



Writing Acadia:

A Personal Memoir

BY CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE

The best-selling Mount Desert Island author takes us inside her stories and her process as no one else can.

Christina Baker Kline is the author of five novels including Orphan Train, which spent more than two years on the New York Times bestseller list. Her sixth novel, based on Andrew Wyeth's painting Christina's World, will be published in 2017.

She and her husband and three sons divide their time between homes in Montclair, New Jersey, and Southwest Harbor.

Baker Kline has also taught fiction and nonfiction writing. Here she shares some of her hard-won insights on the writing life.

PRIMING THE PUMP

Mondays are hard. All weekend you've been doing laundry, taking family bike rides,

reading the *Times* in bits and pieces, going to your kids' soccer games, and then it's Monday morning and they're all out the door (except the dog, who is lying on your feet), and it's hard to know where to begin, how to pick up where you left off.

When I was growing up in Maine, my professor parents bought an A-frame on a tiny island on a lake. The house had no electricity or heat, and a red-handled pump was our only source of drinking water. When we arrived on the island (having paddled over from the mainland in our evergreen Old Town canoe), we had to prime the pump with lake water to get it started. One of my sisters

poured the water into the top while another pumped. The well water took a while to emerge, and then it was cloudy, rust-colored, for at least a minute or two before running clear.



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This reminds me of my own writing on Monday mornings—or anytime I've taken a substantial break from it. As with the pump, I've learned to prime my writing. I might read a chapter or two of a book on my nightstand, or perhaps turn to one of my 'touchstones'—those dog-eared, broken-spined, oft-read volumes I've defaced with marginalia and underlinings, and which I know I can count on for inspiration.

Then I start to write, knowing that it may take some time to reach the deep, cold source of inspiration, but trusting that sooner or later my words will run clear.

FOUR BASIC ELEMENTS

A novelist friend has an index card with these four words on it taped to the wall above the computer in his study:

CHARACTER

CONFLICT

CHOICES

CONSEQUENCES

Sometimes it helps to remember: It's that simple.

BREATH ON THE GLASS

When I'm working on a novel, ideas rise up at random times from the murk of my subconscious like pronouncements in a Magic 8 Ball. If I don't write them down right away, these ephemeral thoughts can fade and disappear.

Driving my 14-year-old son, Hayden, to summer camp in Maine on Sunday, I put him to work as both a DJ and a scribe. (After

// The Maine coastline is similar, in many ways, to the west coast of Ireland, 2,500 miles to the east."

all, I was the chauffeur.) He selected a Green Day song from his new iPod touch (an 8th-grade graduation present from an indulgent grandmother); then I was allowed a song by The Fray. He picked Ben Folds, I chose Dar Williams. Every now and then I asked him to open my writing journal—a wire-bound, college-ruled notebook with a green plastic cover—and scribble a line:

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Sea air in Galway
Fiction chooses the writer
Breath on the glass

Sea air in Galway. The Maine coastline is similar, in many ways, to the west coast of Ireland, 2,500 miles to the east. With this note I was reminding myself to pay particular attention to the sensory details; I thought I might be able to use these impressions in a scene in my novel.

Fiction chooses the writer. This idea for a blog post sprang from an ongoing conversation with several novelists about how and why people start writing fiction.

Breath on the glass. As we drove in the rain, I saw Hayden turn his head to look out the passenger window at two guys on a motorcycle, both without helmets, grimacing into the downpour. Hayden's breath fogged the glass. When he turned back to me, saying, "Wow, Mom, what were they *thinking*?" I glanced over again, and saw that his breath had already evaporated. And the guys on the bike were gone.

That's how it is with these fleeting observations, and why I asked Hayden to keep a pen handy and the notebook on his lap. He was happy to do it—as long as he could listen to Metallica and I promised to get him to Bar Harbor on time.

WRITER VS. EDITOR

I used to agonize over each word and phrase in a first draft, doubtful that when I came back to it, weeks or months later, I would be able to see, much less fix, the things that didn't work. But while I was writing my third novel, *The Way Life Should Be*—and editing other people's manuscripts at the same time—I had an epiphany.

Here's what I realized: My editor-self is surprisingly clear-headed, even ruthless. Hyper-critical and exacting, she is capable of transforming a freewheeling, messy draft into clear and lucid prose. And she likes doing it.

(Yes, it took three novels to figure this out.)

This realization freed my writer-self to have more fun. My first drafts have become more spontaneous and energetic; I feel free to try out a range of ideas, follow tangents in odd directions, write a scene of dialogue three different ways, all with the knowledge that my editor-self will step in when needed with a red pencil and a roll of the eyes—what was she thinking? ■