

Reasons for Writing

By Amy Stahl

What is it about writing that captivates so many people? Can just anyone be a writer or does it require some special gift? Is it a talent we are born with, or a skill that is nurtured over time?

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hen dozens of people crowded into the Idaho Historical Library last winter to hear Idaho author Kathleen Hedberg, the sponsors of the presentation were surprised by the huge turnout.

Were the hundred or so people jammed into the room that interested in hearing Hedberg's tale of the Oakley flood? Hardly. More likely, the men and women listening raptly that evening were writers. Writers who want to see their work in print.

In 1993 Hedberg self-published a historical book, *A Flood Cannot Happen Here*, which won the prestigious Idaho Library Association Book of the Year award. She had, in the minds of many of her listeners at the Historical Library, achieved their idea of the American dream.

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An onerous task to some, writing is an almost mystical art form to others. Anne Morrow Lindbergh said in no uncertain terms: "I must write. I must write at all costs. For writing is more than living, it is being conscious of living."

John Grisham is another famous example of a writer with a near compulsion to practice his craft. Once a small-town Mississippi lawyer, Grisham has made a tidy fortune from his gripping thrillers. Disgruntled with his job and enamored with novels, Grisham spent three years working on his first blockbuster book, *A Time to Kill*. Waking at 5 a.m., he would spend a couple hours scribbling in a notebook before putting on his suit and heading to the office. After 25 rejection slips, he sold the novel for \$15,000 but it didn't sell well. Then came *The Firm*. Now Grisham is one of the crown princes of the literary world.



Allison

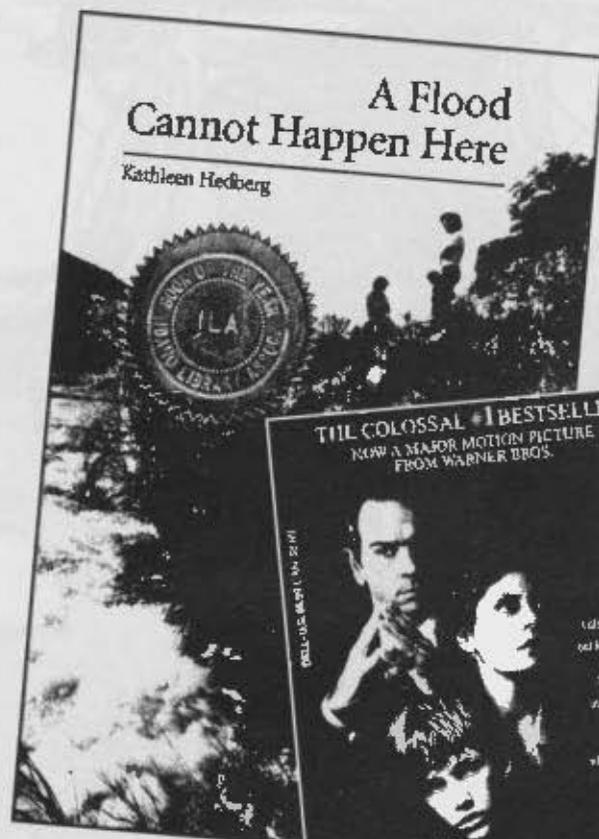
The girl and the monster
Part 1

One day the girl was

walking home from

school and she disappeared

But before she disappeared



*Kathleen Hedberg's self-published book **A Flood Cannot Happen Here** won an Idaho Library Award; John Grisham's obsession with writing has brought fame and Hollywood contracts.*



True, he takes some shots from critics who sniff that his books are crass and commercial. Grisham doesn't seem to care. He's found his calling. And it's a passion he discovered at a tender age. As a child, Grisham's family moved frequently. "The first thing we'd do is join the local Baptist church, the second was go to the library and get our library cards and check out all the books we were allowed,"

Grisham said in a 1993 interview with *Newsweek* magazine.

In Grisham's case, a passion for reading led to a passion for writing. But is that always the case? "I used to think they were two sides of the same coin," says BSU English professor Drick Zirinsky. "I no longer think it's that simple."

