

Bird by Bird Study Guide

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

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Plot Summary

This non-fiction book, published in 1994, is like a written course on writing and life in which Anne Lamott provides intimate details of her life. These life experiences form the basis for her approach to writing. Her life also provides the material from which she writes. *Bird by Bird* is a collection of very personal and sometimes tragic life experiences intertwined with various writing methods.

The narrative of Anne's life begins with her father who was also an author. He and his family often socialized with creative and artistic writers, and such social interactions are vivid in Anne's memory. They shape her initial experiences with the written word and the lifestyle of those who write.

A love of books and a deep connection to the experiences presented in the written word provide an escape for Anne as she navigates her childhood and adolescent years. Anne is a nervous child and young woman, often feeling as though she is on the outside looking in on the life of her friends. She is neither conventionally attractive nor unconventionally too smart for the average school social experience. Anne develops her sense of humor as a way of protecting herself and gaining some semblance of participation with her peers.

While the life of an artist often is a challenge for Anne, it is exactly to this kind of life she gravitates. She decides, with the publication and sharing of her first poem in elementary school, that writing is what she wants to pursue in her life. Anne begins this pursuit by working on a single short story. Her father shares this story with his agent, and the agent gives encouraging feedback to continue working on the piece. In the meantime, Anne works a series of odd jobs while toiling away at the story.

Anne's father is diagnosed with and suffering from cancer. It is the midst of this family tragedy that Anne finds the first story she can complete and submit for publication. The story is about her joys and tragedies and those of her family whilst dealing with the illness and death of their patriarch. The same agent who encouraged Anne to keep writing the miserable short story earlier in her career helps Anne to become published for the first time.

Anne discovers that writing is about telling the truth based on her own experiences. As her life progresses, she gives birth to a child who is the next to significantly impact her writing approach. Anne begins to compare writing to raising her son Sam. Sometimes both can be very difficult with little reward, and sometimes writing and child rearing are incredibly rewarding in the little and big moments.

Anne and her son Sam become close friends with Pam. A journal is kept by Anne on the experiences they have together. This journal forms the basis for Anne's next published work. Unfortunately, much like Anne's experience with her father, tragedy is also a part of this novel. Pam is diagnosed with terminal cancer and the journal becomes a tribute to her life and Anne's friendship.



Anne intertwines the aforementioned moments with others taken directly from her writing life, classes and workshops. Her students' inquiry into the writing process and payoff are a constant source of inspiration and information for the reader. The students begin the class, and sometimes end it, with the sole ambition of publication. Anne attempts to help students and the reader of this book understand that writing is a reward in and of itself. The students' exploration of writing is similar to Anne's and she is generous in relating the challenges and victories of writing.

Each chapter is a lesson in writing. Each lesson is illustrated with a personal experience and poignant reminder to tell the truth in writing. The truth is about life, life is about the experiences one has and the story is the experiences told as honestly as possible.

The book ends with Anne's final advice on life and writing. Writing becomes a noble endeavor to positively enhance the life of both author and reader. It is a cathartic exercise from past pains. Writing captures the wonder of life and shares it on the page.

Section 1: Introduction

Section 1: Introduction Summary and Analysis

This non-fiction book, published in 1994, is like a written course on writing and life in which Anne Lamott provides intimate details of her life. These life experiences form the basis for her approach to writing. Her life also provides the material from which she writes. *Bird by Bird* is a collection of very personal and sometimes tragic life experiences intertwined with various writing methods.

The author, Anne Lamott, sets herself up as a fellow student of writing. In the introduction she sets the foundation and her credibility as one who has experienced the same things as her students. She uses the introduction and its flashbacks to make herself the central figure of the book. Anne is able to teach because she has worked through all the experiences under girding each of her approaches to writing. The lessons for Anne are taken from her own life. Therefore, it is important for the reader to trust there is a wealth of experience to draw from in order to learn the lessons too.

Anne grows up the daughter of a writer. Her father spends much of his days engaging with words in writing and reading. Consequently, Anne's life is deeply engrossed in words. Anne and her brothers are encouraged to read all types of writing, including plays, novels and poetry.

The Lamott household is very calm and quiet, unless her father's writer friends are visiting. Male, loud and colorful, they often make an already nervous Anne even more anxious. Some would pass out in the middle of dinner from too much wine. Anne's father rises early every morning to write for several hours. He travels, reads poetry and generally lives a life free from the mundane routines of Anne's peers. He pays attention to and values life including the moments, memories and experiences from which one draws the material for writing. He teaches a class at a prison that Anne participates in, thus passing along his love of writing and process to her.

Anne is small and looks different from other children. She begins to use humor as a way of navigating through awkward educational and social situations. She then discovers her own drive to write, which stems from her desire to "be artistic, a free spirit, and yet also to be the rare working class person in charge of her own life" (p. xv, Introduction). It is a John Glenn poem written in second grade that serves as Anne's first experience with the power of writing. Her teacher likes it so much that she shares it with the class and the parents of the students.

Though Anne is embracing and acting on her desire to become a writer, she also sees the unique challenges and differences between her family life and those of her friends. For example, money is often low. Her father's writer friends often drink too much and smoke too much pot. Anne and her family do not conform to the white, middle class



societal norms of the community in which they live. These differences heighten Anne's perception that she is an outsider who is looking in on life.

As Anne grows older, she is still very skinny and not conventionally beautiful. Her friends allow her to tag along for their social activities because she makes them laugh. Anne spends much of her life living out the anxiety of being on the outside looking in. While her friends are making out and engaging in adolescent life Anne remains an onlooker. She is miserable on the inside while outwardly being funny.

Despite Anne's efforts to fit in and be 'normal,' the uniqueness of her writing-centered household continues to manifest. When a friend visits, Anne is deeply embarrassed by graphic scenes in her father's newly published book. It is humor Anne uses to survive the adolescent angst.

College is as creative and eclectic as her home life. Anne seeks out the very people she was embarrassed by in her early childhood. She is only truly successful in college when writing for the college newspaper and in her English classes. Anne works desperately to become political, intellectual and artistic, as are the friends she surrounds herself with. Ultimately, college isn't the place for Anne—she drops out to pursue her dream of becoming a famous writer.

Through a series of odd jobs, Anne eventually moves close to her father. She consistently writes, though she never finishes a project or gets published. Anne myopically focuses in on one story, titled "Arnold." Every so often, at her father's urging, she sends it to an agent. The agent graciously encourages Anne to keep trying.

