

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Golf Balls, Pencils, Whales,
What Makes an Author's Obsession a Thrill,
Not a Bore?

by Mary Norris

Among my obsessions I include cows, pencils and all things Greek, and I count myself lucky to have been able to write for publication about two of these things. I used to think it was self-indulgent or shameful to write about my private passions, but then I realized that as a reader I loved learning about other writers' obsessions. I think of reading John McPhee on fishing for golf balls, or Ian Frazier on bears, or John Waters on his childhood fixation with car accidents. "I tremble to think how boring my life would be without the throbbing existence of violence always surrounding me," he writes in "Shock Value." Geoff Dyer, in "Out of Sheer Rage," circles his effort to write "a sober, academic study of D. H. Lawrence" — or maybe he wanted to write a novel about this writer who made him want to become a writer.

He travels to Taormina (where Lawrence lived briefly); to Eastwood, in England (to visit the D. H. Lawrence Birthplace Museum and Gift Shop, an episode that unravels into a description of his mother's

jigsaw-puzzle technique); to Oxford (“or Dullford”); and to Oaxaca, where, he writes, “I sniffed around the city a little but my heart wasn’t in it. ... Maybe those are the words that should be on my grave: ‘His heart wasn’t in it.’” He ends up writing the best book ever written about not writing a book about D. H. Lawrence.

I don’t read many detective novels these days — I’m saving them, and crossword puzzles, for my old age — but the Commissario Brunetti series by Donna Leon, originally of Montclair, N.J., is irresistible for its setting in her adopted city of Venice. Surely she invented Brunetti and follows him from case to case (and meal to meal, and bar to bar) so that she has an excuse to explore Venice and practice a livelihood that allows her to keep living there.

Herman Melville not only harnessed his obsession with the sea in his early books “Typee,” “Omoo” and “White-Jacket” (all set aboard ship or on remote islands) but managed to make obsession itself his subject in “Moby-Dick,” a book I’m not alone in being obsessed with. I’m not the only one who owns multiple copies of “Moby-Dick,” with and without the hyphen. Melville has even generated fan fiction: See [“The Whale: A Love Story.”](#)

Reading takes us places, and reading about someone’s obsessions can be catching. Thanks to Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury was my first destination in London. Vladimir Nabokov gave me a taste for endnotes and butterflies (though some of his other obsessions might be better left unexplored). Reading Janet Malcolm sent me off into Freud and increased my holdings of Sylvia Plath, even unto a memoir of [Ted Hughes by his brother, Gerald](#). One year, I set out to be a Philip Roth completist, and [“Exit Ghost”](#) sent me back to “The Ghost Writer” and [all the Zuckerman books in between](#). In “The Ghost Writer,” Zuckerman visits the eminent writer E. I. Lonoff in Connecticut and gets snowed in. He fantasizes that Lonoff’s protégée, Amy Bellette, is really Anne Frank, who has survived the war but must live under an assumed name, because the fact of her

survival would undermine her posthumous literary success.

On a trip to Amsterdam, I visited the Anne Frank House and bought a paperback copy of the diary, which I read in bed at a hotel on the site of a hotel that Anne records being bombed by the British during the night of April 26, 1943. I felt a connection to Anne through Zuckerman's obsession with Amy Bellette, which was born of Roth's need to write about Jewishness. It was as if Roth and I had met over something, shared something, were warming our hands together over the same fire.

As a writer, I know that my obsessions are built on the back of other people's obsessions. When I feel a sudden need for a deep dive into a subject — say, the transmission of the plays of Aeschylus through scribes and libraries from ancient times to the present — I am grateful to the academics who have done the spadework. I can read the driest footnote and find gold in it.

As Susan Orlean put it succinctly on Twitter last year, “For me, writing is really just learning about things that interest me, and then trying to convince you to find them as interesting as I do.”

But writing about your obsessions comes with risks. For one thing, when you're obsessed by something, everything about it is interesting: You can lose perspective and turn into a giant bore. Believe it or not, some people are bored by the amount of detail in “Moby-Dick.” Rereading the novel, a descendant of Melville's found herself thinking, “[Where was your editor?](#)” In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael seems quite mad, going on about the white shark and the polar bear (their whiteness demands a footnote) and the albatross and the White Steed of the Prairies and the Albino man and the White Mountains of New Hampshire and the white flag. In the chapter on cetology, we have to plow through a dozen pages of whale species, some of them possibly apocryphal, before we get to the payoff, a motto for freelance writers: “Oh Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!”

When I started working on a book about language, I assumed a level of interest that was just not there. A guided tour of the New Yorker stylebook, anyone? A monograph devoted to the front matter of the American Heritage Dictionary as annotated by a proofreader? Or just me hopping around in Webster's Second Unabridged? (Editor's mark: Delete.) You can't expect a reader to be as interested as you are in a subject's minuscule — a beautiful word I just came across in "[Less](#)," by [Andrew Sean Greer](#), a Pulitzer Prize winner featuring a Pulitzer Prize winner. You have to earn that interest by arousing or entertaining your audience, as Greer does, or by sneaking your pet subject in, as [Gary Shteyngart](#) does, when he gives [luxury wristwatches](#) to characters in "Lake Success." Or you may have to seek professional help in the form of an editor who will tell you candidly what's boring and what's not.

For a while I both hoped and feared that writing about my obsessions would make them go away, like a writer's form of the talking cure. But whoo, boy, I am more obsessed than ever. It would not be an obsession if it were so easily quenched. I was embarrassed at first to write about pencils. In confessing some of my feelings — my fear of indelible lead, the sadness and futility of an eraser worn down to the ferrule, the compulsion to pick up broken pencils on the street — I worried that I shouldn't go public. Maybe it was O.K. to keep a display of dainty pencil shavings on the shelf as long as you didn't tell anyone about it.

What a joy to find that there were people who shared my pencil passion! If an obsession can be defined as something there is no end to, there is no end to what I have to say about pencils. From where I am sitting right now, I can reach no fewer than five cups jammed with them: souvenir pencils, gift pencils, giant pencils, bark pencils, pencils with paintbrushes on one end, pencils with caps to keep the point from breaking.

There is one cup of pens, mostly cadged from banks and hotels. It turns out that writing about an obsession, far from exhausting it, fans the flames.

I was a little worried that writing about Greek might kill it for me. Perhaps I would never want to see the Greek alphabet again. It turned out that writing a book about Greek prevented me from studying it — learning Greek is very time-consuming — and also cramped my style as a traveler: I associated Greece with beaches and seaside tavernas, not with tapping away on a laptop, albeit while commanding a spectacular view. To my surprise, I felt oppressed by having to write about Greek. So it was a relief to find myself thinking that once this book was done I was going to get away from it all by taking a trip to ... Greece!

People have asked me the question that every writer dreads: What are you going to write about next? Well, first of all, it's none of your business. It might turn out to be something I'm vaguely ashamed of, like my pencil fetish. Or I might have to go deep into my past. If I am lucky, I will hit on something that has been lying dormant for years and breathe life into it. I think the trick to exploiting your obsessions is to find a way to bring readers along, trusting that even if they don't share the obsession, they can share in the experience of being obsessed. I wonder if I can get a book out of cows.