

On doing it in public



Writer Michael Carroll on sex as creative fuel, late-in-life success, adapting your process to suit your circumstances, and what it means to write in public spaces.

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As told to Michael Carroll , 2133 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Sex](#), [Time management](#).

IT'S LIKE THAT every time, love versus industry. In times of desire—desire put off, desire forbidden, or desire prolonged and yet usually unsatisfied—I don't feel like writing at all. In fact, I started writing as a kid in a shitty southern town because I was lonely. Writing might satisfy my desires, my need to be loved.

If I reached a reader the way a writer had reached me, then that was a form of love. Yet as I got older then realized love would have nothing much to do with literature I felt a gap between the spheres of literature and sexual fulfillment. Sex in the end would prove only immediately fulfilling, but it was sex at least. A lot of personal history is part of that, but what I'm talking about now is adult love, passion, the need for another, a companion, not someone who'd fulfill my perverted desires, just someone there.

And what is sex? It's an appetite, one that doesn't dim completely as we age. Writing is another desire. Separate desires. Too, writing is personal, and comes for me after the cooling of passion-glow—without which there can be nothing, no writing, no appetite for life, no inspiration to go on.

As I write this I am saying goodbye to another failed love-attempt. Mostly I'm happy about this, not because I don't want to be desired, but because now I can get back to work. I love this new-next-gone-now man (as with all previous men I'm enshrining him with my words). While I was growing up, looming was the need for me to make my living, form identity, and earn love on another plane. I think I came to writing because I wanted to be honest about being a gay boy at a time when the stories told about being a gay boy in search of love (and in back of that, in search of sexual fulfillment) was not fashionable, much less acceptable. Back then, I wanted to be my future husband, esteemed novelist Edmund White, but I don't want to be him anymore. I have him. I've in a sense possessed him.

I want to be happy as myself, and for Ed to be happy too. I watch in marvel how he's moved forward in his work, and in his romantic life (he has a new lover, who is like a little brother that has my heart). I think by being a writer who loves, truly, one has everything, as long as he's not homeless. He can accept failure more easily in that shelter, and when success finally comes, if it ever comes (it did), the lover can be proud, both can be proud. At this end of things—I'm fifty four—my surest bet is writing. That comes as a surprise. But as it happens, I have become a writer.

I did it like this. I chored around for nearly two decades under Ed's aegis, publishing a story or two every three years, then one every year. Something happened in my late forties. I didn't like what I was writing or publishing, not much. I was doing it at home—for one thing. Self-consciously. I wasn't trying to imitate Ed's style but I was trying to be more elegant and belletrist than I was capable of being. I read more widely, enraptured. But I can't say much for the writing that came out of that. And then Ed had a stroke, and then I was a caregiver.

After six weeks of his hospitalization and physical therapy, I brought him home. I was even more the caregiver then, not just someone who paid our bills and visited him daily. I had to take charge of his doctors' appointments and diet. I had to work like never before. I did a smart thing inadvertently. I began inviting his friends over to spend the evenings with him. I made the dinners and prepared everything. Then I took my laptop to my neighborhood bar, the Barracuda, and wrote in the back lounge (I was usually the only one there during happy hour), and I wrote most of the stories in my first collection, *Little Reef and Other Stories*, that would eventually get published.

Typically, I arrived and drank the first of my two-for-one white wine spritzers in the front, where I talked to the staff and the friends I was making during that first hour. It's easy to call yourself a writer. You drink some alcohol and answer your friends' questions about your writing. *What do you write about?* Homosexuals like me. *Did I ever put a murder in any of my stories?* No. *Have I ever written a novel?* Several, but none of them went anywhere, and anyway who had the time now to write one, much less read one?

They were all conversationally interested in me as a writer, I felt, and that's the way I liked it. It was relaxing, speaking in general about this art—or at best, activity—that could hardly be called a job. It was hard enough, actually, to get started each afternoon. The wine spritzers helped, and the quick trips outside to smoke. I surprised myself about several things: I didn't need absolute silence; in fact, distraction was a good thing, an adversity to work against. I became impatient with my attempts at colorfulisms and elegant phrasing. I put in ear plugs as the bar music played, and I focused on getting the story out and creating quick, hopefully memorable dialogue and descriptions, movement, and action. By then I was retelling some of my older stories but in much cleaner form. I was so distracted that new ideas seeped in.

What I learned, in short, was time management. I didn't need five to seven hours a day to brood in silence, shut away in my room. I needed to realize what the reader already knew: there are so many other demands on our time that if reading is going to survive, for most readers it needs to get to the point. Much of this resulted in what I call partial effacement: leaving out a lot of character motivations and plot details. What that more recent reading of my own (particularly Joy Williams and Richard Yates) had urged and nudged me toward doing.

