

Writing Conversations

Writing Conversations:
*Spend 365 Days With Your
Favorite Authors,
Learning the Craft of Writing.*

Cherie K. Miller, M.A.

Forward by J. Steve Miller, M.Div.



Wisdom Creek Press, LLC
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Cherie K. Miller

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Writing Conversations

This book is for everyone out there who has a book
incubating in them, but they don't have any
idea on how to get that book out onto
the page.

With a special thank you to my favorite author who has encouraged
me every step of the way, my sweet
husband, J. Steve Miller.

Cherie K. Miller

Writing Conversations

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Cherie K. Miller

Forward

As a writer, I'm never satisfied with my grasp of the craft—always seeking ways to write with more clarity, more energy, and more effect. To that end, I take writing classes, read books on writing, and study the works of the masters.

All too often, I forget what I've learned and fall back into my rut—the way I'm most comfortable writing. It's one thing to take a class under a writer, quite another to allow the writer's suggestions to meddle with my own writing.

To jolt myself out of that rut, I find that I need constant reminders of the wisdom I've heard, but later forgot. To this end, I treasure snippets of wisdom, easily digestible bites that I can read in the morning and reflect upon as I begin each day's writing.

This book serves up those snippets of writing in daily bites that I hope will sharpen your writing as they've sharpened mine.

J. Steve Miller, June 2010
Author of *Sell More Books!*

January 1

BEGINNINGS:

For me, starting is hard, so I really need to give myself permission to do a bad job. I always give myself leave to write total nonsense for as long as I need to release the pressure, because it's really hard to start if you feel like that first sentence you write has to actually mean something. So I tell myself that this is the first page of the book but it doesn't need to be used for anything, just for warming up. ... But not every book is meant to be published, and I think that's freeing for writers. Some writing you just do for the sake of writing, whether or not it helps or it hurts.

Ann Brashares, young adult author made famous by writing
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants.

January 2

BEGINNINGS:

There's one aphorism that's perhaps the most fitting when you begin to write a novel: If you could know what the process was like at the beginning, you might never begin. Hence, you must begin with an ample dose of blind faith. Faith that you have something important to say, that you're competent and capable of writing a novel, and that if you don't begin now, then when?

Jordan Rosenfeld, author of *Write Free*.

Cherie K. Miller

January 3

DAILY GRIND:

Make sure that it's the day-to-day writing you enjoy, not the idea of being a writer. Once you're certain about that, put your goal—the story, the poem, the book—first, every single day, above all else. Always.

Lily King, author of *The Pleasing Hour*, which was her first novel, and a Book Sense selection, a New York Times Notable Book, and winner of the Barnes & Noble Discover Award.

January 4

COURAGE:

And yet writing is also an act of courage, an act of faith. Much of the writers' work must be—can only be—accomplished by doggedly venturing into territories unknown, by risking failure with every word.

Bret Anthony Johnson, Director of the Creative Writing Program at Harvard University.

January 5

INSPIRATION:

Writing is a combination of being alert to your outer surroundings and alive to your inner reality. In my experience, the more honest a piece of work is, the more successful it will probably be when published. ...Our safety as writers lies not in disguising our vulnerability, but in expressing it, because the reader then identifies and empathizes with the writer and becomes involved in their own inner process. And that tends to make them not only more receptive to you as a writer but more receptive to the ideas that you're trying to convey.

Julia Cameron, award-winning poet, playwright, filmmaker and author of *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*.

January 6

HARD WORK:

Writing is 99 percent sweat equity: those who diligently work at it on a regular basis are most likely to succeed.

Terri Brooks, author of *The Sword of Shannara*, which became the first work of fiction ever to appear on the *New York Times* trade paperback bestseller list, where it remained for over five months.

January 7

DAYDREAMING:

Fiddling is an important part of the writing process for Handler, who must have an unsharpened No. 2 pencil in his hands when doing the necessary mulling that goes into writing. He keeps a can of pencils on his desk in an old animal cracker tin for exactly this purpose.

“So much of writing is mere contemplation, and it took me a few years to find validity in this idea. One day I'd write 12 pages and the next I'd sit around and think and eke out one paragraph, and it took me awhile to realize that was a legitimate use of time.”

Daniel Handler under the pen name of Lemony Snicket, wrote 13 books in a series entitled *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

January 8

CREATIVE DREAM:

Stephen King, in his novel *Misery*, speaks of "finding the hole in the paper and falling through it." That's a great analogy, and one I always think of when I consider an author's task. Try to fall under the spell of what you are creating. Try to understand the fantasy behind the book, what's compelling, what grips the reader. Most importantly, with every new selection, ask yourself, "What is this author really saying here about life and love?"

Tara Gavin, editor of Harlequin Enterprises books.

