

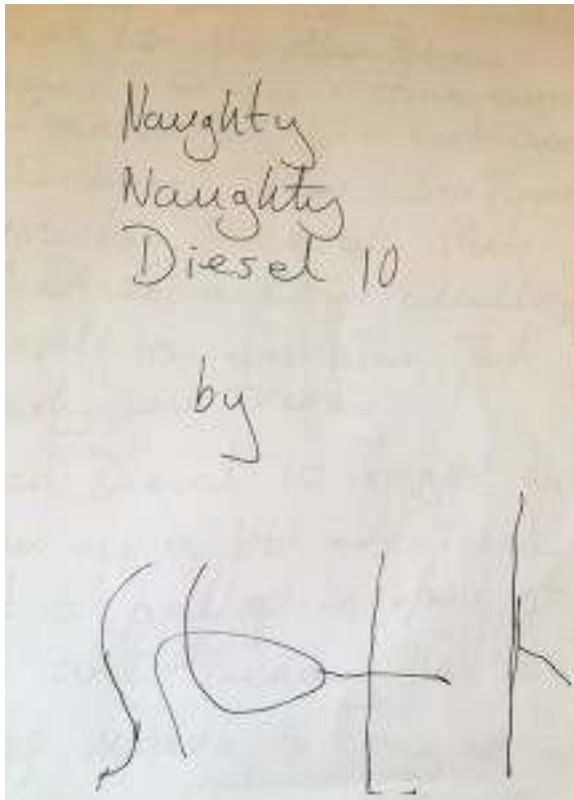
## The Pram in the Hall 4: Writing Together

There just isn't time! That's what it feels like when you have kids and would like to do some writing. Early on in this blog series a reader said that she pretty much put writing aside when her kids were very young, waited till they went to nursery/school and then had the bliss of writing uninterrupted on weekdays and saving weekends for her family. I hugely admire her patience and long-term view. I am not known for my patience. I think, if I had to parent full-time and wholly put aside my writing for those first few years, I would go a bit mad. My writing is what gives me balance, makes me feel like a grown-up, gives me an outlet for my own thoughts and feelings, my own dreams and ambitions. Yes, I have to squeeze it in here and there. No, I don't get enough time doing it because the kids also need and deserve my time, but I persevere in trying to do both parenting and writing, because it works for me. This post is about making it work for you and using the strange sources of creativity that come with writing while parenting.

There really isn't a lot of time. So you have to get efficient in many new ways because even tiny bits of time do add up. Write early in the morning and after work (a lot of famous authors including Stephen King did this while raising kids before they 'broke through'). Write during nap time. If you work outside of the home as well then write in your lunch hour at work and during your commute. Maybe now is the time to learn to be a planner rather than a pantsner? It can help, when you only have five minutes to write, to know what it is you are supposed to be writing. Explore short forms: a writer friend went from novels to haikus while parenting. Find shortcuts to absolutely minimise housework. Teach your kids to do 'quiet time': this is one hour where they play alone and quietly with anything that isn't likely to go horribly wrong (e.g. not painting and nowhere near the pond). My son did this when he stopped naps, aged about two and a half and has done it ever since. It gives me and my husband a chance to do our own things and it seems to have a very calming effect on him: he is immersed in his own imaginary world and emerges from it happy to see us but relaxed, as though time alone has been soothing to him. For those of you intending to downsize your writing to make room for the parenting, I say, don't lose it altogether. If you have been accustomed to doing things like Morning Pages (3 pages of A4 stream of consciousness every morning before anything else),

then downsize it to 3 pages in a mini notebook that fits in your pocket. It's still writing. Find little ways to keep it going.

Another, more creative way to write with kids around is: write with kids. When my first book arrived in the post I held it reverently (as you do) and showed my four-year-old son my name on the front and explained that this was my book, that I had written it. He promptly asked if he could write a book and dictated at high speed a 13-page story about a Mystery Animal. More books have followed, some focused on book and TV characters, others wild imaginings made up of his own ideas cross-pollinated with his favourite stories. Statistics show that the children of entrepreneurs are 60% more likely to become entrepreneurs themselves and I wonder whether this is true of writers – by seeing us write, our children are not only inspired to write themselves but also come to believe that being a writer is something they can do, not some 'special' job reserved for others. I have spoken with tutors who say that many of the children (especially boys) that they tutor really struggle with creative writing as they prepare for secondary school. Letting them see their parents write and being encouraged to do the same may be important in not losing their creative abilities later on. There are also some great books from Usborne that take kids through writing prompts. The first one is called Write Your Own Storybook and there are other genre-specific ones in the series. Watching a child write a 'book' is actually quite interesting, seeing the fairytale 'norms' they have already learnt about how a story should develop can be worth just as much as a perusing of 'The Writer's Journey'.



There are other ways to write with kids and benefit from their creativity. Write on your belly on the floor alongside them for a new perspective. As they get older, set up writing sessions together, perhaps for ten or twenty minutes. Don't make the session drag on or this will become a chore to them but enjoy sharing the writing experience together. Go on what Julia Cameron calls Artist's Dates together, where you experience something new to fill up your creative well. Cameron says these need to be solo but you take what you can: go and experience new things together – from artists' materials shops to a funfair, walking backwards along the street to camping in your garden. Children's immediacy of feeling (and unashamed venting) is shattering but also liberating. Have your own tantrum right back at them and use it in your writing. As writers we are told we should also read a lot to inform and develop our writing: take these early years to explore the wonderful world of children's books and their illustrators with your offspring. Many parents I have spoken to say that having children does something odd to your empathy, "it rips a layer off your heart" said one. You find yourself crying at things that would only have made you sad before, unable to read certain books or genres because they are too painful. Use this newfound sensitivity to explore a deeper layer of emotion in your writing.

As your children grow older you will get more time for your writing because they will be at nursery, at school, because they will have their own interests. Although the uninterrupted time to write will no doubt be welcomed with open arms, there is something to be said for the hurly-burly of writing with small children. Make the most of it in all its madness.