Anne continues to write for a number of years, searching for a story to tell. Instead, the story eventually finds her by way of her father's diagnosis of, struggle with and death from cancer. Anne begins to write of her experiences with her father, which subsequently gets published by the same agent who tolerated her earlier, awful story.

Publishing, Anne thinks, is the apex of her career as a writer, the final affirmation of her talent and even further, of herself. She quickly learns that publication is simply not enough. However, the same awe with which she views reading spurs Anne to continue writing through the challenges.

Anne eventually continues to repeat her father's legacy by becoming a writing teacher. *Bird by Bird* is the instruction manual for writing gleaned from her classes and workshops. Born from her life, vividly introduced in this section, the book explores the writing process through the prism of Anne's experiences.

The introduction serves to solidify Anne's voice, motivation and point of view for the writing lessons she shares in subsequent chapters. The reader can expect the same humor and wry sensibility about life to characterize Anne's lessons on writing. Her point of view is supported by her own testimonials as a writer and as a student of life.



Part 1, Writing, Section 1 Getting Started

Part 1, Writing, Section 1 Getting Started Summary and Analysis

According to Anne, writing is about telling the truth. This is the first lesson she shares with her writing students and with the reader. Students come to her class idealistic in their pursuit of publication. Their one and only goal is to be recognized as brilliant writers, validated through publication. Anne's goal is to turn the students into writers. The two goals often cause students to be disillusioned by the actual work required to write and write well.

Getting started with telling the truth and expressing it well is the first and most formidable challenge. Anne advises her students to start with childhood memories. There are huge amounts of material in one's childhood. Look to the details of dress, mannerisms and activities Anne teaches. Next, Anne says to write about events and holidays and significant events. Focusing on guests, gifts and the life of those times is just one of the initial approaches to writing.

Anne shares a time when she too was overwhelmed with the sheer enormity of her writing task. For her, it was when she was a food writer for a magazine. Anne had written so many food reviews that it was nearly impossible to focus on one specific cuisine or restaurant. However, when she was able to break the restaurant experiences down to a specific dish or other detail, Anne was less overwhelmed.

Delving deeper into childhood experiences, Anne suggests writing about experiences previously kept secret. This frees the writer from worrying about how the reader will react. It frees writers to focus on capturing the rich details and think about consequences later.

Throughout this introductory lesson, Anne shares personal anecdotes about her friends and family. Each continues to mine the deep insecurity Anne has carried since childhood. However, Anne manages to share the little resentments and pains with the same humor and wit as in the introduction.

Anne returns to her father as the one who shapes her desire to be a writer. In her observations of him and through her own experiences, Anne also recognizes it takes work to write, as well as more than a little obsession. Anne obsesses about everything, including her life, her health, her future and her work. Though she may fret through the night, there is always another morning and another day. On this new day inspiration will come.

In the midst of her practical tips and personal revelations, Anne's students inevitably return to the quest to become published. Anne reminds them again that the reason to write is to create books. The students remember it was books that inspired them to write

and pay attention to life. For Anne it began with the books she was surrounded by as a child and those her father wrote.



Part 1, Section 2, Getting Started

Part 1, Section 2, Getting Started Summary and Analysis

Anne begins the next class with two pieces of writing wisdom. The first concept is that of short assignments. As Anne sits at her desk during her own writing times, a familiar obsession arises. Thoughts about finances, friendships and even orthodontia interrupt her writing time. The tool she uses to get and maintain her focus is a one-inch picture frame.

The one-inch frame is a metaphor relating to writing only what a reader would 'see' through the words. "One inch" describes a small aspect of the topic at any one time. It describes the person on the porch and not the town in which the person resides. Small assignments focus on capturing the one moment without delving into the background drama underneath.

Anne illustrates the foundation for her one-inch concept using another personal anecdote. Her brother is sitting at a table to write a report, surrounded by books about birds. He is overwhelmed at the sheer enormity of the task at hand. Anne's father gives a valuable piece of advice on how to write the report. He exhorts his son to write, bird by bird.

This story is used by Anne to help her students become less overwhelmed. She also uses it as the framework for the entire book and its title. The report presented one bird at a time and so too Anne is sharing one writing concept at a time.

Part 1, Section 3, Shitty First Drafts

Part 1, Section 3, Shitty First Drafts Summary and Analysis

The second piece of wisdom, following small assignments, is the concept of poor first drafts. Anne maintains that poor first drafts will almost inevitably precede better second and third drafts. She likens it to a child letting all their thoughts, emotions and ideas pour out onto the page.

As a food writer for a now defunct magazine (its folding was not her fault, she neurotically assures the reader), Anne details her struggles with awful first drafts. After visiting restaurants with friends, Anne uses observations from those times as a basis for her first drafts. She reveals the importance of quieting the critical voices that arise as the words begin to form on the page.

The initial lessons are told using humor and personal memories as she herself employs those techniques. Anne depicts her students as similar to the idealistic dreamer she once was with the sole passion for publication. However, she and they cannot escape the reality that eventually one has to get started. She suggests that writing small assignments and awful first drafts are the first approach.

Part 1, Section 4, Perfectionism

Part 1, Section 4, Perfectionism Summary and Analysis

The greatest opponent to writing is perfectionism. In Anne's account of her tonsillectomy she employs the use of this painful memory as another support of her approach to writing. When her post surgical pain lasts longer than her pain medication, Anne was told to chew gum. In the chewing Anne finds relief from pain. The pain stems from throat muscles clenched around her healing throat. Perfectionism paralyzes. Terribly messy, long and not particularly adept first drafts exercise the writer's muscles, thus freeing them from perfectionism.

While the title of this section is perfectionism, it could have been subtitled perseverance. Writing through the 'pain' of perfectionism means letting every word, image and idea pour onto the page. Anne encourages writers to use many sheets of paper and to be as messy as possible. In this way, a writer overcomes perfectionism and begins to understand, and even enjoy, persevering through the pain of terrible first drafts.



Part 1, Section 5, School Lunches

Part 1, Section 5, School Lunches Summary and Analysis

One wouldn't expect the topic of grade school lunches to contain wisdom for writing. Yet, with Anne, it does. Using a short assignment written with her students, Anne illustrates how the previously shared techniques would work with any type of topic.

