



On Being Alone

by Anthony Doerr
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I've heard it called chair-time, or butt-work, or the more foreboding *discipline of the room*, but whatever anyone calls it, the actual labor of writing is mostly about being alone. You have to love sentences, and you have to overcome fear, and you need a computer or at least tidy handwriting, but in the end, if you want to write, you have to learn how to be alone.

Alone means, of course, “without any other person or thing nearby.” So. You give yourself an hour, or three, or an entire morning. You go to your table, or spare closet, or rented room, or 6,500 square-foot chalet in Ketchum. Maybe there are people nearby, kids screeching downstairs, library patrons coughing in the stacks, a husband milling outside your door. Obviously there are *things* nearby, too, clanking radiators and wasps traveling the windowpanes and the groaning seat of your chair.

You're still not alone, not at first. Minutes pass. You almost get up, you almost check your email, you almost turn on Sportscenter. But then, like a monk, like a holy woman, you start concentrating on it, on whatever lines you've laid down in the days before, and soon—if you're lucky—the things and people begin to vanish. The sounds of traffic go, and then the clanking of your dog's collar—even the desk your wrists rest on and the seat of your chair, and whatever hunger is roiling in your gut. If you're blessed and practiced and lucky, the material problems of the day start to evaporate, too: your Idaho Power bill and the bruise on your elbow and the fact that your Jeep is slowly flooding the garage floor with power steering fluid. Everything fades: the sky out the window, the hiss of the radio, the smell of the bulb in the lamp. What's left is you, alone.

The thing is—the trick, really, the miracle of it—is that at that moment, when you're reentering your work, and the room has begun its marvelous vanishing act, your aloneness disappears, too.

Out of the walls come ghosts. Writers drift toward you, quiet and kind and watchful, some more distinct than others. Every storyteller you know is there, from the long catalogue of memory and influence that a life of reading has built. Without seeing them, without even knowing it, you're surrounded by history: All the writers who have gone before you, and all the living ones, too, all the artists alone like you in their little rooms scattered around the globe, like tiny candle flames burning out there, driving their own work forward. When a project is really going well you can feel yourself entering that great collective flame, just a tiny particle in it perhaps, but in it nonetheless, riding along the edges, or dragging along the bottom, or rising right through the bright, searing center.

Soon more ghosts slip through your walls—these are ghosts you have made, your settings, your characters. More often than not they are big, shambling half-formed beasts

of clay, and they gather around you in silence, waiting for orders. You study them, you claw away their heads or arms or maybe just one of their fingers and remake it as carefully as you can, and glom it back on, and peer into their hearts to see if things in there are any clearer, any more resolved.

Soon you are out on the threads of new sentences, feeling your way like a tightrope walker, all your concentration on the precarious balance of your weight, and you inch forward, fraction by fraction, each hour a little bit deeper into the darkness.

Then, eventually, always, something happens. The phone rings, or your nephew walks in, or your stomach decides enough is enough, and the room floods back in: Gravity, the smell of someone's microwaved broccoli, airbrakes squealing somewhere, a wall settling, the material demands and limitations of life.

You get up, you go back to the world. You surround yourself with people and things, and leave the pages behind, waiting.

Anthony Doerr's first novel, *About Grace*, will be published by Scribner in September of 2004. He is a member of the Log Cabin's board of directors.