

# juicy writing

*inspiration and techniques  
for young writers*

**Brigid Lowry**

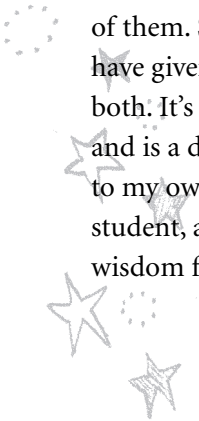
  
ALLEN & UNWIN



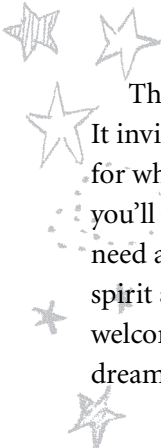
# An Invitation

Writing is a joyous act. It's a pleasurable journey into the world of the imagination and the world of ideas. It brings our deep loves and our sorrows into the light and transforms them, connecting us not only to ourselves but to other human beings. Good writing begins in the heart, with honesty and interesting thoughts, and takes us to places we didn't know we were capable of going.

Good writing produces work that is profound, whether it be a song, a poem, a play, a short story, a novel or a film script. Words are important and our stories matter.



There are many books for writers. In the eighteen years since I've been writing professionally, I've read quite a few of them. Some have inspired and encouraged me, others have given me solid technical help. This book aims to do both. It's written for, but not restricted to, young writers, and is a distillation of information that's been beneficial to my own writing life. It is also fed by my years as a Zen student, a creative writing teacher, and an avid collector of wisdom from other writers.

A cluster of five hand-drawn stars in various styles, some with lines through them, located in the upper left corner of the page.

This book contains an invitation to you, the writer. It invites you to embark on a long mysterious journey for which there is no real map. However, in these pages you'll find guidance and companionship. You don't need anything you don't already have: courage, a willing spirit and an enquiring mind. Here, every part of you is welcome: your longings, your heartbreak, your flimsy dreams, your unique intelligence. Come on in.

Brigid Lowry



# Sunflowers and seeds

Where does writing come from? It comes from our depths, in its own time and its own inexplicable way, almost as if by magic. However, if you love the world of words, there are things you can do to encourage the writing process. The first step is to collect material.

In this way, writing is a bit like gardening. You begin by making compost. Gardeners collect leaves, food scraps, lawn clippings and seaweed, but your raw material is words and ideas. Scribble a line in your notebook. Let it rest for a while. It may be a word that you love, an image, or an idea for a story. Honour the deep murky ocean of your imagination. Let the material accumulate, however slight or random it may seem. This process requires trust. You don't have to know how these fragments are going to be used, just write them down. Your job is to collect things that interest you, and to believe that they are worth collecting. Allow this compost, or seed material, to gather in dark ungainly confusion.

Later, when the time is right, and you're in the mood to write, take out your notebook and play. Take a line and

add another. Follow an idea and see where it leads you. Explore possibilities. You will begin to see connections between some of the stuff you have gathered. Maybe the guy in the black fedora hat you saw in a café, the one who drank two lattes in a row and didn't wipe the froth off his lip, owns the talking dog you jotted down when it appeared in your bizarre dream. The scribbled words 'talking dog?' suddenly interest you again. 'On the day Fifi, the talking poodle, was run over...' you begin. You feel a sudden rush of interest and pleasure as your brain kicks into action and something begins to take shape. Like gardening, writing is a hit and miss process. Certain seeds will germinate, others won't. Sometimes, however hard you try, that good line will refuse to build into anything larger. Never mind. Leave it alone. Let it return to the dark soil of your subconscious. Other seed material will miraculously take root and develop into something wonderful. Line by line, a poem sprouts. A fragment transforms into a short story. A song blossoms into an opera. The joy comes with surrendering to and trusting the process. As in a garden, delight comes with the mystery.

## Exercises

- \* Invent a new garden implement. What materials is it made from? What is its function?
- \* What would your dream garden be like?
- \* If you lived in a garden, what would you be? A bluebird? A witty garden gnome? An echidna? A broken mosaic

birdbath? The bag lady in the shed, who is possibly a witch?

- \* Many odd things are buried in gardens. Write a story that involves digging. Beware of clichés. If there is a dead body in your story, you'll have to make sure you're not rehashing a stale plot stolen from a TV show.
- \* Write an 'Intense Tale of Exile' involving bittersweet love, war, bravery, sacrifice and betrayal. Set it in the world of SNAILS.
- \* Two unlikely characters meet in a garden. A girl in a wheelchair? A waitress? A wizard? Something happens during their meeting that changes them both. Tell their story in five hundred words. Make use of sensory detail, because gardens are alive with sounds, smells, textures. Give your piece a fabulous title.

## Starters

- ⇒ When I lived in a tree house...
- ⇒ You will run through a patch of wild flowers screaming...
- ⇒ When I was six I made friends with a pixie...
- ⇒ Radioactive chives...
- ⇒ At night the wind sounded like a mad dog barking...
- ⇒ Fred enjoyed potatoes but...

