



A ROOM OF MY OWN

RSL Fellows on what a writer needs to work



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FOREWORD

Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, published 90 years ago, examines the role of women writers, what they need to be able to write, and how they exist in fiction. In the essay, Woolf writes about the experiences of women barred from universities and lives as novelists and poets by poverty, by discouragement, by presumptions about the limits to their abilities.

Looking at shelves empty of the women writers who should have filled them, Woolf reminds her readers of the constant assertion “you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that” always present for women “to protest against, to overcome”. She writes that beyond the very real silencing that discouragement can effect, writing is even more impossible without “material things, like health and money and the houses we live in”. It is simple: “Intellectual freedom depends upon material things” and literature depends upon intellectual freedom. Without the money, space and time to write, your chances as a writer are very slim.

In the UK today, we know that writers from many different backgrounds and experiences – beyond those Woolf considered

90 years ago – still need to protest against, and to overcome, discouragement, to continue their fight for the money and space to work as writers.

In *A Room of My Own*, the Royal Society of Literature has collected new essays from seven Fellows, reflecting on the material conditions of their own writing lives – what helped them starting out and what complicated their early careers – and considering what might support more people everywhere to have the chance of a life in words.

These writers show us what such a life looks like, and explore the importance of public libraries, encouragement at the right moment, a writing desk or lack of one, money and a room of one's own in getting there. Their responses draw on their own lives, and place Woolf's essay in the cacophony of life lived with Twitter and Instagram, email and texting. These writers give us their experiences and urge other writers starting out to interrogate convention, and to write beyond the expectations and dictations of others. Woolf wrote, "There is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." Across the seven essays here, it is freedom – of mind and opportunity – beyond all things, that is held essential for the writer.

Molly Rosenberg

Director

Royal Society of Literature



KICKING OPEN THE DOORS

Val McDermid

Ninety years ago, Virginia Woolf proposed that what a woman needed in order to write was £500 a year and a room of her own. (That would be the equivalent of around £30,000 today, incidentally. It's a bit more than the UK Living Wage, but only if you stick to a 40-hour week. And what writer does that?) But for either of these blessings to mean anything, first you have to break down a series of doors. If you're working class, and especially if you're a woman, those doors stand between you and any possibility of putting that room to good use.

"People like us don't write books." Usually preceded by laughter, after I'd revealed what I was going to be when I grew up. It came loud and clear from friends and relations, from teachers, from the shelves of the local library that was my home from home.

The only place I didn't hear it was at home. I grew up in the working class. My grandfathers were miners, my father was a welder in the shipyard. They had manual jobs not because they weren't clever but because they lacked the opportunity to do anything else – their families couldn't afford for them to stay on at school. My mother worked in a variety of offices rather than the linoleum factory only

because during her wartime service in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) she'd been taught bookkeeping.

My mother loved books and believed that the key to me having better chances than she'd had was through education. And that meant reading. She took me to the library before I could read and read me picture books and children's poetry.

That was the first door that opened for me.

My father was a great lover of Robert Burns and he espoused the poet's egalitarian principles. From him, I absorbed the message that I was as good as anyone else and the only thing standing between me and my ambitions was my own determination.

That was the second door that opened for me.

I fear both of those doors would be closed in the faces of most working class children today. The Burns Club where my father developed his knowledge and understanding of the poet's work and politics still exists, but the overwhelming majority of its members are past retirement age. Young working class fathers generally don't turn to poetry for life lessons. And so many of the library closures that have afflicted our communities in recent years have disproportionately affected the poor; school libraries are now far from universal.

Without the libraries I had access to at school and across the road from where I lived, I would not be a writer. I devoured everything I could get my hands on, but even at an early age I realised the books I was reading bore no relationship to my own life. There was no Tirolean boarding school in my future. I wasn't going to be driving round in a sporty red roadster confronting violent criminals who had eluded capture by the police. I wouldn't be spending my summers having adventures on private islands that ended in gargantuan picnics with lashings of ginger beer. I recognised that, for me, these were fictions in more than one sense. People like us really didn't write books.

Nevertheless, there were moments of illumination. Clues about escape routes. It was in the pages of a book that I discovered that

being a writer was a paid job, when a character opened a letter containing a cheque from a publisher. That was the moment I formed the ambition that earned me so much scorn, ridicule and pity over the years.

I spent my teens feeling like an outsider. It wasn't because I was working class – I knew what being working class meant; there were examples all around me and I was part of something. There was no mystery to it. What set me apart was something I didn't yet know about myself. I didn't know I was a lesbian, because it was an invisible state. There were no templates, no representations that I had access to. I became convinced that my difference lay in my desire to be a writer; that somehow I had acquired Graham Greene's splinter of ice in the heart.

I believed that if I was going to become a writer I had to escape those who persistently told me that people like us don't write books. I couldn't spend my university years with the same cohort who had dismissed my dreams so derisively. To escape, to remake myself, I'd have to leave Scotland.

I knew about Oxford from books. Of course, I knew there were other universities in England, but Oxford was the one I'd read most about. I had no idea how to get in, but I managed to find out. From the library, of course. And I had one teacher – just the one – who believed I might just make it and he gave me extra tuition in the set texts I'd need for the entrance exam.

I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. When the Principal at St Hilda's College, Oxford, remarked that they'd never had a student from a Scottish state school before, I bluntly said, "Well, it's about time you started." Sometimes brazening it out is the only way past the gatekeepers. It worked for me.

And that opened door after door, transforming my possibilities. I'd grown up knowing nobody in publishing or the arts. At Oxford I made connections that are still opening doors for me. My first play was directed by the ex-boyfriend of my best friend's sister. When I wrote

my first crime novel, the flatmate of an Oxford friend was going out with someone who worked at the Women's Press who knew whose hands to press it into. And so on, and so on...

I am very well aware of how fortunately the chips have fallen for me. I've seen so many good writers fall by the wayside because one door or another stayed obstinately shut against them.

