



THE WRITING LIFE

WRITE CHOICES

Dede Ryan
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I was the last born in my family. Last to the table. Last in line for the hand-me-downs. My three older siblings had already stretched our parents' time and resources to the breaking point, and I slid quietly into the family's back seat.

Despite being mostly invisible, numerous illnesses as a child brought me more attention than I wanted. In one case, my mom was summoned to school midway through my first grade. She was told that I had already missed more days of school than any other child in the 35-year history of The Immaculate Conception. By year-end, I had broken my own record. This is the only distinction I can recall in my entire grade school career.

But these illnesses and their accompanying seclusion gave me generous chunks of time for imaginative pursuits. At the age of seven, I had no fewer than 30 stuffed animals, each with its own personality, voice and background. I was the Sybil of stuffed toys, and words were always at hand to bring my acting troop to life.

My bedroom performances ended when I was eight, and we moved from Minnesota to Maryland. I can recall waiting for the big, green and yellow Mayflower moving van to arrive. I watched anxiously as each barrel was rolled down the gangplank and into our new home. I eagerly helped unpack each crate. I think even before the last container was unloaded, I knew that my friends had not made the trip. Not one of them. Not even Teddy, who was as old as I was.

For days and weeks after, I felt like my own stuffing had been pulled out. But, as with all losses, I did, in time, recover. I began to *write* about my old friends, recounting their stories, their characters and quirks. I invented new homes and families for them, using words and expressions unique to each. They wrote me letters. Words kept them alive. In fact, words helped us thrive.

When I was "old enough to understand," my mom admitted that Teddy, Nosey, Sammy, Tigger, Stripey, and the rest had, indeed, been given to the Salvation Army before we ever left Minneapolis. She had been worried about my lack of "real" friends, and thought this would give me a "fresh start" in my new school, in a new state.

Eight years old and already in need of a fresh start. Now, nearly five decades later, I can appreciate the real lesson of my lost animals.

This acorn of my youth has grown into the oak of my middle age. My mom, dad and one sibling have joined my stuffed friends in that big thrift shop in the sky. But when I read the letters and poems and stories they left behind, I am reminded of the endurance, the value and the overwhelming power of the written word.

For me, there were no Writers in the Schools Program. No Summer Writing Camps. No writing workshops. In fact, the only "writing" class at The Immaculate

Conception was a penmanship course where we learned the Palmer Method. From there, I had to find my own way as a writer – a path that included both the pure joy of writing, and, in time, the privilege of using words to earn a living.

But for the fortunate young writers in Idaho, WITS and Summer Camps are available, giving them a head start. These brilliant, award-winning programs founded by The Cabin and funded through grants and contributions, help young Idaho writers explore who they are today as well as who they want to be tomorrow, anchoring their lives in words that have the potential to bring them both joy and an income.

I joined The Cabin to help these programs expand and improve. It's not just a slogan, Words Work Wonders. When I write, I'm eight years old again creating stories, characters, personalities, and distinct voices of friends who become as real to me as my old stuffed animals perched among the bedclothes. Through The Cabin's programs, we can encourage young writers to embrace that part of themselves that both isolates them from reality and more deeply connects them. Writing can be a lonely occupation, but not writing can be lonelier. Words are good company.

Words help us know each other and, words at their best, help us understand ourselves. That understanding can take our young writers from choosing the right word – to making the right choices in life.

Dede Ryan is the Managing Director of The Cabin. She held senior marketing positions with Weyerhaeuser and Morrison Knudsen for nearly two decades. Prior to moving to Boise in 1990, she was a Capitol Hill reporter in Washington, D.C., working for Business Publishers, and *U.S. News & World Report*. She has published hundreds of news and feature stories in national media. She holds a BS in Journalism from the University of Maryland, and post-graduate certificates in marketing and business management from Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and Boise State University.