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THE WRITER'S CHAPBOOK

Edited by George Plimpton

Viking

At a casual glance, George Plimpton's life would seem filled with more larks than an aviary. He has played tennis against Pancho Gonzales, fought in a bullfight staged by Hemingway, had Oswald Jacoby as his bridge partner, pitched in an All-Star game in Yankee Stadium, quarterbacked the Detroit Lions, sailed on trapezes and tamed lions for Clyde Beatty's circus, played a Bedouin extra in *Lawrence of Arabia* and gotten shot by John Wayne in *Rio Lobo*. Even his recent novel, *The Curious Case of Sidd Finch*, grew out of a hoax Plimpton perpetrated in the April Fool's Day 1985 issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

He's had fun doing all of it. Of his brief stint in the percussion section of the New York Philharmonic, Plimpton bragged, "I hit that gong, to the delighted enthusiasm of my fellow musicians, harder than any gong had ever been hit before." He's taken each of his roles seriously. Muhammed Ali, at Plimpton's request, treated the Harvard and Cambridge scholar as any other opponent and called him at 4 a.m. with a pre-fight prediction: "You are gonna fall during the ring instructions."

Plimpton has made an artwork of being an *amateur*, in its pristine sense of doing something not for cash but for love. The one love that infuses all the rest has always been his love for good writing, his own and anyone else's. Like Ezra Pound, John Gardner, George Garrett and Joyce Carol Oates, Plimpton is that kind of writer who devotes himself also to being a friend to literature. This prompted him in 1953, having already served as editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*, to found and become principal editor of the prestigious *Paris Review*.

Beginning in its first issue with E.M. Forster, the *Paris Review* has interviewed many of the literary giants of our century. From these interviews, Plimpton has now culled 313 pages of the most salient comments on the writing life and bound them as *The Writer's Chapbook*.

Ranging from 10 to 400 words each, these excerpts form more than a compendium of quotes and maxims. They offer insight into many phases of the writing process. Plimpton confines the cute quips to the book's copious epigraphs: "[Of critics]: 'I love every bone in their heads,' Eugene O'Neill." And even the epigraphs open an aspiring writer's eyes: "'A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,' Thomas Mann . . . 'A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author,' G.K. Chesterton."

We learn here the variety of ways writers got their starts, Ionesco encouraged to write at age nine by a teacher, Anne Sexton turning to poetry after watching a television

lecture on the sonnet, Frank O'Connor deciding to write rather than paint because paint cost too much. We see who they've learned their craft from, Hemingway and James Baldwin from painters, Bernard Malamud from Charlie Chaplin.

We even sometimes see why they do this lonely and often painful thing, Edward Albee and Baldwin writing to learn, in Baldwin's case even to learn "what you don't want to know"; John Barth sharing "Scheherazade's terror" that equates the telling of stories with staying alive; Irwin Shaw finding the writer's life like playing football: "You can get hurt, but you enjoy it."

Plimpton presents writers' quirky sides. Barth and Anne Tyler write with fountain pens, Joan Didion sleeps with the book she is about to finish, John Irving writes his autobiography until he's lying enough to know he has a promising work of fiction, Faulkner arrested for looking like a suspicious finger man, D.H. Lawrence's prim horror at hearing in conversation the four-letter words he employed in his novels. Going back almost four decades, these passages convey a sense of literary history, W.H. Auden speaking of his friendship with A.E. Housman, Jean Cocteau of his with Proust.

The biggest shocks from this book will be felt by English teachers. They will learn from Baldwin, Forster, Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Tennessee Williams, Margaret Drabble, Malamud, Erskine Caldwell and others that artistic writing is not primarily a thinking process but rises from levels deeper than the cognitive. They will learn from Katherine Anne Porter and Mary McCarthy that the very thought of a good writer consciously putting symbols in a work makes their blood run cold.

Even the poor reviewer finds himself sobered by John Irving's comments: "Listen very carefully to the first criticism of your work. Note just what it is about your work that the reviewers don't like; it may be the only thing in your work that is original and worthwhile. . . . One reward of leaving school is that you don't have to finish books you don't like. You know, if I were a critic, I'd be angry and vicious, too; it *makes* poor critics angry and vicious—to have to *finish* all those books they're not enjoying! What a silly job criticism is! What unnatural work it is! It is certainly not work for a grown-up."

True enough, perhaps, but when it involves experiencing that Horatian blend of instruction and delight that *The Writer's Chapbook* offers, reviewing has its moments.