

If You Want to Write – A Book Review

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Abstract

Brenda Ueland was a writer, a teacher, a journalist and a free spirit who believed that you should write what makes you happy and the rest will follow. The real benefit of writing comes from knowing yourself.

If You Want to Write was originally published in 1938, but Ueland's sentiments on writing are universal. Republished in 1987, it became an instant bestseller. It has since been republished numerous times, most recently in 2016 by Dancing Unicorn Books. No matter how many times it is republished and reread, it never loses its charm.

Do you want to write? Then this book is for you.

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Book Review of Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*

If you're looking for a book that will inspire you to write, pick-up a copy of Brenda Ueland's book *If You Want to Write*. You won't be disappointed. The main premise of Ueland's book is that "everybody is original, if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself" (Ueland 4). She believes that you must write for yourself and if you do, in addition to making yourself happier, the quality of your writing will also improve. She writes, "When you get down to the True Self and speak from that, there is always a metamorphosis in your writing, a transfiguration" (Ueland 102). She believes that if you do not write for yourself first, but instead have ulterior motives or outside obligations that push you or censor you, then your writing will be shallow, with very few truthful emotions in it at all. "To teach, encourage, cheer up, console, amuse, stimulate, or advise... you

have to be something yourself. And how to be something yourself? Only by working hard and with gumption at something you love and care for and think is important” (Ueland 100). Her point is that if you write what makes you happy, the rest will follow... or maybe it won't, but that's okay, because the real benefit comes from knowing yourself.

For many, this way of thinking requires a shift in perspective away from the idea that the goal of writing is to produce something publishable. As Ueland notes, our society has developed the belief that every pursuit must have an ultimate goal. We have become a society where we're encouraged to focus on the needs of others before ourselves. Ueland believes that this societal pressure stifles writing, rendering it “empty, dry, calculated and without life” (Ueland 24). Rather than writing with the goal of producing something for financial gain or public acclaim, Ueland frequently mentions instead the personal benefits that can be derived from writing: “If I wrote something true and good that nobody cared to read, it would do *me* a great deal of good” (Ueland 34). Writing for your own benefit, or in other words, for your own personal development and growth, should, in Ueland's opinion, be the main reason for writing. Everything else, including publication and financial gain, should be a byproduct stemming from the writing you do for your own well-being. “Writing, the creative effort, the use of imagination, should come first... It is a wonderful blessing if you will use it. You will become happier, more enlightened, alive, impassioned, lighthearted, and generous to everybody else” (Ueland 14). The study of therapeutic writing, writing for personal development, or expressive writing, as it is variously known, has become an area of significant study: “Interest in the therapeutic effects of writing has risen dramatically over the last few years among researchers, the public, and clinicians” (Lepore and Smyth 4). Research in the area of therapeutic writing, which began primarily in the 1980s, supports what Ueland instinctually recognized in 1938, that writing expressively is good for your health (Pennebaker 164; Baiki e and Wilhelm 338; Pennebaker and Chung 417).

In many ways, this book is a call to arms, telling all people to pick up their pens and write. This idea of writing for you and you alone, in addition to the therapeutic benefits, is very freeing. To write something that makes you happy, without thought of critics or other censoring factors, makes writing easier and less daunting. Some people, she notes, will stop writing entirely at the slightest

sign of criticism. But if you are writing for yourself alone, then you are the only person you need to please. Ueland describes writing in an uninhibited way, of just being who you are and writing without worrying about censoring yourself. “Work with all your intelligence and love. Work freely and rollickingly as though you were talking to a friend who loves you. Mentally (at least three or four times a day) thumb your nose at all know-it-alls, jeerers, critics, doubters” (Ueland 9). She recommends sitting idly in front of the page, and then write what you think “with microscopic truthfulness” (Ueland 102). Through this process of simply writing down thoughts – in a slow and idle, imaginative way – ideas will form over time, and hours of writing down small thoughts and ideas will eventually result in the big thought or idea finding its way to your page (Ueland 34).

Brenda Ueland believes, like Van Gogh, that art is about finding the beauty in common everyday things, because, as she asks, “what is the purpose of existence Here or Yonder but to discover truth and beauty and express it?” (Ueland 179). She believes in writing with a truth that comes from the deepest parts of you for the sole purpose of making yourself happy and fulfilled. Readers of *If You Want to Write* will discover how to find their own personal joy in honest, unrestrained, plain writing made beautiful and profound with the meaning found in it. Researchers have proven that Ueland was right when she said that writing for yourself was good for your health, but anyone reading this book will easily recognize her true message: Brenda Ueland makes you believe that you can – you really can – write.

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