

## Negotiating with the Dead

*Margaret Atwood*

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A writer in writing. This is the way the book is being billed, and the reason why it was sought out. But anyone turning the pages to glean those technical secrets of what it is really to be a writer, how the writing is actually done, will be disappointed. What is presented instead is some rather vague philosophical reflections, the nature of which does not necessarily require any deeper intimacy with the craft and practice of writing.

The biographical story is familiar. How many people have not dreamt about being writers, such dreams fed by the steady readings of books in childhood and the allures of losing yourself into a fictional world. Many of us has felt this, but how many of us have taken up the pen? Where is the difference? Is the future writer a more precocious reader, dipping into Shakespeare by the age of eight, reading all the great Russians before entering the teens? Some undoubtedly have, but not all, and besides precocious reading is no guarantee of a passion for writing let alone the skill that ought to guide it.

To write is by the nature of the craft an act of pretension. Why should you expect others to read what you write? Is writing done by yourself, or by some other part of your personality. Your 'genius' so to speak, which some people are blessed (or cursed) with?. Could that be the secret. It is not you who guide the pen, it is your alter ego. A spirit that is truly disembodied. You, yourself as a person, who does the actual living, eating, drinking and defecating, you are not special at all, on the contrary boringly ordinary. So the reader that want to possess you, believing that he or she thereby will appropriate your gift, is sadly deluded. Close to this, is the matter of fame. Fame is courted, dreamed of and sometimes bestowed. Without fame your ability to live off your pen, is almost void. Yet fame is somehow shameful. The succesful writer must somehow have sold herself. And for somebody starting out, fame is heavy burden of expectation, bound to crush but the most powerful.

Finally what is really the art and passion for writing? Maybe simply a quest to untravelled lands to come back and report? And of course there is really only one foreign land to which you want to descend and return, namely the land of the dead. Being a writer is simply a negotiation with the dead, to enter their realm in order to retrieve some secret jealously guarded by them.

So not a manual but a metaphysical reflection spun in order to fulfill a duty.

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