When my book was ready for submission, and then accepted, I realized another thing: the importance of friends, of ground support. The people who came to see Ed while I worked, but also the set of friends (sometimes overlapping) who supported my book when it was about to be published, lending words for the jacket copy, spreading word of mouth. My first blurb came from Ann Beattie. I remember a devastating time in Maine when Ann called to say she'd just read it and, "I think this book is going to get a lot of attention."

When it did get that attention, it came largely due to her.

I continued to write in public places for a while, but the foothold in the publishing world opened to me by my evenings at the Barracuda (I won a prize) also afforded me a stronger sense of what I was doing and needing to be doing, rather than their opposites.

I continued doing it in public for a while—then along came a younger man who wanted a mentor. The mentee was never a lover, although not without my desiring him. My desire made me work harder, until I discovered what a personality disorder is. The emotional and intellectual energy I was putting into the friendship took up everything I would have expended on writing. I was reading his writing but never to his satisfaction. He had talent but he had the same problem I'd fostered ten and twenty years earlier: his work was full of Fitzgeraldian elegance, strained figurative speech, unnecessary attempts at complicated story development, and allusion. Bulky, clunky stuff that I knew would distract the already distractible, or even the most patient, reader.

I had never been good at taking criticism, either. He ran away screaming and denouncing me, messaging in all caps my shortcomings, my interpersonal failures, my callousness. He apologized and slunk back. He hugged me. Then he grew quiet, disappeared suddenly. He quit his job and went homeless. He popped up in public with a glazed look and warned me to watch myself, so I had to stop working at the Barracuda. Once I was sitting up front talking to my friends. He'd disappeared for a day, texting that he was depressed and in bed. The front door swung open. He stood next to the wall mirror with his arms folded. I went over to say hi and he began screaming at me: "You were

supposed to be working!" He stormed out, calling me an asshole. That was only one scene. There were more tender but awkward ones, too. In the back, he arrived, drank his first whiskey neat, and leaned and folded himself against me and began crying, wetting my cheek, neck, and shoulder. No question, the nest had been spoiled. I was too old to be embarrassed—or to embarrass myself—in front of my friends, like a graduate student in the fine arts.

All this rejection from someone I knew needed severe, deep-treatment help drove me into a depression, which I would fight back in order to do a little writing here and there—about him.

I had Ed to indulge my long sleeps. But by then he'd gone through a second hospitalization of six weeks, so I had to adapt yet again. I had to write whatever I could just to write. Adversity meant writing. Being a lonely faggot in a shithole town had made me want to tell stories. Being married to a famous writer who I knew I didn't want to be—though neither did I want to be a loser and a failure under his roof—had driven me to new strategies, whenever a setback bashed away at our domestic norm. Never is anything completely lost, though. Contiguous with Ed I had a long-distance lover of thirteen years, who got tired of all the oxygen I was taking up talking about my borderliner over the phone and in person—and he left me. So I wrote a new book. In public.

Ed and I went to Key West and, feeling better gradually, with love and support (my recent broken-up lover and I talk every day), I began writing about Key West. I went every day that January and wrote at the bar of the all-male, clothing-optional resort that is like no other. I wrote about memory and regret, broken hearts, aging, moral darkness, Donald Trump, and a madness that is like writing but isn't writing.

As I edit and revise this essay about writing at the Fantasy House (where most of the stories in *Stella Maris and Other Key West Stories* are largely set), it's Naked Sunday. Two young men are naked and walk around the pool and sheltered bar area next to it passing out trays of shots, a different invention for each Sunday. It was supposed to rain all day and spoil the mood, but magically the sun is out and the day is saved. Men from all over the world, very young and very old, dressed or undressed, mingle. They laugh and drink and eat the food the kitchen rolls out. They go off to their rooms together and have sex. They fuck in the hot tubs or in the dark area or on the chaise lounges right there in front of everyone else.

It's enough for me to know that's all going on behind me. I have a deadline. Maybe later I'll get laid. In any event, I'll have stories to tell. The sex and the atmosphere I partially shut out, the atmosphere and what it does to the writerly imagination—it's the rough fiber and found objects of our stories. We only need a place and the distraction of deeper need to do the crafting in.



Warm and partly sunny; light hoodie

The Best of George Harrison

Fantasy House Resort, Key West

Hopeful, anxiously reserved (as usual)

Name

Michael Carroll

Vocation

Writer

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photo: Jeff Bond