The school lunch is a short assignment. It overcomes perfectionism in that every writer has something to write about lunch. When she and her students are overwhelmed by the amount of material possible even with the topic of lunch, they return to the idea of writing only one inch. In the case of the lunches, one inch turns out to be a sandwich for the class.

While focusing with her students on sandwiches, Anne injects the same introspective humor as in previous chapters. She again pulls from experiences with her father, asking, "Why do sandwiches made by fathers look so much more clueless than others?" Anne suggests it's the methodology of loading the meat, cheese and lettuces.

Will one be able to use anything from the messy first draft? Perhaps one will. Perhaps there is nothing of value in the draft. However, Anne's focus remains clear: The first draft may contain only a word of usable idea, but it will contain nothing if it is never written.

Part 1, Section 6, Polaroids

Part 1, Section 6, Polaroids Summary and Analysis

The Special Olympics provide Anne with another context from which to gain writing wisdom. Similar to the one-inch approach, "Polaroids" relates the writing process to the slow development of a Polaroid picture. A self-described "cool man" presents Anne with a Polaroid of himself and two teammates. It is from this she begins to develop the idea.

Anne uses her dry wit to describe her experience with the Games. The basketball game is more like a herd of animals running back and forth across the court. When a ball happens to make its way into the basket, the players all stop to admire the feat. The athletic contests are not Anne's focus. It is the picture of determination developing through the competitions.

As a Polaroid begins to clear and the images present themselves, certain details begin to emerge. The photo may be of a family, however, it is the box or flowers or something leaning against the fence in the background that is truly interesting. Anne suggests waiting to see what develops and then picking a detail that emerges.

Part 1, Section 7, Character

Part 1, Section 7, Character Summary and Analysis

The inner life, motivations and experiences of a character are key to their full creation in writing. Anne uses another metaphor to illustrate full character development. A character should figuratively inhabit an acre of land. This acre provides a framework within which to round out the character's action.

Good things happen to bad characters and bad things happen to good characters. It is important to avoid becoming over protective of characters. Anne advises writers to let the story happen. This will occur over successive drafts and with purposeful experimentation. While on the one acre, one should allow a tragedy and explore what could and probably should happen.

In the story development a writer uncovers the stories told from the character's point of view. Heavy description can overwhelm a reader. Anne suggests taking the character through a variety of conversations in diverse circumstances. One should ask, "What do they have to say about this circumstance or that?" One good sentence of dialogue can do more to create a character than pages of description.

The narrator must also have a compelling voice and be a person with whom the reader can find some affinity. Anne shows how her characters are similar to herself. "I like for them to have a sick sense of humor and to be concerned with important things, by which I mean that they are interested in political and psychological and spiritual matters," Anne writes (page 50). For Anne, a compelling voice seems to be a bit neurotic, just like her. It is this similarity that allows for the story to continue and reliably tell the truth.

Part 1, Section 8, Plot

Part 1, Section 8, Plot Summary and Analysis

Plot, according to Anne, is deeply rooted in character. Finding out what the character is most passionate about is one way to develop plot. Challenge the character's passion and the resulting actions and reactions will create plot. Action for action's sake will take away the credibility of the character. It will also abuse the reader's trust of the narrator. When action is strongly connected to character it will be true.

Drama is the hook to engage the reader with the plot. Setup, build up and pay off are the cycles of drama. None can be shortchanged for the sake of action. A compelling character engaging in action relating to defending their established passion will naturally entail drama. The goal is to get the reader to go along as the drama works itself out. The drama and the action cannot be contrived. Anne revisits a refrain from earlier chapters, reminding her students to be honest.

Part 1, Section 9, Dialogue

Part 1, Section 9, Dialogue Summary and Analysis

Dialogue is a writer's take on how a character speaks. It should be truthful and sound like something the character would really say out loud. There are three approaches Anne shares regarding dialogue.

First, one should say the words aloud. In this way, it can be rehearsed and refined. Anne suggests not doing this in a public place as people may not understand. As a writer navigates and experiences his or her own life, Anne suggests listening to real conversations. From these a writer can begin to understand natural speech patterns and how they may be translated onto the page. New material can always be gained from listening to real dialogue.

Second, each character should be able to be identified by their individual conversations. The intricacies and complexities formed from a character's motivations should be reflected in his or her dialogue. Clever dialogue for the sake of cleverness will deny the truth Anne seeks for all writers to demonstrate.

Third, Anne suggests putting two opposing characters in a close situation. Charging the atmosphere with tension will provide a reason for the characters to talk. The reader becomes an eavesdropper on the conversation. Anne asserts the author's voice should not get in the way. If the dialogue is true to character, it will not.

The final lesson in dialogue relates to writing in dialect. Anne suggests not writing in a dialect at all as it can make a reader's head hurt. One can write in dialect only if it is done very proficiently. Most people, according to Anne, do not write dialect proficiently. However, in an ironic and witty turn Anne shares a funny story of a woman she heard with a heavy accent. The woman simply commented on the weather. Her voice, with its thick accent, inspired Anne to attempt to write an entire book in that same dialect.

Part 1, Section 10, Set Design

Part 1, Section 10, Set Design Summary and Analysis

As characters engage in truthful plot and honest dialogue, they must have a place in which to conduct all this action. Anne shares how to create a set design by relating the process with which she designed a garden 'set' for one of her books. An abysmal failure at gardening herself, Anne relied on a professional from a greenhouse and friends who garden for advice. So successful was Anne creating this set for the book that avid gardeners who read it were in shock to learn she couldn't keep a simple houseplant alive.

While this set creation approach may seem in direct opposition to Anne's adherence to truth in storytelling, it is not. In fact, in the research into the experiences, a writer ensures it is indeed true. This truth emanates from an external view of the set, which is very similar to the process of reading the story.



Part 1, Section 11, False Starts

Part 1, Section 11, False Starts Summary and Analysis

The title for this chapter, and its content, deals with beginning a story yet going nowhere. Anne's point is to encourage writers to spend enough time with their characters to take many journeys. The journeys may or may not work into the final story. However, only through time will a writer be able to delve into different facets of every character.

Anne illustrates the point by sharing the story of her visits to a senior citizen home. Over the four years she spent with the residents, Anne learned there is more than what immediately presents itself. At first Anne focuses on the somewhat tragic nature of their circumstances. As the time continues she discovers the individual life stories of the residents.

