

Book Review: *Ordinary Genius: A guide for the poet within*

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In *Ordinary Genius: A guide for the poet within*, Addonizzio creates a thorough guide to writing poetry. Using personal stories, examples of poetry, and writing exercises, Addonizzio guides the reader through steps of poetry writing from getting started, developing content, using tools to move your poetry forward, and tips for mastering the craft. Woven through the book are themes around creativity, language, meaning, and practice. Overall, the book seems geared towards those who are serious about writing poetry and are looking to hone their skills. Although this book does not focus on writing for personal development, Addonizzio does provide some insight into writing the self and some of the benefits of doing so. In this book review, I summarize Addonizzio's approach to poetry writing and comment on its connection to personal development.

In "Part I: entering poetry", Addonizzio addresses the challenges of getting started with writing. The author discusses fears, the discipline needed to commit to writing, tips for writing good poetry, and exercises to get words on a page. Like others, including Trichter Metcalf and Simon (2002), Addonizzio suggests a commitment to writing regularly, at least half an hour, three or four times per week. Addonizzio emphasizes the need to read as much poetry as possible, providing reading suggestions to get started and recommending that you memorize a sonnet to internalize its structure and better understand it. Addonizzio's passion for language is clearly demonstrated through her description of tools to expand vocabulary, generate sentences, and use repetition, patterns, and rhyme to provide structure to your writing, as well as to explore the use of line and rhythm in poems.

In addition to the technical tips on writing, Addonizzio discusses the passion behind writing poetry, explaining the word "genius" in the title:

This is your genius: your own profound desire to write. Your love of words and language, your attempt to get to what poet Donald Hall called 'the unsayable said.' If you are meant to be a writer, you will serve your genius as well as you can. If not, you'll find your genius elsewhere. You may still love to write, but it won't be the main thing you serve. Forget wondering, *Am I good enough? Can I do this?* The only thing you really need to ask yourself is: *Is writing my genius?* If it is, then apprentice yourself. (Addonizzio 56)

This excerpt provides a good example of Addonizzio's tone throughout *Ordinary Genius*, simultaneously speaking of the drive and passion to write as well as the commitment and hard work required to do it well. Addonizzio does not seem as concerned with the value of writing for self-development as developing the craft of writing poetry to become a better poet.

In "Part II: inner and outer worlds", Addonizzio examines the content of poetry, particularly exploring our identities through body, mind, spirit, and emotions. Addonizzio explains, "Poetry's true subject is the spirit, the divine, the sacred, the ineffable... Art is about connecting to, and experiencing, the life of the spirit as it is lived in a physical body" (100). Addonizzio provides advice for tackling love and sex in poetry and emphasizes the goal of creating a personal connection with the reader. In addition, Addonizzio provides exercises around exploring the unknown, observing daily life, using humour, and tackling difficult subjects such as race, class, privilege, and addictions in writing.

In the discussion on the inner and outer worlds, Addonizzio examines the notion of writing the self. Addonizzio states, "When you explore your own life in poetry, it's useful to remember that nobody really cares" (127) and then she goes on to describe ways of writing your experiences that make a poem interesting, rather than factual. Addonizzio suggests that you create a persona to explore the world in a different way, but she reassuringly explains, "the truth is, you will be in your work with or without an obvious persona" (133). Addonizzio challenges you to dig deep and reflect on your situation with creativity and perhaps a different perspective to write more thoughtful poetry and to gain clarity in your situation. Addonizzio makes this clear in a chapter on writing

about pain, stating that, “if the purpose of poetry is to wake us up, then it cannot only express pain, but point a way toward healing it” (151). Addonizzio’s approach to writing the self appears to focus on infusing yourself into your work without explicitly or truthfully sharing your thoughts and experiences. This approach aligns with Hunt’s (1998) description of writing autobiographical fiction, where the task to ‘show’ and not ‘tell’ one’s experiences allows the writer to engage the inner world more deeply (33).

In “Part III: the poem’s progress” and “Part IV: toward mastery”, Addonizzio dives into literary tools to help propel a poem forward and focuses on fine-tuning the craft of poetry writing, tips for poetry reading, and publishing. Addonizzio examines the use of metaphor, mythology, rhythm, and meter. One of Addonizzio’s suggestions is to take a step back from the emotions in a poem and write more objectively, with coldness. Addonizzio illustrates the effectiveness of this approach through various tools including imagery and restraint. The goal of stepping back from emotions and writing more objectively is similar to Katie’s (2002) goal of using writing to recognize untrue thoughts that may be behind stressful feelings. Katie suggests that by engaging in a written process of inquiry and exploring your thoughts you can become more in touch with reality and experience peace (9). While Addonizzio’s goal is to improve writing, these strategies could also have the benefit of assisting in personal development. The exercises in these sections are aimed at mastering the art of poetry writing, and Addonizzio states that getting to this level takes time, hard work, and a willingness to constantly revise your work. Throughout the book, she compares writing to playing a musical instrument, drawing the comparison of practicing an instrument to practicing writing poetry.

Addonizzio’s *Ordinary Genius* is a useful tool for improving poetry writing skills. Addonizzio’s passion for poetry is inspiring, the writing exercises are simple, and the tips are helpful; however, at times the tone is cool and blunt. It is clear that the intention is to inspire good poetry writing, not engage with those interested in writing for personal development. In spite of this, Addonizzio’s approach does align with other approaches to writing for personal development including a commitment to regular writing practice, engaging the inner world by infusing yourself into your writing, and taking a step back to write with greater objectivity. By exploring the exercises and suggestions presented by Addonizzio, it could be possible to both improve your poetry writing skills and engage in personal development.

Works Cited

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