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Why Write? Why Ask?

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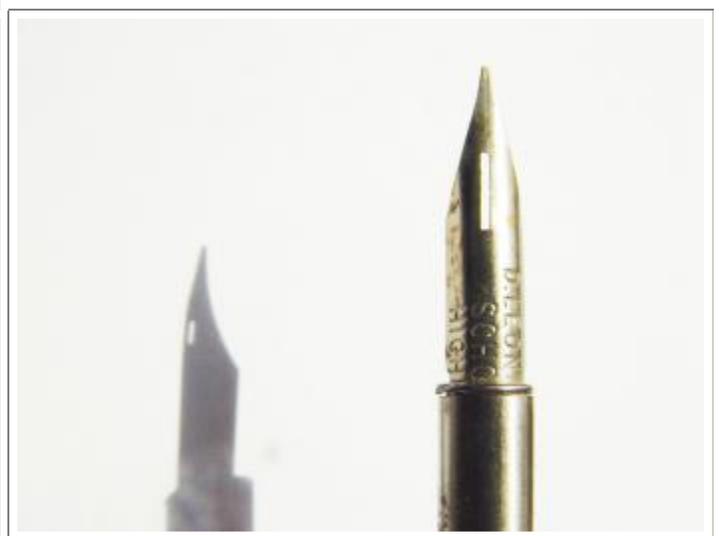
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Why Write? Why Ask?

Mac McCormick, a fourth-year English writing major, contributed the following essay to the Spring 2004 "Questions and Conclusions," a regular feature of IWU Magazine.

I was reading in a different magazine (disloyal, I know) that researchers found something interesting about words: if the first and last letter of a word are in place, a reader can understand the word even if the rest of the letters are all mixed up. *Treherofe, tihs siltl mkaes ssene.* This is because when we read we look at the entire word — as a whole, rather than each letter separately. It's why those French Connection–U.K. shirts, with their jumbled obscenities, seem so extreme.



"I realized: there's a reason I can't sit down and just state my motivation for writing in plain English, without all this but, you see, however that's taking up so much of everyone's time."

Now, I was putting some files away for a professor the other day when I noticed a tab in a book that said "Why Write," on it. Since I had gone into relative freefall concerning the article you're now reading, I figured I could use any help I could get, so I picked it up and looked at it. Underlined near the top of the page was this:

"In the end the only validation for literature is something ineffable that can be neither captured, nor contained, nor manipulated, nor exploited. You must write for this thing itself every time you sit down to write."

It came from the introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1988* by that year's editor, Mark Helprin. And it made me think about the little fact from the Different Magazine.

I realized: there's a reason I can't sit down and just state my motivation for writing in plain English, without all this but, you see, however that's taking up so much of everyone's time. It's not just words that need to be seen as wholes to make sense of them, it's everything. To steal a concept from Gestalt psychology: the wholes of things are greater than the sums of their parts. And it applies to a reason to write. I can take all of my separate conscious and unconscious reasons — communicative, political, monetary (ha!), ego-congratulatory, etc. — and add them all up, and still not have it. The ineffable reason to write, the real reason to write, exists in this weird, inexplicable place outside of all the little, palpable, and ultimately inadequate reasons I or anyone can come up with.

It's why for years there have been defenses of poetry and explanations of writing by all kinds of authors, as if there's something very wrong with what they're doing. The implication is that doing something and lacking a describable reason for doing it must be wrong. For years critics,

authors, and folks from all walks of life — from Plato to Freud — have all tried and tried again to explain why people write what they write and why we all should or shouldn't read it. And none of them has had a satisfying answer. But despite that dissatisfaction, despite our inability to quantify our reasons for it, we still do it.

In a moment of time when everyone likes to consider themselves “post-” everything (I actually once heard someone say, no joke, “I consider myself post-post-modern...”), we're still reading and writing. No matter how many people come along to proclaim the novel officially flatlined, their argument is politely listened to and quickly disregarded by the millions of people who, the next day, sit down and begin writing again. And if you asked them why, they would hem and haw and come up with nothing but a collective shrug of the shoulders.

So writing is doing just fine. The “digital age,” if that's what this is, hasn't stopped people from reading and writing, and the popularity of that sprawling, many-headed beast-creature called the Internet has yet to kill off the paper-and-glue combinations we all love to hold, even though everybody said it would. (E-books, anyone?) Television, video games, visual art, music — all of which, I fully admit, can do a lot of the things writing does and do them better — only address the sum of the different parts of writing. The whole is bigger than that.

So why do I write? Honest answer: I don't know. Every reason I can think of isn't the reason, and all of them together aren't enough either. It's not about money, it's not about fame, it's not about success (whatever that means). It's “something ineffable that can be neither captured, nor contained, nor manipulated, nor exploited.” It's the same reason there has been a literary magazine at Illinois Wesleyan since the late 19th century. I may not be able to say what it is, but it's definitely there.

Mac McCormick '04 has served on the editorial staff and is a frequent contributor to *Tributaries*, a student literary magazine that is the subject of an article [posted here](#). Mac is also an editorial assistant for *IWU Magazine*.