But no matter how lucky, if I was sixteen now, with that same working class background in a small Scottish town that's down on its luck, the door to Oxford would be closed to me. No Bank of Mum and Dad to cushion me against the mountain of debt pushing up against my future.

Instead I'd be taking advantage of free tuition at a Scottish university and staying inside that same community I'd grown up with. I'd get a first-class education, no doubt of that. And these days, there is a vibrant Scottish arts scene to plug into. But I wouldn't have spread my wings in the same way. I wouldn't have been forced to adapt to very different circumstances. I wouldn't have been able to shed my old skin and unshackle myself from the preconceptions of everyone who had decided they knew who I was.

It's true that the world has changed since I was making the choices that shaped the writer I would become. The Internet and radically different print technologies mean that there are more routes to publication than ever before. But it's correspondingly easier to get drowned in the cacophony of voices. The effective megaphones are still mostly controlled by the same people who have maintained their power and privilege.

And the downside of these technological shifts is an economic one. Consumers like the idea that everything is either free or 99p. So for writers who don't have an alternative source of income, that £30,000 would be an absolute lifeline, never mind a room of their own. For most, it's a dream that's soured daily by the struggle to make ends meet, a struggle that often means the words on the page are always at the bottom of the "to do" list.

Some say the best art comes out of adversity. And there's no denying that overcoming the odds makes the success all the sweeter. When it's not a given, when you've taken risks, when you've gritted your teeth and pushed yourself forward and hated every second of it, there's a deep satisfaction in every achievement.

Which would be fine if it was a level playing field, if everyone with the talent and the persistence to be a writer got a room of their own and a living wage. What we need are strong boots to kick the doors open in the first place.

But it's not all grim and hopeless. Increasing numbers of organisations and campaigners are dedicating themselves to breaking down the doors. All over the country, we're seeing the emergence of the kind of indie presses which lost their toehold in the free-for-all of recent decades, presses committed to encouraging the voices that are not always given a hearing. Indie booksellers who understand that there is life beyond the bestseller lists are sharing these exciting new writers with their customers.

I think Virginia Woolf would be taken aback by the range of writers who crowd the shelves now. We've come a long way. But if those new voices tell us one thing, it's that we need to hear still more.

Val McDermid is best known for her crime fiction. Her debut novel, *Report for Murder*, featuring journalist sleuth Lindsay Gordon, was published by the Women's Press in 1987. There are five further books in the series. A second series features Manchester-based private investigator Kate Branningan. *Star Struck*, the fifth in the series, won the Grand Prix des Romans d'Aventure. In 1995, McDermid created the partnership of psychological profiler Dr Tony Hill and Detective Inspector Carol Jordan. They have appeared in a further nine novels, which have won many more prizes. The books were adapted for the successful ITV series *Wire in the Blood*, which ran for six seasons. A fourth series centres on cold case detective Karen Pirie. McDermid

has also written several standalone novels, and works of non-fiction, as well as plays for radio and theatre. She has won the Crime Writers' Association Diamond Dagger and the Theakston's Old Peculier Lifetime Achievement Award, among many others.



THE COURAGE TO FEEL STUPID

David Almond

Disadvantaged? It never crossed my mind until a journalist told me that I must have been. I'd overcome so many obstacles, she said. Obstacles? Don't all writers have much to overcome? Self-doubt, the blank page, rejection. Obstacles come with the territory. They exist out in the world. They exist inside the self. But here's what she saw, I guess, as disadvantages.

*

I was a Catholic kid from far-flung Tyneside. My first home was a nineteenth-century half-dilapidated mice-infested upstairs flat. The bath hung from a nail on the kitchen wall. The toilet was in the outside yard down a steep set of unlit stairs. I was three when the flat was demolished. We moved to a pebbledash council estate, where we lived till I was thirteen. My primary school was a gloomy stone place down by the Tyne, close by the stench of a boneyard and the endless shipyard din. My baby sister died when I was seven. My dad died when I was fifteen. He left five children behind, three of them much

younger than I. My mother was severely disabled by rheumatoid arthritis. She couldn't work. She'd need two new hips before the age of 40. There was little money. The education of both parents had been curtailed by war. None of my family had ever been to university...

Disadvantaged? Me? No.

★

My world was rich, strange, multi-faceted. It nourished the imagination. It gave me love and care, tragedy and joy. I never thought of what I didn't have. I envied no one. My dad worked in the offices of an engineering firm. He had a profound belief in the power of education. My mam told us to do the things she couldn't do – to run, to dance. In my family were printers, bookies, carpet fitters, welders, labourers, firemen. There were feuds and love affairs in the streets around us. A flaxen-haired tramp lived in the fields at the top of the town. Escapologists and quack doctors and mesmerists terrified and charmed us in Newcastle's markets. I walked through the ringing of river bells and the wailing of factory sirens. The bones of children killed in the Felling Pit disaster lay deep beneath us. Skylarks and buzzards soared high above. We lit bonfires and played Split the Kipper and slept beneath fishing boats on Northumbrian beaches. I took part as an altar boy in the weird ritual of the Catholic Mass. I dreamed of Hell and Heaven. We all lived with the dread of nuclear war. From the top of the town, through a sunlit haze, we saw the distant Cheviots, the pitheads of the Durham moors, the dark North Sea. Our new council estates came with parks, playing fields, community centres and libraries. They were populated by families of all kinds, all incomes. We never felt that we were diminished by living in such a place. We felt respected and honoured, part of a welcoming and optimistic wider world. Young writers, just like all young people, need that honour and respect. They need secure housing. They need libraries. They need schools which are properly funded. Private

schools need to lose their charitable status and to be closed down. Why should the children of those on universal credit subsidise the children of the rich?

*

All childhoods, all lives, are “ordinary”, but when looked at through the writer’s eyes, they can become rich and strange and filled with creative possibilities. Yes, demand your rights and work for change. But don’t waste time on envy, on desiring another’s life. See the magic and trouble and drama in your own. Turn supposed disadvantages into privileges. Write them. When I was a boy, when I dared to say I wanted to be a writer, some folk frowned and said, “But son, you’re just you, a kid from Tyneside, and what the hell will you write about?” I write about Tyneside, and my books are read all around the world.

