



# The Writer's Compass

## Turning the Next Page

### Four Ways to Keep Writing when Work, Children and the Laundry Threaten to Take Over

Kate Hendry

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#### About the author

Kate Hendry teaches Creative Writing at HMP Shotts. She has also worked in Greenock and Barlinnie prisons where she has edited and published prisoners' writing and art work. She has compiled, in collaboration with prisoners, an anthology of contemporary Scottish poetry for prison reading groups, *The Poem Goes to Prison* (Edinburgh: Scottish Poetry Library, 2010). With a team of long-term prisoners, she edits a new arts magazine for Scottish prisons, called STIR. Her own poetry and fiction has been published widely and can be found in Harpers, New Writing Scotland, the Bridport Prize anthology 2009, Mslexia, The Rialto and *Kin: Scottish Poems about Family* (Edinburgh: Polygon 2009)

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#### 1) Write While Driving

I know it's illegal and I'm sure there's some Dictaphone-type device, or even a 79p app that would be safer, but I like writing with a pen and paper. Even in the car. I know it's dangerous and I'm not really recommending it as such - the point is not the activity itself, it's about writing when you're not supposed to be. Writing when you haven't made big plans to do so, when you've not built up expectations, told yourself, I must write a thousand words by lunchtime. It's catching the ideas, the images, the lines on the sly, writing while not telling yourself you're writing.

In the hectic pace of my life, writing can slip by me, just as whole worlds slip by me when I'm driving to work. On my commute I go past woodlands that I will never stop to investigate. I've no time. The grassy field of oak trees off the A71, the beech woods on the hills above Shotts.



I flash past June buttercups, purple flowering grasses, the red tips of hawthorn hedges in the summer. Plants and places that are in my life and not in my life.

Similarly writing while driving occupies a kind of liminal space – somewhere slightly out of focus. It's not real writing – I'm not drafting a short story – but it captures the drifting language of my mind. I like the almost automatic writing quality of it. Notebook on my lap, I don't look down. The steering wheel nudges my pen. My words join together and the ink runs out. I don't notice. When I get home some of it is indecipherable.

No matter; this isn't about finishing work, or even starting for that matter. It's about catching the stuff that disappears when you look at it directly. That beech woodland, if I did park up, would turn out to be just a group of trees on a bleak hillside. It's the world where observation and the imagination meet.

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## **2) Cake, Coffee, Chat and some Poetry**

I have two writers groups – one for poetry and one for fiction. The poetry group began as a bunch of fellow mums who wanted to read something other than Topsy and Tim but who are too tired to read more than a page of a novel a night. We began by reading a collection a month. Now we alternate between reading and writing. The children play (preferably in the garden) while we read and talk about poetry.

What actually happens is that the back door is left open, I'm constantly getting up to shut out the blasts of icy wind, there's always one child who's upset/hurt/hungry, sitting on a lap whimpering/crying/clyping at a crucial point. Interruption. And then such is the range of cakes and the urgent need for adult conversation that we spend at least the first hour talking and eating. Delay. Still, we get there eventually. We are not fazed by the pauses and postponements. One month we read, the next we write. I'm guaranteed to produce a poem every two months.

Then there's the other group of 'proper' writers – people I only know in their writerly guises. We don't bother with the chit chat and get straight to work. We only meet once every three months but we circulate work in advance, ensuring that the feedback is detailed and rigorous. I'm guaranteed to produce a short story every three months.

Again, it's ways to trick myself into doing it. Deadlines and friendship; the promises that get you there. I know that, if all else fails, if the muse abandons me, self-doubt besets me, work overwhelms me, children deprive me of sleep and sanity, I will still have, at the end of a year, six poems and four stories.

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## **3) Write what They're Writing**

Like so many writers, I teach Creative Writing. Mostly it's a great job – allowing me to read and to wrestle with such perennial problems as form and voice. Yet there are times when I feel that I'm spending my life helping other people to write while ignoring my own writing. Of course, I do learn from my students and I love our debates about writing and life. Yet there's a knack to getting something out of it for me. Secretly, I'm on the look out for how a class, an exercise, a student even, will help me with my writing.

Sometimes I take to class a problem I'm struggling with – how to write about food, perhaps, or hope – or the germ of an idea – how a gesture (a handshake, a hand on a knee) can start a story. I take what I'm reading too – if it's inspired me – and we unpick what's going on. I've recently been reading a collection of stories by the Irish writer Claire Keegan. In one, 'The Long and Painful Death,' the protagonist, a writer, is described beginning a short story. She 'had made the incision in place and time, and infused it with a climate, and longing.' What a fantastic summary of what a short story should do. I took it, the very next day, to one of my classes and we discussed, after reading another of Keegan's stories, what climate means, what longing does. They planned stories using her four elements and so did I.

I don't often take part in the writing activities I set my students or share my work with them. Teaching isn't about me taking up space; it's about giving them permission to take up space, both within the class and on the page. Nevertheless, it's sometimes good to remind them that you know what you're talking about, or that you've got the guts to do what you're asking them to do. It might be a bit of free-writing (which I can keep to myself) or it might be a childhood memory. Recently we all wrote about a memory triggered by a piece of music. My draft became, after much reworking, a short story.

Borrowing and sharing, working with, alongside and in response to other writers – whoever they are – it's good to remember that your writing is never quite your own.

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#### **4) A Haiku a Day**

I used to keep a diary. I started at 13 and kept it weekly, sometimes daily for two decades. It's another thing that there's been no time for since children (along with reading at breakfast time, listening to The Archers, having a bath on my own). Yet there's something about the never-to-be-published secrecy, the imaginary, kind audience of diaries that is liberating.

Sometimes I take a diary approach to writing. I'll write a poem a day for a month. No redrafting allowed. No thoughts of which magazine I'll send them to. I'll look, during the day, for prompts from ordinary life – that commute, an overheard remark – and write something fast (not in the car).

Haiku are particularly good for this. When you get going, syllable counting becomes a habit. You start to think in 5s and 7s; in haiku lines. More interesting is the way you start to recognise which thoughts and images are right for a haiku and which are too complex. For months I had on my bedside table three glow stars. They were my children's and they must have fallen off their bedroom ceiling and been carried by one of them, along with their toys, clothes and bodies, to my bedside like unintended gifts. Every night I would turn my light off and there they'd be, surprising me, three glowing stars. I was quite convinced that they were haiku material. I had various lines, but couldn't quite capture the facts (the dusty, unwanted plastic stars) and the feelings (the surprise of daily love) together.

Much other, more simple daily stuff is good for haikus – that commute again, even the attempts to write – trying to get to the desk, staring out of the window. A fleeting, captured observation of the world and me in it.

Behind crash barriers,  
a strip of dandelions.  
Cars fill five lanes.

Sitting by the stove,  
My children away all day.  
I'm stuck mid-chapter.

My writing happens in unexpected gaps and places – when I'm doing something else, when I'm working on other people's writing, when I'm being interrupted. Of course, there's the hard slog of novel writing and the inevitable pain of five o'clock starts, but what keeps me writing (the writing that isn't work, but is life) is these moments of strange, elusive, unintended creativity.

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**Turning the Next Page** is a programme of work being undertaken by literature organisations in Scotland with investment from Creative Scotland to support writers living and working in Scotland, especially those who are at an early stage of their careers.