

Advice to a Young Writer

By Susannah Eanes

Q: I am eighteen years old and want to become a novelist. I am especially interested in romantic fiction based perhaps in the 1840s. I have so many stories in my head it feels almost ready to burst. How is the best way to go about it? I don't want to waste much time.

1. Believe in yourself and that you have a calling to write. So do just that; you are correct that if you do not stoke those embers you will lose the sparks that incited you to do so in the first place.
2. Read the following:
 - a) Jennifer Blake's advice to those who wish to write (this should still be on her website at www.jenniferblake.com)
 - b) Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*
 - c) Dorothea Brand's *Becoming a Writer*
 - d) Anything and everything by Julia Cameron and Sarah ban Breathnach - this will help you form the discipline of daily commitment to your craft, and recognize your authentic voice and the outlet for your authentic self.
 - e) As many good books of the sort you wish to write as you can find. Reading (or attempting to read) bad ones will also help you to recognize what is and is not authentic, so it can be helpful in order to learn what to avoid.
3. Write what you know. I cannot emphasize this enough. If you do not know what you are writing about, it will be obvious to your readers. If your interest lies in the 1840s, you need to find out everything you can about this period, as well as identify the reasons that it interests you, and follow what you learn. Don't invent things and situations that are not at least partly based in fact. And do not be satisfied with reading one or two books about the period, or doing some Google searches --this will not suffice. A good reference librarian is invaluable to assist you --but I have an ever better resource for you as a future historical novelist. One of the main reasons I became a living history interpreter was to understand what it felt like to work and exist in the time period I wanted to write about. These experiences have been irreplaceable. Through them I was truly able to develop an authentic voice so I can be certain I know what I'm talking about, as well as expanding my range of ideas for new works. In other words, the more I experienced as a person "living" in the early 19th century, the more my knowledge and creativity was stirred, and the more I knew where to look (in the library) to find answers that I needed.
4. Get others to read and critique what you write. Be prepared, and grateful for, criticism. As writers we carry way too much around in our heads that did and did not go

into the work to be able to be fully functional in looking objectively at our own work. You need that feedback in order to go forward and produce the best work that you can.

5. While I have written all my life, life does intervene. Do not be discouraged if you have nothing ready or worth publishing for decades. Rome was not built in a day, and most of us will not earn a Pulitzer with our first published work at age 24 like Annie Dillard. And all of your experiences and knowledge will help you to flesh out characters and feed your creative impulses to make what you do produce that much better.

6. Converse and build relationships with published authors of the style you admire, as well as recognized writing experts --meaning take classes or workshops that any of them offer. Many of them will be more helpful than you think, as long as they recognize you are genuinely interested in being productive, they will keep up the communication and offer invaluable criticism long after the class is over.

7. Develop your eye for observation, your ear for conversation, your tactile senses that record what it feels like to touch and be touched, to experience and philosophize about that strong inner life that every writer must develop. And write about all of that, as much as you can. Few of us can write every single day, but do it as much as possible. Consider writing as important as nourishment and physical exercise.