HOW TO WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE IN ANY GENRE

WRITER'S DIGEST

101 Best Websites *for* Writers

OUR MOST DEFINITIVE LIST YET

Master Your Genre

THE DOS & DON'TS OF COMBINING GENRES

ROMANCE: WHY IT'S HOT & HOW TO BREAK IN

YOUNG ADULT: TOP EDITORS & AGENTS ON WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT

MYSTERY/SUSPENSE: 5 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR STORY STAND OUT

\+

THE WD INTERVIEW

Anne Lamott

THE AUTHOR OF *BIRD BY BIRD* ON HER RETURN TO FICTION

fwmedia
US $5.99
06
0 74470 02379 1
Display until June 21, 2010

MAY/JUNE 2010 writersdigest.com

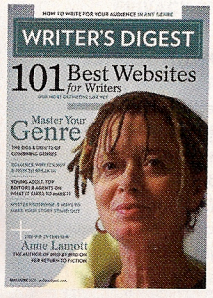
WRITER'S DIGEST
MAY/JUNE 2010 | VOLUME 90 | NO. 4

FEATURES

46
THE WD INTERVIEW:
Anne Lamott
For decades, writers have been turning to the words of Anne Lamott for guidance, inspiration and courage. Now she's back with a new novel—and a lot more to say about a writing life well lived.
BY DIANA PAGE JORDAN

50
Message in a Bottle
The winner of WD's 10th Annual Short Short Story Competition proves that even confined spaces can hold the most powerful of messages.
BY ZACHARY PETIT

52
101 Best Websites for Writers
Check out our 12th annual list for everything you need to help advance your writing.
BY BRIAN A. KLEMS AND THE *WRITER'S DIGEST* STAFF



ON THE COVER

41 How to Write for Your Audience in Any Genre
52 101 Best Websites for Writers
36 The Dos & Don'ts of Combining Genres
22 Romance: Why It's Hot & How to Break In
26 Young Adult: Top Editors & Agents on What It Takes to Make It
32 Mystery/Suspense: 5 Ways to Make Your Story Stand Out
46 The WD Interview: Anne Lamott

COLUMNS/DEPARTMENTS

8 **INKWELL**
The Location-Independent Writer • Bob, The Column • Video + Book = Vook • Maeve Binchy: On Editors • In Memoriam • Poetic Asides
EDITED BY ZACHARY PETIT

16 **BREAKING IN:** Debut Author Spotlight
BY CHUCK SAMBUCHINO

18 **MFA INSIDER:** Necessary Confusions
BY DAN BEACHY-QUICK

21 **ASK THE PRO:** Kate Schafer Testerman, Agent With KT Literary
BY KARA GEBHART UHL

62 **QUESTIONS & QUANDARIES:** Sneaky Terms; Fee-Charging Agents; Style Advice
BY BRIAN A. KLEMS

64 **YOUR STORY:** The Gift
BY SARAH T. SCHWAB

74 **STANDOUT MARKETS:** Wild Child Publishing & Freya's Bower; *Fringe Magazine*
BY VANESSA WIELAND

76 **CONFERENCE SCENE:** Genre Events
BY LINDA FORMICHELLI

WRITER'S WORKBOOK

Genre Fiction

66 **4 STORY STRUCTURES FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY & MORE**
BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

69 **5 TIPS FOR CREATING CHARACTERS FOR KIDS**
BY ANN WHITFORD PAUL

71 **3 TECHNIQUES FOR CRAFTING YOUR VILLAIN**
BY HALLIE EPHRON

PLUS: 4 contributors 5 editor's letter 6 reader mail 88 online exclusives

Writer's Digest (ISSN 0043-9525) is published eight times a year (which may include an occasional special, combined or expanded issue that may count as two issues) by F+W Media, Inc., 4700 E. Galbraith Road, Cincinnati, OH 45236. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Writer's Digest*, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Subscription rates: one year, $24.96; two years, $49.92; three years, $74.88. Canadian subscriptions add $10 per year for GST/HST tax and postage via surface mail. Foreign subscriptions add $10 for surface mail or $39 per year for air mail. Remit in U.S. funds. Canadian Publications Mail Agreement No. 40025316. Canadian return address: 2835 Kew Drive, Windsor, ON N8T 3B7. *Writer's Digest*, Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. Vol. 90, No. 4. Periodicals Postage Paid at Cincinnati, Ohio, and additional mailing offices.

The WD Interview

Anne Lamott

IMPERFECT BIRD BY BIRD

For decades, writers have been turning to the words of Anne Lamott for guidance, inspiration and courage. Now she's back with a new novel—and a lot more to say about a writing life well lived.

BY DIANA PAGE JORDAN

PHOTO © JAMES HALL/JAMES HALL PHOTOGRAPHY

The daughter of a disciplined writer—a man who was at his desk by 5:30 a.m. every day—Anne Lamott has been a full-time wordsmith since she was 20, cultivating an early commitment to the craft many writers only dream of. Her father, Kenneth Lamott, coached her to write daily (like one might practice scales on the piano, she explains), to read voraciously and to study how the masters "have done this extremely hard work trying to capture the story of humankind."

