

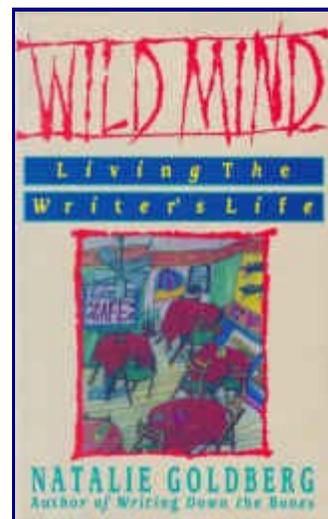
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Wild Mind
by
Natalie Goldberg

Living the Writer's Life
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Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



What happens if you discover you like an author? You want to read the rest of their books, some of which they will likely have written before the one you're currently reading. This happened to me with Natalie. I read [Writing Down the Bones](#) and many years later found [The Long Quiet Highway](#), [Thunder and Lightning](#), and now this one. "One book opens another" goes an old saying. Obviously Natalie has no problem coming up with creative and interesting titles for books about writing. Compare her titles to others in the genre: [The Writing Life](#), [The Practice of Writing](#), [The Writer's Trade](#), [The Writing Life](#), [Becoming a Writer](#), [If You Want to Write](#), and [One Writer's Beginnings](#). Only Margaret Atwood's [Negotiating with the Dead — A Writer on Writing](#) comes close to the ingenuity of Goldberg's titles.

Natalie has a *wild mind*. There — that disposes of the reason for the title in the manner she would use to say it. The Hemingway way. She has a wild mind. But Nat also focuses on *details*, so here's the opening of her Introduction.

[page xiii] Life is not orderly. No matter how we try to make life so, right in the middle of it we die, lose a leg, fall in love, drop a jar of applesauce. In summer, we work hard to make a tidy garden, bordered by pansies with rows or clumps of columbine, petunias, bleeding hearts. Then we find ourselves longing for the forest, where everything has the appearance of disorder; yet, we feel peaceful there.

A mustang is the name given to any particular horse that can't be broken, no matter what its breed. Mustang Natalie will always be wild. There isn't a corral that can hold her mind, her writing, or her energy. If you wish to be a writer and find yourself in some dull corral, hop on Mustang Natalie's back for a Wild Ride. Do the exercises she gives you at the end of a chapter. Notice how short her chapters are. One topic, one chapter. Long leisurely rides. Short rides. Wild bouncing bronco rides. Giddyap!

Want to know what a reader wants? Any author does. Few can say it as well as Cecil Dawkins does:

[page xvi] Cecil Dawkins, a fine Southern novelist, said to me in a slow drawl one afternoon after she'd read *Writing Down the Bones* when it first came out, "Why, Naa-da-lee, this book should be very successful. When you are done with it, you know the author better. That's all a reader really wants" — she nodded her head — "to know the author better. Even if it's a novel, they want to know the author better."

These words should give pause to any wannabee writer who tries to keep his reader from knowing him better through his writing. "What you hide, you advertise" is the prime directive in psychology and all other avenues of life. If you say, "I'm incongruent" suddenly you're not anymore. When you ride your own Mustang Mind, the reader will get to

know you better, because your Staid Critic gets thrown off head-first into the dust of the trail with the first Yippeekayah!

Once in a grocery, I saw an interesting incongruence on a Betty Crocker Cake Mix box. It said, "Be Creative! And here's how to do it!" We call people *creative* whose productions come out of *themselves*, not from instructions on a box, don't we? Well, there's no risk of putting that same [Be Spontaneous Paradox](#) on you, dear Reader, with Natalie's rules for "being creative" as a writer. She tells you to "keep writing" – with instructions anyone with a mind and an operable arm can manage.

[page 2 — 4] Go ahead, try these rules for tennis, hang gliding, driving a car, making a grilled cheese sandwich, disciplining a dog or a snake. Okay. They might not always work. They work for writing. Try them.