*

If I’d thought much about it, the literary world of published authors and poets could have seemed very distant and intimidating. But it hardly crossed my mind. I read and wrote and hoped. I knew that my writing might be nonsense and all could well come to nowt. But I dreamed high, as every writer must. To be as good as Shakespeare. Why not? The literary world existed for me as a boy in our little local library: a clean well-lighted place just downhill from where I lived, just next to where I played football with my friends. In there I roamed and explored. That’s where I found Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, William Blake. That’s where I dreamed of seeing my own books on the shelves one day.

*

I read English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia, where it was assumed that the act of reading and creative writing

went hand in hand. How could you understand what a poet was up to until you'd tried to write poetry yourself? I read and read. I wrote and wrote. I discovered little magazines and small presses. There were dozens of them, several coming from places close by my first home. My stories appeared in such magazines, in *Iron*, in *Kudos*, in long-forgotten publications with a handful of readers. The first story I was ever paid for brought me £3. When, to my delight, I was published in *Bananas*, I received £20. I didn't care about the cash or lack of it. There I was in print. Once or twice I even met a stranger who'd seen and admired my work. I was published, but I held back from naming myself as a "writer". I knew that becoming a true writer might involve a long and often lonely journey.

*

If you wish to write, and to sustain a life of writing, you must look after yourself. I became a primary schoolteacher. Short hours, I thought. Long holidays. How wrong I was. To my amazement, I loved the job, loved working with young people. And it kept me grounded, kept me close to "ordinary" lives. Many of my writer friends kept clear of regular work. I saw them chasing after little grants. I saw how some of them inflated their egos or compromised their work in an effort to impress the literary gatekeepers or the givers of grants. That was not for me, and financial anxiety and the dread of poverty were not for me, either. For two years, exhausted, I wrote hardly a word, but then regained my energy. I sought an agent, was turned down by one who said she already had a couple of authors with Northern working class voices and so she had no need of me. I sold my house, bought time out from teaching, and lived in a commune for a year. I wrote and wrote. I took five years to write a novel. It brought me my first agent, the angelic Maggie Noach. She and I sent it to every UK publisher. Every UK publisher rejected it. I cursed, snarled, spat and carried on. You must be stupid, said some. Yes, I agreed, probably I am. But

all writers need the courage to feel stupid. By now I was teaching again, part-time, three days a week. Perfect. I had money and I had time. The next novel I finished was *Skellig*. It was taken by the first publisher that saw it, has been translated into over 40 languages, and has become a radio play, a stage play, a film and an opera.

★

A grant at the right time and for the right purpose is a marvellous thing. I was given a grant by Northern Arts to go on an Arvon course before I was published at all. There, one of the tutors, the novelist Rosalind Belbin, pointed to my words and murmured, “Yes, you can do this, David.” Those simple words would echo down the years. The best grants have been those that sent me somewhere to write. Another Northern Arts grant took me away from teaching to a month’s stay at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland. There, I wrote much of a never-to-be-published novel. Another took me to a solitary winter retreat in bitterly cold Isel Hall in Cumbria, where I wrote three short stories (all to appear eventually in my collection *Counting Stars*) in ten days. Years after that, I was given a Hawthornden Fellowship which took me to a Scottish castle for a month, where I wrote 10,000 words of a novel, *Kit’s Wilderness*. These words gained me an Arts Council Bursary. With this, I bought myself three months away from teaching, during which time I finished that novel. Soon after I finished *Kit’s Wilderness*, *Skellig* came out. And soon after that, I left paid employment and became a full-time writer.

★

I was 47 when *Skellig* came out. People said that at last I’d “made it”. It didn’t really feel like that to me. I’d been “making it” all those years. I’d always written for the love of it, because I was driven to it, because I couldn’t imagine not doing it. I shaped my life around this work. All

through those years, I had readers – no matter how few – who loved my words. I taught on Arvon courses. I edited a literary magazine, *Panurge*. I read to little audiences. I visited schools to talk about writing and to encourage and inspire young writers. I wrote stories and novels and poems; some of them were never published and never will be published, and about that I really didn't care. To be a writer, to create and to pass on stories, is an elemental, fundamental, very human thing. We've been doing it since the start of human time and we'll be doing it till the end. Every human being, no matter where they are from, or what their life conditions might be, is welcome to take part. Get a pen. Get a notebook. Just write.

David Almond *grew up on a council estate on Tyneside and, from an early age, dreamed of being a writer. He is the author of Skellig, The Dam, The Colour of the Sun and many other novels, stories, picture books, songs, opera libretti and plays. His work is translated into 40 languages, and is widely adapted for stage and screen. His major awards include the Carnegie Medal and the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the world's most prestigious prize for children's authors. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University and lives in Newcastle upon Tyne.*



THE QUEEN OF PRECARITY

Bernardine Evaristo

Q & A. What a Writer Needs. Personal.

1. *Warm-up question: Tell me a little about yourself.*

Sure, I grew up in a busy house with a tribe of ten: my parents and eight of us children. Five of us shared a bedroom when we were small, later we paired off, and I shared a bedroom with one of my sisters. Solitude was not an option, and in order to retreat from the madding crowd I turned to literature. Every Saturday I walked to Woolwich Public Library to pick up the books I'd devour over the course of the week. As it happens, my love of reading nurtured my imagination, showed me the world out there beyond the borders of my London suburb, and eventually led to me becoming a writer myself.

2. *Does a writer need a permanent home in which to let their imagination roam?*

Depends on the writer. I left home at eighteen to move in with my then

boyfriend in Kilburn Park, and I have since lived in about seventeen homes in London. At one stage I moved every year. I was a home-hopper who rented incredibly cheap, short-life housing properties, or council sub-lets, anything from studios and shared houses to one-bedroom flats. I was a dab hand at DIY, could move into a grotty old property on a Friday and by Monday I'd have painted the walls and floorboards white, installed my futon and second-hand furniture, and felt at home enough to put pen to paper. I started writing at nineteen and haven't stopped. I think my peripatetic lifestyle invigorated my writing. It actually stopped me feeling complacent or too comfortable.