Part 1, Section 12, Plot Treatment

Part 1, Section 12, Plot Treatment Summary and Analysis

A plot treatment is a road map with directions for all the characters and action in a story. A treatment is one way of organizing all the drafts and false starts to determine what would work best for the final story. Anne's obsessive nature relating to writing leads her to discover how to develop a plot treatment.

Anne has a showdown with her editor. Preceding the meeting was several drafts and several years working on what would become one of her most successful works. Anne is too familiar with the characters and cares too much about them. In her closeness she neglects to build a connectedness between one plot point and character to the next. By defending her choices to her editor, she tore apart her story and recreated it. As a result she finds and creates the connectedness.

This story, including deeply personal details, is another example of Anne serving as the ultimate case study in writing. The plot treatment is a result of Anne's experiences and her ability to analyze them. In the analysis she continues to gain powerful lessons in writing to share with her students.



Part 1, Section 13, How Do You Know You Are Done

Part 1, Section 13, How Do You Know You Are Done Summary and Analysis

Anne relies on her wit to describe how a writer can know when to stop writing. Putting an octopus to bed is how one knows it is time to be done. Just when a writer has most of the key ideas and character complete, the tone or dialogue may be flat. Similarly, and amusingly, an octopus when tucked into bed may have most of its arms under the blanket, but not all of them. Having most of the story under control, Anne contends, may be the best time to end the story. She also describes it in the following quote: "...if you also know that there is simply no more steam in the pressure cooker and that it's the very best you can do for now—well? I think this means that you are done" (page 94).



Part 2, The Writing Frame of Mind, Section 1, Looking Around

Part 2, The Writing Frame of Mind, Section 1, Looking Around Summary and Analysis

In this section Anne emphasizes the role of the observer in writing. The first person one should observe is oneself. Anne fulfills this through sharing her own personal experiences in each chapter. An observation without judgment is based on a compassionate viewpoint. Being compassionate with one's self frees the writer to use more of their conscious minds. This leads to an examination of all facets of a person, thus creating a truer picture of the character. The multi-faceted nature allows a richer experience of even the most mundane details of life.

Anne demonstrates growth and commitment to observation through a quote kept above her writing space. The quote describes the joy of God in small and often overlooked places. In less than twenty words, through another quote Anne shares, the simple ripples on the surface of water are related to writing. The words contain basic observations yet provide immense depth and clarity. Anne's humor ends the section on looking around with the following: "To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that it presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one" (page 102).

Part 2, Section 2, The Moral Point of View

Part 2, Section 2, The Moral Point of View Summary and Analysis

Centering each story on something the author cares passionately about is Anne's next lesson in writing. This emanates from the moral or deepest beliefs a writer holds. These become the framework for the expression of that passion. From exploring this passion, Anne experiences a new perspective on life. This new perspective allows the author to know more about themselves and in writing to pass it on to the reader.

Part 2, Section 3, Broccoli

Part 2, Section 3, Broccoli Summary and Analysis

How does broccoli relate to writing? Anne introduces the idea of a writer's inner voice or intuition via a quote about broccoli. In the quote broccoli tells the eater how to eat it. The rational mind does not allow for intuition, yet it is the very tool a writer can use to discover hidden ideas in the story. A hunch or a random idea could all lead to a new and more truthful extension of character or plot.

Quietly settling one's self is the only way to hear the inner voice or intuition. It takes practice to overcome the random thoughts and assumptions of the conscious mind. For Anne, whose neurotic and random thoughts are well documented in previous chapters, this exercise of 'listening to broccoli' is not an easy one.

Once quieted, a writer must decide to value what is heard regardless of how it sounds. By framing the idea in the absurd metaphor of listening to vegetables, Anne continues to use humor to illustrate a valuable point. The greatest obstacle to intuition is one's self. Anne has learned how to overcome herself and perhaps some vegetables too.

Part 2, Section 4, Radio Station KFKD

Part 2, Section 4, Radio Station KFKD Summary and Analysis

KFKD is a way for Anne to define the random thoughts interfering with intuition and eventually writing. KFKD is a theoretical radio station blaring two complete opposite streams of music into the writer's ears. Turning on just as a writer sits down to write, one side plays how the writer is so wonderfully gifted, talented and smart while the other is the stream of doubt, ridicule and depression. In other words, the second stream is a clear example of Anne's neurotic obsessiveness about her writing. Anne's point is to tune out KFKD and to tune into the story.

Part 2, Section 5, Jealousy

Part 2, Section 5, Jealousy Summary and Analysis

Continuing with the KFKD idea, Anne uses it to share regarding jealousy. At some time or another, as she has experienced, a really bad writer will gain the notoriety and adulation one feels entitled to receive. Anne uses the humorous anecdote of a herd of caribou to justify why this happens.

Anne continues with her own deeply personal experience with jealousy. From this experience she was able to determine the source and to develop ways to overcome it. For Anne, the source was another writer's sudden meteoric rise to fame and fortune. The effect on Anne was to cause her feelings of not belonging to reemerge from her childhood.

Anne looks to many colorful people to overcome her jealousy. Her therapist, an Al-Anon member and a large, homosexual priest all offer advice. Finally, however, Anne finds relief in writing. She has always found relief in writing from challenging emotional and life experiences. Again, it is her writing that ultimately affects her emotional and mental well-being.



Part 3, Help Along the Way, Section 1, Index Cards

Part 3, Help Along the Way, Section 1, Index Cards Summary and Analysis

A dying friend and a nude Demi Moore are how Anne illustrates the role of index cards. It is on an index card that Anne captures a poignant moment between herself and her friend Pam. The moment entailed Pam's death as a reason to never see another picture of Demi Moore pregnant and naked. A personal story with dry wit is a constant approach Anne uses to illustrate her writing and her life.

"I dismantled the giants" (page 144) is how Anne ends this chapter. The "giants" are two index cards she fashions into puppets. These puppets entertain her young son at the emergency room. One index card has a shopping list and the other she uses to write the story of her son's first asthma attack. Index cards are another way Anne shares to dismantle the giants of writing: topic, tone and detail. They are also, for Anne, a way to deal with personal challenges.



Part 3, Section 2, Calling Around

Part 3, Section 2, Calling Around Summary and Analysis

The writing process is often an isolating and individualized process. The unintended consequence of this can be, according to Anne, a "warped mind." In Anne's case is a stream of conscious journeys from a mouth sore to a description of vineyards to suspected cancer. Her point, within the neurotic story, is to reach out of the isolation to gain information to serve the story.

