

The writing life

By Roland Merullo

Roland Merullo has just finished his fourth novel, *In Revere, in Those Days*. In the summer of 1999, he wrote an eight-part serial mystery, *The Boston Tangler*, for the *Globe Magazine*. Twenty-two years ago, I was living with my girlfriend in a run-down apartment in Allston, working, periodically, at an odd assortment of jobs and dreaming of a life that made sense. I was a 25-year-old working-class guy with an upper-class education, and I'd just made a miserable failure of myself as a Peace Corps volunteer on a tiny island in Micronesia. By almost any definition of the word, I was poor - no health insurance, no car, less than \$100 in the bank - but by my choice the jobs were always part time: a day here and there as an office temp; a day here and there loading trucks with 50-pound bags of peanuts; an enjoyable six weeks spent sitting in a building on Boylston Street and making phone calls on behalf of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital; a few months driving a Checker cab, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays.

On days when I wasn't working, I'd grab the 99-cent breakfast special at a Greek place on Harvard Avenue, then carry a Bic ballpoint and a yellow legal pad to the Allston Public Library and spend six or seven hours writing. I did not know any published writers. In five years of college and graduate school, I had taken only two writing courses. Except for my girlfriend, Amanda, I never told anyone what I did on my days off, never gave voice to my secret ambition. But the idea of writing for a living was tied up with this naive vision I had of a true, pure life that was free of the petty aches and dissatisfactions that speckled the lives I saw around me.

Twelve years later, with the help of a mentor named Michael Miller and the moral support, loyalty, and patience of Amanda, those first scribbles in the Allston library evolved into a novel someone was willing to publish ... and to pay me for. In the interim, there had been rejections enough to fill five shoe boxes - from newspaper and book editors, from agents, from publishing houses, from interns at literary magazines in small Midwestern towns. There was the puzzlement of my parents, who had made enormous sacrifices to give me an

education they hoped would provide me with a level of financial comfort they had not known. There was marriage, debt, illness, the sudden death of my father, seven years of full-time carpentry, back surgery, two arduous but lucrative contract jobs working on cultural exchange programs in the Soviet Union.

At one point during this period, in the fall of 1986, I sold my seven-year-old Dodge pickup and emptied my bank account, Amanda took a leave of absence from her job, and we lived in \$5-a-night hotels in Mexico for three months while I struggled along on my novel and she built up a photography portfolio.

Throughout all of that, like a man clinging to the underbelly of a biplane as it bounced and raced along the tarmac, I held onto my dream of flight. On June 29, 1989, I met with two editors in the old Houghton Mifflin building on Park Street. They told me the novel had been accepted for publication, and I spent the day floating around Boston as if I had, in fact, lifted off. The contract I was offered compensated me at the rate of roughly \$10 a week for the years it had taken me to write the novel, but it didn't matter. I had lifted off. I was going to sail above the ordinary woes of the working world. My life was going to be *The Writing Life*.

Most authors have a similar tale to tell. Their careers began not with years in a professional school, not even with a carefully thought out program of undergraduate study, but with an urge, a dream, an intuition. They either did not know how high the odds were stacked against them, or they knew and told themselves they didn't care. In a few cases, their confidence (or arrogance or determination) proved to be stronger than the odds: Thanks to a great deal of talent or a great deal of luck or very powerful connections, the first book "made a splash," "had a buzz," received a glowing notice in the front of *The New York Times* Book Review, or was made into a movie by a big studio. Age 23, and the dreamer was rich and famous.

Much more often, however, the would-be writers met one of two fates: They encountered a few dozen rejections, a few years of hard work for no pay, and went looking for a saner, wiser dream; or they finished a book and got it published but still had to manage a living by finding a tolerable second occupation - teaching, banging nails,

nursing, writing technical manuals, or giving music lessons. They have children and wake up at 4 in the morning to scrawl a few lines, or squirrel themselves away in a basement room, working at a desk, after their day in the corporate world is finished.

All of those who ended up living some version of the writing life can boast of certain abilities: a fertile imagination, an observant eye and an attentive ear, an appreciation for the shadings and intricacy of language, a sense of tension, of story. But talents like that aren't really so rare. What writers possess that is rarer - though perhaps not always attractive - is a kind of mulish tenacity: the ability to read over a manuscript 500 times, making small improvements; the will to completely rewrite a novel they've already spent four years on; the ability to endure public criticism and waves of self-doubt and years of failure because there is really only one thing they want to be doing.

It's a strange obsession and more common than I'd ever imagined in those Allston days. I encounter it regularly now when I give readings, or sit on panels, or even just fall into a discussion with someone on the golf course or at the playground as we push our daughters on the swings. "I always wanted to do that," a surprising, an amazing number of people say to me. "I always wanted to write a book." Lawyers, dentists, venture capitalists, portfolio managers - "I envy you," they say. "That's the life I wanted." And the response that usually leaps to my lips and hovers there, unspoken, is: Let's trade bank accounts.

Though I know it isn't true, on certain days it seems that every other person I meet wants to live the writing life. This is a strange phenomenon in a society where so few people have - or make - time for reading. There are thousands of writing workshops offered every year, hundreds of master of arts programs in fiction, scores of vanity presses. I puzzle over the source and power of this urge, in myself and in others. I once heard someone describe the act of writing as an "internal ordering," a way of forcing life's manifold confusions into an understandable shape. That's part of it. Another part is a deep desire to have someone else take our thoughts and imaginings seriously, to listen when we speak.