3. Does a writer need to make decisions about who to have in their life?

Good question! When I was in my twenties I lived with a long-term partner who was the biggest supporter of my writing at first, then started to tear it apart as the relationship deteriorated. This domineering individual was addicted to television, droning on in the background from breakfast to bedtime, and talking non-stop over it. I couldn't think clearly, let alone write. Once I escaped, I subsequently spent many years without a television. My new home was peaceful, a sanctuary, as it should be. I started writing again. It's better to live alone than tolerate toxic relationships. #lifelessons

4. Any more sob stories?

How long have you got? I once lived in a shared house in Holloway with a guy in the room beneath me who played such loud music at night my windows rattled. In another house my drunken neighbour in the flat below used to roam the shared corridors shouting and banging on the glass windows of my front door threatening to break it. Another flat, this one in Notting Hill, was broken into by a previous occupant who crazily thought he should still be living there. I returned home to find all my possessions stuffed into my bedroom, while

he'd commandeered the living room. One day I'll write about all three – bastards! The point is, we must carry on writing through the hard times, and I know, I know, times can get a lot harder than my erstwhile accommodation problems.

5. Does a writer need money? If so, how much?

We all need money, darling. Most writers write because they can't live without doing it, not because they want to be rich. They hope to earn enough to live on, with variable results. For about 30 years I was the Queen of Precarity, earning little and never knowing how the year would pan out financially. I took badly-paid freelance arts jobs that gave me time to write the rest of the week. Oftentimes I had £10 to last the weekend. I've never been financially supported by a partner or anybody, nor would I want to be. I like being self-sufficient and not feeling beholden. I have received paid fellowships and a grant. Many writers need assistance – at the start of their careers, in middle age, in old age. As a society we can't only publish commercially-successful writing. We need to give a platform to the works that might not sell well, but which have incredible value in other ways. These days I have a mortgage and a proper salary. I was very late to both parties.

6. Does a writer need to travel? Broaden their horizons?

Yes, imaginatively, intellectually, emotionally, existentially, so not necessarily bestriding the globe with a pith helmet, binoculars and compass. I love navigating new cultures and languages. Years ago I'd save up to travel rather than buy material goods. I wanted to invest in experiences. In the 1980s myself and another black woman drove by car from London to Kuwait via Iraq, living in Spain and Turkey en route. Petrol was cheaper the further east we travelled, towards the source of it – the flaming oil fields of Iraq. Campsites cost 50p a night, local food cost pennies, we cooked on a tiny camping stove, £100 could last

months, sleeping in the car saved money. I learnt to freshen up in the morning with bottled water and halved lemons plucked from passing trees. We never stayed in hotels. Poetry is more portable than fiction, at least it was in the pre-laptop days. I wrote a lot of it late at night by lamplight, sitting outside on a deck chair in the moonlit heat, listening to crickets, paper and notepad in hand, getting drunk on local hooch. Travel liberated my imagination and changed my writing. I was shedding my old life as I journeyed towards what would become my first book, a poetry collection. These days I'm invited to appear internationally as a writer. One of the perks of the job, mate.

7. What about a desk, then? Surely a writer needs a desk or is that just too "ordinaire" for a jet-setter like you?

Don't get snippy with me. I'm merely making the point that travel is a life-enhancing option for writers and their creativity, and it can be done cheaply. You just need to work out how. I absolutely do need a desk. Mine's a wooden IKEA dining table ten foot long. She's thirteen years old, and my third. My first was a painted door balanced on top of wooden worktop legs. My second was a beaten-up trestle table bought for £20 from a second-hand shop in Deptford. Very practical, as it was collapsible and could almost slip under my arm when I moved home. I wrote several novels on it. Today I have the luxury of a study, although I prefer to edit away from my desk – in a coffee shop, on the Tube, a hotel room, which provides some distance and enhances the clarity of my critical eye. It's the equivalent of putting my manuscript in a cupboard for a month in order to then revisit it with fresh eyes.

8. Does a writer need books?

Stupid question, tbh. A writer must read. A playwright must see plays. A screenwriter must analyse films. #writing101

9. *Does a writer need self-confidence? I don't think I have any. (Whimpers).*

You're alive, aren't you? Woman up! Of course, you have self-confidence, but maybe you need to work on bringing it out a little more. I know it can be hard for some people to feel they can be writers. Perhaps the image inside your head is of people who grow up in large, book-lined houses in leafy streets with parents who are professionals and take them to the theatre, opera and ballet, *darling*. Or they're educated at private schools and elite universities from whence they sail forth into a glittering literary career. Perhaps you haven't yet encountered books by and about people like you to show you it's possible. We're here, trust me. Google us. Perhaps your family is poor, working class, refugees or all three; perhaps you're a person of colour; maybe you're LGBTQ+. If any of this applies to you, then why not make it your vocation to get those stories and perspectives out there? There was nothing in my childhood that showed I could be a writer. Back then the writing profession in this country was blindingly white, overwhelmingly male and predominantly posh. #alternativevoicesrock

10. *Thanks for the motivational talk! I just need to find a place and time to write and I'll be off inserting myself into the literary landscape, baby.*

Well, you've perked up, haven't you, although I'm not sure you've been listening. Typical young person, probably "multitasking" by scrolling through Instagram instead of paying attention. Look, you can write anywhere and anytime. If you're holding out for perfect conditions – the right family, home, room, desk, chair, computer, funds, relationship, job, view out of your window, mood or music to inspire you – you'll never get on with it. Sure, sometimes you have to be inventive. A friend of mine, living in a boxy flat on an estate, used to get the Tube to Heathrow Airport to write his books in the spacious

bustling atmosphere of its transient multiracial anonymity. Another moved to Barcelona to write his first novel. It was ideal, he said, he loved the city and had romantic notions of a writer's life. He returned empty-handed after a couple of months. Twenty years later, still no book.