Most people are glad to share details and information they possess which may be beyond the scope of the writer's expertise. In Anne's case, it is the name of the wire thing at the top of a wine bottle. The wire thing is a detail Anne needed to include in her second novel.

Anne telephones a local winery for her information. In the process Anne writes a rich description of a vineyard. In this description Anne discovers a wealth of detail she may or may not use in the writing. She does, however, learn from calling around that the "wire thing" covering the cork is called a wire hood.



Part 3, Section 3, Writing Groups

Part 3, Section 3, Writing Groups Summary and Analysis

While calling around is one way to escape the isolation of writing, so too are writing groups. Anne encourages novice writers to seek out the social and emotional support of a community of fellow writers. Writing groups are simply groups of writers who gather to share, review and support one another's work.

There are many ways to build or connect to a writing group. One way is to participate in a workshop or class, much like the ones Anne facilitates. Anne shares a story from one of her students illustrating the difference between a brutally honest feedback and a nurturing response. Anne chooses to provide a nurturing response in which the student has an opportunity to keep writing. A fellow student determines it is better to be honest and let the writer know how truly terrible is the work.

Another equally effective way of connecting to a writing group is to start one. A group Anne is familiar with started at one of her workshops. The group has been meeting regularly for a number of years. They often return to Anne's classes as the senior 'statespersons' sharing their wisdom from years in service to the story. Anne also demonstrates how this group supports one another through tough times. One of the group members overcomes her own funk by learning of a fellow member's tough times.



Part 3, Section 4, Someone to Read Your Drafts

Part 3, Section 4, Someone to Read Your Drafts Summary and Analysis

Anne advocates for someone to read drafts prior to submission for publication. The person or people should both be close enough and honest enough to make the exercise worthwhile. For Anne, there are two people. One is a fellow writer and the other is a librarian who is an avid reader. While Anne trusts both persons, she is still a nervous wreck after sharing her work.

The role of the reader of a draft is similar to that of a midwife. Their job is to recognize "... (the) stories and ideas and visions and memories and plots inside me (Anne), and only I can give birth to them" (page 164). Draft readers are to recognize the story within the writer and help him or her give 'birth' to it on the page.

Two questions arise from Anne's students. The first relates to finding a partner in writing. Again using her humor, Anne describes it as similar to dating. A writer must overcome their inherent self-preservation from rejection and reach out. If it doesn't work out, chocolate and alcohol will help the writer get back out there.

The second question relates to negative feedback from the reader of one's drafts. Anne relies on a funny and poignant situation with her friend Pam to address this question of negativity. Pam's advice to Anne, and therefore Anne's advice to her students, is that one simply doesn't have the time to be negative. What makes this poignant is the fact that when Pam shared this wisdom she was dying. By using this illustration Anne continues to use her personal, sometimes deeply personal, life as foundational for writing.

Part 3, Section 5, Letters

Part 3, Section 5, Letters Summary and Analysis

Similar in theme to writing one inch or as a Polaroid from previous chapters, Anne suggests writing a letter. The letter should be from the character and detail an event, time or occurrence of the story. It can be addressed to someone familiar to the writer or from one character to another. The point Anne is making is to escape the confines of the story format.

Writing an assignment for a magazine helped Anne discover the power of letters as a writing technique. The topic is her lifelong devotion to the San Francisco Giants baseball team. Upon receiving the assignment, Anne immediately enters the well-documented neuroses and self doubt detailed from earlier chapters. Anne simply cannot think of anything to write so she decides to write a letter to her son Sam. As the letter unfolds, Anne discovers sights, sounds and smells from her own childhood experiences. Not only does she have a great letter for her son, but a wealth of detail she uses in her article.

Part 3, Section 6, Writers Block

Part 3, Section 6, Writers Block Summary and Analysis

At some point, every writer experiences writer's block. It can occur suddenly in the midst of a writing frenzy. Anne's insecurities emerge in describing writing block as the discovery that everything one has written is awful and worthless.

To overcome writers block, Anne suggests something simple: Writers need to write. A writer should write anything as long as it is at least 300 words. In this way one continues to engage the writing process everyday. Eventually something will unlock the block.

Anne reveals, to an even greater and more personal degree, the impact her friendship with Pam has on Anne's writing and life. This time Anne shares the memory without humor to temper the pain it reveals. Several months prior to her friend's death, Anne receives powerful advice from Pam's doctor. The outlook was worse than it ever had been for her friend. The doctors could do little more for Pam. "Watch her carefully right now," the doctor told Anne, "because she is teaching you how to live." Anne uses this when she can't think of anything to write about. The idea of living as if one is dying allows Anne to do what is important and therefore to become a greater observer of life. From these experiences and observations Anne can overcome writers block and, more importantly, always engage more fully in her own life.

It is the writer's experiences, memories and thoughts that are the source of truthful writing. Anne maintains there is enough within the writer to create the truthful story. If one will stay out of the way and allow the subconscious to retrieve the little and large moments, writers block or any writing challenge can be overcome.



Part 4, Publication and Other Reasons to Write, Section 1, Writing a Present

Part 4, Publication and Other Reasons to Write, Section 1, Writing a Present Summary and Analysis

In earlier chapters Anne documents the importance of publication, and the perceived approval, fame and fortune that accompanies it, as the main motivation for students to write. While publishing is important, Anne spends the greatest part of the book providing reasons and methods demonstrating the power and reward of telling a story truthfully. The reward is in the work, the diligence, in the act of writing itself. In this section Anne delves into the reasons why she writes her first two novels.

Anne's first book is a detailed account of her father's battle with brain cancer. She begins the book by describing her childhood. After setting the tone, the story turns with her father's diagnosis. The subsequent treatment of and life with such a devastating disease comprise the bulk of the book. Prior to his death, Anne's father reads the story. He pumps his fist in the air, as he cannot speak, in a Black Panther salute to his daughters amazing work. This story becomes Anne's present to her father.

The present to her father is only one of the motivations for the book. The second is there just weren't any funny books about cancer. Laughter and joy were so much a part of Anne's experience with her father and is credited with helping them all survive. To tell the story truthfully, Anne must use humor.

Unfortunately, it is another tragedy that inspired Anne's second novel. It surrounds the life and death of her friend Pam. Anne draws again upon personal experiences with Pam as a basis for her work. The novel is drawn from a journal Anne writes for her son Sam. As Pam is a central figure in Anne's mothering of Sam, it was a natural progression to chronicle their lives as mothers in the novel.

