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INTRODUCTION

I can't say how long it's been there, but I have an image in my mind of the place where writers work. I picture the writer; I picture the space; I conjure an atmosphere of quiet calm in which someone can write for many hours undisturbed. This place contains a desk, on which lie various tools of writing, and perhaps a large window, out of which my writer looks to try to capture the world they depict. There are bookshelves teeming with dog-eared paperbacks, imposing hardbacks, critical anthologies, story collections, art books; my writer is also a reader, and a voracious one at that. They might sit on an old office chair, or one made of wood with a rounded back, but it has a squishy pillow nestled into it to keep the writer comfortable, and a blanket thrown over the arm, ready to keep them warm.

As well as the copious number of books, the writer of my imagination has art on their walls: postcards pinned and askew

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on a corkboard, prints hung up, and old film posters with a corner that flaps in the breeze. There are other smaller objects too, collected and curated to best inspire, full of meaning and sentiment; the potency of these objects lies in their creative charge – their inherent inspirational potential just waiting to be drawn out through the process of writing. These objects crowd shelves, hang from the door frames, peek out from behind books, or simply sit next to the writer as companions and friends. Sometimes they can become talismans, items of good luck, or part of the ritual of the day, given a pat or a stroke. The writer's room need not be neat, could in fact be the one space of the house where things are supposed to be messy, to show a mind at work. Proper creativity makes for unkempt spaces. Are there crisp packets or orange peel littering the desk? Discarded tissues, unstable piles of books unread, crumpled papers? No writing room can be pristine, but the detritus must not outweigh the buzzing, trembling atmosphere of solemn, serious work.

But what of the person themselves? They are less clear in my mind, a fuzzy outline. What I do know of my imagined writer is that they labour at their work. They are a conduit for that atmosphere they have made, sitting at their desk with a straight back, the pose of the concentrated. They delve into their work, not looking up from the page or the screen for hours at a time. They are a figure

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of certainty and of authority; the room tells me that they know what they are trying to make, it needs only for them to catch the creative wisp and fix it down in words.

This room, with its mystery and romance, was certainly already in my mind when I was a teenager, as I sought to learn about art and writing, and started to read 'important and serious' novels. I wanted to fashion my own creative space, as if, by getting it just so, I would become a writer. Around my teenage desk were pictures from magazines and postcards of art that I understood to be important: I had a portrait of Byron, from 1814, a detail from Leonardo da Vinci's sketch for a painting – *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne and the Infant Saint John the Baptist* – and a photograph of Virginia Woolf, these little splashes of culture vying for space with pictures of Kate Moss looking chic and brooding images of Orlando Bloom. But at that desk, the only toil and worry I experienced was about completing my history homework on time, and later, the complex sexual politics of MSN.

As the years went on, I began to give a lot of thought to what the writer's room might contain, though there were many aspects that didn't even enter my mind; I didn't imagine this work

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done on a laptop or a desktop computer; it was always by hand or on a typewriter. I hadn't yet developed the taste for coffee so I gave no thought to the fuel of writing, and couldn't have begun to envision the lengths to which some writers went to create the right circumstances from which creativity might spring. My imagination didn't stretch to the moment of writing itself; in my naivety, I thought writing came from outside of oneself, the ethereal muse to whom so much literature is addressed. I had conjured up this person, anonymous and genderless, huddled over their desk deep in thought, fully legible in their chosen profession, absolutely 'a writer'. The room I had created was infused with something that went beyond my admiration of particular aesthetics, into a realm of mythology. I couldn't picture the moment of writing because I had made the very image of the room stand in for the writer themselves – and by extension the very process of writing. And though the room must be attached to other rooms, other houses and other people, I didn't think about any of them either. It stood outside time, outside the architecture of the house, freed from the everyday. In imagining this untethered space, I was replaying an age-old idea about art and its relationship to the rest of the world, in which the artist is on one side and everything else is on the other. The artist's job, my mythology suggests, is to work across that gulf, understanding the world,

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and communicating it to those who are waiting for missives from the other side. The writer's room remained always seductive yet timeless, caught in between.

