



Library podcast

Seattle Writes - Fear and Writing

[00:00:05] Welcome to the Seattle Writes podcast produced by the Seattle Public Library with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation and Amazon Literary Partnership. Seattle Writes supports local writers through programs, workshops and writings and by providing space to work throughout the city. To see upcoming classes and additional information about Seattle Writes visit our website at SPL dot org slash Seattle Writes.

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[00:01:48] Well, when Linda Johns first contacted me last year and said, "Hey, do you want to teach a class for the Seattle Writes program?" I was absolutely thrilled. Then the second thought that came into mind was I should just teach on fear and writing. It's because it's something that I've struggled with during the last couple of years. I know how it feels to have all the time in the world to write and then I don't do it because I'm afraid. It was a really strange thing for me, because I had written part time for about 12 years when I worked full time at the UW [University of Washington] and then later when I was running my own consulting business. Then two years ago, when I closed my business and I decided I was going to follow my dream to write full time, I tried writing and I just couldn't do it. I would actually sit down and try to write and

[00:02:44] I would just think of so many other things I need to be doing, like cleaning the bathroom, washing the dishes, maybe do an extra load of laundry, clean out that bookshelf, reorganize it. There

was always something more urgent and it wasn't that I would sit there in my chair and actually feel like fear coursing through my veins. It wasn't like that. It was just this overwhelming desire that I had to do something else.

[00:03:15] Just had to do something else and I had to do it now. That's how my fear showed up and over time, I realized that for a lot of writers, that's how their fear shows up, too. So, again, when I was asked to teach a workshop, the first thing that came to mind was how do you overcome the fear that always comes in when you're trying to sit down and write? That's why I wanted to teach that workshop. Yeah. That's excellent. What do you think causes people to fear writing? So there's a lot of reasons I think that people fear writing and I'm going to go over them. The ones that I know of and a lot of these relate to me and then some of them don't. One of my fears is that the writings just gonna be bad. Yeah, I think a lot of people have that. I definitely have that. The other fear is that I'll let other people down. That's more related to not writing good enough so that it is of the quality to be published. Whether self published or published through a traditional publisher. That somehow if I can't achieve that, then all these other people who know that I'm writing, who are cheering me on are going to be let down. I also have fear that I'm going to let other people - Let myself down in addition to other people.

[00:04:44] So if I wasn't able to achieve that, I would feel bad too. I also have fear about the dark emotions of my characters feel. Yeah. Like, you know, on most days, I don't really want to go through anger, anxiety, sadness, depression. My characters go through that and I'm like, you know, I don't really want to go through that today. What's related to that is that, as with most good stories, your characters are gonna get hurt. You know, I can't remember, was it Nabokov who said your job as a writer is to get your character up a tree and throw stones at it? Throw stones at him or her. That's what good writers do. So I also have fear of hurting my characters. Even though I'm not my characters, because I'm writing them it is me. So when I know a really crucial hard scene is coming up I actually fear writing that because I don't want to go through it. I don't want to feel how it feels to be hurt. So, yeah, that brings up a lot of fear. So some people have fear from a creative wound. Like at some point in their lives, either a friend or a family member or a teacher saw something that they created and they criticized it. It put it down or said, "Who do you think you are that you think you can draw?" Something. Like they have a creative wound.

[00:06:24] I feel very lucky that I'm actually one of those people that doesn't have a creative wound. But when I first heard about that, I realized, oh, my gosh, there's actually quite a few people out there that have that. The other thing I don't have, which I recently was alerted to about this, is that if you're dyslexic, you tend to fear the actual act of writing. I've worked with dyslexic students before and I realize that a lot of my writing exercises don't work for them because they fear the actual act of writing. One of my friends who's actually a really fantastic writer, he has to see the whole story, almost the whole story in his head before he writes it down. So it takes him a really long time to see that vision but then he can write it down. It's not that it's perfect or that it's super easy to write it all down but he can't as dyslexic. For his type of dyslexia, he can't actually discover as he writes. It has to all be discovered. Mostly discovered ahead of time. So he actually doesn't like the actual act of

writing. That part is the hard part for him. So there's just many different reasons why people fear writing.

[00:07:42] I think it's very personal to each writer. Yeah, but I can relate to the majority of them.

