

From the Kitchen

1 July 2009

Writing is a secret pleasure indulged in by dreamers and visionaries. As well as those who have a burning desire to proclaim their insights and wisdom to the world.

Why do I write?

Why do you read?

Presumably I have something to say and you want to know what that is. But I don't write specifically for you and may not even know who you are; and if I do know you and write specifically for you, guessing what you want to read, am I writing for you alone?

I know I write because of an urge, which is like an itch that needs scratching. I've always had a need to broadcast my ideas. It was one of those things that had me annoy many of my teachers, although some were happy to engage me in weird and wonderful debates. Often I was told to stop arguing. Me? Argue? No, Never! I merely wanted to express my ideas. I need to have them out there where I can see them and play with them. Yes, that's it, that's why I write. I need to have it out of my head where I can play with it, rearrange it, argue with it.

I write as self-indulgence, for my own gratification and, perhaps, enlightenment. I also write to encourage others to think about themselves and the world in different ways.

Does what anyone writes change anything fundamentally? Only if the readers are already receptive to the ideas or at least prepared to have their own thinking informed by what others have to say. However, for every group of people who agree with anything, there will be another group who won't. There have been important books, with warnings of dire consequences if their messages were ignored and their messages were ignored. *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson comes to mind, and more recent ones, such as *Scorcher* by Clive Hamilton. There have also been books predicting the current Global Financial Fiasco and they were ignored.

There have been books whose messages seemed like a good idea at the time and they were widely adopted. For instance, Dr Spock's ideas (not the one from *Star Trek*). However, *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin is *still* being argued about.

I wonder if any of these authors, or at least the ones who wrote more than thirty years ago, would themselves still agree with everything they wrote. I know I disagree with things I wrote only a few years ago, as my ideas and beliefs have evolved.

There are things I read that entice me to think in a different way or to think about something I've not previously given any thought to. There are also books from which I learn something new, which open up new possibilities – such as *The Brain that Changes Itself* (Norman Doidge), which I have just finished. What Doidge lays out beautifully, fits in with things I have believed for a long time and now feel empowered to look at in a fresh way.

It is difficult to not read through the filter of my prejudices. It takes awareness and intentionality, which is not possible if I'm lazy. I would suggest that, other than for pure entertainment, neither reading nor writing are possible without some effort.

I love reading books that have me respond with ‘Yes, of course, that’s how it is’. Mostly these are works by people who take knowledge and understanding beyond the limits of my school and university education. Much of what I learned in my teens and early twenties was taught as unarguably true, in both the sciences and other areas. In music, some teachers suggested that everything was open to interpretation; others insisted that the composer’s marks were to be followed exactly, in accord with the teacher’s interpretation, of course.

What people have written can become almost globally accepted as ‘the truth’. An example is the writings of René Descartes, who expressed the belief that the human body and brain are machines, motivated by the soul. This led to centuries of dogma about, for instance, the fixed nature of the brain: unchangeable and not affected by a person’s experiences or thoughts. The irony is that Descartes may well have expressed these views merely to avoid persecution by the Catholic Church.

The questions I will leave you with are: Do you read what you believe, or believe what you read, or both? Do you express opinions in order to convince others or yourself, or to test your ideas?

As for me, I’m driven to write.