Some of the images we hold of this work of writing originate from the very earliest depictions of it taking place, the lives of monks, and even the lives of those who became saints, sequestered away in the simplest of rooms, working with the inspiration of divine feeling. One of the best known is that of St Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, as well as penning extensive commentaries on its contents. The German artist Albrecht Dürer made various engraved versions of it. One example from 1514 has an extraordinary depth of field: Jerome sits at the far end of the space, hunched over a very small writing slope. His desk is bare, except for a small inkpot and crucifix, and he is seriously attending to the work at hand. Dürer's engraving, however, is not all as austere as the desk, and his addition of pillows in differing sizes laid around the room suggests that alongside the concentrated work of the scholar must come rest and relaxation. This is echoed in the detail at the front of scene, with two animals, a companionable pair, asleep. Like many writers, St Jerome is kept company by furry friends. Unlike most, however, one of his companions is a rather diminutive lion, the beast that he is said to have healed by removing a thorn from its paw. In another version from around

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1530 by the Flemish painter Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Jerome's desk is equipped with a book rest, on which lies an illuminated version of the Bible, as well as a pair of spectacles, and a candle and knife. But his posture is slumped, and as he holds his brow, one finger rests on the human skull at the very bottom of the image in seeming defeat. Though this seems to indicate that he's following the instructions of the words that sit behind him ('*cogita mori*' or 'think upon death' in Latin), the open book and his forlorn expression seem to communicate another, more familiar feeling: the painful throes of writing exhaustion. Comfortingly, even saints find writing hard.

In my teenage obsession about the writing room, other thoughts began to emerge about what formed a literary life. Could I determine what it would *feel* like to be a writer? Ironically, in wondering about the experiences of writers, I joined a coterie of figures from literature who do the very same thing. Adrian Mole, the self-important teenage diarist from Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾*, wants to invent himself as an intellectual, casually mentioning the great works of literature he is reading (including *Crime and Punishment* and *Madame Bovary*) with the minutest of accompanying reviews. Adrian tries his hand at literature, writing a few poems, before confirming that: 'I have decided to be a poet. My father said that there isn't a suitable career

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structure for poets and no pensions and other boring things, but I am quite decided'[1] and goes about painting his bedroom in black vinyl paint (obscuring the cheerful faces of Noddy wallpaper) to reflect his new identity. Another teenage protagonist, Anthony Charteris Forster of Patrick Hamilton's *Monday Morning*, is even more obsessed with becoming a writer, indulging in lengthy fantasies about the lifestyle without undertaking any writing whatsoever. For Anthony, the allure lies in an image of hard work done at night while hidden away. Later, when he tries to live out his fantasy, he finds that the actuality is a little trickier:

> After dinner he went to his room, switched on the light, lowered the blind, took off his coat, put on his dressing-gown, lit his pipe, ruffled his hair, got out the small wicker table, put the ink and writing materials on it, adjusted his legs in it, opened at the first page and started thinking, about himself, in a dressing-gown, with a pipe, about to write a novel. The romantically complete novelist.[2]

Anthony's writer is fashioned through his clothing, smoking paraphernalia, and – my favourite detail – the ruffled hair. No writer, Anthony seems to think, should look immaculate, their hair worried repeatedly by anxious hands. He envisions himself as 'the

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romantically complete novelist' not because of his writing, but because of the pose he is in – even sitting at a table and being in the room seems half the battle. The title of Hamilton's novel references the little bargains Anthony periodically makes with himself, that his life will 'begin' the following Monday, but it also refers to the way he interacts with the idea of creativity itself, something he will be able to channel soon, but not quite yet. For any procrastinator, these kinds of bargains may seem familiar; Anthony's creative spark, his ideas and his talent will arrive – eventually – and given that the book is a semi-biographical account of Hamilton's own life, that longed-for employment of talent is evidenced by the large body of writing Hamilton went on to produce. But in the book, the promise of writing remains only ever that: something that *may* come in a perfect moment in the future. If only, Anthony seems to think, he gets the look perfectly right.

