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A Review by Joyce Milambiling of Writing to Change the World, by Mary Pipher

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Mary Pipher, *Writing to Change the World*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2006

Reviewed by Joyce Milambiling

“We have it in our power to begin the world again.”
Thomas Paine

You have probably heard someone start a comedy routine or conversation with “I’ve got good news and bad news—first, the good news.” This is a popular opening gambit since life can be good and bad almost simultaneously, or because we know that if we approach something from one side in the sunlight, there is likely to be another side in the shadows.

In *Writing to Change the World*, Mary Pipher starts with the bad news. The world is a mess. She describes how U.S. politics and corporations have contributed to the abysmal state of the world and that “our world needs leaders yet people everywhere feel helpless and lack direction” (p.3). However, Pipher does not simply place blame. She has learned from her own experience and that of others that people and situations can change, sometimes in very small ways but often on a grand scale. The good news, she tells us, is that writing, all kinds of it and by people from every walk of life, can contribute to social change. The idea of “writing to change the world” might be considered anywhere from self-evident to grandiose, but this book nonetheless succeeds in large part in fulfilling its purpose. It is written in a compelling style, is full of examples of good “change writing,” and is written from two of the author’s strengths, those of experienced psychotherapist and published author.

Pipher has written a number of non-fiction books and is probably best known for *Reviving Ophelia* about the perils facing adolescent girls in modern culture. *Writing to Change the World* is a departure from her other publications in that the present work does not focus on one social or psychological issue, but rather contains an account of her coming to age as a writer as well as ideas and practical suggestions for those who want to do this kind of writing. In addition to her own perspective on the subject, the author also includes an array of examples in the form of the actual words and stories of people she calls “change agents.”

Pipher says in the introduction that “this is not a book on how to write; rather, it’s a book on how to write in order to improve the world” (pp.13-14). Pipher’s contribution to the large number of books on the market that contain advice about writing is her focus on the purpose behind why some people write and why others should; namely, to make a contribution that only she or you or I can make because of who we are. The organization of the book is simple. It consists of three parts, each with five or six short chapters. In the first section, “What We Alone Can Say,” Pipher tells readers, convincingly in my opinion, that everyone has a potentially unique contribution to make as a writer and as an individual. She quotes Alex Haley who said that “Every death is like the burning of a library” (p. 41). Pipher encourages writers to find their own voices and gives examples of the steps she took to be a writer after the age of forty. By describing her own life and development and that of others who come from widely ranging places and circumstances, she is doing what she is telling others they should do in their own

writing—to put a face on a problem, a situation or an outstanding example and in that way make a connection with the reader. She shows how this works by introducing us to Mark Salzman, a teacher and writer who taught creative writing to violent offenders in a Los Angeles juvenile hall. Pipher describes the profound effect of Salzman’s writing on her own concept of young people whom she had previously categorized simply as “gang members.”

In addition to highlighting the published work of writers, Pipher devotes a good portion of the book to the process of writing. Headings of chapters throughout the entire book do not say: “Do this or do that,” but rather contain one or two words like “Original Thought,” “Research,” and “Orchestrating Moments.” She tells writers to “dive in,” join a writer’s group, and some other timeworn favorites, but she also includes some more original insights she has gained in both her work as writer and as therapist: “Epiphanies cannot be scheduled but they can be invited” (p. 101).

The final section of the book, entitled “Calls to Action,” is about the possibilities and practicalities of the kind of writing Pipher is advocating. Rather than being a string of imperatives (which someone might expect when being called to action), the author describes how she and others use various forms of writing such as letters, speeches, personal essays and blogs to connect with others and to engage in community building and/or social protest. Examples are given of a pair of blogs which have had a strong impact on the public’s perceptions of the situations of two Americans, one a soldier in Iraq and one a Hurricane Katrina survivor. In introducing readers to these particular authors and to the genre in which they write, Pipher shows rather than tells, a technique that is emphasized in the best writing classes.

While I found that featuring the words of other writers was a highlight of this book, Pipher’s extensive use of quotes set off in boxes at the beginnings of sections and chapters was often distracting. The title of the book comes from James Baldwin, and even though many of the short quotes are quite good and relevant to what is being discussed within the text, the sheer number of them is overwhelming. I am surprised that in the process of putting the book together that an editor didn’t say: “Yes, the quotes are all wonderful, but do we have to have so many of them?” Also, when you read this book and find a quote that you particularly like and expect to easily find the author and the work listed in the back of the book, you may be surprised to find that the authors and their works are arranged in different categories. For example, if you want to know where the Mickey Spillane quote on page 149 came from (“Nobody reads a book to get to the middle”) you can look through the different categories such as “Memoir and Biography” or “Fiction” and yet still not find where it previously appeared. That said, I found many books and authors in Pipher’s list that I will seek out in the future, and I did appreciate her categorizing them even though the system did not make it easy to find any particular title.

Writing to Change the World is an example of persuasive writing that encourages a certain kind, perhaps even the same kind, of persuasive writing. Lest this be thought of as a circular notion and therefore dismissed, I propose that you leaf through this book the next time you are in a real or virtual bookstore and try to resist its pull. Let me know if you can.

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