



# THE WRITING LIFE

## Writer as Reader as Writer

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Is the writing life different than the reading life?

Most writers read, of course, and some readers write. But as a reader who finds writing hard, I've developed a . . . I was going to say "method," but that word's too precious. It's a *trick* that I've developed, pure and simple, but it's a *good* trick.

Here's how it works. I pretend that I'm reading the article I have to write, and, as if by magic, the article starts to happen. Sometimes I actually see the opening words—the lead—as well as the metaphor that I'll stalk through the piece. Other times I merely sense the shape of the piece and the rhythm of words and ideas that I'll follow.

To put it another way, I let the reader—this particular reader who shares my name—do the writing. But, to my surprise, my trick has recently become a method after all. For the first time in decades I'm writing fiction, but so far it's a particular kind of fiction. For as long as I can remember, my writing has been fact-based. I've recounted the sinking of the *Bismarck*, for example, and described the many varieties of salt. The stories I've started are also fact-based—but with a twist. Call them "fact"-based.

I've always been intrigued by news reports that Ronald Reagan was originally to be cast as Rick in *Casablanca*. From there it was an easy step to imagining a larger reversal of roles, an alternate version of history in which the Bogart years replace the Reagan years. Alternate histories are a dime a dozen these days, and tend to smother their fragile concepts with mundane details. But what if the reader were forced to make up the story—in a pretty real sense, write it? Novelists once felt it necessary to describe characters and events at length, but as good ghost story writers know, the most effective stories are those that leave the details to the reader's imagination.

With this important lesson in mind I've conducted an interview with an aging member of the Bogart administration. He was glad to share a few revealing anecdotes, but since the (imaginary) members of his universe know about Bogie's years in politics, I didn't have to recreate them for my (real, albeit prospective) readers. Instead, those readers now have to construct the story in their own minds, imagining, for instance, the particulars of Bogart's politically scandalous affair with Ingrid Bergman. Suddenly my readers are writing my story for me, and it's a darn good one!

So far so good? Well, I've said to myself, let's give readers even more work. From my yellowing files I've pulled the opening chapter of a novel I was never able to push to completion. It was a deliberate exercise in mixing wildly dissimilar elements—the JFK assassination, lighter-than-air flight, and the island-strewn eastern coast of the Adriatic. Given the work's nature, it seemed only reasonable to make its opening chapter an amalgam of episodes that I had (unconsciously, I now realize) linked with a few repeated images.

Now I'm expanding some of those fragments, adding new ones, and giving my characters more grey hair than they once had. But my biggest departure is to treat the fragments as

fragments. I've turned "Azure of Oblivion"—a variation on a marvelous phrase from Ezra Pound—into a series of cards. They're bigger than playing cards, but still small enough to handle easily. My readers will shuffle the deck to create their own story. If they don't like it, they'll reshuffle. Oh, the characters will share the same names, but their thoughts and actions will take on subtly new connotations. A few sensory elements—a blaze of light at sunset, the play of wind on water, the ominous snap of a gunshot—will reappear throughout.

Your deal.

*Grove Koger is the author of a play, Ruby Testifies, and a survey of travel literature, When the Going Was Good. His story "He Would Have Made a Great Rick" has recently appeared in the online journal Lonesome Fowl, and he is currently compiling a reader's guide to sea fiction. He lives in Boise with his wife, writer/teacher/librarian Margaret A. Koger.*