



Writing to Change the World

Mary Pipher

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In these tumultuous times, don't we all want to be heard? Who doesn't want to transform the world? And who doesn't harbor a secret ambition to write? *Writing to Change the World* is intended to help people who have a message they're passionate about to convey it clearly through writing. Inspired by a course of the same name that Mary Pipher taught at the University of Nebraska's National Summer Writers' Conference, this book encapsulates her years of experience as a writer and therapist, as well as her extensive knowledge of the craft of writing.

Writing to Change the World combines practical instruction with inspirational commentary, featuring personal anecdotes, memorable quotations from other writers, practical how-to advice, and stories about writers who have transformed society through their work. In addition to laying out the various steps of the writing process-brainstorming, writing, revising, and publishing-Pipher gives advice about specific forms of advocacy writing: op-ed pieces, letters, essays, speeches, and blogs. She inspires readers to take up their pens, while reflecting on the writer's responsibilities as a moral agent. This is a book that really can make a difference!

Writing to Change the World Details

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Mary Guthrie says

My creative writing teacher assigned my class to read a "developing style" book this semester and gave us a list to pick from. Dr. Pipher's book was on that list. It immediately appealed to the anime fanatic in me with its grand title, reminding me of "Death Note" (although what Yagami Raito wrote changed the world in an entirely different way). I had also recently written an essay to apply for a scholarship; in it, I explained what I hoped to accomplish from writing. I ended the essay with these sentences: "I might not be able to reach the entire population with my writing nor reach anyone in my own time. But, if I were to help someone somewhere live a fuller life, I feel my own life would be complete." So, to see a book that would explain to me just how to do this... the choice was obvious.

I have not a single criticism for Dr. Pipher's work. It was both humbling and encouraging, instructive and explorative, loving and critical. She linked her advice to her own life and the experiences of others, showing that all great change writers start somewhere. I couldn't help but think, when she described her own doubts about writing, "That's me. She's talking about me." This gave me so much hope for the future of my writing career. It dismantled my idea that only best-sellers are important; I don't have to kill myself striving to be at that level. I should not be the most important part of my writing. I just have to write about something important.

Her book was wonderfully fresh. It incorporated many of the issues of today, from global warming to same-sex marriages, 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina, too much TV in the lives of children to the moral state of the USA. Although she criticized the prevalence of technology in our world today, she never ceased her hopeful words and wrote a chapter about how internet bloggers can incite change. To every dark, Dr. Pipher proved that there is a light.

I'm almost happy to say that I had a hard time staying put and reading this. I kept becoming distracted because I was that encouraged to grab my laptop and start writing.

I would also like to thank Dr. Pipher for the quotes in her book and the recommended reading she included at the back. I was glad to see where her ideas came from and hope that I can too read these authors that have changed the world.

This book has surely changed the way that I view myself, others, and my writing. I have been writing so many dark and meaningless poems and stories lately that I forgot what humans really need to keep living, to keep fighting for a better future. Love. Hope. Connection. By reading this, I have been given something to strive for and a way to strive for it.

Whether you are a fledgling writer like myself or a well-seasoned one, I'm sure it will always be good to be reminded of those three values. This book is dog-eared, highlighted, and going on my shelf to be devoured again every time I fall into a writing slump and lose my light.

Sarah says

I lost enthusiasm for reading this one about half way through. A bit preachy.

Kelly says

This book was an impulse buy at my local bookstore, and I'm so glad I own it because I plan to read it again one day. One of my main motivations for writing is summed up by this quip: Books change people, people change the world. So I really enjoyed looking at writing from that point of view throughout this book.

