

Growing Your Own Story

by T. A. Barron



**“There are three essential rules for writing.
Unfortunately ... nobody knows what they are.”**

Encouraging words? Hardly. But when a good friend who was an accomplished writer said them to me, quoting W. Somerset Maugham, her eyes sparkled. It’s taken me several years—and several books of my own—to understand why.

When she said those words, she knew that I longed to be a writer. And that I already had an idea for a novel. Trouble was, my idea was only partly formed—like a secret, half-remembered song that stirred emotions (in me, at least) but couldn’t be fully expressed.

Knowing all this, my friend wanted me to be realistic about the difficult challenge ahead—and not to expect any help from simple, formulaic rules. That challenge was to solve every writer’s riddle: **How can I possibly make sense of a craft so amorphous and shape-shifting that it seems to have no rules or boundaries?**

The answer, I’ve found, lies in treating your creation as **a living, breathing organism**. A tree.

In the soil of the writer’s mind, you’ll discover what might or might not be a seed. Sometimes, it will turn out to be just a lifeless speck of dust. Yet if it truly is a seed, and you plant it with care, it could sink roots and grow into something tall, evocative, and beautiful.

If that seed is to grow at all, though, it will need plenty of sunlight, air, and nourishment—that is, the writer’s version of those things.

Sunlight, for a writer, comes in the form of **observation**. Notice the world around you with all your senses. How do different people speak, with their voices, faces, hands, and posture? How do different types of autumn leaves fall to the ground, each with a singular sort of flight? How do different ideas cast light on people’s passions, fears, hopes, and dreams?

If you observe the world with care, noticing smells as well as sights, textures as well as tastes, then you’ll gain plenty of elements and ideas for your writing. The places you describe will have all the subtleties and complexities of people. Your characters will stand up, walk off the page, and speak to you. Just add a few drops of imagination—and anything is possible.

Now go deeper. Ask yourself how each character in your story feels. What are her greatest longings and darkest fears? What is her true motivation? And most important of all ... what is her deepest secret? Once your characters reveal their secrets, speaking in authentic voices, your writer’s tree will flourish.

Air, for a writer, is belief. Hard as it is to do sometimes, you need to believe in yourself—in your own worth as a writer. Your voice matters. And if your voice matters, then so do the ideas you want to express. Believe that you have some valuable things to say—and the passion and skill to communicate them. For your writer's tree is unique and deserves a chance to grow.

Just as important, believe in your creation. Give it the space to grow organically while you get to know all its characters, places, struggles, and mysteries. Breathe deeply of the world you are inhabiting.

Nourishment, for a writer, takes the form of **discipline**. Writing may be the hardest work you'll ever do—and also, if you stick with it, the most gratifying work you'll ever do. But your seeds of ideas won't grow into anything unless you work hard to bring them to life.

The bad news—and also the good news—is that writing doesn't get any easier with time. As soon as you think you understand the craft, you realize how much more there is to learn. Why is that good news? Because writing continually challenges us to grow, to develop deeper awareness of language and ourselves, and to perceive life more clearly. As difficult as it can be at times, the labor of writing also nourishes us—and makes us more fully alive.

While neuroscience is just beginning to illuminate how our minds work, we do know this much: Creative activity uses many parts of the brain, involving centers of logic as well as metaphor, the stuff of life and the stuff of dreams. If you can find the discipline to write and rewrite and rewrite some more ... your mind will expand along with your abilities. Your tree will reach higher and deeper than you ever imagined.

Finally, after receiving plenty of sunlight, air, and nourishment, your writer's tree will stand **fully grown**. It will feel very much alive, bearing surprisingly tasty fruit that others may enjoy. It will also feel wholly authentic—for at the core, **good fiction must be true**.

And perhaps, when the wind whistles through its branches, you will hear the full expression of a secret, half-remembered song.

Best wishes from your fellow writer,

T. A. BARRON

