

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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My Mother, the Writer



I grew up with a writing mother, Sylvia Cassedy, whose fiction and poetry for children garnered critical acclaim and loyal readers. Having a literary model right in the house was a great gift, which set me on my own path toward writing in several ways:

Learning to observe. Having a writing mother meant being around a keen observer. “Writing begins with taking notice,” my mother believed. She modeled the art of paying close attention – to human behavior, to how things looked and sounded and smelled, to one’s own thoughts and feelings.

Loving language. My mother adored words. A shelf of dictionaries occupied pride of place in our dining room, and we rarely made it through a meal without consulting at least one of them. After I moved away from home, the letters I received from her were small gems. Today, whenever I’m

plagued with insomnia, I reach into the store of the elaborate word games she invented; they always do the trick.

Setting high standards. My mother was an exacting editor. At times, her critical eye on my written work could be intimidating, even stifling. Other times, she pushed exactly the right button when she asked, “What do you *mean* here?” – followed by, “Well, write that down.”

My mother died young, in mid-life and mid-career. Soon after, I noticed that my own writing life had begun to change. I found myself plumbing deeper places in my writing, spreading my literary wings. I sensed new opportunities and felt a new obligation – to take up the torch, to be the writer she could no longer be.

Today, in my head, she’s one of my treasured readers. I write for her. And I, too, have become a writing mother, passing on the literary legacy in ways of my own.

Reading is important to my kids. Even when they were little, when they skinned a knee, instead of a kiss they’d ask for a book. Snuggling on the couch with a story was the very best consolation.

Playing with writing has been a beloved family pastime. Every so often we’d “publish” a couple-page newspaper full of the latest household happenings. We’ve been known to collaborate in writing and illustrating a little book from time to time. (One that I’ve saved, called “Mr. Telephone,” we gleefully presented to my workaholic husband.)

Reviewing homework, I’ve tried to remember to ask the kids what they like best about what they’ve written, rather than wading right in with my own praise or red pencil. (If you ask them, they’ll tell you I’ve failed utterly at this worthy goal.) Rather than judge, I’ve tried to *notice* how they’ve developed as writers.

As a beginning writer, my son liked to capture on paper the exact way he talked, while my daughter preferred a more formal literary style.

Having a writing mother, being a writing mother – for me, each has been a precious privilege.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.