Here are a few of my favorite parts of the book:

- * Whereas writers of propaganda encourage readers to accept certain answers, writers who want to transform their readers encourage the asking of questions. Propaganda invites passive agreement; change writing invites original thought, openheartedness, and engagement.
- * In the upside-down world of America today, our culture's dysfunctional message is that healthy people accept the world as it is. We are taught that problems are pervasive and insolvable, and that we are powerless. Also, we hear that only radical nuts or quixotic fuzzybrains work for social or political change. Yet powerlessness produces despair in people and stagnation in cultures. Throughout history, it has been the strong people who have endeavored to make their communities better. Healthy people act.
- * Compassion and acceptance, especially self-forgiveness, open up thinking and allow for growth.
- * We are more likable narrators if we present ourselves as curious students rather than as smug experts. Humility is appealing.
- * Only by facing our own grief fully can we do the work necessary to alleviate the world's grief.

Loree Burns says

I found WRITING TO CHANGE THE WORLD at my local bookstore last year and couldn't resist the flap copy: "[this:] is a book that will shake up your beliefs, expand your mind, and possibly even inspire you to make your own mark on the world." Seemed to me a rather tall order for a single book. I'm happy to report that Mary Pipher delivered with quiet style.

Early on, as an example of activist writing, Pipher shared an article she wrote for the September 2004 issue of Psychotherapy Networker. It is a clinical assessment of a fictional patient by the name of Mr. United States of America. One particular line resonated with me and qualifies as having shaken up my beliefs. That line? "[Mr USA:] crafted a Bill of Rights, but no corresponding Bill of Responsibilities." Woah.

Later, Pipher challenged nonfiction writers to think bigger. Don't simply share the conventional wisdom in new ways, she says, but instead, rethink the wisdom based on your research, your knowledge, and your experience. As an example, Pipher talked about the hard work of crafting her bestselling Reviving Ophelia: "I slashed and burned through my manuscript, crossing out every 'Based on the previous information, we could tentatively conclude for certain populations ...' and instead wrote, 'We live in a girl-poisoning culture.' This section of the book forced me to think hard about taking a stand in my own work; it is safe to say my mind has been expanded.

As for inspiration, I found it throughout the book, but most especially in these lines: "In a sense, all people

are riding a rickety boat across dangerous seas. I like to think of writers as the steady ones saying, 'Breath deeply, stay steady, we will make it if we help one another.'"

I'm glad I have this one in my library, and I'd recommend it to nonfiction writers, both beginning and practicing, who want to think harder about how their words mark the world.

Liva says

This book for me personally wasn't too interesting. It might be a good read for those who have no education in linguistics or other related fields and no knowledge on basic human psychology. Since I've studied those subjects and read many books, unfortunately I didn't find anything new to take away from this book. I also felt the author's writing style is too touchy-feely, and it seems that she is trying too hard. However, I did get something out of "Writing to Change the World" - some inspiration to write more. It made me remember that I actually can write quite well and miss it.

And thanks for this quote: "Get mad, yes - there's plenty to be mad about. Then get organized and get busy. This is the fight of our lives."

Erik says

For a such a gifted writer, Mary Pipher's title sure is trite. I initially bought this book for its high recommendations from the critics circle, and for being a cheapie remainder through Amazon. Luckily, within a few chapters, I was relieved to discover that you can't always just a book by its cover title. Some people don't like "touchy-feely" how-to books -- and I'm certainly one of them -- yet Pipher effortlessly transcends this tired genre by delving deep into the essential human need to understand and communicate both our hopes and fears about the world in which we live.

Rather than travel well-trodden ground of style and usage -- a la Struck or White -- the best of Pipher's chapters deal with the often-ignored issue of rhetoric; that is, how best to appeal to your audience in either speech, letter, or essay. (Her chapters in the last section "Calls to Action" is proof positive that she saved the best for last.) By the close of its 226 pages, more genuine and powerful advice about our need to write has never been spoken.

Joe Bell says

The seemingly over-ambitious title put me off at first.

But.

I was pleasantly surprised to find how humble the voice was in Pipher's book. It's very unassuming and quiet in how it tells us that it's possible to change the world without writing a best-seller, without being Dan Brown. Which is nice. Given that many of us aspiring writers see those twenty or thirty big names and are totally and completely intimidated by them. Thinking we'll never be there. Etc.