Even if the only space that's yours is one half of a shared bed, you can get up an hour early and write. It's so easy to come up with reasons not to do it. After a while they become excuses and you've wasted your life. #wakeupcall

11. *Finally, the inevitable question – does a writer need to be able to cope with rejection? I'm not sure I can take it, but if I say that you'll snap at me again.*

Oh here we go again, more self-pity. You've gotta develop a tough hide for when things don't come easily, and if they do come easily, you'll need the tough hide for when they don't. Rejection is good – it makes you stronger, more tenacious, more ambitious, and if it makes you give up, you don't want it enough. Look, dear, just start writing and see where the journey takes you. #toughlove

Bernardine Evaristo is a British-Nigerian writer, the award-winning author of eight books of fiction and verse fiction, and many other works of short fiction, drama, poetry, essays and literary criticism as well as projects for stage and radio. Her novel *Mr Loverman*, about a septuagenarian Caribbean Londoner and closet homosexual considering his options after a 50-year marriage to his wife, won the *Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize*. Her latest novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, was published in May 2019. A long-standing advocate for the inclusion of writers and artists of colour, Evaristo is Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University, London. She has been awarded many writing fellowships, for which she has travelled extensively and internationally.



GIVE YOUR ROOM THE SLIP

Eley Williams

The first edition of *A Room of One's Own* features artwork by Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell. The cover illustration is simple and comprises a square white clock sitting on a white mantelpiece or plinth. It is not clear whether the clock's hands are set at ten past ten or ten to two. On re-reading *A Room of One's Own* and considering some of the essay's themes these small details seem remarkably apt symbols for the book's content: the relationships that occur between women and their craft(s), the power of ambiguity and the necessity of not only access to a *room* of one's own but also control of the *time* to make good use of its space.

We are often made to feel as if time is not entirely under our control. Certainly some of the reasons for this are addressed by Woolf in her essay, and competing demands such as externally imposed deadlines, tasks, exams, intrusive visits or enquiries, childcare and commuting all still can and do subsume potential writing time. To meander a little on a related tangent, have you heard the story of "the man from Porlock"? Someone with this shady identity is credited with disturbing Samuel Taylor Coleridge while writing a draft of his epic

poem *Kubla Khan*. Coleridge was so distracted by this unexpected visit that when he returned to his pen the poet could not fathom how to carry on writing: the images and plan for his piece “passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!” Perhaps this line of Coleridge’s reminds you of the way Woolf’s writing is often described as “stream-of-consciousness”, or the many streams, rivers and tributaries mentioned in *A Room of One’s Own*:

“When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant.”

“Thought – to call it by a prouder name than it deserved – had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it until – you know the little tug – the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one’s line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out?”

“By hook or by crook, I hope that you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream.”

In terms of finding time, one can add uniquely modern pressures to all the restrictions Woolf and her contemporaries faced. We snatch moments between calls, texts, reading articles online or updating social media. For many of us, our hot-desked open-plan writing desks require proximity to phones, laptops and tablets. This is a wonderful technological advance if one can access such hardware, and it is certainly a privilege to be able to do so. As communities lose their libraries and materials become more and more expensive, these

devices also increasingly act as our notebooks, alarm clocks, places of learning, repositories of literature, televisions and radios as well as the means by which we can communicate with the world and the world communicates – unrelentingly – with us. We write with them, on them, read on them, have our attention spans dictated by them, and are also tasked with publicising, marketing, reviewing material and keeping abreast of colleagues’ and associates’ work all on these same devices. As such, from pocket-to-pillow, we attend school, travel, relax and sleep with an unexplored museum, a 24/7 cinema, a briefing room, a roaring torrent and a carousel of all the people we have or could ever meet buzzing in a glossy upturned hornets’ nest from Porlock sitting by our side. Even if a room of one’s own *can* be secured, therefore, we must guard our time carefully from some aspects of *streaming* or *refreshing*. Find time to digress and lose yourself *to* thought rather than find time to be distracted *from* thought. Be generous with the time you need to fulfil your obligations to producing thoughts and make sure that hard-won time is free from unnecessary distraction.

If this sounds like I’m advocating snipping all your phone chargers in half and hoiking your Wi-Fi router into the nearest lake, I’ll quickly stress ways by which I have found the Internet beneficial to writing. The text of *A Room of One’s Own* is based on lectures Woolf delivered to two University of Cambridge societies in the autumn of 1928. You can listen to a clip online of Woolf speaking: the recording was made by the BBC in 1937 as part of a broadcast series called *Words Fail Me*. She has an extraordinary voice with consonants and vowels both lithe and cartwheeling but also fustian and particular. There is an intimacy that comes with the received spoken word, especially the notion of women speaking to other women, which to me is akin to the intimacy of words or images being mulled upon by a reader:

“Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen.”

With a characteristic wryness, Woolf addresses and lampoons the traditional formal rhetoric and pedagogical adequacy of lectures specifically, relying as they do on modes of exhortation and “holding forth” established by a patriarchal expectation for scholarship:

“...you must find out what treatment suits them – whether these hours of lectures, for instance, which the monks devised, presumably, hundreds of years ago, suit them...”

She also writes:

“Here I would stop, but the pressure of convention decrees that every speech must end with a peroration.”

Woolf was keenly aware that *convention* was not always to be trusted, be it stylistic on a sentence-by-sentence level or structural and institutional. *A Room of One's Own* clarifies that *convention* is occasionally synonymous with *systematic* and often with notions of oppression. Use the Internet to pursue your own interests and diversify your allotted syllabi in ways particular to you. Establish your own canon of literature, query received or inherited structures, and cultivate modes of learning that are best for you. If you retain information by listening to multi-guest podcasts, do that; if you find you express ideas with clarity and complexity through visual cues or drawing web comics, make that your project and a site of community; if you welcome regular, linked, archived articles sent into your inboxes, sign up to relevant newsletters. For example, it was through Twitter that I discovered the work of some of the queer, non-male, non-Oxbridge writers whose first language is not English from whom I learn the most. Research organisations such as Index on Censorship, Liberty and PEN International strive to enshrine the rights of freedom of speech and the promotion of uncensored discourse online and in print, and VIDA: Women in Literary Arts monitors gender equality in publication.

