

WHY WRITE?
By Kevin Scott Hall
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A few years ago, before embarking on a Master's degree in Creative Writing, I called my father with some optimistic news: "Guess what, Dad? I'm no longer an actor, I'm no longer a singer. Now I'm going to be a writer!" My father, now in his seventies, had a good laugh with me. He had long ago accepted the fact that his number two son was never going to come up with a practical career choice. That wasn't about to change just because I'd reached forty; I would just try a different creative direction.

Now, as I finish that degree and plug away at a novel, having endured countless workshop critiques, assignments that involved reading a book a week for fifteen weeks, and writing academic papers of 20-plus pages, I have to ask myself, "Why write in the first place?"

It is estimated that about 100,000 books in the English language are published annually, for a population that seems to have less and less time for them. As our attention span wanes, we catch headlines on the internet, or flip through five hundred channels, having no patience for the well-told story. Independent booksellers fight to stay open and, increasingly, the internet has gobbled up a larger share of book sales. It seems nobody wants to walk through aisles of shelves and feel dusty books in their hands.

I just returned from a writers' retreat in Archer City, Texas, home of Larry McMurtry and his four warehouses full of books. Several years ago, he had decided to turn the dying, one-redlight town (featured in his novel and movie, "The Last Picture Show") into a literary center by replacing shuttered businesses with these bookstores. Larry's sister, the colorful Sue Dean, who essentially caretakes the stores, says when they had the grand opening several years back, nobody showed up because, she says, "Only three people in Archer City read books." Amazingly, they have kept the bookstores profitable although, when I was there, I could spend hours in a store without seeing another soul, save for someone from my writers group.

The great Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." It is my belief that a life--one's own or another's--can only be properly examined by writing. Talking to a psychologist is therapeutic, but the words dissipate into the air after they are said. "How do I know what I think until I see what I say," E.M. Forster said. Writing marks the progress. Yet writing is more than therapy: What may begin as a process of trying to understand something is, one hopes, eventually crafted and molded by the writer into something bigger than the original idea. The writer creates something beyond himself, so that the reader recognizes a universal truth and--if the writing is great--can become better for having read the work.

Today, film is the literature of the age, and spectacle and acting get most of the attention in that medium. And yet, the reason "Star Wars" can be considered great while "Independence Day" cannot, is because of the writing. And where is the actor without the writer? Even Meryl Streep, always putting forth her best effort, is great when uttering the language of William Styron in "Sophie's Choice" but forgetful in the mediocre thriller "The River Wild." Good writing trumps good spectacle and good acting. The quality of the writing makes or breaks the film.

Most of us will not become great writers and even if we do, the whims of the market may keep our masterpieces largely unread. Herman Melville did not become famous as a writer until after his death.

Serious writing is a noble calling, in a time of little nobility. Our society rewards the corporate CEO, the aggressive salesperson, the glamorous moviestar, the highly paid athlete, the winning attorney, and the technologically gifted. The writer keeps a trained eye on our world, its values as well as its absurdities, and reports back and comments on it with as much of his well-read intelligence and poetry-fed heart as he can muster. Not many have the patience or work ethic to do so, especially if no tangible, foreseeable reward is promised.

As the world becomes more fractured, and technology moves things along more quickly, we need the writer to be the voice of sanity, to slow us down and help us observe the world around us.

The serious writer writes out of a sense of calling, not economic reward. So when asked, "Why write?" the answer becomes inevitable. In the words of Somerset Maugham, "We do not write because we want to; we write because we have to."