- 1. Keep your hand moving. Pick a time and once you begin, don't stop.**
- 2. Lose control. Say what you want to say.**
- 3. Be specific. Not car, but Cadillac. Not fruit, but apple.**
- 4. Don't think. Writing practice will help you contact first thoughts.**
- 5. Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar.**
- 6. You are free to write the worst junk in America.**
- 7. Go for the jugular. If something scares you, go for it.**

Do a writing practice for ten minutes, she suggested. Begin it with "I remember" and keep going. So I did. This is the result. Skip this next piece if you're rushed for time and spend the same amount of time writing your own "I remember." Print out this review and write on the back side of it. First my "I remember" and second my "I don't remember":

I remember Dale Boudreaux, the rich kid across from 566 Avenue F whose mom, Maude Boudreaux, ran an auto parts shop and whose grandfather, Paul Boudreaux, was usher at the Gordon Theater in Westwego. Dale got the greatest new toys. Once he got a space gun that shot smoke rings! That was neat! You put these special paper matches into it and when you pulled the trigger, it popped a diaphragm that blew out a perfect smoke ring everytime. We never got any expensive toys like Dale did. But he came over to play with us because we were fun. He got bored with his new toys and brought them over to the Matherne boys because he knew we would have fun with them, and so would he. Because of Dale Boudreaux we could learn what it was like to be rich and bored with a lot of toys — well actually we never got bored playing his new toys because we could never play as long as we wanted with his toys. We had the best of both worlds: we could be rich and not be bored.

I remember Westwego Elementary school. Lining up to start the school day. Fire drills in the halls. Recess under the oaks. Bullies wanting to fight. Marble games. Boxes from cigars with a hole cut in the top to barely admit a marble. Drop a marble from your waist and if it goes in, you win three marbles, else you lose your marble. From eye level, win five marbles. Many people won marbles this way, yet the kids with the cigar boxes always had a full box of marbles, and none of them looked new. I learned about gambling from those cigar boxes. If my dad had smoked cigars, I might have become a gambler. I learned to shoot marbles — sometimes I won, sometimes I lost. It was a skill, it was a gamble. One twig and a good shot goes awry and you lose. Other toys and games were around — each seemed to have it own season in the sun or shade. Suddenly one day no one showed up with marbles, but everyone had tops. Then it was yo-yos. Or kites. Or mumbly peg with knives. No one could afford to buy kites, not in my family. But with a knife, a few pieces of tapered weatherboard siding, string, flour and water (for paste), tissue paper, and rags for a tail, and pretty soon you were flying a one-of-a-kind kite that didn't exist the day before. All these raw materials were available, free, around my house. Except the string. We needed No. 50 Cotton thread, which my mom rarely ever used. Luckily the string was re-usable and lasted a long time if you were careful.

I don't remember anything about the kids around 566 Avenue F — except for snippets. I don't remember when I got chicken pox, but I remember it was torture for me to stay away from school — I went to the back fence and looked over at Wego Elementary with its redbrick walls with glass bricks bordering the windows. I wished I was in there learning things.

I don't remember when Dale's mother gave us the box of books. These were considered kid's books back in 1945. I wonder if they still are. Black Beauty, Robin Hood, Gulliver's Travels, Treasure Island, Little Women, etc. What makes Gulliver's Travels a kid's book anyway — all those weird names and people. Lilliput, Brodingnag, hey, I'm a kid! I thought. How can I read all that stuff with made-up names when I haven't learned about the real things of the world yet? So when I could choose my own books, I read about real people, like Thomas Edison, Wilbur Wright, Samuel Morse, and Dr. Doolittle. Okay, the good doctor wasn't real to you, but at seven-years-old, he was real to me.

That was my effort. How did yours go? Read yours now. Do you have a style? No? You don't think that you have a style? Oh, you do. Natalie says so. Write on.