In some cases, the urge toward the writing life comes not from any spiritual or psychological optimism but from a bald drive for fame. Very few of us can hit a golf ball like Tiger Woods or a baseball like Nomar Garciaparra or summon the patience, energy, and financial backing to run for public office. But just about everyone can read and write, so, for some people, getting a book published seems like the easiest route to celebrity.

In several of the more successful writers I know, this craving to be heard has mutated into an unquenchable lust for attention and praise. I have literary acquaintances who stand at parties, drink in hand, looking over the shoulder of the person they're talking to, interested in making conversation only with someone as famous as they are. Others seem to believe that an interview with Terry Gross or Charlie Rose is really the important thing, and that their child's cough or mate's mood belongs to a pettier, second-rate world.

For the less famous, those often referred to as "mid-list authors," the demon is not too much attention but too little. Even for semi-reclusive types like me, who would rather have a glass of wine at home on a nice fall night than go jetting around the country on a fabulous book tour, a certain measure of public notice - interviews, readings - is essential to survival. The writing life then becomes a strange admixture of thousands of solitary hours and bursts of gregariousness: signing books for a line of strangers; chatting it up with radio interviewers who have not read your novel but need to fill a quarter-hour of air time; talking about agents and contracts to a roomful of men and women at a conference who want, sometimes desperately, to see their name on the spine of a novel.

Perhaps part of what appeals to them is the risk, the fact that making a living as a writer of books has a good deal in common with making a living as a gambler. There is that same perverse need to flirt with bankruptcy, to trade the comfort of a regular paycheck for the dream of an unexpected windfall. More and more, as our society gets tidied up to fit the commandments of the corporate gods, the writer feels a prideful sense of being a maverick, a cowboy, a card player who sleeps late and dresses as he chooses and stakes years' worth of income on a few hundred pages of prose.

Like the professional gambler, the writer lives his life on the margins. This doesn't mean we don't date, marry, have children, or go to friends' homes for barbecues on the Fourth of July. And it doesn't mean we labor under some especially difficult burden unknown to carpenters, truck drivers, and nurses on the cancer ward. I have, in fact, no patience with fellow authors who describe their work as "torture," "agony," and so on. People who use language for a living should be more careful with it. Yes, it's difficult to face a blank page, to knock your spirit up against a bad case of writer's block, to expose your dearest interior dramas to the world only to have some quasi-professional critic tear the book to shreds in a snide review. But torture and agony it ain't.

What living on the margins means is that we spend a little extra time and energy observing the human predicament rather than just living it. We are very much part of the crowd but seem to prefer to walk along at the edges, watching how the crowd behaves, and how we behave within it.

Though storytellers have played a fundamental role in every society from the beginning of human time, in this age of the deification of science and business, such an occupation can seem a mad self-indulgence, even to the storyteller himself. Some days, when I have spent hours fussing over a manuscript - erasing commas, moving paragraphs, fine-tuning a character's speech patterns - I sit down to the evening news and look at the faces of hungry children in North Korea or marchers protesting repression in Burma or Tibet or doctors working to find a cure for cystic fibrosis, and I feel a sour wash of shame. At least, in the years when I worked as a carpenter, I could drive by a customer's house and see the set of steps or deck or garage I had built and know that I was spending my time in a useful manner. But a writer can work on a book for two or five or eight years without knowing if it will ever be published, ever be read by more than a handful of friends and fans, ever serve any worthwhile purpose on this earth.

Still, the obsession continues in so many of us, unabated. "It must be nice," my neighbor on a long flight said when I told him what I did for work, "to sit home all day and get paid for thinking." A dumb comment that goes to the heart of the matter. Those people who

express an interest in making a living as a writer, it seems to me, and those of us who cherished a dream of it long before we knew the pleasures and hardships it actually entailed, were looking for a life with some stillness and quiet in it. Amid the frenzy of the modern world - traffic jams and hurried meals, flights to catch and bills to pay, day-care hours, dentist appointments, trashy TV and trashier radio - there is a tremendous thirst for contemplative time. This is an important part of the function modern storytellers serve these days: We sit home and ponder the human condition because others don't have - or make - time to. We then put those musings on a page and hope to sculpt some small truth about living that will be more than just our own private truth. The price for this type of existence, this freedom, is an almost total lack of security. No retirement plan, no group health insurance, no paid vacations, no co-workers, no structure, no office to go to, no title ... just the satisfaction of knowing that, even if no one ever hears it, you have at least made a life of reaching down into yourself to speak one true word.

Every once in a while you find that word and are able to place it on the page. And every once in a while it turns out to be true for someone else, too. A few weeks ago, I received a note from a man in Colorado, someone who'd written me a fan letter once before, not long after my third novel was published. He was writing this time to tell me that his sister had just died, a woman who'd struggled for decades with the demon of schizophrenia and who had known something of the neighborhood and family life I'd tried to depict in that book. His sister had suffered through her last days in a coma, in a hospital near Boston. Not knowing what else to do to soothe her, to express his love, his solidarity, his compassion, he sneaked into the intensive care unit at 1 o'clock in the morning, three nights in a row, and read to her for two hours from my novel.

A writer lives for a letter like that. Set on a scale against five shoe boxes full of rejections, careless reviews, and all the doubt and dark hours of the writing life, it more than holds its own. That is the kind of bare human connection that lies at the heart of the writing dream. Your favorite book may be out of print, the graph of your credit card balance may look like the profile of Heartbreak Hill, your editor may quit two months before your new novel hits the shelves, but you can console yourself with the thought that you have spent your working

life trying to put something pure and true on the page. And, at least on this one occasion, at least for this one other human being, reading to his dying sister by flashlight in a dark hospital room, you have managed to do so.