Though Adrian and Anthony are seduced by certain enduring myths about creative life, even for those who have written plenty, the idea of the writing-room scene can still haunt the imagination. Linda Brodkey, a professor of literature who taught writing and composition for many years at the University of Texas in Austin and UC San Diego, describes how she imagines writing to look in strikingly similar terms to my own conjured images: 'When I picture writing, I often see a solitary writer alone in a cold garret

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working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle. It seems a curious image to conjure, for I am absent from this scene in which the writer is an Author and the writing is Literature.'[3] I know that for me the image of the writing room has not always been useful for my sense of myself as a writer. Over the years, I have found it hard to occupy the space with confidence, as if I were always about to be found out or replaced by someone who would be able to do the work I attempted with so much more naturalness and grace. Brodkey wonders about this too, and in noting her absence from the scene of writing asks if it is in fact 'not [her] scene at all', borrowed instead from a range of artworks and 'canonical literature'[4] – the descendants of St Jerome's room.

Even so, the image endures. I can't help but be fascinated by the portrayal of writers in fiction, like those in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* or George Orwell's Gordon Comstock from *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, who suffer at their desks; or I look for the inverse, for those spaces of real writers who have been wildly successful, such as the beautifully cramped shed of Philip Pullman or Toni Morrison's sofa. But perhaps this acquisitiveness is less to do with them and more to do with me, as if I might suddenly become more intellectually or artistically alluring through internalising some particular architecture or layout, allowing me to become one of those people who have never once doubted that they were

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writers and their work worth reading. Yet though we may culturally come back to that space of the solitary creative, writers and artists themselves have seemed aware that this separateness was always an illusion. The American writer Don DeLillo, over the course of fifty years of writing, often invokes the figure of the writer, a person he describes in his novels and in interview simply as 'the man alone in the room'. His writer figure is partially a way of thinking about himself and his career: he has, to all intents and purposes, been a man alone in a room since he started writing in the 1960s and publishing in earnest in the 1970s. But it is also about the way he conceives of the special kind of solitude on which the labour of writing is based. Nevertheless, though the figure in his novels is isolated, he is never fully severed from everything either. As DeLillo writes in his novel *Mao II*, 'A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world.'[5] There is a relationship between what happens in the writer's room and the world the writer is attempting to understand, even if that relationship feels indistinct and one-way, in this iteration at least. Though we might imagine the writer's room as the most *interior* of spaces, it is undoubtedly looking outwards, towards the world it is trying to represent. A strange dance between public and private.

The British painter, engraver and satirist William Hogarth, who worked in the eighteenth century, was a keen observer of British

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society, producing work that depicted many facets of London life, including its seedier, rougher sides. Between 1733 and 1735, he turned his attention to the life of writing, painting *The Distrest Poet*, and later reproducing it as an engraving. The poet in this image sits in a poky garret, at a small desk by a window, but this is not a scene of calm creativity: as he looks vaguely out of the frame his wife sits nearby mending clothing, a cat lies on the floor seemingly undoing her good work with sharp claws, and in the background, nestled in the bed, lies a meaty-looking infant on the verge of a scream. The already-crowded and cramped room is further disturbed by the arrival of a woman demanding payment for a bill, one that, from the looks of the pile of paper on the floor under the desk, is unlikely to be met any time soon. Hogarth later created the engraving *The Enraged Musician*, a companion piece in which a violin player is bothered by the cacophony of people and noise that lies just outside his window, distracting him from rehearsal. These two fascinating (and hilarious) images place both the musician and the poet fully in the centre of the social world. Though the individual may try to separate themself from others, whether in the writer's garret or the musician's room, the outside is always trying to get in.

