



READER'S GUIDE

Part 1: Introduction and Writing Process

1. In the introduction, Kerri lists various reactions people had when they discovered she wanted to be a writer. Have you told people about your literary pursuits? How have they reacted?
2. In “Drafting,” Kerri says that the first draft is a place where we are free to make mistakes, because we can always fix them later. What kinds of obstacles have you encountered when writing a draft? How can these seemingly negative issues be turned into positive aspects of your emerging writing?
3. Kerri thinks that reading can be a form of writing. What was the last book you read that felt more like writing than just reading? What memorable lessons did you take away from it? How did you apply them to your writing?
4. “Priceless raw materials” (see “Eavesdropping”) for your writing can be found all around you; Kerri has benefitted from eavesdropping, Art History, and teaching in particular. What work, activities, and guilty pleasures do you latch on to, and has this raw material changed as you have gotten older?
5. How valuable has feedback been to your own writing process? Do you feel comfortable giving feedback? How do you apply feedback—both given and received—to your own writing?
6. The old writing adage “Show more, tell less” will likely present itself time and time again throughout your literary life, as it did in Kerri’s. What does this expression really mean, and is it really good advice?
7. Writer Susan Sontag believes in “pluralistic, polymorphous culture,” the view that there is equal value in high- and lowbrow forms of entertainment; given Kerri’s view of soap operas, she is likely to agree. Think about the movies, television shows, games, museums, and other forms of art that you enjoy and ask yourself *why* these forms of entertainment succeed in capturing your attention.
8. Kerri learned from watching soap operas that “You have an audience. Make them happy. (You are your own first audience! Does your writing make you

- happy?)” What is the balance between making an audience happy and making yourself happy? How have you balanced these two happinesses in your own writing? Have you ever had to sacrifice one for the other? What compromises have you found?
9. Writing what you believe is difficult, particularly in this Internet-dominated age in which everyone’s truth is on display. How can you separate your truth from what others perceive to be true? Can these different truths coexist?
 10. Take a shot at the prompt from the creative writing class Kerri describes in “Come at It From the Side,” which was inspired by David Lodge’s *Thinks...*

Pick a book or story by an author with a strong, recognizable style (you might also call it “voice,” as we have in class). Make a photocopy of one or two pages from the voice you’re using as your example, and be sure to provide the attribution (i.e., name and title).

Then, pretend you are a dog (I am not kidding). Write a short passage (500–750 words) from the dog’s POV, but in the voice of the author you’ve chosen. This need not be a full-fledged short story; it can be about whatever you like, as long as it’s in that voice, and from the POV of the dog.

11. Do you agree that Keats’ “negative capability” —that sitting “with our doubt,” embracing danger, and overcoming fear—is essential for a writer? If you disagree, what other challenges provide writers opportunities to grow as people and artists?
12. What kind of writer are you: a chiseler or a genre-hopper? How are these approaches to writing different and similar, and why do these distinctions matter?

Part 2: The Writing Life

1. Edna St. Vincent Millay once quipped, “I am glad that I paid so little attention to good advice; had I abided by it I might have been saved from some of my most valuable mistakes.” What is your stance on well-intentioned advice by writers and nonwriters?
2. Who was the first audience for your writing, and what did he or she say that made you continue down the literary path? Have you ever been someone’s first audience? How was this experience?
3. Is it essential to have a writing buddy? If you’ve had one, how did the relationship help and shape your writing? If you haven’t had one, did Kerri motivate you to look for one? Why or why not?
4. Forming a writers’ group is no easy task. What aspects of creating one seem the most intimidating, and how can you overcome those hurdles?
5. In the publishing industry, a “midlist” novel is a book that isn’t a bestseller, but gains enough sales and critical attention to advance the writer’s career. The majority of books fit this definition. How does this fact align with what Kerri says in “How Good Am I?” Why are midlist novels imperative to the future integrity of the book industry—and of your own future career as a writer?
6. At some point in your writing career, you will encounter this unavoidable question: “What is more important to you: time or money?” How would you answer today? How

do you feel about your response? Does the life you currently lead reflect this personal value?

7. Kerri believes that Teddy Roosevelt's quotation, "Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." encapsulates much of the essence of the writing life. How does this philosophy prepare a person for the difficulties of that life? Do you agree with the sentiment?
8. Kerri discusses the virtues of rejection throughout TINAWM. Which one of her reasons carries the most weight for you, and has it changed your point of view on what constitutes "rejection" and "failure"?
9. Kerri loves SARK's mantra, "You are rare and wonderous." Why does the spelling error make her pronouncement even more valid?

Part 3: Looking Ahead: Supporting Yourself, Getting Published, and Not Getting Published

1. Take a moment to research famous writers who had "real jobs" while pursuing their writing career. Were any of the results surprising to you? How come?
2. Did the chapter, "Those Who Can't Do, Teach" alter your impressions of teaching? Can you add to Kerri's ideas on why it's such a beneficial career for a writer?
3. In "Hating Your Best Friend" and "Hating Yourself," Kerri reveals how the success of others inevitably affects how you see yourself. What tips does she share in order to tame the beasts of envy and jealousy? Can these emotions ever be *helpful* for a writer?
4. Do you write for pleasure? Did you used to? Do you want to in the future? For what other reasons do you write? Why do you think Kerri places such an emphasis on the seemingly impossible task of writing just for "pleasure"? What pleasures do you take in writing?
5. The journey to publication is a long and arduous one, filled with more steps backward than forward. Kerri suggests numerous ways of approaching this process. Can you add more suggestions? Which ideas fit best with your current goals?
6. Kerri concludes her book with a chapter on the importance of reading in the writing life. Can you think of additional ways to champion reading and literature? After considering both her ideas and your own, where would you be most inclined to begin?
7. The Appendix is filled with many creatively stimulating "real jobs" for writers to investigate further. Were you surprised by any of them? Can you think of others? What is Kerri trying to say about the balance between the practical and the creative in a writer's life?

Questions by Lourdes Keochgerien, Editor-at-Large of YARN, Young Adult Review Network.

Lourdes Keochgerien is the Editor-at Large for YARN, the Young Adult Review Network, where she has worked since its inception. After finishing her thesis on YA literature, she moved back to Uruguay with her family and now freelances creating Reader's Guides and providing Spanish language consulting on manuscripts. She can be found at lkeochgerien.writes.blogspot.com.