

the writer mom

When I was growing up and dreaming of becoming a writer, I was delighted to discover the trope of the aberrant artist. She was eccentric and free of desire for material things. She was considered socially unconscionable until she became famous, at which time she was thought of as deliciously scandalous. She dressed mostly in black. If she had children... Well, I never knew anything about a writer's children. Surely she would never have them. Or perhaps, if she did have them, they died of neglect, and the writer became even more hallowed for her sorrow.

Above all, a writer needed Experience. As a young person I didn't know what that Experience might be, only that it had a capital E. And of course, a writer suffered, as all writers must, tortured by the true and bleak vision of life as it really is, of which the rest of us live comfortably ignorant. I did my best to misspend my youth in pursuit of an Experience. But then, without meaning to, I grew up. I joined the ignorant blissful as I filled my home with babies. I wore maternity clothes. Occasionally I wore pink. I doubted my longed-for writing career would survive growing up and having babies and wearing pink maternity clothes.

In fact, all those babies were at least indirectly responsible for my writing career for so many utilitarian reasons. First of all, I added it up and I breastfed for a sum total of eight years. You can't do much while a baby is attached to your breast, but you can read. I read the very best books, sometimes aloud, to my baby, and this refined my palate for good literature. I read picture books aloud to my children every day – I added up the years I read aloud to my children each night without fail, and they total thirty-four years. Thirty-four years of reading aloud can train your ear for voice. Certainly it revealed to me the subversive nature and the subtle artistry of literature for young people. Mostly I learned that the Experience a writer needs can happen just as easily in the wee hours with a sick child as it can in a walk-up in Greenwich Village.

Becoming a mother taught me that making art is not an act of running away from life, but an act of running to – mostly to wonder and to discovery, and there's nothing like a child to show you how to do that. You can discover this in other ways – some of my best writer friends do not have children. But this was my way. Having children connected me to the world in a way I hadn't been before – and that connection is one of the important reasons that I write. Yes, sometimes in protest I put graffiti on the wall of the universe. But the universe lets me. The universe believes in freedom of graffiti. Marvellous. Extraordinary. These are the words more often said by the artist, not how meaningless it all is. Motherhood helped me learn that.