

Who Are You, and Why Do You Want to Write?

There is a prevalent fashion that says, ‘Don’t bother to think about anything remotely philosophical because old men have already done all the thinking.’ It doesn’t matter how many books have been written, or how many studies made; each of us still needs to think things through for ourselves.

—Nick Bantock



I always encourage writers to ask themselves, “Who cares?” Why does their work matter? Why should we invest our attention? If it seems too early on in your development to be asking yourself such tough-love questions—you’re too unsure of yourself, of *course* no one cares!—**please understand that this is not a question of whether or not you have anything important to say. It’s a matter of uncovering that important thing and building the courage to do right by it.** (And yes, I say “building” purposefully, because courage can be cultivated.)

I have slogged through plenty of self-indulgent writing in my day, much of which I have written myself. When it became clear that I wasn’t going to sell my “practice novel,” I resolved to write another book that would incorporate all the feedback I’d received in those rejection letters. I left my job to go to grad school, and one afternoon I had a conference with my fiction professor, Mike McCormack (author most recently of *Solar Bones*, which won a bunch of awards in Ireland and the UK). Mike had read some early pages, and he had positive things to

say about the unexpected juxtapositions I was making: human cloning and one’s identity in relationship to one’s family, science and nostalgia—inspired by Mary Shelley yet very much its own thing. “You have to create a space for your book on the shelf,” he said. “Write something that no one else could ever think of writing.”

I had to get out of my own way, and that conversation with Mike helped a great deal. The sooner you move past the prestige-oriented desire to *be* a writer and focus on what you can contribute, the sooner you will devise stories worth reading. In this section we’ll take some time to reflect on your values and interests, and ponder how you can begin to nurture them into a unique sensibility.

Whatever the stages in your own creative cycle, this initial step of reflection and clarification is something you will ideally make time for at the start of each new project. Every story has its own reasons for birthing itself, and your overarching sense of purpose can and will evolve over time.