[00:07:51] People always want to know how a writer writes. Can you describe your writing routine?

[00:07:55] Sure. So I try to link my habits as they lead up to writing. So I wake up in the morning. I have breakfast. Then I read for pleasure, usually for about 20 minutes to 30 minutes. Sometimes longer. Then I meditate for about ten minutes. Then I take a shower and then I write. All these things are linked so sometimes I'll do them out of order and it will feel weird. I'll be like, wait a minute, that didn't feel right. Sometimes it'll actually keep me from writing because I didn't link it. It didn't link as it normally does. But generally, if I follow that routine of wake up, breakfast, read for pleasure. Meditate for ten minutes. Shower. Then I sit down and write before I do anything else then it usually goes OK. It took me a long time to realize that that routine works for me. Actually, I'll go into more into that a little bit more in depth later. But I just want to say, too, that even even when I'm not writing and I think this is true for a lot of writers, even when I'm not writing, when I'm actually doing chores or I'm gardening or I've gone to the grocery store to get some get some food I'm actually still writing. It's still the stories, the problems. They're still working their way through my head. So I find that when I'm doing something very rote, very normal and like something I do all the time, that's when the solutions to a lot of my writing problems will come through.

[00:09:34] Because you know how, a lot of times people say I got the best ideas in the shower. I'm like that. I will be showering, folding laundry, something like that.

[00:09:42] As long as I'm not using that thing to avoid writing, the solutions will come through. Yeah. That's neat. Do you write every day?

[00:09:57] No, but I try to write five to six days a week. So how do you not get distracted while writing? I do get distracted a lot, but I've gotten into the habit of using the the Pomodoro method. Have you heard of that method? I think I've heard of it, but I can't remember the details. I can't remember who exactly invented it. It was some guy named Pomodoro or if it's named that, because people use a tomato timer, a timer shaped like a tomato to do this. Whatever. It's basically what it is, is you get a timer and you set it for 25 minutes and you write for 25 minutes. And when the timer goes off, you take a five minute break. It's a great way to sort of break up your day so that you don't feel like, oh, man, I have to sit down and write for three hours. Like, how am I gonna get through this? Ooo, avoidance. Now I'm going to go do something else. You just say, OK, can I do this for 25 minutes? Yeah, I can do it for 25 minutes and then give yourself a nice five minute break. Now, sometimes I don't stick with that, like I will take like a 20 minute break or longer depending on what I got done. If I got something done that was really difficult I'll give myself a longer break. I'm like, that was fantastic Peg. Like, you deserve a longer break. But generally I find that twenty five minute blocks using the Pomodoro method is is a great way to not get so distracted.

[00:11:31] That's excellent.

[00:11:33] I might need to try that during my work day. So when you write five or six days a week, how do you keep yourself accountable to writing every day or that often?

[00:11:46] So that's a good question. This is what I was alluding to when I said I want to get more in depth about how I write. So it took me almost a year and a half to figure out a really simple way to stay accountable. It was actually something that my therapist and I came up with. What I do is I keep a paper calendar where you can do this with an electronic calendar, too. So when I sat down to write, I actually write down the time of day. So let's say it's 10:15 a.m. that I start doing my writing. When I stop writing, I write down when I stopped. So let's say 11:15 a.m. Then I write down next to that, how many minutes in this case it would be sixty minutes. At the end of the week on Saturday, I actually would write an email to my therapist with all those times on it. So it'd be like Monday. 10:15, 11:15, sixty minutes. Tuesday, you know, on and on for the whole week. I'd send that off to her and she would sometimes write, "Good job". I remember this now. I realize she didn't always write back. Sometimes she would say, "Hey, good job" and other times she wouldn't write back. But it was more the act of actually doing it, of actually writing down the times and then doing a summary at the end of the week. It helps me realize that even if I only wrote a little bit, even if I really sat down to write for just 20 minutes or 50 minutes. By the end of the week, I had completed a decent amount of writing.

