

Write For Your Life

By Laura Stoll, Assistant to the Director/Outreach Librarian

One summer during college, I had a part-time job at a bathing suit and fitness clothing store called Swim & Sweat. Since most customers had already purchased their summer swimwear by the end of June, there was plenty of downtime. My supervisor told me that as long as there were no fitting rooms to clean or customers to serve, it was okay for me to read a book.

That summer I was on a break from my usual guilty-pleasure fiction and I was reading a compilation of “New York Times” columns by Anna Quindlen called “Thinking Out Loud.” Quindlen’s columns were about all kinds of issues, both public and private. She wrote about life, love, home, and families and how they intersected with current affairs. Their short length made them ideal for reading during work because I could easily put the book down and pick it back up.

One rainy afternoon, a customer pointed to the book I’d just laid down and said, “Are you reading that?” I tentatively said “yes,” worried that she was going to judge my choice or chastise me for not working. Instead, she replied by saying, “Huh. I didn’t realize people actually read her. Anna’s my sister-in-law.”

The story tracks. Quindlen is from New Jersey, not far from Swim & Sweat and presumably had family in the area. Maybe I misremember that the customer was her sister-in-law; she could have been a college roommate or cousin. Regardless, her comment launched my lifelong love of Anna Quindlen.

Over the years, I’ve tried to read everything that she has published. Her novels are excellent. “One True Thing” is about a daughter who cares for her dying mother. It was made into a popular movie starring Meryl Streep and Renee Zellweger. “Still Life With Breadcrumbs,” published in 2014, is about a photographer who flees the city to build a new life. Both shed beauty on everyday life experiences, turning them into moving and compelling stories. Quindlen published two other anthologies of her columns as well as other nonfiction books. I recommend “A Short Guide to a Happy Life,” a reminder to live fully and authentically.

Her latest book “Write For Your Life” might be my all-time favorite. In this short nonfiction volume, Quindlen invites readers to pick up a pen and do some of their own writing. She points to Anne Frank’s diary as an excellent example of how writing down what’s on our minds and in our hearts can keep us grounded during extraordinary times.

Without directly saying so, Quindlen encourages us to write about how we are surviving these unique Covid days. She suggests that keeping a journal or writing a letter to a friend or family member can be an excellent way to sort out our feelings while preserving the ways that make these days remarkable.

Shaun Usher’s book “Letters of Note” is a compilation of 128 letters that are entertaining, inspiring, and powerful. Some record correspondence between notable figures while others are from ordinary people writing about extraordinary circumstances. One that I enjoyed was from 11-year-old Grace Bedell, who wrote to presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln to suggest that he would win the election if he grew a beard. Lincoln later met Bedell and thanked her for the suggestion; it worked!

Journals and letters can be used to tell fictional stories as well. One of my favorite books of all time is the oddly-named “The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society” by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows. Told in a series of letters between an author and residents of

Guernsey island, the conversation uncovers truths about the characters that straightforward prose could not.

Likewise, "Bridget Jones's Diary" by Helen Fielding takes us directly inside the mind of a 30-something single woman as she tries to advance her career, find love, and juggle her friends and family. Again, the diary format of the book allows for a first-person perspective that has us relating to all of Bridget's ups and downs, laughing with her, not at her.

If you're not quite ready to put pen to paper and start a journal or write a letter, you could start by reading some old letters you might have saved. Or, jot down a sentence about what you've done over the course of a day. As Quindlen says, writing will leave the gift of your presence. "It doesn't matter what you say. It matters that you said it."