The idealised version of a writer's room, silent and solemn, arrives as an idea not only through its depictions in art, literature

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and in the media but also as the very real spaces that are often contained in museums and preserved writers' houses and make up one part of a display about their lives. Literary tourism is a profitable industry and most capital cities have several preserved house museums to lure the bibliophile. An intrepid literary explorer can take a trip to the houses of John Keats, Thomas Hardy, Fernando Pessoa, Jean Cocteau, Emily Dickinson and Louisa May Alcott to name but a few. Though the houses are all very different, depicting different time periods and living styles, an emphasis is often put on maintaining the room in which the writer wrote, recreating it, or presenting a composite version of many different rooms the writer may have worked in throughout their lives. As the academic Nicola J. Watson suggests, literary tourism 'materializes and individualizes reading as remembered experience of place',[6] linking the books we love with the writers who were working in particular houses, settings or rooms. We are reminded, in these spaces, that writing does not just happen, but has to happen *somewhere.*

But what pulls us to the writer's room, to Charles Dickens's study at the Charles Dickens Museum in Holborn, London, for example? Are we looking for evidence of genius in his pen and inkwell, or somewhere behind the blue jug decorated with black olives and green leaves? Or is there something murkier here, the leftovers of words or ideas secreted behind the picture frames

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or even in the very walls themselves? It can feel almost prurient visiting the famous houses of celebrated artists: at Sigmund Freud's house in Hampstead, his books line the crowded shelves, his collection of antiquities sit in a glass cupboard, and yet Freud himself is not there to mediate or to explain their significance. As I've wandered around a writer's house or museum, I sometimes feel as if I'm trespassing, entering a place where I shouldn't, looking at the objects that make up a life, objects instilled with so much more significance than they can communicate through a quick glance.

These questions leave me wondering how I should be engaging and interacting with these spaces that purport to give a 'true' sense of a writer's creative life. As the academic and biographer Hermione Lee, who has written the lives of Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, suggests it is 'a strong but muddled impulse, a mixture of awe, longing desire for inwardness, and intrusive curiosity'[7] that leads us on these pilgrimages. We may not even be sure ourselves of what we are looking for when we purchase our ticket or plan our route, but I'm fascinated by the impulse. In pursuing writers into their homes, we move beyond simply trying to learn more about them or their work (after all, we have Wikipedia for that) to trickier territories of looking for proximity, even intimacy. Yet I suspect there's even more to our obsession with these places.

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A tapestry of desire that *The Writer's Room* will examine and unpick over the coming pages.

Undeniably there is something about *the writer* as a character or an archetype that enthrals us. While writing this book, I have been amazed by how many writers I have come across in popular culture: Hollywood films, from classics such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to more contemporary films including *Ruby Sparks*, feature struggling or uninspired writers; the supremely popular works of Irish writer Sally Rooney are about the work and perspective of writers; there are even guides in lifestyle and fashion magazines that instruct us in how to dress like Sylvia Plath. The writer, we understand, is different from others, living a more sensitive, more internal life.

I'm not sure I believe this. My understanding of the writer might be more in agreement with Virginia Woolf, a figure to whom we'll return throughout *The Writer's Room*, who describes the writer not through a focus on their internal life but a clear-eyed examination of the world:

> A writer is a person who sits at a desk and keeps his eye fixed, as intently as he can, upon a certain object – that figure of speech may help to keep us steady on our path if we look at it for a moment. He is an artist who sits with a sheet of paper in front of him trying to copy what he sees.

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> What is his object – his model? A writer has to keep his eye upon a model that moves, that changes, upon an object that is not one object but innumerable objects. Two words alone cover all that a writer looks at – they are, human life.[8]

For Woolf, what we must value in our writers are their unique powers of looking and their capability to record what they see. Nevertheless, the writer is always enmeshed in that same material world, anchored to the desk, using a sheet of paper. To be a writer then does not mean to live in some far-flung field of the imagination, but to be in a present moment in a particular place and time. We collect the work our writers publish, hoping perhaps to read everything they produce and thereby gain access into how they view the world, matching our own experiences and desires with theirs. We pore over the minutiae of their lives, where they lived and how they wrote: Marcel Proust in his bed, seemingly surviving only on coffee; screenwriter Dalton Trumbo in his bath, pen in one hand, cigarette in the other; Jane Austen scribbling in small neat handwriting at her little table. And these small details can come to take on such significance. The narrator of Julian Barnes's 1985 novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite, thinks about just this topic. A retired GP, he spends the pages of this tricky novel tracking the life of Flaubert through the traces the writer left behind