[00:13:18] It didn't matter if it was just that I had written two chapters or 10 or 20 chapters, like there was something about seeing the time that I spent writing and then the actual amount of writing that made me feel good. That exercise made me feel really good. And so I did that for eight weeks. Every week I would send that e-mail to my therapist. And after eight weeks, I told her, yeah, I don't have to do this anymore because it's now a habit. Now I just do it for myself. Like, I don't email anyone. I just write it out on my calendar. Look at it. Tabulated the total at the end of the week. And I go, wow, that was quite a bit you got done in that amount of time. Good job, Peg. I feel great about it. I don't need to have anyone else hold me accountable. Now, some folks, they will do this forever. Just they'll find a friend or a buddy that they will email once a week and I think that's a great idea. Hopefully that friend is someone who actually writes back, "Hey, great job". Yeah, people have troubles keeping themselves accountable. This is actually a technique that worked for me that took me a long time to discover and you might want to try it. It might work for you.

[00:14:32] That's neat. I like that. How do you choose...

[00:14:38] Sorry, I forgot to mention that I actually recorded a video about this. So if you go to Peg Cheng dot com and click on blog at the top and then look for categories on the right pic videos, then click vlog. That's a video blog. Vlog Number one. How to feel the fear and write every day. I actually explain in detail and with visuals about that exercise I just told you about.

[00:15:05] That's excellent. Thank you. Sure.

[00:15:08] So when you sit down. How do you choose what to write? So for me, I have to be very extreme. Like I have to choose what I'd like to see published if I were to die tomorrow. That's great. That's how I choose what to work on. Whatever is most urgent. I actually have a blog on this, too. So if you go to my Web site Peg Cheng dot com, you pick Vlog number two. How do you choose what to write next? It's something one of the students asked and so I thought, that's a good question. But yeah, for me, it has to be something that I feel absolutely compelled to write. It can't be something that well, I think this could be very commercial, could sell or, you know, this is something I've been working on for a long time. It could be, but it actually has to be something I feel like, OK, if tomorrow I were to be pushing daisies. Sleeping with the fishes, what would I want to be out in the world? And that is the thing that I have to work on.

[00:16:13] I like that. It's kind of a way of visualizing what is most urgent in some ways. Yeah, it's a little morbid, but it works for me.

[00:16:24] So how do you not get intimidated by all the other great writing out there?

[00:16:30] It's a good question. I remember when a student asked me this and I thought, oh, that's so interesting because I just thought, that's just normal, isn't it? Isn't that just normal that you read fantastic - Right? If you're a reader, you'd be surprised how many people say they want to write, but they don't read and I'm like, what? That's like saying you want to be a doctor, but you don't want to touch human bodies. I'm like, wait a minute, that doesn't work. But yeah, I mean, I read all the time. I read more than I write. I'm always amazed by the great writing out there. I'm always like, wow, that's fantastic. I can't write like that. Or I wish I could write like that. Or that's great that that person writes like that but I'm never going to write like that. Most the time when I read something really great I think, "Oh bravo!". Good game. Like you just upped the level that I need to reach for. I feel motivated by that not to imitate anyone, but to just realize that someone created a piece of work that is so fantastic that it makes me go I need to create something as great as that for myself.

[00:17:37] Yes, I just think it's normal, actually, to feel intimidated as long as you don't let it stop you from writing. Another thing that I recommend to people, I only got this tip recently in 2016 when Prince died. So, I'm a big fan of Prince. When he died, tragically, it was really sad. But this one article that I read it made me feel good but it also made me feel good thinking about Prince. But it also made me realize, oh, wait a minute, this is something that could be good for writers.

[00:18:13] So the article is called Isn't This Funnier? New girl creator Liz Meriwether recalls the making of the Prince episode. You can Google it or it's actually on Vulture dot com. But basically, it's an article that Liz Meriwether, who is the creator of the TV show "New Girl", she wrote after Prince died.

[00:18:31] It was about the time when Prince said he wanted to be on New Girl because he's a fan. She freaked out because she's a huge fan of Prince and just her and her staff had to write an episode with him in it. She describes how that went and she also describes how the shooting went. It is just a

beautiful, hilarious article and tribute to Prince. I recommend that even if you're not a Prince fan you should read it, it's actually really well-written.

[00:19:10] What it made me realize is that even someone who is a genius and Prince was a musical genius can like a regular old sitcom like *New Girl*. No offense. I mean you know, *New Girl*. You know, it's amusing, but it's to me, it's like a regular old sitcom. So you never know who out there could be a total genius thinks your writing is great and just loves it and is a fan. So you just have to do your best writing and not think that, oh, you know, no one is going to like this or other people are going to think other people's writing is better. No, you could write something that you like and makes you laugh and turns out some genius out there like Prince also loves it.

