

From the Kitchen

16 May 2012



Three years ago I heard of a project being launched to put poets into cafés. It was limited to city cafés and was called something like Poets in Residence. The organisation initiating the program was not interested in branching out fifty kilometres south, so I went to my favourite Mount Eliza coffee establishment, 'In the Kitchen', and told the owners that henceforth I would be their Writer in Residence every Wednesday afternoon. How could they resist?

With few exceptions, I have been there, as appointed, every week. The café changed hands and kept me on with the furniture and the staff. All they changed, initially, was their name: Café on the Mount. I sit and write, read, talk to people who come and sit at my table, dispense advice and encouragement and drink excellent coffee and wine.

The people who come and discuss their writing with me include students writing essays or stories, grandparents writing about their lives for their grandchildren, locals wanting help with content for their web sites, emerging writers intending to try their luck in competitions and a published author asking me to edit his next novel.

This weekly blog originates at the café. Not only is it usually written there, but the ideas often come from things I see or hear on a Wednesday afternoon. Such stimuli also can lead to short stories or poems, even a play. A number of these stories have gone on to win prizes. Having a regular gig like this gives some structure and discipline to my writing and each Wednesday afternoon serves as a way station in my week.

Like most things, writing requires discipline in order to do it well and to become better at it. I write because I am passionate about doing it – I feel deprived if I go more than a few days without writing. But passion is not enough – the first flush flowing from my pen (yes, I write with a fountain pen on paper) is only the first step, albeit an essential one. Without it the ensuing *work* of writing is impossible. The draft is keyed into a computer and essentially forms the second draft, as changes and corrections flow almost automatically. I may then not look at the piece for days, weeks or months, depending on when I intend it for the wider world.

Eventually I print my second draft and set to work on it as if it were someone else's creation. I edit and proof, rewrite some passages, cross some out, insert something not thought of earlier. I then key the whole corrected piece into the computer, rather than make my corrections on the file of the second draft. Doing this will ensure that the piece continues to flow; as I type, I find that further changes occur to me, so this becomes my third draft. It is this draft that I may show to others for comment.

Again, depending on intended submission date, the piece can lay idle in the computer for weeks or months. The printing and editing can happen as many as ten or more times, until I feel I should leave it alone. Mind you, some pieces, such as this column and something I decide at the last moment to send to a competition, can go from first draft to posting in as little as one day, although the final iteration may be the fourth, fifth or sixth.

I intend that everything I send into the world be at least free of errors, yet I still find myself posting wonderful things such as ‘flung disease’ and ‘he reacted a new process ...’

I essentially write for myself, but with a number of neurone networks occasionally engaged in gauging whether anyone would read it and feel that it was worth the investment of time and effort. That neuronal critic is kept out of the way during the initial flush of passion, otherwise I will find the second guessing of others’ likes and dislikes stemming the free flux of ink onto paper.

What about those times when I cannot think of what to write? As I said earlier, writing is a discipline. “I can’t get started’ is not an option. Epictetus (CE 55 - 135) is quoted as saying “If you want to be a writer, just write.” So I write. Anything. It can be a description of what I see out of the window or a snatch of conversation I overhear or a shopping list for a centenarian’s celebratory dinner. Anything. Once the ink flows, the flow of ideas follows. Sometimes it is hard to stop the flow.