- ☞ Ophelia and Bedelia are making daisy chains...
- ☞ I remember mud and rotten pumpkins...
- ☞ She sat under the striped sun umbrella drinking....
- ☞ Bare feet are good
- ☞ My grandfather did not believe in flowers...
- ☞ There will be a circus in the garden shed at 3pm...
- ☞ A box of secrets lies buried...
- ☞ Certain things made the worm grumpy
- ☞ King Turnip and Madame Pumpkin
- ☞ In soft rain...
- ☞ A man needs a shed. Actually, so does a woman.  
However, only some fifteen year olds need a shed.
- ☞ As the spade said to the trowel...
- ☞ Edible flowers
- ☞ It takes a long time to cut a lawn with nail scissors
- ☞ Hindsight is a wonderful thing. Looking back, it seems obvious that my mother shouldn't have made my eighth birthday celebration a garden party.

# Good ideas and how to get them

*Writing is not hard. Just get paper and pencil, sit down and write it as it occurs to you. The writing is easy – it's the occurring that's hard.*

Stephen Leacock

It's been said that if you've survived childhood you already have enough material for a lifetime of writing. One of the questions that people often ask writers is where they get their ideas. The answer is simple. Your everyday life is abundant with ideas, if you have the ability to notice them.

Muriel Ryseker said that the world is made of stories. It's also made of rabbits and roses, sunsets and sadness, lizards and longings. It contains everything: soup, itchy scarves, Japanese hip hop, raspberry smoothies, old suitcases, dodgy deals and slippery slopes. Your job as a writer is to stay alive to all of it, to collect the world and turn it into stories.

It doesn't have to be something of epic proportions to be good material. Even a small thing becomes important, if it is told well. The following poem, by Perth poet and

musician, Ross Bolleter, is a great example of taking something ordinary and turning it into poetry.

Washing at night  
Slinging it up cold and heavy  
Wet under the misted stars

Morning each black T shirt's hung  
With powdered galaxies of  
Oh God one ancient Kleenex

If you are awake to it, your own life will provide endless good material for your writing. For example, you have a soul-destroying fight with your sister. It feels like the end of the world, but it isn't. Two weeks later you're best friends again. She even lends you her MP3 player, which is very cool. Even better, because you are a writer, nothing need be wasted. The short story you're working on for the school magazine needs conflict. Use the insults you fired at your sister and give them to one of your characters. Using the material of your own life in your fiction in such a way will give your work the ring of truth.

## Feeling short of ideas?

Here are some places you might find inspiration.

**In the newspaper.** The world is a mysterious place. As the old saying goes, there's nothing so weird as folks. Newspapers and magazines are full of AMAZING TRUE STORIES. For example: Did you know that the first

bomb dropped by the Allies during World War II killed the elephant at the Berlin zoo? Or that a tiger has striped skin as well as striped fur? Somehow, for me, those two odd facts that I found in a newspaper quiz seem to go together. My mind begins to imagine a zoo, and a mood. This moment of recognition is almost not rational. It is the flimsy cobwebby possibility of a beginning of something. For a writer, that moment of interest is important. It contains the germ of something significant enough to be scribbled down and thought about, a seed idea which later may find its way into a poem, a story or a scene in a novel. The family who are aiming to get into the *Guinness Book of Records* by building the world's largest wall of sausages. A young couple who were prepared to sell the rights to their unborn child's name to a corporation for a million dollars. For me oddities such as these, discovered in my newspaper, inspire many possibilities. I can feel a story coming on. 'Once upon a time there was a kid named Coca Cola...'

So, when you're having an imagination drought, get on down to your local library and spend some time browsing in the newspapers. International ones such as *The Hong Kong Times* can be particularly fascinating. Take your notebook, because there are luscious ideas just waiting to be picked.

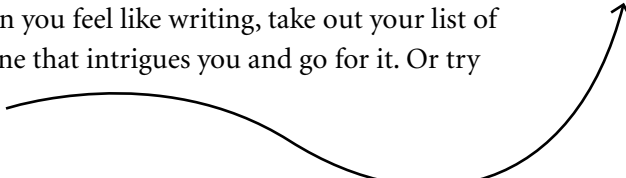
**Poetry books and songs** are often a stimulating source of good beginnings for a piece of writing. Take a line that intrigues you and let it lead you towards a poem or a song of your own.

**Cemeteries are full of stories.** Wander around on a sunny afternoon reading the headstones, then let your imagination take flight. The young man struck by lightning, aged 17 years, November 27th, 1902. Who was he? Was he a farm labourer or the rich son of landed gentry? Where was he going on the day he was killed? Was anyone secretly relieved that he died? His sister might have been, if he were arrogant and cruel and it meant she'd inherit the farm. Keep on asking the question *What If?* Follow the story and see where it takes you. Let the mossy graves provide tendrils of ideas. Write them down. Take them further.

**Step outside your comfort zone** and go to a place you've never been. A bridal shop, a posh café, the railway station, anywhere that's not your usual sort of haunt. Then use it to inspire some writing. TWO PAGES, make it brilliant!

