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Why I Write

Abstract

My primary impulse is a private, individual one- a powerful urge to say the unsayable; this is one of the ways in which I think of poetry, its purpose and function. The desire to make sense of the amorphous and chaotic experience of living is part of this; I can't do better than quote Picasso: 'Art stabilises us on the edge of chaos'. From as far back as I can remember in my growing up, the way to 'make sense' was through words, so I have a lifelong passion for the power and intricacies of language. I write to discover, not to tell what I know. The flash of something new (even if in one sense familiar) is where a poem begins; the writing of the poem elucidates for me what that first glimpse meant.



Lauris Edmond grew up in Greenmeadows, a small country town in New Zealand. She trained as a teacher and speech therapist and then went back to living in small towns as the wife of a school teacher and, eventually, the mother of six children. She has written poetry in private since childhood, but did not publish her first collection until 1975. *In Middle Air* won the PEN Best First Book Award. She went on to publish nine other volumes of poetry, including the *Selected Poems* which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1985, and, more recently, *New and Selected Poems* from which she has been reading on a tour of Germany and England. In 1986 she was awarded an OBE for services to literature and in 1988 an Honorary Doctorate of Literature by Massey University, Palmerston, North New Zealand. She has published a novel, a number of plays, and a three-volume autobiography. She lives in Wellington, New Zealand.

LAURIS EDMOND

Why I Write

My primary impulse is a private, individual one – a powerful urge to say the unsayable; this is one of the ways in which I think of poetry, its purpose and function. The desire to make sense of the amorphous and chaotic experience of living is part of this; I can't do better than quote Picasso: 'Art stabilises us on the edge of chaos'. From as far back as I can remember in my growing up, the way to 'make sense' was through words, so I have a lifelong passion for the power and intricacies of language. I write to discover, not to tell what I know. The flash of something new (even if in one sense familiar) is where a poem begins; the writing of the poem elucidates for me what that first glimpse meant.

But because I live in a young, small, remote country there has always been another less defined reason for being a writer. This is that the collective urge to define ourselves as a new and cohesive society, a nation, is still very strong here. Before I had published a single poem (I wrote for many years before I tried to publish my work), I knew that there had been few writers who had tried to re-create the authentic experience of life in these islands, and fewer still who were women. I did not know then, though I do now, that there was a significant prejudice operating against women who presumed to enter what was seen as a male field.

I published my first volume of poems in 1975, at a time when this climate was changing. That was International Women's Year, and this new consciousness came, here as elsewhere, after some years of vigorous re-examination of women's own attitudes and habits. The late 60s and early 70s was the time of 'consciousness raising', and among other effects was a great burgeoning of women's writing. The whole movement had great significance for me. In simple terms, it gave me the courage to express a view of the world I had always till then kept secret.

I have now published a three-volume autobiography, which I set out to do in order to define and document the changes and the upheavals brought about by this revolution in my life and work. As it has turned out, these volumes have been read by many women as their own story, despite obvious differences in detail.

But first, for ten years I wrote poems constantly, and published, on average, a book a year – a state of hyperactivity which was, no doubt, one effect of finally breaking the unnatural silence of my first 50 years. I also began to travel. This is the habit of islanders like ourselves, but for me it

had, like much else, been delayed till middle age. This widened my view of my place in a broader scheme of things, and gave me, by one of the paradoxes of travel, a stronger sense of my identity as a woman, a writer, a New Zealander. I met women from other countries and cultures whose experience held parallels with my own; I felt both more local, and more universally a woman writing of my time and my generation.

I should add that my long 'apprenticeship of silence' was not spent in some kind of waiting inactivity. Conforming to the dictates of my conditioning – as we now know to call it – I married and brought up a family, as it happened a large one. I do not, of course, regret my maternal function, but even in a literary sense I now believe that beginning to write in one's middle years has certain advantages. You have a kind of inner assurance (however unsure you may be on the surface) that expresses itself as the voice in your writing.

The Nineties are for me the post-autobiography period. I have as it were recovered from that five-year labour, and am writing poetry again, with a freedom I appeared to have lost during that time. I also plan to write my second novel. But the interesting discovery for me is that the inclination towards poetry rather than prose is still there, though it may have been in abeyance for a time. I surmise that it is to do with typical – and preferred – kinds of intellectual and emotional response. I don't, characteristically, want to make up stories about what I see and know, as I think novelists do. I see quick flashes, encapsulated stories if you like, without the development of plot or theme; I like to try and grasp the experience all in one. I don't know why this is so, and neither perhaps do other writers, poets nor fiction writers. An intriguing question.