

COURSE REVIEW

Reading for Writers 2009 with Sarah Myles

'A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.' Franz Kafka

Plenty of books will tell you how to read. And there are plenty of book clubs around. But this reading course was different – it dragged writers away from their keyboards and flung them into the world of readers.

Recent research shows that reading occupies a discrete part of the brain, totally separate from writing. So I decided to do this eight-session course, meeting monthly, to link the two. I wanted to attune my ear to the nuances of language, as well as dissect the techniques that other authors use.

The course focused on one aspect of writing each month – starting with reading and going on to words, sentences and paragraphs, narrative, character, point of view, dialogue and finally, detail, in a festive last session at the new VWC home. Tutor Sarah Myles, an insatiable reader herself, provided a reading list relevant to each topic. With 100 titles – ranging across 250 years, from Voltaire to Galgut, Shelly to Schlink – and recommendations added by participants each month, we took in an enormous range of styles and viewpoints. Reading our own selections aloud reinforced the rhythm of each work.

'I don't want it to stop!' one participant cried on the last day. The course had become a thread that linked the months, helping participants to develop their writing in weaker areas and open up the creative process. (I attribute a competition shortlisting to course-inspired review.) Participants remained later each month as discussion grew shoots then blossomed while winter changed to spring.

During the year we learned to slow down, to read with conscious attentiveness. We discussed how different writers navigate a practice for which there is no template. Reading is indeed the best writing course – we learned where to look for the nuts and bolts of writing and took away some tools to fine-tune the mechanism of our own work.

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