

Starting hints from the creative greats

Creative people are often like great chefs – temperamental, undisciplined, spontaneous, surrounded by chaos – but out of it all comes a magnificent meal. The problem is, how to keep the standard of cuisine high when there is so much pressure to do so. Are there any techniques to motivate, provoke, or inspire the creative juices to flow? Can a creative person be switched on like a light?

I did a little research to find if there was a key to trigger creativity. Let's take a trip through history to discover how some great creative minds got their creative engines to start running. "Applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair" is the first rule for writers. The problem is many writers find this simple task very hard to do. Victor Hugo probably went to the most extreme lengths to focus on his work; he gave all his clothes to his servant with orders that they be returned only after he had finished his day's work.

Confinement, voluntary or otherwise, is essential to the act of creation. Throughout history solitude has been a great aid to productivity for many writers. (It's perhaps another insight into the darker side of the creative nature that many writers have found themselves working in rather dubious accommodation.) Miguel de Cervantes began writing *Don Quixote* in the royal prison in Seville. John Cleland wrote the notoriously bawdy *Fanny Hill* while in Newgate for debt. The £20 for which he sold it paid his debt and secured his release. Sir Walter Raleigh spent thirteen years as Her Majesty's guest in the Tower of London, where he wrote his *History of the World*. As everyone knows, Sir Walter lost his head before he could finish his ambitious project. The Marquis de Sade wrote most of his shocking literary output from his cell in the Bastille. These examples would seem to prove the point that the quality of the working environment is not as important a factor in inhibiting the flow of creative work as are all the diversions which exist outside the working environment.

The warming-up techniques of some writers are certainly strange. Ernest Hemingway had to sharpen a score of pencils before he stood up to write. (He wrote standing up after injuring his back in an aeroplane accident.) Lewis Carroll and Virginia Woolf also worked standing up. Three men who wrote in the nude were Benjamin Franklin, who owned the first bathtub in America and liked to write in it; French playwright Edmond Rostand, who worked in the bathtub so he wouldn't be interrupted by his many friends. Anyone who has seen the recent film *Trumbo* will know the screenwriter Dalton Trumbo wrote while taking a bath. James Whitcomb Riley had himself locked in hotel rooms nude so that he could write without being tempted to drink.

Drink is something that keeps recurring in the lives of many creative people. Alexander Pope enjoyed strong coffee, but not as much as Balzac who drank fifty cups a day – so much so that caffeine poisoning was one cause of his death. Bryon was partial to gin and water. Dylan Thomas drank anything he could get his hands on; his last words were "I've had 18 straight whiskies.....I think that's the record." The German poet Schiller was turned on by the smell of apples which he kept in his desk drawer, though he also stimulated his brain with coffee mixed with champagne.

A sense of rivalry and competition can be another great incentive. Henrik Ibsen was motivated by a picture of August Strindberg that hung over his desk. Said Ibsen: "He is my mortal enemy and shall hang there and watch me while I write." Rivalry and criticism can, of course, be vitriolic and those who take criticism too much to heart be rendered incapable of working at all. For example, the critic who wrote in his review "the problem with this book is that the covers are too far apart" probably caused a poor fledgling author to give up forever. The cutting wit of Dorothy Parker was probably even worse: "this is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force." The

fact is that no creative person throughout history has been free from criticism, and it is very important for creative people to use criticism as a spur and not to be deflated by it.

The factors which stimulate the creative act are many and varied but the in the end you've just got to start working, even if it's the last thing on earth you feel like doing. As a poet once said, "I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork." Perhaps he should have tried taking a bath.