[00:19:58] That's excellent.

[00:19:59] I like keeping that in mind, that even with all these other great writers out there, someone's going to love your work, too. That's right. There might be Prince. Well, not anymore. It might be someone like Prince. It might be someone like Prince, which would could be just as good. It could be amazing. Yes. Kind of an addendum to that question. So you write books for both children and adults. So, for example, when you were writing *The Contenders* for a middle grade audience, did you read other middle grade books or did you read things that were different from what you were writing? How do you, I guess, do you abstain from reading certain things when you're writing in that area?

[00:20:38] Oh, that's a really great question. I know there's a lot of writers who won't read in their genre when they're writing that genre. So they won't read middle grade while they're writing middle grade and at first I used to think that that was really good advice. But now I'm like, no, I totally read what's in my genre as I write that genre. It's mainly just that I feel like I need to read whatever feels appropriate and motivating at that time. So it could be middle grade novels. I've read many, many middle grade novels throughout my life. So I have some favorites that I like to read but when I think back at the time when I was reading or writing sorry, writing *The Contenders*, I actually wasn't reading any particular middle grades at that time, but I had many, many of them in my head. I was reading a lot of classic adult stuff. I'm a fan of *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, which if I could write a book as good as that. Boy. Wow. I mean, yeah. It wasn't that I was trying to make *The Contenders* like that but I was reading it to remind myself of what really good writing is. Yet *Of Mice and Men* is very different from *The Contenders* but just reading something really good made me feel more motivated to do my writing. So yeah, I do both. I'll read stuff that is totally within the genre and then stuff that's totally not in the genre.

[00:22:14] Yeah. Nice. That's great.

[00:22:18] So speaking of reading, do you have any books on writing that you would recommend?

[00:22:24] Yeah, I have had many books that I'd recommend, but I'm going to mention the three that I talk about in my *Fear & Writing* workshop, and they are *Big Magic : Creative Living Beyond Fear* by Elizabeth Gilbert.

[00:22:37] That's it's a really great book. I love it because it's so full of all these little stories that Liz went through or that her friends went through in terms of living a creative life. There's just many great insights and just lots of fun and hilarious and touching stories in there. I really recommend that one. The other one is Ink Spots : Collected Writings on Story Structure, Filmmaking, Craftsmanship by Brian MacDonald. Again, similar to Big Magic, it's full of very short chapters, really great stories and tips on writing and story structure and getting better at your craft. I really love that book. Then the last one is Art & Fear, which is a fairly short book by David Bayles and Ted Orland. Art & Fear : Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking is a bit more academic. It's short and it's a fast read, but it's a deep read and it's one of those books I recommend that you read more than once because it's got some really great tips and concepts in there. There's one more that I don't talk about in the workshop, but that I recommend to pretty much anyone who asks about getting better at writing, which is a book that I read recently called Better Than Before : What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits by Gretchen Rubin. It taught me a lot about habits and it taught me a lot about how we're all different and how we make or break our habits. She gives some very interesting tips on how to figure out what kind of person you are and what kind of quirks or preferences you have in that, how when you realize that about yourself, you can actually create better habits for yourself. So it was really enlightening for me and so I recommend that to everyone too.

[00:24:36] Those sound great and the good news is that the Seattle Public Library does own all four of those titles. So if you're a listener with a library card, come on down. Finally, Peg, do you have any last words you want to leave with our listeners?

[00:24:50] Yes, actually, Andrea, as a matter of fact, I do. Which is I really love this quote from James Baldwin, which is, "If you're going to be a writer, there is nothing I can say to stop you ; if you're not going to be a writer nothing I can say will help you. What you really need at the beginning is somebody to let you know that the effort is real." That's what I try to do in my Fear & Writing workshop is to let people know that the effort is real. That it's totally possible to have fear and still do your writing in that it's completely worth it. So I hope if you're listening right now, I hope to see you at one of my workshops Sunday. I hope that you'll feel the fear and keep on writing. That's great. Thank you so much, Peg. Thanks. Andrea it was a real pleasure.

[00:25:40] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.