

Jo Ann Beard on the Writer's Life: Balancing Writing, Teaching, and Publishing—and What Really Matters

by Stephanie Anderson for *Coastlines*



Jo Ann Beard is author of the essay collection *The Boys of My Youth* and the novel *In Zanesville*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *Best American Essays*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of a Whiting Foundation Award and nonfiction fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. Beard also teaches creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

Coastlines: Most people balance several identities: worker of a particular job, son or daughter of particular people, member of a particular community, and so forth. I am interested in how you balance your identity as a writer and as a teacher of creative writing so that you feel good about the work you do in both roles. Do the roles of writer and teacher complement each other, or do they clash, or is it some combination of both?

Beard: I think they complement one another completely—the process of writing is the process of learning, especially in essay writing, which mostly is what I teach, and the process of teaching is the process of learning, as well. They are sort of the same, except you get paid for one and not the other (guess which one) and except that if you don't show up for one people get bent out of shape about it (guess which same one). The thing about teaching is that it can easily take the place of writing, but writing can't easily take the place of teaching. Speaking only for myself here: I have spent whole semesters not writing because of teaching and have spent whole semesters not writing while also not teaching. In those cases, I had to come up with other reasons for not writing, like staring out the window intently, and/or playing computer solitaire. If I had to choose identities, I would choose writer, not just because there are amazing things out my window—hawks, wearing their shaggy trousers, a black feral cat that goes by every once in a while with something squirming in its mouth—but because once I thought I might be dying, and I realized that the only regret I had were the books and essays I hadn't bothered to take out of my head and put on the page.

Coastlines: I don't think I need to ask if or why you enjoy writing (although feel free to answer that if you like), but what do you enjoy most about *teaching* writing? What do you enjoy least? What drew you to teaching, and what keeps you in the classroom?

Beard: What drew me to teaching was that it was a better job than what I was previously doing (office drone), and what I enjoy most about it is being able to think about and talk about literature with like-minded people. I enjoyed being an office drone, too—it's possible that I have the capacity to like whatever I'm doing—though it felt like daylong solitaire without the solitaire. Absorbing while you're doing it, but you don't push the "Play Again" button, they do. What I enjoy least about teaching is the, um, the paperwork.

Coastlines: It is often said that creative writing can't be taught. Whether this is true or not, most people can agree that writing is a difficult craft to teach. In broad terms, what is your philosophy of teaching creative writing? How do you help your students understand and create good work?

Beard: Oh, I do think creative writing can be taught. Or rather creative thinking can be taught, and how to develop insight can be taught, and how to access personal emotions that will lead to universal truths can be taught. It's what I teach, and it's what I continue to learn. One of the ways I do this in the classroom is to ask students to pay less attention to their own work and more attention to the work of others—whether outside writers or their peers—with the goal of understanding the human condition first and then applying that understanding to their own story and the characters who populate their story. Remember, I teach nonfiction, so those characters are real people who exist in three dimensions off the page, and therefore should exist in three dimensions on the page.

Coastlines: Writers often feel a strong pressure to publish, especially those seeking university positions. Some view this pressure as healthy motivation; others see it as an oppressive force. How do you feel about the pressure to publish?

Beard: I am in the oppressive force camp.

Coastlines: Do you think publishing is necessary for a writer to feel fulfilled or satisfied, to be a "real" writer? If you had never published anything after leaving your MFA program, do you imagine you might feel differently about yourself as a writer? What are the rewards of publishing for you?

Beard: For me, it was necessary to publish in order to feel satisfied. In the mid-90s I had a book manuscript that went round and round, down the spinning spiral of all the publishers, beginning with the appropriately named Random House, all the way down to the inappropriately named one at the bottom who offered me a \$250 advance and then reduced it to \$100 because the book had to be rewritten. When the manuscript finally came back to me, I gave up on writing and began focusing instead on my stapling job and my television watching. Eventually, it was published, which was utterly satisfying and rewarding, etc., but also uneasy because all those houses that had turned it down or wanted it rewritten suddenly were finding it acceptable as was. It's like when Toto draws back the drape and we see the wheezing conman at the controls. Doesn't inspire confidence.

Coastlines: For you, what are the differences between your writing life and your writing career, if there are differences? Is there any importance in valuing one over the other?

Beard: I'm not sure about writing life versus writing career, but I do know about writing versus real life. Writing is Oz, with yellow roads and emerald cities and horses that change color. Whereas real life is black and white and there are tornadoes. It's hard to say this, but even in this moment, sitting on a balcony in warm flowery Florida, overlooking the vast ocean, I value my writing over my life.