Although her father didn't live to see her first book published—her 1980 debut novel, *Hard Laughter*, was written as he was dying of brain cancer—Lamott still clearly treasures the role of both teacher and storyteller that was his gift to her. And it was his words that inspired the title of her 1994 book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, equaled only by Stephen King's *On Writing* in texts writers cite as a "bible" for the craft. The well-known story behind the title bears repeating: Lamott's little brother had waited until the day before a report on birds was due at school to start working on it—and quickly found himself overwhelmed. Their father wisely advised him to take the writing "bird by bird."

Lamott's early writing life was not an easy one: Her struggles with addiction have been well chronicled. She says her personal turning point came at age 32, when she penned her fourth novel and first sober book, *All New People*. When she no longer began her writing days hungover, she found her mind was freed from the "grandiosity and self-loathing that often accompanies alcoholism."

Today, that rebirth into sobriety still informs Lamott's writing, as does her spirituality, trademark humor and political awareness—another quality acquired from her parents, who actively registered voters in the '60s. Later nonfiction bestsellers like *Operating Instructions* and *Traveling Mercies* focus on themes of motherhood and faith. One of Lamott's favorite lines from her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, "Laughter is carbonated holiness," encapsulates the approach evident throughout her catalog of work, comprised of equal parts fiction and nonfiction, as well as an impressive body of essays and other short works widely published on Salon.com and elsewhere.

This spring marks the release of Lamott's first return to fiction since 2002's *Blue Shoe*. Her 12th book, *Imperfect Birds* is the final piece of a trilogy that began with *Rosie*, written when she was still drinking, and *Crooked Little Heart*, her later attempt to resurrect *Rosie*'s characters and "do right by these people." Here, she discusses what it's like to be an imperfect bird—and much, much more about the craft and the dream of writing.

Tell us about *Imperfect Birds*—what sparked its writing?

Rosie is 17 years old, and beginning to dance with the dark side. I love these characters, and I felt like I could commit a couple years to helping them tell another chunk of their story—and, of course, I had a teenage son. But I also live in a town with a real drug problem, which Rosie develops, and I just felt like my nose was being rubbed in a lot of really bad decisions made by kids who I felt like I'd raised because they all came to our house all the time. I just wanted to write about what was right before me, which was a beautiful little town and a real possibly evil thing going on in that town.

Why did you decide to write another novel after devoting the past few years to essays and other nonfiction?

I wanted to sink myself into something long and lasting. Novels take a lot more concentration and stamina, obviously, than a six- or seven-page essay. Every so often I feel like I'm up to it—all of a sudden it's like something tugs on my sleeve and I feel like I have what it takes to commit that much time. I start to see scenes of the characters and where they are when we start, how old they would be and how different they might look—or, if I don't know them, who they are to begin with. And then, little by little, I start to see the interactions and the travels and the struggles. Because I love novels. I secretly love novels more than nonfiction.

Did writing this book change you?

I think it captures changes I've already been through: what I want to share with people about stamina and letting go and faith and trusting, trusting God and trusting life. I think I have a little bit of a messiah complex in the

"The triumph is to hold a finished novel in your hand that's going to be published in four or five months and that it's not awful. The triumph is that it's not awful."

sense that I really want to share useful information. I want to share stories that I think are valuable and medicinal.

What's it like writing fiction again?

You start off thinking, *Oh, this is going to be great. Oh, I'm so on top of it this time, and I really know these people—I've written about them for years.* And instead it's just like two feet forward and one back, and two forward and four back, and complete collapse of confidence and complete giving up, and having various people and forces help me get back up on my feet and dust off my butt, and sit back down, and push my sleeves back. It reinforces the message of *just do it.* You just show up [to write], and if you're committed, then something very interesting and trippy is going to happen, and you don't want to miss it.

Anne Lamott's Bookshelf

Charles Portis is one of my very, very favorite American literary heroes. He wrote ***The Dog of the South***; he's famous for ***True Grit***.

I love ***Drop City*** by T.C. Boyle, and I think he's one of America's pure, great, clean, exciting storytellers.

Pippi Longstocking was what launched me into my life as a feminist and a woman of laughter.

My favorite book that my father wrote is called ***Anti-California: Report From Our First Parafascist State***, about the years when Reagan was governor. That's a book I really love and have read a number of times.

If I had to pick one book by a woman that I love above all others, it would be ***Middlemarch*** by George Eliot.

Mostly, I just think this is a miracle: It is a miracle to produce a decent novel. … The triumph is to hold a finished novel in your hand that's going to be published in four or five months and that it's not awful. The triumph is that it's not awful.

What does the title *Imperfect Birds* mean?