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in his stories, in his letters and drafts, as well as through objects, most obviously in the stuffed parrot of the book's title. This parrot, the apparent model for the bird in Flaubert's story 'A Simple Heart', becomes a way for Braithwaite (and Barnes) to explore his most beloved author: in the course of his travels around France, Braithwaite finds that not one but several 'original' parrots exist, each with its own back story and supposed authenticity. We are left then to wonder how we might ever get close to those we admire from afar or across time – to the 'real' writer – if the things of their existence are also so impermanent.

Just before my thirtieth birthday I decided to look for a new desk. I have been thinking about writing spaces for some time, and yet I'm still helplessly in love with the image of a desk. I want to be critical, to use my analytical training to examine what lies behind my idealisation and assumptions, but I find myself still day-dreaming and fantasising about the possibilities this new object will bring. I have spent long mornings at weekends looking for this desk, and with it, making promises to myself about better work habits and writing routines. I scour Etsy, eBay, Facebook Marketplace, Gumtree. My search terms are 'painted desk', 'wood desk', 'vintage

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desk'. I don't want to write 'antique' because I know this is likely to increase the asking price and I am on a budget. I find some old-fashioned leather-topped desks, in various dark woods. They look heavy and forbidding, as if they have been in place forever; they will only ever be a picture, or behind glass somewhere, never in my possession. There are some desks you can purchase that come pre-distressed. The 'shabby chic' desk seems particularly prevalent on Etsy, and often with a higher price tag.

I eventually decide upon a white wooden desk in the Shaker style, found after extensive eBay perusing, bought from a woman who says she can deliver it to my door. On the day of its arrival, she parks around the corner and I watch as she and her husband unload the desk, piece by piece. The three of us walk the few metres to my house, holding a leg or a drawer. As we walk, we chat a little, the husband telling me that their daughter just finished her A levels at this desk. He asks me what I'll be using it for. I decide to say, 'I'm a writer', and I see he's pleased. 'She'll like that', he responds smilingly. I thank them both, say goodbye and begin bringing the pieces to the room at the top of the house. It easily reassembles and soon I am looking at my new object with its drawers to be filled and its surface to be covered with notebooks and tea and candles and mess. I begin to list the new habits that will take place here:

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I will be one of those people who gets up very early to write.

I will be one of those people who writes all morning and reads all afternoon.

I will set myself a number of words to be completed every day. I can talk about 'doing my words', and then go outside and play tennis (I don't play tennis).

I will be doggedly tied to my desk, and a deep feeling of calm will descend on me when I sit down to write; I will have made an escape room.

I will be able to spend hours at home, and not sit in bed, or play with my cat, or watch television. This desk will ensure I become serious. It will eradicate my frivolity.

The desk is a serious object to curb my bad habits, a talisman for the future when I will be a better worker, a better writer and, perhaps, a better person.

I start off with aims of keeping the desk very clean, of trying to avoid leaving too much of myself, but this soon proves impossible, mug stains, scrap paper, notebooks, petals and little smatterings of pollen and dust proliferate; the desk was painted white, but through time and use, little bits of its former life are revealed, a fleck at a time: I see that it used to be a baby pink. My cat Bartleby, who loves to sit on my lap and kiss me while I type, leaves her hairs strewn

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on the surface, in black, ginger and white, as well as little rivers of drool. My life is always present at the desk, though I may try to keep it to the edges.

But this desk will not remain in its place for long. Unlike those of famous writers with their preserved scenes in museums and houses to come, this arrangement is only temporary: my husband and I know this desk can be in this room only until we run out of space. As I arrange my piles of books, proofs, notebooks, pencils and bowls of dried fruits to keep me going, I am aware that everything I'm positioning will alter, that soon there will be a different negotiation of furniture in this room, perhaps a bigger spare bed for a friend who needs to stay because of some life upheaval, or more expansive bookcases for my ever-expanding collection.

