

# Writing Fiction: Who are you?

Richard Hugo, in an essay titled 'In Defence of Creative Writing Classes,' recalls the most important lesson he ever learned, "perhaps the most important lesson one can teach. You are someone and you have a right to your life." He decries the way the world tells us in so many ways that "individual differences do not exist" and that "our lives are unimportant." He says, "A creative writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters." The same thing is true for the writer who sits alone at her desk.

## THE EXERCISE

If you can, get a notebook to use for just this exercise. Then, on a regular basis, perhaps at the beginning of your writing time or before you go to bed, write for ten to twenty minutes addressing each of the following subjects:

- List in detail all the places you have lived - one place per page. (This is a good way to begin because it gives the entire notebook a concrete grounding in time and place.) You might even want to get very specific, say, by recounting all the kitchens, or bedrooms.
- Next, recall if you were happy or unhappy in those places.
- Consider your parents' relationship, from their point of view.
- List important family members: brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins. Where were the dynamics of your family, including your extended family? (Some of these subjects may take several twenty-minute sessions. Leave space for the unfinished business.)
- List smells - indoor and outdoor - and the memories they conjure up.
- Do you have any recurring dreams or nightmares? Start a section for dreams.
- Ask yourself, what did I care about when I was five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, etc.? What do I care about now?
- What is your five-year plan?

These are the kind of questions that help you define who you are. Now make up questions of your own to answer in your notebook. In fact, making up questions to bring back the past, to explore the present, and to voice your hopes and expectations for the future is part of the fun of this exercise.

## THE OBJECTIVE

To lead an examined life. Your notebook will become a life-time companion and an invaluable source of material.

Source: *What If?* by Anne Bernays & Pamela Painter