It's a line from a poem by Rumi. The line is, "Each must enter the nest made by the other imperfect birds," and it's really about how these kind of scraggly, raggedy nests that are our lives are the sanctuary for other people to step into, and that if you want to see the divine, you really step into the most absolutely ordinary. When you're absolutely at your most lost and dejected … where do you go? You go to the nests left by other imperfect birds, you find other people who've gone through it. You find the few people you can talk to about it.

You've been writing most of your life, following your father's influence. What did you learn from your dad?

I learned that you sit down at the same time every day. I learned that you do it even if you're in a bad mood or if you're a little sick or you don't know what you're doing—*especially* if you don't know what you're doing. I learned that you don't wait for inspiration. That that's just a crock. That's just an excuse to not have to take yourself seriously as an artist.

I got sober when I was 32 and that more than anything changed me. … It was like getting the windows washed. I could see better. By then I felt like I came with a gift: I felt like God made me a person who is good with words, and a person who listens really carefully, and pays attention and has a sense of humor. And I could finally reach into the toolbox and find some decent tools, because my mind was better and my spirit was coming back to life after 15 years of pretty serious drinking. I started wanting to tell these stories of having survived and having come through.

I've always told my writing students to write what they'd love to come upon. So, all of a sudden I tried nonfiction at about 38, 37. With that book, *Operating Instructions*, and with *Bird by Bird*, I could really tell mothers and then tell writers: This is what it's really like

for most of us. It's hard, it's a struggle, it's about small breakthroughs and small breakdowns. If it's going really badly and it's like pulling teeth, you're probably on the right track. …

The writing grows you up into the person you've always dreamt of being, and that's so amazing.

If you were to write another book on writing, how might it be different?

That's an old book now. Fifteen years old! I could tell people a lot more about how crazy publication will make people. A lot of people really have assumed that if they got a book published and out, especially from a good publisher, that all sorts of things in their lives would change for the better, and that they would feel very, very redeemed and validated and it's. Just. So. Not. True.

I could write about that, although I also don't want to be discouraging, because more than anything I believe people should be writing. And that the writing will give them what they're looking for, which is that connection to the community of writers. … I really believe people are called to a literary life like others are called to a theological life or a religious life, but [publishing is] a business that is really hard. Hard on your heart. Hard on your soul. Hard on your everything.

In terms of the writing process, I'm not sure how much I could add to what I've always preached, which is short assignments, and really shitty first drafts.

How does your process for writing shorter works differ from crafting a book?

[It's] so much easier, because there's a foreseeable beginning, middle and end. If I'm working on a story, then I would typically scrawl it all down on a Monday, and on a Tuesday, I'd start cleaning it up … and the third day I would get very firm and adult-like and disciplined, and try to make myself edit it all much more tightly, and be much more self-indulgent. By the fourth day I become desperate to show it to people, and that's always alarming for me, because I'm really not ready then. … And on Friday, I'm a whole different person, and I'm cutting stuff out.

With a novel, there's no easy way to separate out the assignment—it's like trying to move a hockey puck in super slow-mo down the ice. If you were in my office, you'd see that there are index cards taped to the window that are either moments or possibly ideas for stories or for the next section of what I'm working on, which I can't even really talk about yet. There's a huge sheet of graph paper up that is all the various things that I know that will be a part of the thing I just began, and there are index cards taped to that, too. There are stacks and stacks of papers and notes everywhere. I kind of, sort of, semi—if I ever did another writing book, I'd probably call it *Kind of Sort of Semi*—know where it all is.

What is the most positive change you've seen in the publishing industry since you published your first book decades ago?

The online community and the explosion of people trying to capture and communicate their lives and their histories—that profound expression of our humanity collectively on the Web, I find very powerful.

The most negative?

That whole big-box store aspect of publishing has been heartbreaking. I've always seen bookstores as churches in that they are sanctuary, they are temples of truth and illumination. And that's so much more true in a small bookstore … so I'm sad about the very sweet and holy bookstores that haven't been able to stay alive, and I'm very sad about the small-press-run books that taught me to be a writer, the books that we handed to each other like sacred scrolls when I was 18, and 19, and 20, and 21, because most of the presses have gone out of business. It was such a way of life. It was another way of having holiness and truth and communion, espresso instead of a wafer.

What's the most positive thing you could tell writers today?

That it really matters that they write. It's very inconvenient when you start to say no [to other life obligations], but no is a complete statement, because from now on, hell or high water, I write for two hours a day. It's absolutely the most important thing you can do if that thing is inside you, tugging on your sleeve, hoping you'll notice it there, urging you to be one of the storytellers. **WD**

WritersDigest.com

ANNE LAMOTT: THEN AND NOW To read WD's June 1996 interview with Anne Lamott—which took place not long after the release of *Bird by Bird*—visit writersdigest.com/anne-lamott-archives.

DIANA PAGE JORDAN (dianapagejordan.com) interviews writers for radio, TV, the Web and print publications.