[page 12 — 14] Style requires digesting who we are. It comes from the inside. . . . Hemingway said if a writer knows something, even if he doesn't write it, it is present in his work. . . . Nanao Sakaki, who translated Issa's kaiku, said, "Not gifted with genius but honestly holding his experience deep in his heart, he kept his simplicity and humanity." . . . don't worry about style. Be who you are, breathe fully, be alive, and don't forget to write.

In *Chapter 4 Structure*, Nat tells us how after eight years of trying to get *Bones* written, finally one day she flashed on the idea of short chapters. Some of her chapters in *Bones* fill only half a page. But it was a structure, and that structure, that phantom, acted as a hat rack upon which she could hang her long and her short creations.

When you ask for advice from a writer, you're liable to get it and take it. Luckily Annie Dillard didn't get this next advice (or take it) or else [An American Childhood](#) would still be only an idea in her mind.

**[page 19] After I finished *Writing Down the Bones*, I called my agent, Jonathon Lazear. "Okay, Jonathon, now I want to write my memoirs."
"You're too young to write your memoirs. Wait until you're sixty. Write a novel."**

Nat wrote "Banana Rose" — her novel. But first she had to find her *wild mind*. In New Mexico the sky was big — it represented to her *wild mind*. With her wild mind she wanted "to climb up that sky and put a one dot on it with a Magic Marker. See that dot? That dot is what Zen calls monkey mind or what western psychology calls part of conscious mind." What is monkey mind? It's efforting at doing something, but never doing it. It's talking about being a writer, but never writing. It's writing poems, and pointing to other poems in an anthology saying, "My poem is as good as that one, and they published *that* one!" It's orbiting the writing planet, but never landing.

[page 32] This is how it works: You've always wanted to be a writer, but instead you decide should become a health care worker. You go to school for four years. You get a degree in social work. You are at your first day of your new job, listening to an orientation, and you realize you really did want to be a writer. You quit your job, go to the library with a notebook, and begin page one when you decide it is too hard to be a writer. You want to open a café so writers can come in and sip the best *caffelatte* and write all afternoon. You open the café. You are serving *caffelatte* to all the writers in your town. It is a Tuesday. You look out at your customers and see they are writing and you are not. You want to write.

How does one ever reconcile wild mind with conscious mind? Distance does the trick. Distance for a writer is basically time. Allow three weeks or so to go by until you've forgotten what you wrote. Pick it and allow yourself to be pulled into the writing by the words, the sentences, the narrative drive. If it doesn't pull you, throw it away or re-write it. The distance allows conscious mind to appreciate the efforts of wild mind. When I first began writing, anytime I'd finish a piece, I'd read it right away. "Oh, that's horrible. Trite. Surely this is drek!" So, I'd stow the piece away and

later pick it up and read it, thinking, "Hmm, this is rather good. I like it. This is a keeper." Over time I learned to not judge any of my writing pieces until at least over night. Lately, just a couple of hours away from the piece is enough for me to get a flavor for the piece. But, remember this: I didn't start at a couple of hours — I started at a couple of weeks. That was the time in the beginning I needed for my monkey mind to stop shaking a cup of coins in front of my wild mind. However long it takes for you now, you'll know it because you will experience a wholeness when you take that time. You will learn how to appreciate your own writing.

[page 35] This is why I tell students, "You don't know what you wrote until a few weeks later when you have some distance." With that distance, conscious mind isn't so fearful of wild mind. Reading your work later is a chance for wild mind and conscious mind to meet. When the unconscious and the conscious self meet in this way, there is wholeness.

I've been a newspaper boy, a motor fuels tester, an athletic dorm tutor, a stable isotope separator, an offshore oil-well logger, a research associate, a computer programmer, a manager, a planner, a college teacher, a massage therapist, a psychotherapist, among other things. I moved from one job to another over time. But once I became a writer, I stopped changing jobs. Took me forty years to understand that I wanted to be a writer and I'm going to be writing as long as my fingers can tickle the keys. Nat said she was always meeting people who wanted to be a writer, even prestigious doctors and such. She wondered why they wanted to be a writer.

