

Daily Rituals: How Artists Work

Mason Currey; New York: Knopf, 2013.

Mason Currey, a Los Angeles writer, has compiled summaries and quotations about the everyday working routines of writers, composers, painters, and other artists. Common to all these creative vocations is the requirement for the artist to organize one's life for productivity – usually without the imposed structure of a boss or a separate place to go to work.

A central issue for daily routine is when to work and when not to work. Many writers preferred the mornings – Hugo, Kierkegaard, Henry James, Orwell, Updike, Stephen King, Trollope. Others socialized late in the night, and began work shortly after arising in the afternoon: Picasso, Styron. Some created a normal 8-5 workday for themselves: Twain, Nabokov. Thomas Wolfe stands out, as he started to write at midnight, standing up using the top of the fridge as his desk. Balzac too wrote through the night. Other writers had to work before and after full-time day jobs: T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams. Heller wrote *Catch-22* in the evenings after work, spending two or three hours a night for eight years.

One can be fertile without having to work much. Three hours in the morning and three hours in the evening. This is my only rule.

~ Jean Paul Sartre

Another decision is where to work. Most had a study within their own homes. Nobel laureate Alice Munro, typical for women of her generation, wrote at home initially in between time for raising her family. Jane Austen wrote amidst the bustling life of the household gathered around the hearth – reading her work aloud to family in the evenings. Proust famously retreated to his bed for 12 years to write the seven volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*. John Cheever took the elevator to work in a basement storage room in his apartment building.

Physical exercise, most commonly walking, was an important part of many daily routines. Some walked before working in the mornings, others walked in the evenings, many walked when the writing bogged down to clear their heads. Walking was especially important to Kafka, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Dickens.

It is intriguing to read about the daily lives of writers and other artists. The main lesson is that productivity depends on routine, with infinite variation possible for the specific routine created.