There are still many obstacles to even notional equality in many aspects of the publishing industry, not least writing: much to be fought and to fight for. To take one example, data analysis regarding recent winners of the former Man Booker Prize reveals that the average winner is white, English and in his late forties, and that the book will feature a male protagonist. Add to this “average” the fact that winners are “overwhelmingly English”, with a 26:19 ratio of private to state-educated, and a huge proportion having attended Oxbridge. There is another conversation to be had regarding the funding of such prizes and prize culture in general: what does it exclude or reward, and what values and competitiveness does it promote? Returning to the level of the sentence, a certain gendered machismo is often seen as advantageous and desirable. One is told to remove the word “just” in email communications, for example, and not to be circuitous or apologetic or digressive in stated thought. I love that *A Room of One's Own* demonstrates a refutation of this: check the opening paragraph of each section and the use of dashes and ellipses throughout. I love that Woolf is playful, that she narrates doodling, conjures characters and riverbeds and impossible sisters to bolster and furnish her conjectures and resolutions.

I will end with playfulness. Let's pretend that I wrote “A Room Of One's Own” as the saved filename for this essay, noticed that the initials of Woolf's title spelt out *AROOO*, tilted my head back and gave a wolfish, Woolfian howl to the ceiling. The word *stanza*, often applied to poetry, comes from the Italian, meaning “stopping place” or “room”. The word *anthology*, such as this collection of essays, comes from the Hellenistic Greek *ἀνθολόγιον*, meaning “gathering of flowers”. Virginia Woolf wrote: “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” You can say you are sitting with *A Room of One's Own* tucked under your arm. Have a room of your own and time to make full use of it. And when you are ready, lower a ladder down from your window, let others enjoy the space, arrange flowers together and then, enriched and enriching, you can raise the roof.

Eley Williams's published works include a pamphlet of poetry, *Frit*, and a collection of prose, *Attrib.* and other stories. *The latter* won the *Republic of Consciousness Prize* and the *James Tait Black Memorial Prize*. Recent work has appeared in *Liberating the Canon*, *The Penguin Book of the Contemporary British Short Story* and *Not Here: A Queer Anthology of Loneliness*.



THE ART OF WRITING FOR FUN

Daljit Nagra

I want to begin by thinking about “a room of one’s own”. To establish the type of room authors such as myself might need, I’d like to mention my upbringing. My parents came from India in the late 1950s and worked in factories around west London. My mum had no formal education and spoke no English when I was growing up; my father had some education and could speak a bit of English. In our home, a stone’s throw away from one of Heathrow’s runways, there were always at least nine of us occupying the three-bed semi. The occupants included me and my brother, my parents, several uncles and grandparents, along with the odd stray who’d fetched up from the villages of Punjab and needed somewhere to stay until he’d sorted himself out. My first language was Punjabi, which was the only language spoken at home. So, at home, there was no English and there were no books. I didn’t have my own bedroom until I was in Year 10, and in that box room I had a small table under which I stored my schoolbooks. At my secondary school we studied CSEs and the highest grade was equivalent to today’s GCSE grade C. Homework was rarely set by my teachers, and I never read books for pleasure. I

played football most days after school and watched dramas such as *Minder* and *The Rockford Files* in the evening. I studied A levels from the age of nineteen, at evening class, and again there was no need for a study desk because we didn't need to submit homework.

At university, there was a large study desk in my room. It felt quaint, as though in a swoop I'd moved up a whole echelon of the social sphere. That solid, pale wooden desk challenged my notion of what it means to be centred around learning, when at home. It felt strange to have books neatly arranged on shelves above the desk and to have an anglepoise waiting to light up your very thoughts. It felt strange to have a desk being given such dominance in a small room. If I could go back to school again, I'd learn what it means to have a study area where your mind can find a haven, a zone towards which it gravitates so its imagination can be at home there. I suspect there are many children who have my experience of education without a desk at home, who never get the time to dwell in silence and to contemplate like some sage meditating atop a mountain.

A desk had not been a feature in my life until I was in my early twenties. Perhaps because of this I've never used a desk for writing. Right now, I'm seated at a corner of the dining room with my laptop before me. When I'm researching for a new poem I go to the British Library, and when I'm editing that poem I do it on the Underground, in cafés, or wherever I happen to be at home, at that free moment. I've enjoyed the freedom of not having a writer's room. I feel as though writing has remained a hobby rather than a job, a source of action that I only lock horns with when the urge takes me. Writing is not a routine, a chore, but a sacred event that strangely works best when I'm on the hoof. I suspect that if I were to sit down for an allotted space of time every day, the muse would fly out of the window. My muse doesn't want to turn writing into a white-collar day job.

I'd want young people to be taught the art of writing for fun. So much time is spent in class analysing text that it prohibits a fuller immersion into the moods and feelings of the setting, the speaker

or the character tensions of the story. When young people enter the world of, say, poetry, it's often through a competition, so they're being judged again, as they are all day at school. I'd rather students were taught that writing is a conversation, and that the created work shouldn't always be judged but should be enjoyed on its own terms for the effect it has on the reader. As an example, I don't have a conversation with a friend and then judge the quality of their participation in the chat by grading it out of ten. So why should a student's poem be judged – especially in the early days of a new writer who lacks confidence, who lacks self-belief?

There is no such thing as a superior form of writing. I've worked with many authors who look down on certain types of text. In my field, all the different forms of poetry are trying to exist on equal terms. Forms such as social media poetry, performance poetry and page poetry are all slightly distinct, dependent on their medium. We should encourage students to find the form that best suits them, and enable them a greater access to the variety of that form.