That's not to say that reading is not integral to a writer's development. Reading is an interactive process, she says, one that draws on a reader's personal history because "they need to create pictures in their own mind."

Writing requires a different set of building blocks. "You write based on what you have been able to write before," she says. "It's always been a common thought that writing is developmental and builds over time."

Zirinsky firmly believes that writers who are serious about their work are dedicated to improving their skills, a commitment that is made, not born. "It has to do with drive, determination and self-discipline," she says. Writers struggle constantly against self-doubt and the distractions of the world: the fax machine, fame, writer's block.

The muse that allows words to flow forth with beauty and grace is a myth, says Zirinsky, admitting that she sometimes faces "the loneliness of the writing desk."

It's the rare writer who has the luxury of empty hours spent at a comfortable desk. Free moments, for example, were few for Evelyn Amos, a ranchwife and mother who lived on a family farm in the 1940s and '50s near Sweet. She wrote hurriedly on scraps of paper bags, advertisements and the insides of used envelopes. Her diary, a

charming and revealing glimpse of life on a dry-land farm, has been published by BSU's *cold-drill* books.

As Amos' diary attests, writing is about more than poetry and Pulitzer-winning prose. Letters, memos and even grocery lists are part of the craft of writing.

For children, writing begins with pictures, says BSU education professor Stan Steiner.

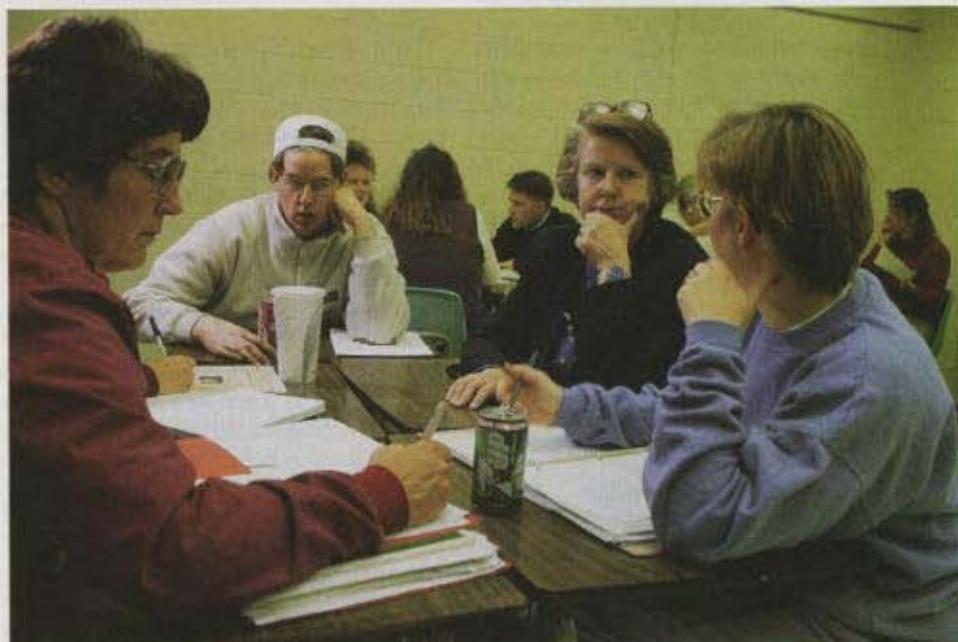
"All kids want to write, we just have to provide them with the opportunities," says Steiner, quoting writing guru Donald Graves. "It's not something we're born into."

Steiner stresses the importance of "modeling," in which parents and teachers write constantly and share the experience with their children. Kids see adults writing and inevitably want to mimic it, says Steiner, whose 3-year-old daughter recently tried to "write" him a note on the back of a cash register receipt.

Teachers, Steiner says, are taking a new look at writing. In recent years, the educational establishment hasn't paid much attention to writing other than to drill students in spelling and grammar. "We've missed out on bringing real-world examples to children," he notes. Creativity apparently has been lost in the schoolroom shuffle.