[page 44] Then I thought to myself, "You know, I've never met a writer who wanted to be anything else. They might bitch about something they're writing or about their poverty, but they never say they want to quit. They might stop for a few months, but those who have bitten down on the true root do not abandon it, and if they do abandon it they become crazy, drunk, or suicidal."

At one point, Nat and her writing group hit on doing their writing practice orally. Instead of committing words to paper, they simply spoke aloud for the same amount of time. It was freeing and wonderful and it only lasted a short time. Note how she describes speech as "the wind that makes its sound, is invisible, and then disappears." It is a metaphor for the life each and everyone of us lives — the essential parts of us are invisible, we make our sound, and then we disappear. Only our writings remain behind to survive destruction by the elements of the material world.

[page 64] I was very excited about it. Now it is two months later and I haven't done an oral writing since. I can't say why. It was terrific fun. I guess old habits like pen and paper, wanting to look over my work later, die hard. I'm not yet as good as the wind that makes its sound, is invisible, and then disappears.

Nat writes about the "writer's dilemma" — the process by which people fully competent in their chosen profession draw a complete blank when they think about becoming a writer. They have so many questions they need answered before they're ready to write. Terry, her running teacher was like that. She gave him the advice he would have given her if she'd come to him to ask if she could become a runner.

[page 26, 27] "Now, Terry, listen. You can answer the question yourself with what you know about running. Let's switch it around. I come to you. 'Terry, I want to be a runner so bad, but I know only a few can do it. I don't have it, do I?' What would you say?" He smiled. "You'd say, 'You have two legs, don't you?' "

He nodded. "I'd say, 'Just go run up that mountain.' "

"Well, to answer your original question, I'd say, 'You have an arm, don't you? Just move it across the page.' " I told him.

"Oh, my God," Terry let out a sound of delight. "Why didn't I ever think of that before? Of course, it makes sense. Now I feel foolish. There's a hundred questions I wanted to ask about writing, but then I think of running and I have the answer."

At one point Nat was hearing a voice telling her to quit her job and devote herself to her novel full-time. She kept working at her job instead. One day her friend Michael showed her a glass of straight whiskey and a glass of watered down whisky.

[page 118] "Which kind of novel do you want to write? Here." He pointed to the first glass. "You gotta write it straight whiskey. There is no other way."

Writing is a one-person job. Only one hand can hold the pen. Writing is something you do alone. To be a writer, one must learn to distinguish between being alone and being lonely. Katagiri Roshi knew this distinction and was able to help Nat make it when she told him, "Writing is *very* lonely."

[page 130] "Anything you do deeply is very lonely. There are many Zen students here, but the ones that are going deep are very lonely."

"Are you lonely?" I asked him.

"Of course," he answered. "But I do not let it toss me away. It is just loneliness."

Natalie has something that is really very important to tell you because you need to know it. Instead of telling you, I decided to demonstrate it to you in the previous sentence: Watch your use of the three words, *really*, *very*, and *because*. "Writers don't need to explain things. They need to state them." This is easy to forget *because* you were taught to write logically and such. Look at the two-sentence quote from Nat just above the penultimate sentence — they don't need a linking word -- their juxtaposition is enough to communicate the linkage. "Don't be bogged down in the need to explain. Just state it as it is and be fearless." I remember now that so much of what made me unsure of my writing was my fearlessness — writing in complete disregard for the way I had been trained. I had to unlearn my bad habits of good grammar and Eighth-Grade English, and even when I did, the strangeness of the result caused me to quake a bit until a week or two had passed and I could read my words with fresh eyes.

Eighth-grade English teachers taught me to use adverbs to modify adjectives and verbs and to write like this, "The boy was very timid." and "It is a very good story." What they didn't teach me was that it was more powerful to write, "The boy was timid." and "It is a good story." Natalie taught me that. She can teach you that if you will read her books.

This next poem was inspired by *Chapter 38 Because* and *Chapter 39 Very and Really*.

