

The Writer Confined

by Phyllis Chesler



Colette

Some say that the writing life is like that of an invalid's, isolated, indoors: a woman's life.

I have been ill, in and out of surgeries, long out of agony, but left walking disabled for many years. Being confined is not that different for me—except that now, I am part of a collective confinement and more is at stake than mere writing deadlines.

An ailing [Proust](#) once took to his rooms for years, where he continued to work on *In Search of Lost Time*.

I always romanticized poor Proust's retreat, even as I climbed mountains, sailed, toured museum exhibits, and traveled the wide world.

Many writers lead quiet, even boring lives. I return to my Self only in solitude; that's where I find my words waiting for me. Some writers thrive on a riotous social life, partying, drinking, drugging, entertaining, constantly turning up everywhere.

Not I. Although I love conversation and am a very social being, very early on, I understood that my daily life had to be steady, quiet, unchanging, almost staid, so that, if by chance, a Muse or two wished to grace me, they would know exactly where to find me—right here, in my usual spot.

[According](#) to one of Flaubert's [biographers](#), "His days were as unvaried as the notes of the cuckoo." He stayed close to home with his family, followed unchanging routines, and then, for a time, "wrote from 1pm to 1am."

Tolstoy followed a routine which remained spartan and unchanging which, for years, included limiting "[visiting a brothel to only twice a month](#)." Although he fathered eleven children, he eventually resolved to "keep away from women." This included his long-suffering wife, Sophia.

Anyone who has ever lived with me has had to live with my morning silence; I go straight to my desk and start reading and writing. I used to quip that: "Mainly, I want to be left alone—but by somebody." By evening, after I've exhausted myself in the day's work, then I crave company, a lecture, a movie, an opera, and am up until very late.

I've never understood the overly theatrical lives and writing times of some of our Greats. I know a very prolific novelist who used to put up an endless stream of visitors and who cooked and gardened daily, as well as magnificently. I marveled at her energetic level of activity. But she worked at home and stayed close to home.

I knew some other writers most divine who suffered from writer's block, who fled to the country or who walked the city

streets with desperate determination. Although their output was diminished, the world still treasured their every burnished word.

Words flock to me like friendly birds, the wind is usually at my back. (I dare not write “always” for fear of the evil eye of envy), and although I’ve led a “scandalous” life according to some, it scarcely compares to those of the more scandalous and beloved writers, George Sand and Colette.

[George Sand](#), (Aurora Dudevant), known for her cross-dressing, had many great love affairs, both with women and men of talent, even genius (Prosper Merimee, Alfred de Musset, and Frederic Chopin, whom she nursed as he struggled with tuberculosis). Her work was admired by Balzac, Flaubert, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Walt Whitman, and translated into Russian by Doestoevsky. (Not bad for a nineteenth century “girl”!)

Sand “made a habit of pleading pity for her ‘literary agonies.’ Despite her complaints, the word ‘prolific’ is woefully inadequate to describe her output.” She could not have done this without marshaling enormous discipline. Aside from her eight novels and several Memoirs, she founded a newspaper and a private theater, mainly to showcase her own plays, ran a salon for many of the great writers of her time, and wrote articles about women’s rights and social justice.

[Colette](#) (Sidonie Gabrielle) may have been an even more “scandalous” figure. When young, she famously married the much older Willy who locked her in her room until she’d produced enough pages to suit him, and he published her early work under his name. Colette [wrote](#):

“To write is to sit and stare, hypnotized... It also means idle hours curled up in the hollow of the divan, and then the orgy of inspiration... but already recompensed and laden with treasures that one unloads slowly on to the virgin

page in the little round pool of light under the lamp. To write is to pour one's innermost self passionately upon the tempting paper, at such frantic speed that sometimes one's hand struggles and rebels, overdriven by the impatient god who guides it..."

The very popular gadabout Colette, who once became a music hall performer to stave poverty off and who, for a time, lived with her wealthy lesbian lover "Missy" aka the Marquise de Balbeuf, also married many men. She spent her last five years confined to her apartment, crippled by arthritis.

But what a life she'd lived and how prolific (at least 28 books) and how saucy a writer she was—perhaps the most popular writer of her time, male or female.

Few are in that category. These days, all the rules of publishing are in free fall, now held hostage not only by the Wuhan Virus, but also, far more fatefully, by politically correct censorship and "sensitivity." Enough said for now.

Stay safe. Stay strong. Stay indoors. Write if you must.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqdyyk-i0vY>