But that's changing, too. Connie Lyons' second-grade classroom at Hubbard Elementary School in Kuna illustrates the importance of writing and how to encourage self-expression in children. "I try to establish a classroom environment that supports writing in any way," says Lyons. Buckets of markers, scratch paper, colorful index cards and envelopes line the shelves of a classroom bookcase. A metal mailbox sits on the top. Lyons encourages her students to leave notes for one another in the box; the notes are then "delivered" daily. On a nearby table, handmade construction paper "briefcases" stuffed with students' writing samples fill a large box. The walls, too, are lined with illustrated stories.

"Kids need what writers in the real world need: to have time to write," says Lyons. Her pupils spend 30-40 minutes writing daily. They also devote time on Fridays to "author's chair," a specially



Good writing is about drive, determination and self-discipline, says English professor Driek Zirinsky, second from right.

designated rocking chair from which each student reads a sample of his or her writing while classmates make suggestions or comments.

"With all of this you're building a community of readers who are not competing so much as cooperating," says Lyons, who has a master's degree from BSU in education with an emphasis in reading.

At the start of the school year, Lyons outlines the steps in writing: choose a topic, write a first draft, revise, proofread and publish. The first step can be the most difficult for young writers. She guides the children, explaining carefully how she finds something to write about.

A 20-year teacher, Lyons has worked with hundreds of students, but she still marvels at their abilities. "They have their own ideas and the power of that comes through, the power of who they are," she says. "They have their stories, their things to say."

Self-expression is a need we all share, says Lucy McCormick Calkins, the author of one of Lyons' favorite writing texts. In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Calkins says: "Human beings have a deep need to represent their experience through writing. We need to make our truths beautiful."

The writing process just comes more naturally for some than others, says Rick Leahy, director of the BSU Writing Center. He thinks that some writers are born with the inclination and blessed with the right environment. British novelist Jane Austen, for one, had no formal training in rhetoric, he says. But writing was in her blood. Even the children in Austen's family wrote "tremendous amounts together."

Some of Leahy's students are prolific journal writers and are "good largely just by sheer practice. They have a sharp ear for language and the effects of language." Most importantly perhaps they "have a lot of motivation and a lot to say." Nonetheless, he says, "there are a lot of ways to make people good writers."

Leahy recommends looking to the past — 2,500 years ago in fact — to get a perspective on writing today. He uses the works of Aristotle and the Sophists, Gorgias, Hermogenes, Cicero and

Quintilian as examples.

The ancients kept copious journals, imitated other writers, revised their work constantly, and toyed with sentence structures, says Leahy. "They really laid the foundation for the techniques that are being used today."

It's an ongoing process of rediscovery, says Donald Murray. Murray is a one-time journalist, Pulitzer winner and one of the nation's most highly respected writing teachers. Writing "is the result of a series of logical, cognitive, and affective activities that can be understood, and, therefore learned," he wrote in his 1982 book *Learning by Teaching*. Writing, he says, "isn't magic."

Maybe it's not magic but writing has a certain unmistakable power, says Boise State student Jackie Schnupp. When asked if she consciously picked writing as her field of interest, she is unequivocal. "Writing picks you," Schnupp says firmly.

An inveterate reader, she constantly scrutinizes other writers' work. A 33-year-old senior majoring in English with a writing minor, Schnupp is vice president of BSU's chapter of the Sigma Tau Delta international English honorary society. She also writes a humor column that runs in a monthly upstate New York newspaper.

Her interest in reading was cultivated at an early age. Even when she was a toddler, Schnupp's father, a Morrison Knudsen engineer, worked with her on words and spelling. Reading was a welcome diversion, she says. So is writing.

"People tell me how much they hate writing and that it's so hard," says Schnupp. "It's never been hard for me. It's almost like a game — playing with words. I love it."

Whether writers are born or made, no one really knows for sure. But most writers know that it's rarely easy. In fact, it's hard work. Most people agree that good writing requires patience, commitment and a willingness to fail. But Murray believes it's worth the struggle because it enables writers to reach deep within themselves. "For the writer, writing is a process, a way of seeing, of hearing what he has to say to himself, a means of discovering meaning," he says. □