

Encouraging young writers

by BROCK WEIR

Today, April 10, is apparently National Encourage a Young Writer Day.

Why? I'm not sure.

Who says? Well, I'm not sure of that, either.

All I know is that this particular observance is listed on the National Day Calendar along with such other 'notable' national days as National Alcohol Screening Day, National Erase Self-Negativity Day (this one, as it happens, has an origin story to go along with it and is one we should be following as much as possible), National Farm Animals Day, National Cinnamon Crescent Day, and National Siblings Day, so it must be something.

Wherever it came from, I'm glad it's here and that it's today, because encouraging young writers and older writers, for that matter, is something that is terribly important in this day and age.

We're living at a time when letter-writing has become something of a lost art. If you handed a kid a post card, chances are they would most likely look at you as if you had an extra two heads popping out of each ear if you asked them to fill them in and stamp them.

Sadly, independent booksellers are, with each passing year, becoming more and more of an endangered species. Cursive writing is now seen in some circles as outdated at best and obsolete or irrelevant in others.

We might still be a long way off from Artificial Intelligence, such as it is, threatening those who make their living by the written word, or find a vital creative outlet through setting pen to paper, into obsolescence, but it's working double time to convince some of those who employ them that they're inconvenient or too expensive compared to the alternatives.

At times I despair for the young scribes coming up and pursuing careers in journalism, creative writing, advertising copywriting, and related fields, as it feels while there are passionate people who impart knowledge and foster the next generation of talent in the classroom, lecture hall, or workplace, once those days are over and you're setting out to ply your trade, find a job, or hang up your own shingle, you're required to really do the heavy lifting. It's a matter of making the case for not only why you're the right person for the job but, in some instances, why the job should exist in the first place.

While this is often discouraging, at the same time, however, there are more outlets than ever before for the aspiring writer to hone their craft and find an audience.

Libraries that serve our communities are more bustling now than ever before. Writers groups in these libraries and elsewhere never have a shortage of participants eager to let their creative juices flow onto paper or their screen of choice and, in turn, participants eager to channel their passions into constructive criticism of their peers.

Events like Toronto's Word on the Street, which shines a light on authors and publishers large and small, is always an event that brings out a healthy and diverse crowd. The arrival of a new independent bookseller, new or used, on the horizon never fails, at least from what I'm seeing, to make a splash and arouse excitement.

Elsewhere, in less traditional forms, social media outlets are changing the rules of the writing game and not necessarily for the worse. A well-crafted Tweet, have we settled on a name yet on what to call posts on X? can be an artform in and of itself. The same for a pointed Instagram caption or particularly compelling Substack. New forms are nothing to sneeze at and have their own

well-earned place at the table.

But, in this odd timeline we're currently living in where writing, in some of its forms, is under regular attack while, concurrently, there are more avenues for writers than ever before to get their names out there, how can we encourage young writers to pick up the pen or crack their knuckles before hitting the keyboard? Well, the National Day Calendar has some suggestions.

Do you know a young person who has a vivid imagination, maybe someone who likes to tell stories and reads a lot of books? These may be signs of a great young writer, they say. National Encourage a Young Writer Day would be a good time to talk to them about their ideas and dreams. Encourage them to pursue their goals and develop their writing skills.

Give a journal. A journal provides a place for daily writing. From short poems to inspired essays, this is a place young writers can feel free to stretch their wings unjudged. Offer writing prompts. These random bits of inspiration can come from the most unlikely sources but often generate unexpected results. Encourage them to read. The more they read, their experiences with writing and writers will expand. Have young writers try multiple writing styles and different voices. Changing perspective will keep their writing style fresh, allowing them an opportunity to find their personal style. Create a young writers' group. It's a good way to see their story from the reader's point of view and to receive feedback from peers.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a home where writing was always encouraged. My father, once upon a time, was a journalist and continues to find pleasure through this form of creative expression. My mother was and remains a voracious reader, always eager to crack in and provide feedback.

Under their watch, there was always a ready supply of journals, note pads, random assortments of scrap paper, and plenty of pens, pencils and crayons about for whenever my young self had a moment of creativity.

Short stories were my preferred medium at that point, and with plenty of time to spend after school and over the summer holidays, I would regularly churn out stories we don't need to discuss the quality of the product at that time inspired by just about everything around me. A regular inspiration for me in the 1990s were riffs on the two Addams Family movies (still two of the finest comedies ever committed to film, in my opinion), the nature around me, and a random character named Mabel. Where she came from in my imagination, I have no idea, but she had many an adventure in her trademark pillbox hat, complete with flower, which wilted down to her jawline.

My iterations of Gomez and Morticia, Mabel, and the foxes that lived in our backyard didn't exactly set the world of youth lit on fire, but given the time to explore these avenues, I believe, helped me build a solid foundation.

Now is a time when young people are considering their next moves, whether they're still weighing their options for their post-secondary education, trying to break into a career with a fresh degree under their belts, or simply looking for a place to get published.

Work in these fields might seem discouraging at times, but they remain powerful outlets not only for expression but for creativity and even keeping people informed of the world around them and they deserve every encouragement as we all benefit.