Anne's next work isn't published, but is read on the radio. In the three-minute-long essay, Anne shares the truths she and her son Sam learn from baby Brice. Brice was the child of a friend of Anne's family. The essay was written in the five short months in which Brice lived. In that time Sam was present, even at the time of Brice's death. After the funeral Anne takes Sam bowling. It is what he wanted to do.

Anne closes this section by writing how these works were presents to the people she loved. "I wrote for them as carefully and soulfully as I could—which is, needless to say, how I wish I could write all the time" (page 194). In this quote and in this chapter Anne provides the clearest connection between her life and writing.



Part 4, Section 2, Finding Your Voice

Part 4, Section 2, Finding Your Voice Summary and Analysis

Remaining truthful, a recurrent theme in Anne's approach to writing, entails writing in one's own voice. Writing in another's voice removes the author and the reader from the experiences. It lends a lack of authenticity or falsity to the story. It is the truth that is the central core of any story.

Anne explores answers to the question, "Where does the central truth come from for a writer?" Beneath the surface of any story on any topic lies a deeper truth. Anne likens it to "exposing the unexposed" with "liberation and joy." This deeper truth is how a writer views the world and what their experience shows them to be true.

Part 4, Section 3, Giving

Part 4, Section 3, Giving Summary and Analysis

Anne likens the giving of one's self to writing as that of parenting a young child. She herself is a mother and often draws upon experiences with her son Sam. At times words will elude the writer much like a child running just out of reach. Other tender moments, such as toddler touching a mother's face, also happen when writing from a very personal experience.

Nearly everyone Anne is in contact with reminds her of patients awaiting treatment in an emergency room. With disconnected lives and emotional wounds, Anne believes people can use writing to soothe and heal. Writing has certainly accomplished this for Anne. This healing and greater purpose is one reason Anne finds to continue giving through writing.

A second reason Anne continues to give herself in writing is an opportunity to return the gift. This relates to Anne's deep love of reading. She writes to give back more books for all the amazing works Anne reads over her lifetime.

The final point relating to giving involves innocence. Writers must delve into their deepest and sometimes darkest secrets. They must also retain the innocent ideal for some purpose to emerge from all the often-painful exploration. She illustrates this point with a story of a little boy helping to save his sister by potentially dying himself.

Part 4, Section 4, Publication

Part 4, Section 4, Publication Summary and Analysis

Publication is the primary reason most of Anne students want to write. They believe it will redeem all the hard work and rejection they must endure in the process to be published. Anne tries to get her students to realize the publishing process is truly mundane and unremarkable.

In her own experience with publication, Anne shares her ever-present neuroses. They emerge just as she sends in her first draft. While waiting for a response, she imagines all manner of rejection and ridicule, which never occur. Once her manuscript is accepted for publication, Anne then engages in the confidence-sapping process of revisions. When the galleys, or first type set version of the book, arrives so do the pre-reviews. All of this angst precedes the magic publication day on which nothing special really happens.

Eventually, even successfully published writers have to again face down another blank page. Writers must again give themselves to the hard work of writing. Only this time, Anne hopes, the author will realize the prize is in the writing itself. There is, however, some residual satisfaction of the affirmation of publishing. This can carry the writer through challenges and writing blocks. It can also block out certain programs on the KFKD radio.

Even Anne succumbs to the lure of believing publication ascribes the writer a certain type of prestige. She shares a humiliating experience at a clothing store in which an employee, upon finding out she is an author, promptly announces Anne has never written anything anyone has read—or at least anyone working in that particular clothing store. To soothe her wounded ego, Anne seeks solace from her son's school's pastor. He emphasizes real peace resides in one's heart. The heart, he notes, is the one place from which the world cannot steal peace.



Part 4, Section 5, The Last Class

Part 4, Section 5, The Last Class Summary and Analysis

Even after sharing so much of herself and her wisdom with her students, and the readers, Anne is overwhelmed by how much more there is to share. A central point, which Anne reiterates from an earlier part of the book, is to return to childhood. "Write about that time in your life when you were intensely interested in the world," Anne advises on page 225, "when your powers of observation were at their most acute, when you felt things so deeply."

Anne goes on to address another central idea: Write the truth even if it is rooted in revenge. The truth is important as it is the reality of one's experience. Vengeance entails a depth of experience from which a writer can mine rich detail. She wants to be careful and to avoid libel. However, Anne advocates using the emotions behind the vengeance to sort out and to heal from the experience.

The dichotomy of freedom for the soul by engaging in the discipline of writing is one of Anne's final lessons. It is the freedom to observe, to explore and then to comment on what is seen and experienced. It is also, conversely, the discipline of writing everyday. This freedom and discipline leads to, in Anne's view, a healing of wounds of the past purged onto the page.

Writing can also be the mirror society examines itself in. It is also a gift to one's self, one's family and perhaps the world. She likens writing to lighthouses guiding ships home. Writing, Anne shares, is how writers bring themselves home. On page 237 in the last sentence of the book Anne writes, "It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship." Writing truthfully is singing on a page.



Characters

Anne's Father

Pammy

Sam

Writing Students

C.S. Lewis

Arthur

Wendell Berry

Nurse Ratched

Natalie Goldberg

Anne's Editor



Objects/Places

Books

Books are the first and most important object. For Anne they formed her love of writing and fed her obsession with writing and writing well. They are also one of the gifts she gives back to through her own writing.

Index Cards

Index cards are important objects to Anne. She uses them to record moments, ideas and details. The information on the cards is the material from which she is able to write.

One Inch Picture Fram

A one-inch picture frame illustrates several of Anne's writing techniques. The one-inch picture frame is the best example of short assignments and focusing on one detail in the Polaroid picture.

Writing Desk

The writing desk is the area in which the writer commits to engaging in the daily grind. There are several places where the writing desk is important to Anne and the story. The first is where her father wrote. It is at this spot that Anne observed the hard work and engaged in her first experiences with writing and reading. Anne's writing desk also is the setting in which she shares her most of the writing angst and process.

Catcher In the Rye

This is the first book Anne read where she discovered a voice speaking through the pages. It was if someone finally spoke of her and her experience. Through this book she was able to begin to understand how she herself could be a writer.