It was a little too light for me, though. A bit too much about the up up up and not enough about its relationship with the down down down, if you catch my drift. Because, while writing is a positive thing, sure, it's also a terrible thing. We're exposing our soul to the light, yes, but also to the rain, and the steel, and the thunder of the world.

It helped me, for sure. It showed me that it's possible to be important as a writer, yes.

But it kind of annoyed me all the way throughout, too.

Amanda says

I bought a copy of this book when I was approaching a daunting writing project. Having read Pipher's "Reviving Ophelia", I knew she would have something profound to share. I was right, and instead of trying to sum it up myself, I will use her words:

'With connection comes responsibility...Writers help readers construct larger, more expansive frames of reference so that more of the world can be more accurately perceived...Our goal as writers is to convey to readers the greatest meaning with the most precise images and the fewest words.'

Sound easy enough?

Nausheena says

has given me plenty of ideas to write and I've written a few pieces now because of it.

Julie Christine says

Very lovely, like the embrace of a trusted friend. There is a lot of gentle, beginning-writer guidance and I was expecting more of a call to action, more examples of change-specific writing; perhaps less instructional and more motivational. But, there are beautiful words of encouragement and inspiration. A reference to return to when it seems change is too hard to come by.

Aaron says

This book is indeed a good book, but its not necessarily a book for me. The analogies she includes are really great, and her overall explanation as to why we need to write is profound, but i already had a certain grasp as to why i need to write, this just added more to that grasp i had. That is why i liked it, it further improved my thoughts of writing, and encouraged me to write more often than what i actually do.

Jodi says

I first read this book nine years ago, and it resonated. I chose this book to read this past semester with several of my high school students, and this time I found it dated and irrelevant, especially when reading through the lens of today's teen.

Gail says

Mixed feelings about this book. There are chapters - primarily in the beginning and at the end -- that were inspiring and helpful. As a novice writer, I was looking for concrete guidance on how to construct non-fiction writing that was in support of change. Too much was so general that it was meaningless. Some examples she used were mediocre at best. She didn't use concrete examples to illustrate technique. And her own point of view as a therapist, really limited her ability to guide someone who doesn't share her touchy-feely approach to things. She sees writing as a form of therapy which is very distant and disengaged.

I was disappointed in this book. I forced myself to finish, hoping for some gems along the way. They were few and far between.

Rebekah Choat says

All the readers and writers I know agree that words are powerful tools, and that they can, indeed, bring about great changes in individual lives, communities, and entire cultures. However, wielding words effectively is a skill that even those with a natural gift for writing may fine-tune and improve with guidance and feedback from their peers.

Writer/therapist/activist Mary Pipher offers clear and practical advice for discerning appropriate forms and tones of writing to convey information, communicate ideas, and convince readers of the truth and importance of the issues being discussed. She shares insights from her broad range of personal experience, from counseling troubled adolescent girls, to working to preserve an unspoiled prairie, to helping immigrants adapt to American life; giving examples of techniques that achieved their goals, as well as approaches that failed. She also addresses adapting written words to effective speeches, the particular power of poetry and music, and the potential ramifications – both positive and negative – of instant electronic self-publication.

While some of Pipher's tips are geared specifically toward writing as an activist, most are applicable to most types of writing, and seasoned professionals as well as novices may find something of value to glean from this book.

Meghan says

I was absolutely amazed with this book. It is actually one of the best books I have written on writing. She is very passionate about the subject and gives you lots of information. I fully recommend this to any person who wants to write and carries around a soapbox in their purse/on their person. (That's my thing - I have a

soapbox and I'm not afraid to pull it out and use it haha.)

Towards the end of the book, she says the following (I think it speaks volumes):

"The finest thing we can do in life is to grow a soul and then use it in the service of humankind. Writers foster the growth of readers' souls, and the best soil for growth is love. Writing can be love made visible. In the end, one of our best ways to truly change readers is to love them. We can create a world in which those who know teach those who wish to learn. We writers may not live to see the changes that we work for, but readers will enjoy the shade of the trees we have planted."