What eventuates: a new chest of drawers, a changing mat, a cot. The quiet space of contemplation, of worry, and of work, disrupted by new life. My private sanctuary for writing transforms, bearing the weight of different expectations, and one day, just as the desk came into my home, it will have to have a new owner – there really isn't enough space to keep it here – and my scene of industry will be made anew elsewhere.

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Looking around at the things in my room, it's interesting to note the objects I've chosen to make me feel at home in writing: I have a carved wooden elephant in a beautiful dark wood that used to belong to my grandfather, who died when I was young; I have a painting of a woman in a room sitting at a desk reading a book, created and given to me by one of my best friends; I have a converted Victorian gas lamp, one of my prize possessions; and I have an oil diffuser in which I burn palmarosa, sweet orange, lavender and geranium, as a sort of sensory signal to myself to start work. Many of these objects have straddled two writing spaces, carried over from one house to another, rearranged and reorganised. In the moving, I realised that I had a box of objects that had become my writing objects, which would sit with me wherever I was working. They were and are the background against which my writing life has been formed.

So many creatives look to objects as a way of anchoring themselves or centring themselves, or as a way to conjure the words they need into existence. Writer and translator Lauren Elkin keeps a copy of Gustave Caillebotte's painting *The Floor Scrapers* (1875) hanging up nearby as a reminder to work hard;[9] Jen Calleja, also a writer and translator, keeps a little assemblage of contrasting objects, model cottages, worry dolls, a troll in a football kit, even 'a model of a slice of cake I made that I was tempted to get

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rid of because it was a bit shonky and I rushed the painting on the sprinkles, but I decided I really liked it, so I have it to fight against perfectionism, a reminder that something being perfect doesn't mean it's good'.[10] It feels notable that both writers choose objects that are so contrasting to the work they undertake to root them in this tangible life, even console them in their ordinariness when needed.

Still, inspiring or charged objects aside, it's hard to know where writing comes from or why; sometimes, I am so filled with the desire to sit at my desk and write words, *any words*, until some kind of descent occurs, where I start to feel calm and otherworldly. I've often described the process of writing as plunging underwater; not only is that feeling strange, but the impetus for it even stranger. The writing room helps us envision this lack of presence, as if by situating us in that place, we can begin to give weight to an activity that can otherwise seem mystifying.

During the pandemic we all, in one way or another, spent much more time at home, with many of us trying to find spaces to work in the home for the first time. As we adjusted to our new lives inside, we were purchasing desks, comfier chairs, new plants, and even redecorating or redesigning our homes to allow us to find calm and peaceful places away from our housemates, partners, children or pets. For some, this opened up avenues of possibility about what

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work could look like, with better work/life balance, less money and time spent on commuting. A few years post-pandemic, as we've seen the variety of benefits of home-based working, a large number of us are resisting going back to the office full time.

Yet even though many more of us found or created spaces to work in our homes during the lockdown, a few years later, getting to use them or keep them is a different story. How do we get to be alone, how and when do we feel able to ask this or demand this from our lives and loved ones? Anyone who has ever written anything knows that it is almost always a solitary act; even if our art is deeply enmeshed in examining or representing the lives of others, we desire the space, whether that's physically or emotionally, in which we can execute our work without disruption. In the writer's room of our collective imagination, it becomes possible for a person to unhitch themselves from their attachments, settling in to the space they have made that not only produces the conditions for work, but helps inspire it. In this dream, the room is a protective bubble, keeping the writer in and the rest of the world out.