The Movie "Chariots of Fire"

This movie is the first Anne uses to describe the giftedness of writing within all those driven to write. She compares the runners God given abilities to run fast with a writer's ability to write well.



Anne's House

In Anne's house, often alluded to in the writing as cluttered, she both captures the experiences and does the bulk of her writing. It is in her house that she spreads out a mammoth manuscript and is able to put it in a better semblance of plot in preparation for another sparring match with her editor.

A Friend's House

Anne stays with friends in Cambridge to sort out the plot treatment her editor is requiring for her latest work. It is by removing herself from the life she so focuses on in her writing that allows her the freedom to work on the new work. She is able to myopically focus only on the 500-1000 words per chapter. Anne is also able to stay there for free, which is good as the rest of her book advance is contingent on the plot treatment.

Alcohol and Drugs

Though Anne becomes and remains sober, alcohol and drugs are part of her coping with the rejection inherent in the publishing process. True to Anne's socially conscious upbringing, she describes the drinking as social. However, she makes sure to share there were hundreds of social drinks and the small bit of cocaine. "...at one point, I resembled an anteater" (p. 90).

A Ship

To end the work, and sum up all the wit and wisdom shared in the previous chapters, Anne chooses to use a ship. All people are on the ship, a metaphor for life, together. Writing is the song sung during a storm raging around the ship.



Themes

Interconnectedness of Writing and Life

Life, and its accompanying experiences, is the subject for writing. These life experiences can be first hand to the writer. It can also be second hand from doing research with others who have the first hand experience. Writing is the way to sort out the meaning and effects of life. It can also make life better by healing wounds and providing insight.

For Anne this theme is demonstrated by her constant reliance on personal experiences to underscore her conclusions about writing. Anne's writing process is impacted by the lives and deaths of some of those closest to her. Their lives also provided the raw material from which she writes. In short, Anne's life is her writing. Her writing is reflective of her life.

The interconnectedness of writing and life is also demonstrated in her students' reasons for writing. They approach writing as a way of having their lives validated through publication. The students think publication will make everything better and provide a sense of security, both financial and emotional, that they lack in reality. Valuing their life experiences is part of connecting it to the students' writing.

The Nature and Meaning of Truth

Truth is found in the telling and the subject matter of the written work. Anne is a strict adherent to the truth even when it is painful. She learns how to write the truth, no matter the consequence, from her father. He chooses to write an article unveiling the true ugliness of the community in which they lived. While it brought a margin of criticism, it also showed Anne the power of truth. She watched as people came up to her father in the street and thanked him for being brave enough to write what everyone was thinking.

The truth extends into Anne's writing of her father's illness and death. In reality it was difficult and painful, both physically and emotionally. It was also a very real time of joy and laughter. Both were true of her experiences. Anne included both in her book about that period of time.

Motherhood is a joyous privilege. Too often Anne reads books in which motherhood is depicted as a mythical goodness where if one did the right thing it would all work out. She knew, as did her fellow mother Pam, that while there is goodness more often than not there is no 'right thing.' Anne's life was that of a single mother. At the time she wrote the book, there was little available to provide support for mothers like Anne. The truth was needed.



This commitment to truth does not mean a license to be destructive. Anne exhorts her students to take the truth of the experience and disguise it a little. The underlying voice, point of view and emotion are the same. The hairdo and the speech pattern is different.

The truthful telling of a story extends beyond the words on the page. Anne views the truth of a story to be one that emanates from a person's passions and fundamental core values. She relates this to establishing a voice. The voice gives its expressions of truth through the written word.

Writing also affords the author an opportunity to find truth within a situation. Finding the truth is discovering the character really doesn't love his wife, or wants to become a chef. The truth can also be that the "wire thingy" at the top of the wine bottle is, in actuality, a wire hood. It can also go deeper within the writer. Anne found truths about life, death and motherhood in her first two books.

Value of the Writer as Person and the Writer's Perspective

For Anne this began when her father shared a John Glenn poem with her second grade teacher. He valued it enough to share it with someone outside the family. Anne, in turn, felt valued when adults and students alike admired the work. This experience was valuable enough to accomplish two things in Anne's life. The first caused Anne to begin to consider writing as her life's work. The second thing it accomplished was leaving a lasting impression on Anne. Though she is many years removed from second grade, she still included this experience in this book.

When Anne's students walk in they are focusing only on getting their great ideas published. They neither recognize nor embrace their lives as the basis for that great idea. The students do not value their own experiences as integral to telling a story truthfully. Anne gently leads them to value their own experiences. She starts them with writing about very simple topics focused inwardly: Their childhood, their memories, their experiences are teased out through little assignments cloaked in humor. The school lunch assignment is a good example.

Anne also pushes her students to value the process of writing. She does this by reinforcing the little efforts. If a student can just stay committed to writing at least 300 words a day, they will learn to value the process. Anne reminds them, as they are drowning in the sheer enormity of the task at hand, that they are not alone and every writer, both great and small, has to work this way. The students are asked to think of the books that impacted their lives. For Anne *Catcher in the Rye* was the first to show her how writing can connect people. For the students they learn to value the work of their favorite authors in the same way.



Style

Perspective

Anne Lamott's perspective was shaped by her upbringing in a literary centered household. She was surrounded by books and writing was revered. From an early age she was encouraged to read and write. This led to writing emerging as a tool for how Anne both experienced and examined her life. Her perspective was also shaped from the tragic and deeply personal experiences with her father, her best friend and her son. Anne became not only a reader but a writer as well. She became a writer seeking to tell a story truthfully.

The culmination of these experiences creates for Anne camaraderie with her students. She is first and foremost a reader and consumer of books and then a writer. Anne is a fellow student of books and the process of writing. In this way she can bring her expertise as a published author from a perspective of one who has been there, done that and continues to be there.

Anne writes this book, notes on an index card, letters, books and paragraphs to capture the moments of her life. Whether the moments are expressed through a character or in a memoir, for Anne the reason to write is to express life. She also writes to make sense of her experiences. In this way she can also help others make sense of their experiences. For Anne these experiences can be based in tragedy as with a terminal illness of a loved. Her experiences can also be based on a practical reality such as single parenting.

Humorous analysis of even the most personal and painful moments of life give her a perspective that is free from judgment. It makes Anne's unique take on life more approachable. Her students are able to relate as they too have been neurotic, lost, alone and with nothing to write. For the reader this wit and humor takes the edge off poignant and painful realizations. Some are not so painful, such as one has to write everyday. Other realizations, such as life is short and death could be tomorrow, are made more palatable to the reader by couching it in terms with a little laughter.

