

THE WRITING LIFE

THE SECRETS OF THEIR SUCCESS

History reveals that many great writers of the past faced the same litany of foes we all do—from procrastination and writer's block to confounded interruptions and sleeplessness. So how did *they* deal with these hardships?



Procrastination was seldom a problem for Victor Hugo, but when he found himself distracted, he employed his own sure-fire cure. The author of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables* simply removed his clothes and instructed his servant to return them several hours later. Naked and alone, he wrote.

Somewhat less Spartan methods were employed by Honoré de Balzac. The famous French author relied on coffee to help him produce the novels in *La Comédie Humaine*. Listen to him wax ecstatic about his beloved “black water,” which he said caused a “general commotion” from the very first drop:

Ideas begin to move like the battalions of the Grand Army on the battlefield, and the battle takes place. Things remembered arrive at full gallop, ensign to the wind. The light cavalry, the artillery of logic hurry up with their train and ammunition, the shafts of wit start up like sharpshooters. Similes arise, the paper is covered with ink, for the struggle commences and is concluded with torrents of black water, just like a battle with powder.

I’ll take mine with cream and sugar, thanks.

Coffee is indispensable to many writers, who often report that their personal sleeping schedules are more at-

tuned to their innate, creative tendencies than to the clock. This tendency is borne out by history. Like Balzac, many writers seem to be night people. Balzac habitually wrote from midnight to noon, a practice that would have greatly aided insomniac Franz Kafka, who is said to have found sleep impossible so long as words were growing inside him.

But some amount of sleep is necessary for peak creative performance. Knowing this, James Thurber devised a unique solution. Whenever sleep eluded him, the author of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* found relief in rewriting Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” using the famous bird’s viewpoint. (If that doesn’t work for you, try rewriting *Mitty* using Poe’s style. . . .)

Yes, hardship often seems to accompany great lit-

erary works. Indeed, innumerable writers have penned their wares from the pen itself. It was in prison that Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Cervantes kick-started *Don Quixote*, and John Cleland found *Fanny Hill*. While serving time for embezzlement, O. Henry wrote many short stories, including *The Gentle Grafter*. And Oscar Wilde wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* while residing in Cell 3, third landing.

Most of these writers were jailed for political crimes, notes Vincent Starrett in *Books Alive*. Few have been imprisoned for theft or murder. Perish the thought. . . .

If the pen doesn’t provide the answer you’re seeking, try the tub. It’s not only mightier than the pen, but heavier. Benjamin Franklin, proud proprietor of the country’s first bathtub, is reported to have read *and* written during long soaks. While a bubble bath and his rubber ducky may have helped Ben with *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, French author Edmond Rostand reportedly used his tub to hide from interruptions while penning *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

The best advice, however, may come from other quarters. Though actress Mae West wasn’t widely published, she did author her own memoirs. When an inquisitive reporter asked about her writing methods, he received the legendary reply: “I do all my best work in bed.”

—Pat Russo