

# Literacy Narrative: The Diarist

written by Guest Contributor | December 6, 2018



1.

Out of everything I have written, it's my diaries where I have written the longest and with the most faithfulness. As a diarist, I'm an observer, a scribe of the self, a careful thinker and feeler. But I've shied away from seeing myself like this or identifying as a diarist. It's a peculiar and particular type of writer to be. A diarist is a writer that is not read; a writer who intends their writing only for themselves. Something about the act of keeping a diary feels rebellious in a performative world. The refusal to share or show became, for me, a metamorphosis of what it means to write and to be a writer.

Recently, I was asked to choose a passage of a book to read aloud that represented ideas about writing which shaped me as a writer. While others chose passages from novels, I read this passage from Anne Frank's diary, written in 1944:

"I have my own views, plans, and ideas, though I can't put them into words yet. Oh, so many things bubble up inside me as I lie in bed, having to put up with people I'm fed up with, who always misinterpret my intentions. That's why recently I always come back to my diary."

A diary is a sort of magnetic space where your thoughts can exist as fully realized without being perfectly articulated.

Anne, though, edited her journal. After hearing a radio broadcast in 1944 about how diaries kept during World War II should be preserved to testify to their writers' experiences, she underwent a project of editing the existing diary during her last months in hiding. After her death, her father finished the project, editing her diaries and censoring some of her opinions in the

process. In the burgundy paperback edition of the *Diary of a Young Girl*, the one I owned as a teenager and the edition commonly assigned as middle school reading, the members of The Secret Annex are named with the pseudonyms Anne created for them: Mrs. Van Daan instead of Mrs. Van Pels, as she actually was. The diary is somewhat opened for the general reader. Similar to Marguerite Duras's project of rewriting her diaries, Anaïs Nin also edited her diaries to be read by someone other than herself. I've read some of her multi volume diaries and was bored by them, although I admired her devotion to the project. She kept her finished diaries in a bank vault.

Even though I have so many old journals—more than twenty which I've written for over a decade now—I haven't yet transcribed them, or even spent a lot of time analyzing their contents. "You can page back into your consciousness," someone once told me excitedly about the resource of the diaries. I detected a hint of envy in their voice, as if I had a power to unlock a part of myself that they didn't. The astonishment in their voice felt unrecognizable because I don't flip back very often and look at what I've written. I'm not so sure diaries are meant to be read, even though they seem like such a *trouve* of the mind. It's an illusion. At least mine are for nothing more than the present while I'm writing them.

2.

I feel quite okay calling myself a writer because I do write. Even when I'm not writing longer or more formal things, I'm at least thinking about what I'll write next. And when I'm ready to, I trust myself to write something of quality. I used to see myself more as a novelist because I wrote long complicated novels. They've for the most part all ended up in drawers. Then I felt like a short story writer, since I realized that a short story is exactly the right amount of writing for a workshop. I worked on my short stories for months and years, making them connect to each other, and seeing them as mini novels, or simply as practice for "The Great Thing."

When I started writing nonfiction after years of fiction, it felt substantially different. I complained about the odd foreignness of feeling like a novice at writing while having such an expanse of fiction behind me. Nonfiction felt very like something I had never attempted before. Without a reader, it was like my diaries weren't even writing, let alone a version of nonfiction. While they're the largest amount of anything I've written, my diaries are an outlier. I have the most difficulty connecting them to my larger body of work.

Of course, the writing in my diaries is closely tied to the writing meant for a reader. I would have never been able to write fiction if I hadn't known I was capable of writing from my multi volume diaries, every page filled. I knew I could put down an entire thought for a story because I knew I was able to write at length. The ability to write for myself helped me know I could write for others.

I write at least one new diary entry every week.. Sometimes I lag, maybe going as long as two weeks but never longer in over twelve years of keeping a diary. At my most frequent I've written twice a day. I've written out of boredom, desperation, and confusion. The diaries have created a peculiar space that keeps me returning to them.

My thoughts about the space my diaries created are often more compelling than what's written inside them. In my teenage diaries I wrote constantly about my developing body, noting the color of changing nipples, the sprouting of armpit hair, the consistency of menstrual blood, the widening of hips, shaving I don't give a second thought to these on-goings of my body, but at thirteen it felt important to record, and my diary became a place where I could talk about and enjoy my body when I barely understood what it was doing.

Space to enjoy my own existence happened again when I lived in Paris. After months of considering every aspect of my French grammar when I spoke, I wrote ceaselessly in my diary, releasing my English into the void. In French, I was constantly being misunderstood and confused. I felt stupid because I could only communicate with the fluency of an elementary school child. And then I would open my diary, finally able to articulate perfectly. My diary was a practice of solitude and pretending there was no one else but myself. Keeping a diary in English felt like an exquisite betrayal of everyone in Paris.

3.