January 9

BEGINNINGS:

Kafka began *The Metamorphosis* with the most dramatic moment: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." But Kafka, like many contemporary writers who wonder how ordinary life goes on after great trauma—is not concerned with the hows and whys of the unthinkable cataclysmic event, but rather its aftermath.

Diane Lefer, author of *Breaking the Rules of Story Structure*.

January 10

REWRITING:

Asked if after 30 years he finally had *Shadow Country* in the shape he wanted, Mr. Matthiessen laughed and threatened to rewrite it all over again. "There are people who are scared to death that I'd really do that," he said smiling. "I'm such an obsessive and perfectionist. But the truth is I can hardly bear to go back. I immediately see an adverb that should come out. It kills me."

Peter Matthiessen, author of *Shadow Country*, a 2009 National Book Award Winner.

Cherie K. Miller

January 11

PERSERVERANCE:

I think it has been a steady-as-you-go-uphill sort of thing. Not a mountain but a good-sized hill and the higher I climb, the higher I want to go. One always smells that clean, fresh air at the top, and one is always aware of the bottle of vintage '97 wine in the pack. So we push on to the top so that we can enjoy the view and share a lovely red with our friends.

Nikki Giovanni is a world-renowned poet, writer, commentator, activist, educator, and author of *Grand Mothers*.

January 12

GRAMMAR:

Newsroom old-timers like to tell the story about a city editor frustrated by a young writer addicted to 50- and 60-word sentences. The old curmudgeon sat down at his typewriter and banged away a single key, filling a page with periods. Then he walked across the newsroom and confronted the neophyte. "Here," he said, handing over the sheet of copy paper. "We call these periods. We have lots of them. So use all you want. When you finish with these, come back and see me. I'll give you more."

Jack Hart, a managing editor at the *Portland Oregonian*, has coached reporters through some notable narratives and on to the Pulitzer Prize.

January 13

SUCCESS:

For some reason, reporters often call me an overnight success. But if that's true, it's been a 15-year long night. My career, like those of most writers, has been one of slow, incremental growth, a mixture of both successes and failures. And here's the thing that's really remarkable: the failures you face as a writer are more important, because they're what make you work harder, do better and build up the rhinoceros-hide-thick skin you need to survive in the publishing world.

Jodi Picoult, best-selling author of 15 novels, including *My Sister's Keeper*.

January 14

GETTING IDEAS:

The first question put to an author, personally, or through the post is: "Where do you get your ideas from?" The temptation is great to reply: "I always go to Harrods" or "I get them mostly at the Army & Navy Stores," or snappily, "Try Marks & Spencer." You merely say firmly, "My own head. If one idea in particular seems attractive, and you feel you could do something with it, then you toss it around, play tricks with it, work it up, tone it down, and gradually get it into shape. Then, of course, you have to start writing it. That's not nearly such fun—it becomes hard work. Alternatively, you can tuck it carefully away, in storage, for perhaps using in a year or two year's time."

Agatha Christie, author of 80 detective novels, such as *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Cherie K. Miller

January 15

PERSERVERANCE:

A writing career is not completely rooted in talent. Nor is it based on what success is happening right now. It's whether you can make yourself work through those darker periods when you're not getting a lot of recognition or interest. That ability to keep persevering ultimately separates writers who publish books from those who don't.

Andrew Porter, author of *The Theory of Light and Matter*.

January 16

GETTING IDEAS:

How shall you get full information—apart from the evidence of your own eyes and ears? The answer is frighteningly simple. It is what the press brings to you every day, served up in your morning paper under the general heading of News. Collect it from the front page. What is going on in the world today? What is everyone saying, thinking, doing?

Agatha Christie, author of 80 detective novels, such as *Murder on the Orient Express*.

January 17

PROCESS:

I find that in the beginning, when I'm working on an idea and I have all that excitement and stuff floating around in my head, scenes and character and plot, I write for a couple of hours and then I get up and have to walk away from it. Then I come back. So this process, this yin-yang between abandonment and concentration; concentrate for a long time, as much as I can, and then that abandonment to help things gel and simmer and come together.

Carla Neggers, author of more than 50 novels - 10 of them *New York Times* bestsellers.

January 18

PROFESSIONALISM:

I have to say that when I began, I didn't start it as a hobby. I wasn't going to dabble in it. I thought if I'm going to do this, I'm going to treat it like a job. And that's what I did.

Sandra Brown, author of 65 novels and over 50 *New York Times* bestsellers.

Cherie K. Miller

January 19

BEGINNINGS:

As you write the first novel, you are embracing the novel's greatest tradition, that of obscure beginnings. No other art is so simple or so cheap to engage in as literature. A lifetime's reading may be borrowed from the library; a pencil and some sheets of paper may be purloined without much trouble. You can sit at the kitchen table. You can sit on the stool in the bathroom and put a board across your knees. There is no outlay for paints or clay. And since you are writing a novel, you aren't going to need actors or film, or a stage.

