writing the stuff that was far from my heart, circling the subjects that were tender to the touch, hiding my soft underbelly under a punch up, a bank robbery, a buried body. Yet even in those worlds, I found something deeper to explore, the why of the bad man, the broken bones behind the posturing, the dead eye of four o'clock in the morning loneliness.

But eventually, after my screenplays didn't make it to the screen and my bad men turned to dust, the circling led me to what I knew I had to write, a story about vulnerability and longing where the stakes were high in a small boy's world and where I couldn't afford to fail. The fear of failing kept me going and it's often what keeps me writing now.

And from there I wrote about an older woman and time and longing and never letting go, about finding yourself in the most unlikely of places, and then screenplays and essays and short stories and the short short story that turns on a moment, a moment that can last a lifetime. I've always been fascinated by the hinge of time, how it bends from this to that and you find yourself suddenly, somehow on the other side of the door and everything has changed.

I write now because I find it easier than not writing. Not writing is like being forever at a party. The guests are lovely, the food is wonderful, beautiful wine, comfortable sofa, excellent music. You laugh and chat and pour another drink. Yes, it's all great but after a few hours you just want to go home, strip off the party dress, kick off the stilettos and loosen your belt. You want to climb into the big jumper and pyjama trousers and wipe off the lipstick and when you look in the bathroom mirror, why, there you are! That's the real you, the real me. That's what writing is like, being the real me and what kind of a contradiction is that? By writing about the unreal, the made up, the invented, I can find myself, I feel authentic and true, in touch with who I am. A psychiatrist would have a field day.

It makes you wonder if you would write without the plaudits and the success. It makes you wonder if you would write on a desert island with no expectation that anyone would ever find your words and read them, if straight after writing you had to burn your words to stay warm. I think I would.

I think I would because success isn't the prize and the publication though it's lovely all that and it really does make you feel you've achieved something. But success is also, and more importantly, getting that feeling that's in your head, the scene that's in your head, the truth of something to bend and succumb to the medium of word. It's feelings made into words.

What does it feel like to watch your lover kiss someone else?

Can I get that down on paper? Can I get someone who's never watched their lover kiss someone else to feel it, get the kick in the gut, to cry on the bus and know the truth of it?

What does it feel like to get the news that you have only a week to live? Can I find the words that makes it so real that someone else checks their body for lumps, books a doctor's appointment, makes a will? Can I do that? Do I have the words to make you cry? Can I

make you check the lock on the door in case the bogey man comes? Can I make you laugh? I said writers aren't very nice, that's another thing we do, manipulate, play with your feelings, shatter your heart.

If I can, if I can move you to tears and laughter and worry and fright then that is success and it's what keeps me writing even when the going gets tough and it's often tough no matter how well I appear to do.

What keeps me writing is that feeling of having got it right and also that I might be able to help other writers or would-be writers think they can get it right too.

The best singers aren't in the charts, they're chanting a prayer in a mosque in Bradford, the best footballers are probably kicking a can in the slums of Rio, the best painter is decorating his mother's front room in Swindon. The best person at anything might lack opportunity, faith in themselves, training, know-how, a helping hand, an open door.

The best story tellers might never write. Or maybe they can't write. They might look at the writing world and think, that's not for me, I don't belong, I could never do it, who would read it? They might look and think, I don't see my sort of stories in the shops, my sort of lives in books, my face, my body, my family. And the more they see the success of those stories that don't speak to them, the further away from writing they move and they find themselves, maybe at the end of their lives thinking of a particular moment, thinking of their life, thinking of that certain someone and saying 'I should have written it all down about it and now it's too late.'

It's not too late but it can feel too late and feel too hard. What keeps me writing is that someone might see me, a sixty year old, Brummie, an Irish woman, a black woman who grew up hungry, who left school when she was fifteen and went to University at 51 and say maybe I can do it. And maybe my story is worth writing about.

History they say is written by the victors, by the winners, by the people with the pen. One day all this will be history and I wonder what stories will be there for the future people to read. Will they be able to read about the small stories in the big tower blocks, about the strange stories in the tied cottage? Will they be able to read about the black boy and the queer girl and the hard life full of laughter, about the woman in the factory and the man in the call centre, the sex worker, the teenage YouTuber, the girl who signs, the boy who

becomes a girl. The future will be the poorer without these stories. And we are the poorer without them right now.

If anything keeps me writing, it's the hope that I won't be alone, that I'll be joined by you and you and you and we'll get our stories out of our heads and on to the page. That when people look back - and when people look now - they will see that we all had the pen, we all had the chance to be winners.