

The myth of Write What You Know

A question of misunderstood writing rules came up in a newsgroup, and I decided that one of the biggest is "Write What You Know."

No you don't have to write about being a middle-age (insert one: accountant, housewife, secretary, x-rated movie star). It's taking lot of the little gritty details of life and working with it.

Grew up in Pennsylvania? Well, then you know what its like to have very little flat land, summer days that are muggy, and the woods are filled with oaks, maples, and pine.

Grew up on the Outer Banks? Well, then you know what its like to live year round on the edge of the ocean.

And this isn't boring. 95% of the world finds your hometown interesting when seen through your eyes.

Were you an only kid and always wanted a little brother? Were you a younger sister whose older brother picked on you? Did your father die when you were young? Did your best friend steal your boyfriend in high school?

These life experiences will resonant strongest in your writing because you know them of well.

Don't want to set everything in your hometown and don't want your hero to be a (insert one) well then its time to research. Read about living in the desert, visit one, get books on the ecology/animals of deserts, rent travel videos and watch them, get the National Geographic for articles on desert countries -- THEN write your desert world. Do the same with jobs.

Notice however, that the time investment to learn the new world deep enough to match your native knowledge is great.

There were these sisters. They lived a very staid, boring, middle-class life, which was made even more boring because they were living in the Victorian era when things were pretty quiet all the time anyway. They almost never left the tiny village where they lived; never married; never had jobs, save perhaps the genteel profession of governess.

Their names were Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Bronte, and they wrote some of the most breathtaking works of fiction ever - books that are still grabbing readers and not letting go more than a century later.

And the thing is - they **did** write what they knew. They knew people. Their characters went places they'd never been and did things they'd never done, but they knew them, and because of that they could make us believe in them.

It's not about knowing, really. It's about observing - about really **seeing** what's going on around you, and using it. Shamelessly.