Jane Smiley, Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist who wrote *A Thousand Acres*.

January 20

READING:

Reading is almost as important as writing to this task of pushing yourself forward. It was about this same time that I discovered John McPhee of *The New Yorker*; I devoured his books, studying how he shaped stories, set scenes and delivered details. I used to prowl the journalism and anthology sections of used bookstores, grabbing diverse collections of old *Esquire* articles. I dissected the work of nonfiction masters ranging from Tom Wolfe to Lillian Ross, Edward Hoaglund to A.J. Leiding. Reading good writers—like a tennis player studying videotaped matches....

David A. Fryxell, author of *Write Faster, Write Better*.

January 21

READING:

Read a good newspaper every day. Don't let your prose get florid or self-indulgent or trendy; it's better to aim for elegant simplicity rather than lyricism. Learn to self-edit, have fun and don't procrastinate.

Jody Rosen, Music and Arts Writer for *The New York Times*.

January 22

RESEARCH:

James Michener begins "writing" a book four or five years in advance. When he "felt something coming on" he would start reading as many as 150 to 200 books on the subject. He browsed, read, checked things. He kept it all in his head and then finally, he began to write. All the material gave him plenty of ideas to draw upon.

James Michener, author of more than 40 titles, the majority of which are novels of sweeping sagas, such as *Hawaii*.

Cherie K. Miller

January 23

SELF-PUBLISHING:

Self-publishing is not the easy way, but sometimes it's the only way. Self-publishing is like running in the Olympics without a country. They make you run outside the stadium. It's different from having a publisher, because your focus is on the reader, not the selling. You can't get your book into stores or control shelf space anyway, so you can't worry about it. Even after *The Christmas Box* had sold 200,000 copies, I still had no press. No one would touch it.

Richard Paul Evans, author seven bestselling books including *Timepiece* and *The Christmas Box*.

January 24

STARTING OVER:

But every time I finish a book, I forget how to write the next one. I cannot remember how I did it. I get panicky. I think "Surely one's used up all the words. How can I do it again?" It's not till I get hooked and start again properly that I suddenly think, "Ah, that's how it'd done!"

Beryl Bainbridge, a master of historical fiction.

January 25

STORYTELLING:

I regard my work as storytelling. People want to know what happens next, so I spend a lot of time plotting. By the end of Chapter 1, this has to happen, and then this must happen by the end of Chapter 2. I think about a feeling first, or an emotion—friendship or betrayal or hypocrisy. ... This is a great writer's tool: "What would I feel like if this would happen to me?" It helps you flesh out the book a bit.

Maeve Binchy lives in Dalkey, Ireland, and is the author of 24 novels like *Tara Road* and *Quentins*.

January 26

MY WRITING PROCESS:

Writing exercises are the maps, not the destinations. They are the keys to the castle, not the castle itself. Exercises both narrow and broaden a writer's imagination and such narrowing and broadening is, I believe, the means to more successful writing. ... Although there is an obvious element of prescription to every writing exercise, the goal is to awaken creativity by erecting loose, empowering structures.

Bret Anthony Johnson, Director of the Creative Writing Program at
Harvard University.

Cherie K. Miller

January 27

MY WRITING PROCESS:

What I tell my students is, for at least two years, what you should just do is what I call writing practice. Just do timed writing with nowhere to go. Because during that time you'll begin to have a relationship with your mind. And your mind is your most potent writing tool. ...Writing is about being alive. So see what's alive and then see what you do with it.

Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*.

January 28

FINDING TIME TO WRITE:

...in the beginning [Matthiessen] supported himself by working as a commercial fisherman. "It was the perfect arrangement. The work was seasonal, and this place is the house of wind, so there were a lot of days you couldn't go out. I loved the contrast. I'd go to work at 4:30 in the morning and then I've have a big chunk of time in the middle of the afternoon."

Peter Matthiessen, author of *Shadow Country*, 2009 National Book Award Winner.

January 29

INSPIRATION:

First read. Reading is a prerequisite to great writing. Second, when you're writing, don't write for self-gratification. Writing is done for the gratification of others. Write to educate, or to amuse. But when you write, you are supposed to have something to convey.

P.J. O'Rourke, author of *Eat the Rich*.

January 30

SUCCESS:

This success is like a Christmas tree with packages piled halfway up the tree. It's almost too much to handle. What do I do with all these packages? There's only one package that I care about. And that's the one where I'm sitting at the table and writing the next book.

Frank McCourt, Irish-American Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Angela's Ashes* and *Teacher Man*.

Cherie K. Miller

January 31

REJECTION:

Two publishers rejected *Love Comes Softly* which has since sold 1,020,000 copies. "A person who's going to write should expect rejection. Writing is difficult, but getting your work matched with the right publisher is just as difficult. Writers must have faith in their material and diligence in submitting it."

Janette Oke, author of *Love Comes Softly*.