

The Pram in the Hall 6: The Sound of Silence

I do look forward to both my kids being in full time education, three years or so from now. In my mind, this will be a golden era. I will write, uninterrupted, for many hours each day, turning out huge quantities of exquisite prose in a quiet and tidy house. I'm not sure this image is entirely correct (my house was never tidy even when I didn't have kids and I can only hope my writing will become exquisite one day) and also the ideal image masks a secret fear: what if, in fact, it was the chaos of parenting that got me off my bottom and into writing seriously?

Before kids I did write, in a very leisurely way. I took time to watch the cats on the internet (I can haz cheezburger? being a favourite) and I procrastinated enormously over sending my writing out. I made progress but very slowly. Writing was a fulfilling and relaxing hobby. With kids on the horizon, however, I suddenly went into power mode. I wrote faster than I had ever done and learnt to redraft. The cats disappeared. I got better at writing: working with an editor, seeking feedback in large quantities, writing regularly. I used pregnancies as deadlines and baby naps as mini [NaNoWriMos](#) of just one hour. Faced with redundancy I chose to stay at home from early 2015 and look after the kids until they were of school age and prioritise my writing to see if I could make it my new career. I got serious. I wrote a business plan. I self-published four books in just over a year with three more to follow this year. I secured a Writer in Residency at the British Library and a fully-funded Creative Writing PhD at Surrey to start this autumn. I sent out pitches without worrying over them and got new writing opportunities, including this blogging residency with Mslexia. I'm telling you all this not to boast but to show you the difference that parenting has had on my writing. I don't think I'm alone. I've met too many people now (mostly women) who tell me very similar stories, so that I am nodding before they even say "and then I had kids and I..."



The Letter by Alfred Stevens

So when my kids are both in school and I have all that time available to me, I want to keep up the momentum. I want to use everything I learnt in the mayhem of parenting and make it work for me when there are no kids around. I hope this post will help anyone else in that position – or those who for whatever reason haven't got kids about but would like to benefit from the creative shove I believe they give you. Here's the things I will try to remember to do:

- Immerse myself in the new. Pregnancy provides such a dizzying wave of new emotions, products, experiences, relationships and more. It can be a fertile ground for your own creativity. Julia Roberts, author of [Motherhood to Otherhood](#), talks about planning an unpregnancy: taking 40 weeks and using them to grow a new life for herself. A rebirth. She used the time to change her body, her relationships, to write a book, to workshop with other mothers on their transformation journeys. She felt entitled to be moody, obsessed, to prioritise her journey before anything else, to indulge cravings and find out what she really wanted. I like this idea. It's easy to get stuck in a rut of

doing the same things every day but creativity comes from making new connections and if you give your brain new experiences it can forge something you never even dreamed of. So I will try many new things on a regular basis – things that help me experience new physical and emotional feelings, shifts in relationships, new food, new products, new locations, new forms and routines of writing. I will upset the daily pattern of my life and see what happens to my writing and creativity as a result.

- Avoid the energy-sucking power of the internet, TV, minor boring tasks or perceived ‘should dos’ like having an immaculate house: things that use up time fairly enjoyably or that you feel obliged to do but when you look back you somewhat regret wasting your time on them. Above my desk is an orange children’s magnetic number 1, such as those that adorn fridges everywhere. It reminds me to ask myself: what is the one thing I could do, right now, with the time available, that will make the biggest difference to what I want to achieve? The answer, sadly, is rarely: go and look at the I can haz cheezburger site. But it might be write a thousand words, or go take a long soak in a tub to prioritise your own physical well-being, or call a friend instead of always texting. It makes me question my priorities in life and make the very most of the creative time I have available, two things kids are pretty good at forcing you to do. For more on that one focus you can read [The One Thing](#) by Keller and Papasan.
- Keep up a regular writing habit. If I write every day, even for just five minutes, I doubt I’ll get writer’s block too often. You get used to the flow, you can pick up where you left off quickly and easily. You don’t wait for the ‘muse’ – you get on and write. And it adds up. Even tiny, tiny amounts of time add up to something pretty significant.
- Set outrageous deadlines and exceed them. I used to drift about, perhaps writing 500 words in a day and being very proud. Now I can knock out 2000 words in two hours. Yes, it will need polishing, but it’s still not that bad because I now write so much more that (I hope) I’m improving. I look back on earlier writing and can see the distance I’ve come which is simultaneously cringe-and-proud-making. [NaNoWriMo](#)

is right up there on my list of events to engage with. I am one of those who will do the work in the time I am given to do it in: you give me five days, it'll be ready then. Give me five minutes and I'll be pretty close to finishing. I will push myself because I am naturally lazy but I now know what I can really do.

- Be bold and brave. Send out pitches, queries, manuscripts and so on. Who cares if they say no? Send out another one. We need to put ourselves out there. It's just paper. Nothing awful will happen if I'm turned down. And if they say yes, then that's great: send out another one. Hope Clark at [Funds for Writers](#) (a really good free newsletter, sign up for it) says she always has 13 pitches out somewhere and encourages writers to pick their own number and always keep it at the same number: if a piece is accepted or rejected, out goes another one in its place.

These are the things I have learnt about my writing life and opportunities from my kids. Thanks, littl'uns.

Cyril Connolly, you were wrong: the two prams in the hall I've had improved my writing and my output a hundredfold. When my kids go to school I shall come back to this piece and use it as a reminder of all the positive shifts to my creativity and writing life that my kids brought about and try to hang on to them.

Of course, the very first week they are in school I have other plans. I'm going to spend the entire week in bed. Asleep.

This is my last post for Mslexia on the topic of The Pram in the Hall and it's been an absolute pleasure. I hope some of it's been useful or thought provoking. Thank you so much to everyone who commented, I loved reading your ideas and points of view. Happy writing!