Now, years after the purchase of my desk, I find myself newly tethered to the world, more connected than I ever have been, to my son, my husband, my family. Can a writer be enmeshed with others and still do what they want, what they need? Many writers have asked and continue to ask this question as it is not one with a

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straightforward answer, but I have returned here again and again to Virginia Woolf's famous work from 1929, *A Room of One's Own*. At the opening of the book, the narrator is going to a luncheon at a fictional Cambridge college; the longer she spends in the grounds of the college, the more she begins to think of the money the grounds were built on, and the disparity of achievement between men and women in both academic and intellectual worlds: 'Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?'[11] The narrator is then inspired to take a trip to the Round Reading Room at the British Museum in 'pursuit of truth',[12] but she finds that, in the place that purports to give a full account of human knowledge through collecting its literature, women are only ever the subjects of work by men, and seldom the writers of valued work themselves – how we come to measure that value is something I'll be thinking about in the following pages. Woolf concludes that the only way women are ever to breach the gap, to redress that balance somehow and start to write their own literature, is to secure an income of five hundred pounds a year, and find a space to call their own in which they can work and access solitude and privacy. The phrase she uses to illustrate this, of course, 'a room of one's own', one still very much in common parlance today, that writers name as the idealised version of creative solitude. Yet the book is more

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complex than the phrase would suggest, in that it tied creativity to the practicalities of life, suggesting that creative work does not come from realms otherworldly and unknown but from the realities of finding necessary time and space. Woolf shows that writers are not made solely through their talent, but talent that is allowed and enabled to flourish. She creates the figure of Shakespeare's sister, whom she names Judith, a writer of equal talent to her brother, but who, given her gender and circumstance, dies penniless and unremembered. As Woolf examines the history of English literature, she cannot help but revisit this question of physical space: no matter how and where the writer works, they are always 'attached to grossly material things'.[13] For beyond the notion of the protective bubble, the very practical concerns of the world cannot be set aside.

That connection is vastly complex for many people, sometimes even insurmountable. Women have been told over and over again that creativity is incompatible with having children: the writer and critic Cyril Connolly famously asserted in the 1930s that '[t]here is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hallway'.[14] Writing this in his work, *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly sought to identify the array of impediments that could stymie potential genius – his own included – conveniently ignoring that, at that time, the 'pram in the hallway' was a given in the lives of most women. For many, time has never felt their own, and so finding moments

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in which to be creative is to forgo a seemingly inescapable sense of duty to other people. Much Anglophone feminist writing of the mid-twentieth century looked at how the patriarchy curtails the freedoms of women, including their psychological and creative lives. Partly, as Woolf and many other feminist writers suggest, that curtailing is spatial: the refusal to be given space to work or to create tells another story about a refusal to be *allowed* to do those things in the first place.

In writing this book, I didn't set out to try to create a rulebook for writing, nor did I expect to find formulas for how people undertake creative work. Instead, I wanted to find a means of recording just how varied the writing life has been and can be. More than that, I looked for ways that all of us can find to be creative, to ask for things for ourselves *from* ourselves, as well as the people around us.

How many other versions are there of the writer, except the one I imagine in the garret?

The writer with another job
The writer in a queue
The writer who is a carer
The writer who is a mother
The writer who is a father
The writer who is a parent

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The writer on a bus

The writer who is not rich

The writer who is not white

The writer who is an immigrant

The writer who is in prison

The writer on the street

The writer with no space of their own

The space of the writing room, though increasingly rarefied, can feel like a credential, an assurance of the quality of the output of the person who works there; the problem of the writer's room is that not everyone has one, or at least, does not have equal access to one. And perhaps, even more importantly, creativity might not always be tied to being solitary. So in this book, we'll explore other writing spaces too: those still based in the home – at the kitchen table, on the sofa, in the living room; those in public where we are surrounded by people, such as libraries and cafes; and those in between, on portable writing desks or typewriters, in hotels, or on the commute. I'd like to create a little more space, open out the writer's room from the four walls, the desk, the chair, the bookcases, the objects that inspire, and find new creative ground. We can let the room stand, for now, but it does not have to be the *only* space that defines the writer and shapes the books we love.

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The writing room can tell us a lot about the history of how we have imagined and talked about writers and creativity in the past, but in the pages that follow, we'll also try to build new spaces that can give us a sense of a more accessible future.

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