## Starters

Lists of starters are fun. You can compile your own, maybe using some of those good lines from your juicy writing notebook. You can make them up as a game with friends or family. When you feel like writing, take out your list of starters, pick one that intrigues you and go for it. Or try the following:



## Write about:

- \* When robots go bad
- \* Slime balls
- \* The day after I died
- \* The world's most boring job
- \* When the lampshade fell in love with the light bulb
- \* Why I am scared of fairies
- \* Op shops
- \* It was a queer time
- \* It started with bananas on toast for breakfast...
- \* Evil flowers
- \* Purple pens
- \* Strange habits
- \* Being four
- \* Being fabulous
- \* I told her my name was Daisy
- \* Sipping sunflowers on lazy days
- \* Glossy bossy people
- \* Travels with my aunt
- \* The day things started disappearing

# Notebooks and journals

I have a host of notebooks. There's one in my bag for jottings and thoughts that arrive at inconvenient times. I have a dream journal by my bed, for recording and working with dreams. On my desk there's an encouragement journal in which I save all the encouraging things that friends say or write to me. I also use a visual diary, and I have a daily journal. Other creative people have one huge journal that serves all of the above purposes and beyond. Big journals are a record of a life, and can contain love letters, feathers, photographs, quotes, bus tickets, poems, words, anything you like.

Let's start with the basics.  
Get a notebook.



You don't have to spend heaps. I often buy a cheap school exercise book for less than a dollar, then frisk it up by pasting a picture or a wild collage on the cover. My most recent purchase looks superb covered in green and gold psychedelic contact paper. Feel free to splash out on an expensive one with a suede cover if it makes you happy.

Right, so now you have a notebook. Cool. Carry it everywhere. Use it to jot down good words, phrases, ideas. Tune in to interesting conversations, make a note of lines of dialogue that intrigue you.

☞ ‘Never marry a man with a bad back,’ the silvery blonde woman in a café tells her buxom friend.

☞ ‘I think too much and I talk too much,’ the skinny guy with the Celtic tattoo says loudly to his girlfriend, as you pass them in the street.

☞ ‘We had to write about the lady who loved cherries,’ you hear a kid say to his mum.

**Write it down.** These lines in your notebook are valuable. They provide a treasure trove of material that will be useful, even if at first you’re not sure how. Novelist Richard Ford collects everything he can: dreams, random images, lines and snippets, things he overhears, items he reads in the paper. He records them all in his notebook, and when he has enough of them, his characters begin to emerge.

Sometimes an interesting line appears all by itself, out of the depths of your imagination, like a gift. ‘Once I was mad and lived on the edge of nowhere,’ is a line that came to me as I sat waiting for a train, gazing aimlessly at the vivid blue of the Indian Ocean. It seemed like a worthwhile line so I jotted it down, though I had no particular use for it. Some months later, hearing of a radio competition requiring short stories of 750 words, I got out my line, and began a story, which won a prize.

## 'How to mend a Broken Heart'

Once I was mad and lived on the edge of  
nowhere, planting basil and bright nasturtiums,  
slowly dreaming the days away and folding myself  
into the corners of the night, folding time into  
squares of old newspaper and cutting the squares  
into stars and hearts and rows of paper dolls.  
I slept by myself under a blue quilt and ate bread  
and cheese dipped in soup from a Chinese bowl.  
I loved a man who didn't love me. It was an old  
story and a sad story and nobody cared a fig.  
Or maybe they did.

(If you'd like to read the whole story you can find it in  
*Tomorrow All Will Be Beautiful.*)

**Yay for the notebook!** Many writers also keep a daily journal or diary. There are many reasons for this. It's a good way of staying in touch with yourself and your feelings. It can bring clarity and focus at the end of a long hard day. It is a safe place to be yourself, when the world seems murky. The mere act of putting black on white keeps the writing muscle going.

Keeping a daily journal also feeds your work in ways that are not always known to you. One brilliant example of this happened to poet Audre Lourde, who had a period in her life when everything turned to custard. Just about everything that could go wrong went very wrong and Lourde felt completely overwhelmed and exhausted.

During this time she wrote furiously in her journal. What she wrote seemed to her to be self-indulgent and scrambled, but it also felt like her lifeline to sanity. One of her great despairs during that time was that she was unable to write any poetry. However, some time later, Lourde reread her feverishly scratched journals and was amazed to discover a series of strong poems.

**A visual diary.** Every evening I get out my hard-backed drawing book, in which each large page is divided into eight squares, and I draw a picture. I use one of the little squares daily. Other people might choose to use a whole page, but I like doing a small picture. Whatever I draw means something to me that day. It might be a wild angry scribble in red and orange, it might be a small blue cloud with the word *sleepy* written in it. I always feel grounded and creative when I take the time to use my coloured pencils and draw my day. Don't limit yourself to only one art form. Collage, painting, photography are all great ways to explore creativity.



**Experiment with journals.** Journaling is a fantastic tool. Again, there are no limits. Use a small notebook one time, a classy fabulous journal the next time. Many writers do it all on their laptop. Others prefer pen on paper. Experiment with whatever works best for you. Start a dream journal, a collection of story ideas, a collection of good words, a scrapbook of visual stimuli that appeal to you, or a diary of a year.