Tone

The tone of the book is completely subjective. Every word is about the key subject, which is Anne. Every word is directed towards the secondary subject—the students, who are also the reader.

The tone also is reflective of the content. When sharing the end of her friend Pammy's life, the tone becomes less witty than in previous sections. Anne does this to ensure the truth of that moment. It was a difficult and painful loss.



The affect of this tone on the reader is an almost immediate sense of sitting in Anne's class. However, one is not sitting alone. The idea is also clear that Anne is sitting in the seats as well. For the reader and the students she refers to, the lessons are from her. For Anne the lessons are from life and the students.

The writing process can be such a subjective idea to the reader. It can be at once prescriptive and more than a bit uninteresting. Through her use of humor and stream of consciousness writing Anne reminds the reader it doesn't have to be complicated. One gains a sense that a secret has been let out about the truth of writing. The truth is that writing is hard work and the work is as valuable as the end product.

The net effect of this tone of familiarity and collegiality is the reader accepts Anne's truth about writing. It affords a comfort level of credibility because someone who has started by staring at the blank page paid enough attention to tell the reader what to do next.

Structure

The structure of the book is a mix of flashbacks, direct instruction in writing and a collection of quotes from various authors. The chapters are arranged as if they were sessions of a writing class. Theoretically, the last chapter is what Anne shares in the last class.

Interrupting the potential monotony of a writing class on paper are smaller chapters or sections. These are something like Anne's neuroses put to paper. KFKD is a good example of this type of interruption. They are also used to illustrate the writing technique presented in the earlier chapter. At times these interrupting sections are small, self-contained commentaries about a particular event or experience. Anne uses this to write about Pam's last days and Brice's death. It is expected for these smaller pieces to distract or cause the reader to be confused. To the contrary, they are powerful supports to the other text. They also are a breathless moment of searing truth making the reader stop and pay attention.

The lessons in writing are often illustrated multiple times through multiple experiences. If the reader understands the main idea the first time these additional insights can become extraneous. However, they can also, if carefully considered, add a new dimension to the already existing framework of the writing lesson. The short chapter relating Brice's life and death is an example of a small assignment. The small assignment was a three-minute piece for the radio. However, the small assignment held within it a larger truth for Anne's son Sam. It also affords the reader an opportunity to recognize smaller assignments can extend beyond a short paragraph. They can be for a variety of purposes. The reader also can begin to understand small assignments are no less powerful than a full-length novel.



Quotes

"So I grew up around this man who sat at his desk in the study all day and wrote books and articles about the places and people he had seen and known." (Introduction, Page xii)

"All I ever wanted was to belong, to wear the hat of belonging." (Introduction, Page xvi)

"All my life I've felt that there was something magical about people who could get into other people's minds and skin, who could take people like me out of ourselves and then take us back into ourselves. And you know what? I still do." (Introduction, Page xxvii)

"The very first thing I tell my new students on the first day of a workshop is that good writing is about telling the truth." (Part 1, Section 1, Page 3)

"...we are going to concentrate on writing itself, on how to become a better writer, because, for one thing, becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and that is the real payoff." (Part 1, Section 1, Page 10)

"The first useful concept is the idea of short assignments...write down as much as I can see through a one-inch picture frame." (Part 1, Section 2, Pages 16-17)

"...and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'" (Part 1, Section 2, Page 19)

"The first draft is the child's draft." (Part 1, Section 3, Page 22)

"Over and over I feel as if my characters know who they are, and what happens to them, and where they have been and where they will go, and what they are capable of doing, but they need me to write it down for them because their handwriting is so bad." (Part 1, Section 8, Page 60-61)

"You can see the underlying essence only when you strip away the busyness, and then some surprising connections appear." (Part 1, Section 11, Page 84)

"Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor." (Part 1, Section 13, Page 93)

"To be engrossed by something outside ourselves is a powerful antidote for the rational mind, the mind that so frequently has its head up its own ass—seeing things in such a narrow and darkly narcissistic way that presents a colo-rectal theology, offering hope to no one." (Part 2, Section 1, Page 102)

"...a writer tries, I think, to be a part of the solution, to understand a little about life and to pass this on." (Part 2, Section 2, Page 107)



"You have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way." (Part 2, Section 3, Page 114)

"One of the things that happens when you give yourself permission to start writing is that you start thinking like a writer. You start seeing everything as material." (Part 3, Section 1, Page 136)

"I told him that the best possible thing was to shoot high and make mistakes, and that when he was old, or dying, he was almost certainly not going to say, "God! I am so glad I took so few risks! I'm so glad I kept shooting so low!" (Part 3, Section 4, Page 156)

"...it may strike you as a small miracle that you have someone in your life, whose taste you admire (after all, this person loves you and your work), who will tell you the truth and help you stay on the straight and narrow, or find your way back if you are lost." (Part 3, Section 5, Page 164)

"The letter's informality just might free you from the tyranny of perfectionism." (Part 3, Section 6, Page 172)

"There are few experiences as depressing as that anxious barren state known as writer's block, where you sit staring at your blank page like a cadaver, feeling your mind congeal, feeling your talent run down your leg and into your sock." (Part 3, Section 7, Page 176)

"Everything you need is in your head and memories, in all that your senses provide, in all that you've seen and thought and absorbed." (Part 3, Section 8, Page 181)

"And the truth of your experience can only come through your own voice. It is wrapped in someone else's voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else's clothes." (Part 4, Section 2, Page 199)

"But eventually (after publication) you have to sit down like every other writer and face the blank page." (Part 4, Section 4, Page 215)

"This is what separates artists from ordinary people: the belief, deep in our hearts, that if we build our sand castles well enough, somehow the ocean won't wash them away. I think this is a wonderful person to be." (Part 4, Page 231)

Topics for Discussion

Who were the significant people in Anne's life, what were her experiences with each and how did they shape her writing theory?

Truth in writing. What is it and how does one know it is true?

Anne titles this book based on a small experience with her brother and father. What is the experience and why did she choose to title the book from it?

What role can humor play in helping the reader and the writer? How does Anne use humor? Is it appropriate under the circumstances?

What is the real payoff for writing?

Are there any aspects of writing Anne missed?

Can anyone write? What makes a writer worth reading?