It's been hard to convince myself that my diaries are real and complex writing, mostly because while I've kept this practice up for now more than a decade, I've rarely treated it with relevance and resignation. I am a careless diarist: the handwriting is terrible, the punctuation sparse, the capitalization erratic and sometimes totally missing, words are misspelled. I don't introduce new characters. I skip explanation and introductions. Absolutely nothing is contextualized. Some of my old diaries are falling apart because I chose such terrible, cheap books to write in. They're scattered between my apartment and my parent's house, in no particular order and without their own storage space.

Right now my diary has a blue cover, it's lined, and it was twenty dollars. I've been writing in it for four months. Before that, lined, pink cover, thirty dollars, lasted nine months and one entire relationship. I used to prefer a diary to be spiral bound so I could bend it over and it didn't even feel like a book anymore. I've had diaries made out of strange paper, so it felt more like an art project, and I've had diaries with locks and keys. Perfect bound, discolored paper, stiff recycled paper. Yellow, purple, red, green, and purple covers. I have, I think, completed twenty five journals in twelve years, and no two look alike.

I'm fascinated with the difference between diary and journal. A diary's main difference from a journal, it seems, is that it's written by girl. *Diaries* are childish and feminine while *journals* feel mature. As if keeping a diary is something to outgrow. For a long time and because of this, I chose *journal* as my default: *That's my journal, I was writing in my journal, I keep a journal*. I've tried to abandon this. I've tried to take my writing more seriously and realize just how important it is to keep a space for myself in in the diary.

When my great-grandfather died, my grandmother found her diaries in the attic. All of them were about my great-grandparents' courtship, documenting the times they went to the movies, went dancing, went out to dinner with friends. My great-grandmother's diaries weren't written in books but instead on yellow legal pads. I still find it strange that she kept her thoughts in such an informal place—the type of legal pad you'd pay bills on or write a shopping list. She held onto her diaries though, and my great-grandfather kept them after her. Of course they were of value. They meant a great deal to my grandmother who read them after both their deaths. She has a special place for them in her home now. Like me, perhaps my great-grandmother tricked herself into pretending her written feelings were informal, inconsequential, not worth investing in a nice book to write them in.

4.

A few years ago I wrote a novel to get over something that nagged me. I rewrote a week in my life so that it happened differently. I was me the main character. I looked the same and had the same intelligence and faults. I tried to keep myself as I was. The only other character, the person who spent the made up week with me, seemed like strange silhouettes of the real person. I felt so stupid writing the book that I constantly stopped writing and changed the text to italics to note within the narrative all the ways I was failing. These interrogations for myself became asides I just kept as part of the book, almost like footnotes. *What was I doing and how did I have the audacity to do this? This had to be wrong, an incorrect interpretation. This seemed really over the top right here. Or, you seem quite clever right here in this book you wrote about yourself.* Mostly, I wrote, *this won't change anything that happened.* Perhaps because of the way I was used to writing for myself in my diaries, I was able to make space for my self doubt in a book. I was already in the habit of recording thoughts like this, so automatically, I preserved them, even while writing auto-fiction.

I decided to keep the ending as it had been in reality. The exact same thing happened to me. Oddly enough though, I felt a lot better when I finished writing the novel. I had control. I let a writing professor read a portion of it, and then declined when he suggested that I work on the book for the rest of the semester. Someone who had been my friend, without reading a single a word of the novel, told me it was a horrible book that I never should have written. It was a denial of the inherent value of writing for myself. Her

words wounded me, and I didn't write anything for months after this. The only place I could write was in my diary of course, which didn't count.

I still haven't even taken the time to read the book in its entirety because I realized it wasn't really made to be read. It was a book made to be written. Once I wrote it, once it was printed off, it was over and done. I deleted it from my computer. It was an accomplishment, and I felt proud of myself for writing it, but it wasn't something meant to be shared. It was writing for myself and for no one else. It was freeing, and I felt healed. Eventually, I got over the cruel words. I moved on and wrote other things. But novel was important; it was an act of writing for myself, a denial of a reader. Finishing the book was only possible because I kept a diary. It was a novel that only a diarist could have written.

My diaries aren't about what I've written in them so much as there being a place where I can always be alone with myself, write for myself, without the pressure of what I'm doing or trying to do. In my diary I write with the intention of releasing words into a physical location. I am most productive when no one is reading what I write. There is something about a diary that represents a limbo place between writing and understanding your thoughts. It's where the two connect. And a lot of the time, they're still separate, undefined. Your head plowing forward, your hand transcribing underneath.

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If writing defies "common sense," if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we're allowed to reinvent ourselves. That's what I'm looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours: when you first "clicked" with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote "poetry," but looked at it again and called it "lyric essay." I want to see your literacy narrative in its

scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at [sylvia@entropymag.org](mailto:sylvia@entropymag.org). Stay tuned for more [literacy narratives](#) from yours truly and others.