Just Because It's Really Very Unnecessary

Don't use *Because*

Why?

Because

it's unnecessary.

Why did I use it?

Because

it's necessary.

Why?

Just because.

Don't use *Very* .

Why?

Because

it's very unnecessary.

Like *Because*

is very unnecessary.

Why?

Just because.

Really?

Don't use *Really* either.

Don't tell me: it's really unnecessary, huh?

Really very unnecessary.

Natalie's dad inspired in her a love of horse racing or at least some of his own rubbed off on her, so that when she went to the horse races with Janet, she picked winners and Janet didn't. Janet asked her "How do you know this stuff?" Janet wanted to know how Nat could look down a list of names and trust some kind of energy to choose a winner. Nat said she didn't know, but it dawned on her.

[page 165] Then I realized: it was writing. I'd learned long ago, so long ago I'd forgotten I knew it, to trust those perceptions at the periphery of my mind. When we write, many avenues or directions open up in us and I have learned to go for the words that call me, that have a shivering possibility. It's not something I think about. I submerge myself in the pond of darkness and let the electrical animals of thought pass by. If we are awake, the whole world is shimmering and giving us guidance. I was awake at the race track because the horses' names were written down. I have trained myself in one area: To be awake to words.

Chapter 52 Detail takes us away from the abstract and the general into the specific. This is a recurrent theme of Nat's. Don't tell, describe. Not a plane, a Boeing 737. Not a strange feeling, a veil of gooseflesh all over. She and a writer friend have a discussion over how to build up to an abstract statement: make 37 statements of concrete details before an abstract statement. If you want to see the details in your life, it's writing or LSD.

[page 203] The effect of a lot of popular drugs, including Ecstasy, LSD, peyote, is merely to make you open to the moment. "Wow, look at that salt shaker." You reach across the table and pick it up and notice the granules, shake some on your hand and put them on your tongue. Well, writing, when you sink into it, does the same thing. Even if you're writing about thirty years ago, you are completely there. Detail does this for us. Think about it. Life is not abstract. It is not good or bad. It is. A girl is not pretty. Our mind makes that judgment. The girl has red lips, white teeth, freckles brushed across her nose, eyes that hint of lilacs, and she just lifted her right eyebrow. The reader steps away and says she is pretty. The writer just stays with the eyes, the lips, the chin, and makes no judgments.

A favorite writer of mine who uses the name [Dr. Ink](#) wrote recently about a ten-year-old girl at camp who never wore two of the same socks. You could call her unique, a little weird, different, confident, uninhibited, her own person – all of these abstract ways of talking fit Maddy. Or you could just describe her socks as Dr. Ink did: "I peeked under her work table and could, indeed, see something unusual. With her low sneakers, Maddy wore one white sock and one gray sock. Not only were the socks of different colors but also different textures, and each came up to a different height over her little ankles." Nat reminds us to not get lost in our abstractions and miss the "Maddy's socks" aspect of the person we're describing.

A lot of amazing stuff can happen with detail when the wild mind is handling the pen. This is an incredible example, one that beginning writers can dig into for many hours and mine diamonds from its depths.

[page 204, 205] A student in one class wrote: "My first beautiful boyfriend was missing three fingers and always smelled of baloney, because he lived above a butcher shop. My second boyfriend also smelled of baloney, but he did not live near a butcher shop." There's a mystery here. It is created by original detail. Put down what was — the butcher shop, and it holds what was not — no butcher shop and still the same smell. Something tells you about nothing. It is the power of juxtaposition of detail.

"Try this," Nat says, "Just sit where you are sitting. Look around and take four minutes to describe it. By description, I don't mean "There's a *lovely* doily on top of a *well-made* table." Those two italicized words are your opinion. Just give the original details." Okay, I was reading this while driving in my Geo Hatchback and I scribbled these words in the margins of the book on pages 206 and 207.

