

## The Adequate Writer: Writing Intensives

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When I'm embarking on a novel, I set a daily word count, and write seven days a week until the draft is finished: generally 1000 words.

When I was younger, I commonly did 3000, but 1000 knocks me out these days. Rarely, I get the word count done in the morning, but far more frequently, I'm writing till ten at night, or till 2 a.m. It's a sit-there-until-I'm-done enterprise Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.

It makes for crappy everything else—friendships, relationships, parenting, movie-going, whatever.

But since I now live alone, I am free to do intensives the way I would once have done them via winter housesitting, or by going to a retreat like Banff. Or for longer and harder.

A couple of weeks ago, I finished up an intensive from February of 2014 that ended up lasting 17 months.

That was crazy—even I recognize that--and I felt the burden of it.

On the other hand, absorbed as I was, I didn't have to clean my place or do my laundry or make my bed. I didn't have to get dressed. I didn't have to make the garden presentable. No one cared what I ate or when I went to bed or got up.

I was free to write my fingers into nubs.

When I traveled, as I had to do for reading tours, I kept up my punishing schedule. Even the day I attended the Governor General's awards in Ottawa after flying in from NY, I got my 1000 words in. Even the day I took 5 ferries to get back to Vancouver from a reading on Hornby Island, via Saltspring, I did my words.

During most of this lengthy intensive, I was sick. I began the intensive accidentally because, due to disability, I had become a shut-in, and, really, what else was there to do except write? I was traveling a lot in 2014. I spent 5 weeks in Paris shut-in. I spent a month in Toronto and another month in Montreal shut-in. I was shut-in when I was home in Vancouver.

So I wrote.

I got sicker. Eventually, it was time to re-write "The Lost Boy" and I was acutely ill. The words from in hospitals, written while my heart flew out of my chest, were indistinguishable from text I might have written in my semblance of normal.

I could argue that having my kids grown, my marriage shattered, leaves me free to be unloved, and to an extent, I'd be correct. Love is a many-tendriled rope that long knotted me, hard, to the world. Now I enjoy solitude and few demands. You know how many older women say they're too set in their ways now to ever be with another partner? I suspect that might describe me now, too. I can't imagine knocking off work because it's dinner time, or someone's wanting to spend the evening together.

The freedom I've got is a prize.

But why not at least take Saturdays off? Sundays? Every weekend, I think this: *Go play*. What could be the harm? I do grab a day occasionally, but I won't take off two in a row. It's because I am the worst kind of procrastinator. Losing the flow, for me, is a calamitous writer's block.

I'm not sure why, but I can't force myself back.

Losing the flow is like quitting smoking, starting again and then having to screw up your courage and readiness to stop again. Composition is that for me—just so hard that I can't force myself back into it. Filling up a blank page is, for me, dunning. I have the heart of a poet. Brevity and concision rule my days. Why say it in chapters and paragraphs when I can say it in a line and a break? Why utilize sentences at all?

I have to force expansions. You'd never guess what a flexible toolbox I have in 26 letters considering the trouble I have with it. The push to make a sentence a paragraph, a paragraph, five paragraphs? Paragraphs into chapters? It's not natural for me. I'm no natural-born story teller. Words eek out in the most parsimonious of ways.

But I am focused as a worker. A tortoise, a little a day, day after day. During my intensive, unimaginably, I wrote the romance novel, 'Muskoka Weekend,' some stories-in-progress, the literary novel 'The Lost Boy,' (which is an expansion of a short story), most of a flash-fiction book, participated in NaPoWriMo twice, plus managed second drafts of both novels.

Which let me just say: it ain't nothing.