

Mary Jane Black
Text Interview Questions

Tell us about your writing process.

I would like to say I wake up at dawn each day and write, but I don't. I'm one of those writers who spends a lot of time thinking about an idea I have for an essay or a short story or even a scene in a book. I have a writer friend who's an avid swimmer. She says her best books are written in her head while she's swimming. Of course, I have a notebook and a big white board on my wall by my desk. During all of this thinking and planning, I'm making notes and drawing a narrative arc of scenes for the writing piece I have in mind. Although I have to say, not all of my ideas make it to this planning stage. Some stay scrawled on an index card and never become anything more.

Does writing energize or exhaust you?

I'd have to say it energizes me or at least makes me feel as if I've accomplished something important. Now I'm the queen of procrastination, and I can spend a lot of time putting off writing, but when I sit down and write a draft, even a terrible first draft, I feel like I've earned a prize. Actually Natalie Goldberg once told me that she treats herself with wine or chocolate if she writes for a set period of time. She advised me never to try to write for hours without a break since that is never productive. Now I write for ninety minutes, and then I stop and enjoy coffee and chocolate before going back to writing.

What motivated you to write a memoir?

The story I tell of my marriage to Dwayne was building inside of me from the moment we sat in a doctor's office and received his diagnosis. We had a remarkable love story. I know everyone probably says that! However, we were both over forty and love had almost wrecked both of us. I escaped an abusive relationship before I met him. At my first memoir workshop with Joyce Maynard three years after his death, the dam inside me broke, and I wrote the first essay for the memoir. By the time, I went home I had three essays or chapters completed. In the pages of my book, Dwayne lives again, and I want my readers to meet this remarkable man; they can also join us on the incredible road trip that was our life together.

How did you get involved in motorcycling?

On our wedding day we made a vow to love each other until we died and to buy a Harley together. Within a year we bought and rebuilt together our first Harley, a 1980 Shovelhead. It's called that because the top of the motor looks like an upside-down shovel. Eventually, Dwayne brought home my first Harley which was a police Road King. Hesitant at first, I loved the feeling when the large motorcycle rumbled beneath me as we danced down the highway. Even if I don't own a Harley now, I always see myself as a biker, a Harley rider.

You have escaped from marital abuse. What would you tell a woman who has yet to do that?

I had to stop listening to everyone who told me I'd hurt my children if I left their father. I spent years waiting for that magic moment when they'd be old enough for me to leave. I spent twenty-three years in a state of fear, trying to keep from making him mad. He never broke any bones, but he killed my soul. I would say to any woman living like that she needs to escape to

save her life. She only gets one, and it's too short to spend being terrorized. You are stronger than you can possibly imagine. I found happiness and the love of my life as soon as I walked out the door. Think what may be waiting for you.

Who are your favorite authors?

Reading Alexandra Fuller taught me what a memoir could be. Her stories about her childhood in Africa with less than ideal parents are both laugh-out-loud funny and heart-breaking sad. I'm a southerner at heart, and I read Flannery O'Connor to remind myself how to write a simple story that tells a complex truth. I taught high school English, so I'm a Shakespeare lover. Some of my most proud moments were the times my students would tell me they learned to love him because of me.

What are some common traps for aspiring writers?

If you want to be a writer, you only have to do one thing: write. I know it sounds elementary, but it's not. As soon as anyone hears I wrote a memoir, they usually talk about this book they're going to write someday. Some of them spend money on classes, or they attend workshops. Ann Patchett says in an essay that if you can sit down and write every day for a month then you've proven you have the discipline to be a writer. I see aspiring writers all the time who think they can't call themselves writers unless their work is published. You may not be published, but if you write, you are a writer. You can perfect your craft, but it's all about the discipline of putting words on paper. It really is that straightforward.

What was the best money you ever spent as a writer?

I think every writer should attend quality writing conferences to learn about the business of writing and to meet other writers. Not all conferences are worthwhile, so do some research. I can recommend the Writers' League of Texas Conference, and the Creative Nonfiction one in Pittsburgh. Joining a group is also smart if you want to be successful as a writer. However, I have to say the money I spent traveling to Lake Atitlan, Guatemala, for a memoir workshop hosted by Joyce Maynard was the best investment I ever made. I learned to love Guatemala, and I learned how to polish my voice as a writer.

What is the first book that made you cry?

I grew up in a small town in Missouri, and the library was a few blocks from my house. I escaped there almost every day, and I read. In the fifth grade, I pulled *Anne of Green Gables* off the shelf. When Matthew died, I cried with Anne. That's when I realized what power books can have. Sitting in a dusty corner in Missouri, I was transported to Prince Edward Island to experience life as an orphan with bright red hair.

What's next for Mary Jane Black?

I'm thinking and sketching ideas on another story that will be based on someone's real story, and while I'm part of the story, it won't be a memoir. I'll write in third person limited point of view rather than the first person of a memoir. This will allow me to write in the active voice I prefer, but have a single point of view.