It's not fair to judge all young poets equally. I've judged several competitions where most, if not all, of the winners have come from grammar and private schools. From my experience as a judge, there have been improvements, but we have a way to go. Students whose second language is English, or who have had little access to books, are likely to write less accomplished poetry compared to their privileged peers. Perhaps we shouldn't be judging young poets for their ability to write a finished poem; we should be using a range of criteria that include an appreciation of some spark in a student's poem indicating they may have a flair with words. I started writing poetry seriously when I was about 30. It took me a long time to build up the confidence to believe in my writing and to send it out for publication. I'd wanted to write poetry for at least a decade, but without any encouragement I either threw away the poems I'd written or simply held back the urge. I wonder how many other potential writers are being put off the dream of becoming a writer or will

experience a great delay before they arrive at the desk and say what they've been waiting to say all their lives.

Daljit Nagra comes from a Sikh background and was born and grew up in west London, then Sheffield. He has published five collections of poetry. His poem "Look We Have Coming to Dover!" won the Forward Prize for Best Individual Poem in 2004. His collection of the same name won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2007 and was shortlisted for the Costa Poetry Award. Subsequent collections, Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!! and his version of the Ramayana, were nominated for the T.S. Eliot Prize. In 2014 he was selected as a Next Generation Poet.



NOISE AND NOSTROMO

Howard Jacobson

For years, when writing seemed an unrealisable ambition, I yearned for quiet. If they would only leave me in peace I would be able to start. It doesn't matter who "they" were. No one in particular. The unseen forces of botheration. I envied the untroubled serenity of other people's lives: the gardens running down to gently burbling streams, the hushed living rooms, the phones that didn't ring, above all the carpeted studies with inkwells rather than typewriters on the desk and an oak door that no family member dared approach. I had read about Joseph Conrad locking himself away at the top of his house when he was writing *Nostromo*. Nothing was allowed to break the trance necessary for him to go on living in the fictional country of Costaguana. For three years no one spoke to him. Food was pushed under his study door. Only when the empty dishes were pushed back out could his family know he was still alive.

What bliss. Quiet – that was all I needed. And quiet's more vivacious sisters, space and time. Give me Quiet, Space and Time and my own *Nostromo* would miraculously appear.

I had grown up in a noisy house. Good noise not bad noise. The

distinction is worth making. I didn't have to listen to rancour. Quite the opposite. Ours was a tumbling, Dickensian household. Busy and forever impecunious; ingenious in the way of small-business families, all of us expected to help sort, repair or make things which my father could sell on his market stall. I spent two whole summers weighing loose chocolates into one-pound bags, occasionally removing the slight suggestion of mould that had formed on those that had been around too long. When television came to the North ours was switched on in the morning and only turned off after the national anthem. I did my homework in the kitchen to *What's My Line?* My brother sat cross-legged on the floor and painted. You can get used to noise. There's an argument that noise enhances creativity of a certain sort. It affected my brother and me in different ways. He painted the turbulence out. I incorporated it – or I would have incorporated it had there been anything to incorporate it into. The novels I thought of writing were all noisy anyway. But the fact that I wasn't yet writing them I ascribed to the racket.

Today, I could, if I had to, write a book with the television on. An advantage for which I have to thank the invasive boisterousness of my upbringing. But you only get to see that as an advantage later, once you have become productive. And initially you need quiet to be productive. You have to hold your nerve, is what I think I'm saying. You'll be thankful one day for all that seemed to hinder you at the beginning.

I had a good enough room to work in at university, protected by an oak door which, once "sporting", no one dared to breathe on. But mainly I left it open. I was lonely. I wanted company. So it wasn't only quiet that stood between me and writing. It was my head. I wasn't ready. I didn't have the self-belief. I couldn't see wherein my literary genius would lie once I unloosed it, which might be another way of saying I feared it wouldn't turn out to be genius at all. Many a literary career never quite gets going for that reason. That which you don't attempt will never come back to haunt you with its mediocrity. It's

often the case that those who never do quite get going have the most ideal conditions never to quite get going in. You can make things too comfortable for yourself. You can mistake the conditions of creativity for creativity itself.

D.H. Lawrence is said to have rewritten *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in a garden in Italy. He was so engrossed that lizards ran across his feet without his noticing them. Imagine it – no desk, no computer, no reference books, quiet maybe, but not the quiet of upholstered writerly indulgence to which many writers aspire.

I often weighed up Lawrence's way of writing against Conrad's as a means of emulating neither. In the end, desperation forced me to buy a kitchen table from a second-hand furniture shop and install it in a corner of the bedroom of a cold-water flat I shared with my new wife. We weren't getting on terribly well. The flat was horrible. The weather was horrible. I was horrible. Nothing could have been further from the writer's room or state of mind in which I'd imagined I would finally settle down to write my *Nostromo* or *Lady Chatterley*. But the desperation that made me horrible also made me purposeful. I was well into my thirties. "So how's that novel of yours getting along?" my father would ask whenever I saw him. I don't think he intended to be cruel. But he might have wondered why I'd been in so much of a hurry to give up helping him on his market stall if the novel I'd told him was burning me up inside was taking so long to get written. And on top of this I was teaching in an institution to which I felt snobbishly superior in a town that depressed me. I had become an absurd figure in my own eyes. After all the grand plans I'd nursed to write a novel of philosophical weight, I saw my way now only to a comedy in a genre I didn't even very much admire – the campus novel. That was a further absurdity. As was the kitchen table in the corner of the bedroom itself. Not having a room to write the novel in became, in that sense, contributory to its spirit. Let me put that another way: I could never have written *that* novel in a Georgian house in Gloucestershire with the Stracheys preparing breakfast in the kitchen downstairs.

I'm not saying a room to write in is unimportant. Once I finished that first novel and could believe I was a writer, I was assiduous in setting up lovely book-lined spaces to work in, first in London, then in Cornwall, then back again in London. But there are a few of my novels which, when I look them over now, seem to me to lack the urgency and vitality that come with hardship and even desperation. You don't have to wrestle with the angel every time, but you can't let him walk all over you. Start playing the writer and surrounding yourself with writerly things, such as quiet, time and space, and there's a danger you'll domesticate your demons.

I don't say we should fetishise disadvantage. Sometimes the noise is too great and the circumstances too debilitating. But mostly one's travails are grist to the mill. What doesn't extinguish the flame entirely, makes it burn with more ferocity.

