

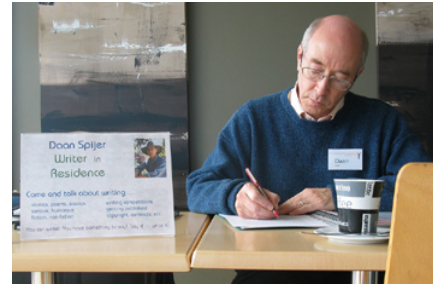
From the Kitchen

29 July 2009

Do I do requests? Singers do, as do other entertainers. Am I an entertainer? I hope so.

One of my fans (yes, I have at least one) suggested I write 'from the café'. Okay, here goes.

I sit at a long table (two squares) facing the door, to catch the customers as they come in. One just came in and nearly left again when he saw me. Maybe he thought he was in the wrong place. He looked at me again, at the books on the table, at my notebook and pen, at my poster (which explains who I am and why I'm here) and then went to a corner table as far from me as possible. I'm the Ogre in Residence.



It's crowded and noisy in here: the kitchen behind me, conversations everywhere, the hisses and squeals of the espresso machine, a knife dropped on the floor, little kids running around and laughing, ring tones, the coffee grinder.

Café on the Mount (until recently called In the Kitchen) is on a corner, with floor to ceiling glass following the curve of the footpath. The view is of the hub of Mount Eliza 'village'. Constant traffic: metal, human and canine. A high proportion of the first consists of four-wheel drives (remember this is *Mount Eliza*, 75 metres above present sea level). A high proportion of the human traffic consists of secondary school students. What are *they* doing out at 2:30 on a Wednesday afternoon? Five of them are at the next table, discussing girlfriends, boyfriends, teachers, parents, skiing, overseas holidays, skiing overseas and their next English literature assignment.

"Hey, I'm over here. I could help you with that – I've read *The Book Thief*." They don't seem to have noticed me, or they have and I'm irrelevant. What would an 'old' man know, anyway?

A woman comes over and reads my poster. It features a photo of me and the words 'Writer in Residence. Come and talk about writing ...'

"What do you do?"

I'm not sure. I write, I read, I walk my dog, I eat, I sleep.

I resist being a smart-arse. "I write as often as I can and I help others to get started with writing or to improve their writing."

"Do you make money doing that?"

"A bit. I still have a part-time 'real' job, which allows me to do *this*."

She nods and walks away. It seems I'm a novelty.

My sticky date pudding and long black arrive. Ahhh ... a break from this hard, intellectual labour.

It's now 3 o'clock. Two men come over. "He wants to write his memoirs."

"No, that's not what I said. I've got all these ideas and memories, though, and I'm worried I'll forget them one day. I think I should write them down."

We talk about writing as storytelling; whether one writes for oneself or for others; first drafts and the craft of creating finished work; whether one can make a living from it.

A woman sticks her head in through the door and points at her dog on a leash. “Can’t talk today. I’ll see you next week.”

I nod. She’s stopped to talk about writing a few times in weeks past. Am I attracting groupies?

By 3:15 the café is growing quieter. Most of the tables are empty and I can hear Nora Jones singing.

A teenage boy in school uniform sidles over to my table. He looks over his shoulder at a woman at another table, then down at the books. “Mum said I should talk to you.” He’s uncomfortable. I gesture to a chair and he sits down.

“What does your mum think you should talk to me about?”

“Well, I write all these stories and she thinks they’re great, but that’s because she’s my mother.”

“What do your teachers think of your stories?”

“I haven’t shown them to anyone else.”

“Do *you* think your stories are good?”

“I don’t know.”

We talk for a while and he starts to relax. He says he’ll email me some of the things he’s written and I promise to read them and give him feedback. He looks happy as he rejoins his mother – they talk animatedly, occasionally glancing over at me. I seem to have made an impact.

A little after 4 o’clock I pack up my paraphernalia and leave. I look back as I go through the door – there’s no evidence of my having been here. It’s all ephemeral really.

So there you are, my fan. I’ve done a request. Now it’s time to get home and take the dog for a walk.