



### ***Bird by Bird***

Anne Lamott  
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237 pp  
[Scribe](#) 2008

As a writer, I occasionally pick up a ‘how to...’ book, looking for gems of wisdom or inspiration to ride like a surfboard on the waves of creativity. I have rarely read any of these in their entirety – they have mostly been too dry to be gripping, though many were useful (such as *How to Build Your Own Particle Accelerator*).

*Bird by Bird* is totally different from any of the above. I read it from cover to cover; I laughed many times and was compelled to share the jokes with my wife; I was inspired; I felt gratitude towards the author and compassion for her when she shared her experiences. Anne Lamott doesn’t only give advice on how to write – though she does this succinctly and with humour – but the whole book is an example of what she is hoping to instil in aspirants.

If you look at the Contents pages, you will find many of the headings you would expect in a book about writing: Getting Started, Character, False Starts, Writing Groups, etc. You will also see unexpected ones, such as: School Lunches, Polaroids, Broccoli, Jealousy, and Giving. These latter topics give an idea of Anne Lamott’s right-brain thinking – she is highly creative in the way she shares her ideas and is rarely didactic. She ‘teaches’ by example.

Lamott is a Californian (San Francisco Bay area), the daughter of a writer-father and (at the time of her writing, 1994) a single mother of a four-year-old boy, Sam, who comes in to many of the personal stories she tells; I wonder how he now views his notoriety, as an eighteen-year-old. The author encourages her students to write about the members of their family and about ex-husbands in particular; she also gives advice about avoiding libel action.

The section on ‘Broccoli’ starts with a quote from Mel Brooks, in which a psychiatrist tells his patient: “Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it.” This translates as: listen to your characters and...

Ann Lamott talks of her frustration with students who come to her classes, not to learn how to write, but how get published. She admonishes them (and her readers) with the advice that, if you are not the person you want to be before you get published, you won’t be that person after you get published.

The one aspect of this book that prevented it being an unalloyed joy: the book is written by an American and contains mention of American personalities and situations which mean nothing to me as an Australian. It meant that I had to gloss over these and it caused hiccups for me in the narrative. However, this is only a small complaint and did not spoil the experience for me. Nor did it prevent me learning a lot about writing.

Read the book from start to finish, as you would a novel, and you will find out about using a 1-inch frame, about taking a young child to a dying friend, and about what is wrong with “the fucking keys”. You will also be inspired to write.

Daan Spijjer

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