I'm in the middle of a Diesel Derby — surrounded by large menacing 18-wheelers and dump trucks. One dark blue semi with Golden Star Trucking Co. just passed me. Behind me are two 14-wheeler dump trucks, one with a red front and one with a white front. To my right on the passenger side door I see an Ozarka bottled water half full or half empty. Ozarka in large white letters on a red label with a yellow banner that says 'Natural Spring Water' — I wonder if there is any un-natural spring waters in bottles that I should watch out for. To my left front is a red badge-sized medallion glued to the dashboard that says: Member Sacred Heart Auto League. Christ Jesus has His left hand under His heart which is bounded with thorns and crowned with a glowing fire. His right hand is raised with two fingers in the air about eye-level. The sky outside is a pale, baby-blue and is full of snow bunnies standing at attention. On the road I pass a golden coated Lab, his head run over. Couldn't see his shiny white teeth.

"Verbs are the stars that light up the dark sky" Nat writes in her *Chapter 55 Verbs*. She shares with us a change of tense she suggested to a friend of hers. The difference in the two versions is dramatic. The first version is appropriate only if a reporting of thoughts she had about an event that didn't happen; the second if the event actually happened. This is a distinction that escapes beginning writers who will cling to an unnecessary and diluting *would* when a simple *was* is the stronger choice.

[page 214] Here is her first version: "Being with my father after my performance was not a way to care for myself. The talk *would be* about baseball games, his next visit to India, frequent-flyer miles on United. It *would be* as if the performance had never happened and I was not present."

I liked the original detail, but the two underlined verbs created condemnation and made me squirm. I suggested she change "would be" to "was," simple past. Look how it lightened the load for everyone: "Being with my father after my performance was not a way to care for myself. The talk *was* about baseball games, his next visit to India, frequent-flyer miles on United. It *was* as if the performance had never happened and I was not present."

I was intrigued by this passage because of an incident in a movie I saw last night called "Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her" in which Holly Hunter plays this Bank Manager who is inadvertently impregnated by a married man, Greg Hines. She mentions that she's going to have an abortion and he nods his head and then begins talking about unfinished business having to do with picking up some picture to be framed, etc. He gave no air-time to the decision she had just announced to him, skipping right to other topics. Like the father in the quote above. Like as if the abortion decision had never been announced.

What is a plot? That question has plagued me. I know if a novel has one, but how do I create one? Nat's friend, Mary, had some apt words on the subject. She told Nat that "there has to be at least one question that makes the reader turn the pages to find the answer." Nat asked Mary what the question was in *Banana Rose*. Mary said, "We want to know if Nell ends up with Gaugin."

[page 223] "You're kidding! So mundane? Whenever anyone asks me what the book is about, I always wax philosophical, tell them it's about the hippie years and after, about a generation." Mary laughed. "Nope. I want to know what happens to Nell and Gaugin. The background is the hippie years."

Later Nat asked her friend Pat and got this reply to "What is plot anyway?" A great question. One that Nat admits it took her "three and a half years to ask that essential question."

[page 223] "Well, E. M. Forster wrote that a story is: The king died, the queen died. A plot is: The king died, the queen died of grief."

So there you have it. Plot. A question to be answered as the chapters move forward. Details. Strong verbs. No *very*, no *really*, no *because*. If you have legs you can be a runner, if you have an arm you can be a writer. Run to the top of the mountain. Write where you are seated. Write often. Write when you are bored. Write when you are scared. Write bravely about things you don't want to write about. Write like Hemingway, who, after long sentences about the

weather in Spain and about when he was in the war in Constantinople, and then like a fast U-turn on a highway, with no warning and no switch of paragraph, he makes a simple comment: "Seeing the sunrise is a fine thing." (Page 191)

You want to write a novel so you have to fill yourself up with the characters and story and then empty it on the page. You become like a tankard in a pub that is filled with ale and then emptied by a customer.

[page 165] So there you have it. Empty at the beginning and empty at the end — the old story you learn over and over and over as a writer.

