

Inside the Writer's Room

BY JANE BRESKIN ZALBEN

WHILE WATCHING THE movie *Romancing the Stone*, my husband leaned over and whispered, "She's wearing your outfit." Kathleen Turner, author of romance novels, had on a plaid flannel nightshirt and kneesocks, sitting in front of her typewriter. I also wear pajama bottoms or loose ripped jeans so I can sit cross-legged at my desk—an old slab of wine-colored marble on top of two filing cabinets. It irks my mother that I don't have grown-up office attire even though I put in an eight-hour day. It got me thinking over the years: What idiosyncratic behaviors or little rituals do other writers have or do before they begin to create? Any? Or none?

One of my editors once said, half kidding, "I want you to organize my closets." I clean. Everything has to be in its place before I begin in the morning. Beds made. Kitchen spotless. I've been known to iron pillowcases so I can slow down and think. Then I go into the hall, shut one door, then another, to my room that has a laptop, a copier on top of an oak cartography case full of art papers, a drafting table, picture books, seashells, and a disorganized corkboard push-pinned with quotes, ideas, scrap notes of my thoughts, poetry, photos, a Mardi Gras mask, an Edward Gorey bat. I sit next to a window overlooking my garden (that I work on as diligently as Monet, doing art or writing in my head). E-mails answered, I start. I used to answer the phone. Now I never do. There's voice mail. I remain focused, intense, uninterrupted—inside the book—sometimes more real to me than real life.

The process makes me happy: to refine, to obsess over plot pacing, dialogue, and scenes.

In my last novel, the main character realizes, "Music is my air. And I need it to breathe." I am a whole person when I write. It makes me complete. Often, the world I am in there is better than this one—because I can control and shape it like clay or paint it with words and feelings. Here are other writers' worlds:

Jane Yolen said tersely, "Cuppa tea, quiet room, laptop on—then I go. Doesn't work without the tea."

Virginia Euwer Wolff mentioned advice she found in the *SCBWI Bulletin*: "Write something that might not end up in the book or anywhere—whatever image is available soon after waking." She had so many things to say on her "simple and rigid" rituals, I had to pare down her gems: "The night before, I have two or three glimmers of some section of the book I could work on the next morning. Up in the morning. Push two buttons: Thermostat. Decaf. (Loaded the night before.) Feed and praise the fifteen-year-old cat. Mention to whatever's out there, I am grateful for the privilege of working before a huge window facing evergreens, birds, squirrels, and sky, saying, *Thank and You*." She eats breakfast and gets dressed when she feels like it, pours coffee into one of her many special mugs that "infuse her with the spirit of the day" to give her "the confidence not to be afraid of the work ahead." Then she opens whichever folder of the book-in-progress that terrifies her the least and begins somewhere in it, "just to drive the fear into a corner for a moment." She praises herself on progress

in the text in bold, always dated, which she deletes as the manuscript matures. There are times Jinny practices Bach or Prokofiev on her violin, "knowing that as hard as writing is, it's nothing compared with the daunting music of the great composers." Or she listens to classical music and breaks reading poetry. On a bad day, she builds a fire, earlier than usual, involving a trip to the woodshed, where she can take her mind off her work for a while before she returns to it.

Judy Blume said, "When it comes to working, I'm less idiosyncratic than the rest of my life. Less neurotic. What does that say about me?" She went on to say, "When I'm writing I need to be at my desk in the morning or it's not going to happen that day." She showers, dresses—T-shirt and pants—"Hey, I live in Key West"—and has breakfast. Then, because she lives most of the time in a tropical climate, she throws open the doors to her study so she can "feel as if I'm working outside in the garden. I have a loose-leaf notebook, plenty of three-hole paper for the printer, and pencils for scribbling. I still get my best ideas with a pencil in my hand even though I work on a computer. During the first draft, I need to sit at my desk for two hours no matter what. First drafts are still a torture for me. I have to remind myself, one scene a day. Just get something down. Pray the rest will come. Sometimes I get anxious about it. But the next morning, I'm ready to hit it again."