Howard Jacobson, *novelist and essayist, was born in Manchester and studied English at Cambridge under F.R. Leavis. He is the author of sixteen novels and five works of non-fiction. He has twice won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing. His novel The Finkler Question won the 2010 Man Booker Prize and he was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014 for J. His new novel, Live a Little, will be published in July 2019.*



A SPACE WHERE YOUR STORY SHOULD BE

Nadifa Mohamed

But, what do you feel you need to write? A room, a blank sheet, a fountain pen or laptop, privacy and silence, a trust fund or wealthy spouse, a library of books, a clutch of creative writing degrees, a cleaner, a mother with a PhD who read books to you in the womb, a little sorrow but not too much, numerous writing retreats in the country and abroad, a subscription to the *LRB* and *TLS*, an aunt or uncle who knows someone who knows someone in publishing, an ergonomic chair, writer's block, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, organic food, a west-facing garden with a reading bench, absolute freedom, another country to escape to or escape from, chronic dissatisfaction, yoga, knowledge of abstract art, an obscure literary hero or heroine, ambition, twenty volumes of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, a log fire, a cat, two cats, three cats, a complicated attitude towards motherhood, *un peu de français*, long dinners with intellectuals you don't like very much, an embarrassingly expensive education, a desire to write books that are not "about" anything, a London road named after an illustrious ancestor, pilates, a feminism that doesn't prevent you taking your father's money or your husband's, a humble and moderate agnosticism,

working class people who stoke your imagination, a need to live a simpler life, sympathy, boxes full of juvenilia that someone might find of interest one day, a psychotherapist, a distant father, a five-year plan, pot plants, crippling self-doubt, moments of flow, a close friend who keeps your secrets, an ability to write about your secrets, a daybed, love, a knowledge of all the women who paved the way for you.

But, what do you have? A shared room, no privacy, no silence, a small, strange collection of second-hand books, a dead-end job, an illiterate mother who recites long, ancient poems, an angry god, that one teacher who saw your talent, a television, walls so thin your neighbours' footsteps and voices comfort you, music that teaches you rhythm and rhyme, a chip on your shoulder, long bus rides that feel like free theatre, pain that comes in flashes, concrete blocks that light up like lanterns, a country that is both lost and ever-present, a holy book you learn to recite without understanding, rejection, black-and-white family photos, pot plants, distant relatives who arrive at the door with nothing but a plastic bag, imperfect grammar, instability, a best friend, a council house, city parks and library books, a childhood spent translating letters, an irrational, uncontrollable desire to write, a borrowed laptop, shame, dreams in another tongue, a distant father, ignorance of the publishing world, unemployment benefit, curiosity, humour, self-sacrifice, secrets, manual labour, free hospitals and education, second chances, love, someone who tells you that you can write, someone who tells you that you can't write, a space where your story should be, arts grants, a nemesis, a stray cat that lounges on your doorstep, a good mattress, incense burning in the corner, a generous patron, the quiet depth of the night, a knowledge of all the women who paved the way for you.

Do you need more? No.

And, what is there to write? The world.

Nadifa Mohamed was born in Hargeisa, Somaliland, in 1981. Her first novel, *Black Mamba Boy*, won the Betty Trask Prize; it was longlisted for the Orange Prize and shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Dylan Thomas Prize and the PEN Open Book Award. In 2013 she was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists. Her second novel, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, won a Somerset Maugham Award and the Prix Albert Bernard.

AFTERWORD

On 20 October 1928, Virginia Woolf presented the first of two papers to the Arts Society at Newnham College, Cambridge (the second she read at Girton a few days later). These would be published, in 1929, as *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf had been invited to speak about “Women and Fiction” and, after turning the subject over in her mind while sitting in the sun on the banks of a river, had come up with a great feminist polemic, touching on writers from Jane Austen to Aphra Behn to Charlotte Brontë, and concluding that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”.

Her essay takes the form of a part-fictionalised narrative. She processes her thoughts through an imaginary narrator (“call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance”) who is standing in her shoes, pondering the same topic.

She explores the fact that the educational opportunities available to men way outstrip those on offer to women (Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, was a firm believer that only boys should be sent to school).

And, in one section, she invents a fictional character, Judith, sister to Shakespeare, to illustrate the fact that a woman of Shakespeare's gifts would not have been able to develop them. While William studies, Judith is chided by her parents if she so much as picks up a book: there are household chores to which she should be devoting her energies.

Finally, tragically, Judith takes her own life and, denied a resting place in hallowed ground, is buried "at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle".

A Room of One's Own closes with Woolf entreating her female audience to do all they can to improve the lot of women authors, so that their own daughters may take up their pens in a very different world. "So long as you write what you wish to write," she insists, "that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say."

Ninety years on, while much has been achieved, there is still a long way to go to improve opportunities for writers from all backgrounds to pursue a life in literature. As the seven pieces here demonstrate, not all writers now consider either a "room" or a comfortable income the chief necessities for their work to flourish. Some prize public libraries, writing courses, opportunities to travel. Some even embrace a measure of adversity as the grit in the oyster.

Yet none would dispute the passion, importance or brilliance of what Virginia Woolf had to say. As Woolf's biographer, and RSL Fellow, Hermione Lee has written, this was "probably the most influential piece of non-fictional writing by a woman in [the twentieth] century". As these essays demonstrate, it continues to inspire.

Maggie Fergusson

Literary Adviser
Royal Society of Literature

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A Room of My Own

Ninety years ago, Virginia Woolf said that, to be a writer, a woman needed money and a room of her own. The Royal Society of Literature marks this anniversary of *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, by asking: what do writers need to work today? Through this pamphlet of new essays, workshops and a competition for 14–18 year olds, and a survey of UK writers, the RSL examines what we can do now to make a career in writing possible for more people everywhere. This programme is celebrated on Dalloway Day – a whole day dedicated to Virginia Woolf, one of the twentieth century's most important writers – on 19 June 2019.

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