Janet Tashjian stated, "There is something so physical and visceral about pen and paper that I can't get on my laptop." One of the things

she loves is how “spontaneous and portable writing is.” She has written scenes on paper towels, the backs of checkbooks, and in lined cloth journals, and panicked that she’d be “forced into early retirement” when the bookstore chain that carried them closed. When she found them again on a vacation, it was the highlight of her trip to ship two boxes home in anticipation of filling up empty pages with stories. She has even downloaded an app on her MacBook so that when she writes on it, it sounds like an old-fashioned typewriter with the *tap-tap-tap* of the keys, which drives her family crazy. She, too, lives near the beach, writes outside a lot, and finds it difficult “when you’re looking at palm trees all day.” But Janet is disciplined. Her routine: Get her son on the bus. Run upstairs. Write until the second he gets home. “People may think of writing as a cerebral activity, but it’s a tangible and real-world act for me.”

Gordon Korman began writing as a teenager and got revved up like this: “In the early days of my career, when I was in high school and college and writing was still my summer job, I used to keep a Nerf basketball hoop attached to the closet door next to my desk. (Computer? What computer? We’re talking old-school here!) Then, when my work-in-progress reached a particularly exciting part, I’d put down the paper and take a few shots.” He doesn’t do that anymore. His kids don’t walk in on him “reverse-jamming or popping three-pointers.” Still, every now and then, when the story really gets going, he gets up from the computer and paces the floor. “I can feel it then, an emptiness in my hands, just about the size of a Nerf ball. And I look to the top of the closet door where the hoop should be.”

Johanna Hurwitz exercises. She realized she was leading “a sedentary life.” She would wake, shower, and sit at her desk for hours on end. Five days a week. Sound familiar? On her morning walks, she discovered that her brain is

busy, too. “I don’t wear earphones or listen to music or books on tape. I listen to myself and the characters I am in the midst of creating. I ask them questions about why they did something, and they give me answers. As a result, I can’t wait to sit at my desk to begin writing. I am rarely stuck. I’ve worked out all the kinks in the story. I know the answers.”

James Howe has a “dream workspace” above treetops—a perfect writer’s perspective “for feeling not quite in the world”—on the third floor of a Victorian house. It’s cluttered with quirky objects, toys, his life’s drawings tacked on walls. “One of the high-wire acts children’s authors are called upon to perform is to balance our child selves and our adult selves as we write. Having both of these parts of myself represented in the room in which I work is vital to me.” His office is “too small to pace,” so he goes down to the hallway on the second floor to pace instead. Removed, he can “talk out loud without worrying that his husband, the dog, or two cats will hear him.” He starts his workday on whatever book he’s in the middle of, or reads poetry because he’s well-served by “the poet’s ability to speak not only through what’s said, but what’s left unsaid . . . The biggest mistake I make is ‘Let me quickly check my e-mail.’ I can lose the morning and more frequently the entire day. So it’s best to start the day reading, daydreaming, and writing, and move on later to e-mails and taking care of other business.”

Jim is in love with his chair—the glider kind for nursing babies “that allows for various positions, including the dangerously comfortable full recline. Sitting in mine brings back memories of the years I sat reading A. A. Milne and Robert Louis Stevenson to my young daughter.”

As for the writing itself, he has a few hard-and-fast routines: Print out and keep the draft in a three-ring binder to give the manuscript the feeling of a book. Leave the work unfinished each

day so the next morning you can return to the middle of a chapter or poem. “Beginnings can be so daunting!” The last thing he discussed was a rock he found on a path he travels every day. It sits by his keyboard. He picks it up from time to time to feel it in his hand. “Holding on to it is maybe a way of holding on to the mystery. And mystery is what we encounter every time we sit down to write. Maybe the rock is a reminder to keep it as simple as that: encounter the mystery and see what happens.”

At the end of the day, there was a shared sense—I can hardly wait to get up the next morning, go into that room, and write. Period. A glimpse of these authors inspired me to see more. Outside and in. So I planted a climbing rosebush with a slate path into the woods near my window. The pianist Artur Schnabel said, “The pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides.” Give yourself space, appreciate time, do whatever works for you in whichever way, but the key is to get in the chair, any chair, without any excuses, and do it. With passion. Or what Jim likes to call “a daydreamy approach I need for my work.”

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