

STILL LIFE WITH TEAPOT: ON ZEN, WRITING & CREATIVITY

BRIGID LOWRY

ABOUT THE BOOK

The author was inspired by the courtier Sei Sonagon, whose *Pillow Book* of close observations, lists and witty gossip provides a picture of life in 10th century Japan.

Still Life with Teapot in turn explores what it means to be an ageing woman living in the 21st century. This eclectic mix of creative non-fiction, fiction and poems explores the creative life and what it means to live life creatively. It is the perfect book for people who love to write, are thinking about writing, or who just love to read about writing practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New Zealand-born Brigid Lowry has an MA in Creative Writing and has taught writing at Curtin University and throughout the community. She is a long-time Zen student in the Diamond Sangha tradition and spent her twenties living in a Theravadin Buddhist community. She has a particular interest in spirituality, travel, social justice and food. Lowry is the author of eight books for young adults, including best sellers *Guitar Highway* *Rose* and *Juicy Writing: Inspiration and Techniques for Young Writers*.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

In your essay 'On Zen and Creativity', you talk about the connection between spirituality and creativity, specifically the role of Zen. Is spirituality essential to your creative practice?

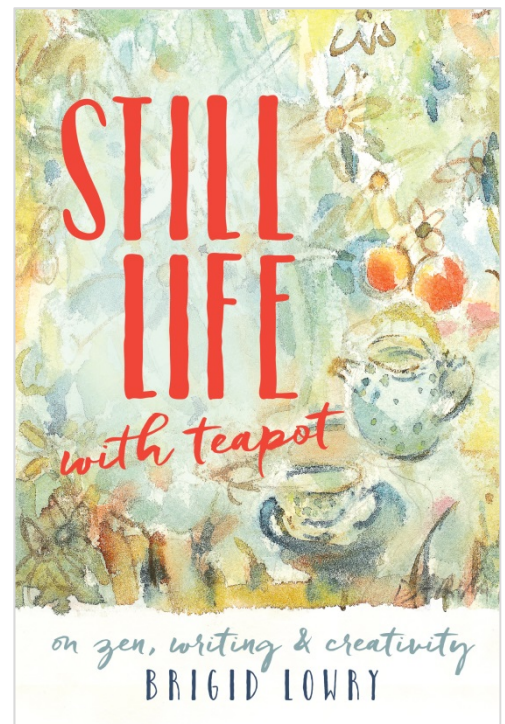
Spirituality and my creative practice are entwined in ways too complex to untangle. In each I meet myself fully, and discover joys, challenges and mysteries. In both there has to be a leap of faith, and both require turning up, whatever the weather.

'The Queen of Everything Soup' was inspired by the famous Pillow Book by Sei Shonagon. What is a 'pillow book' and what made you decide to create one?

The earliest pillow books were erotic in nature but they later became a written record detailing a period of someone's life. I was attracted to Sei Shonagon's work because of her beautiful poetic language and her use of lists. It inspired me to create a similar work based on my own life and times, documenting it on a daily basis in a light-hearted yet meaningful way. I was exploring how one might create a narrative about oneself that was not strictly memoir or autobiography but a playful variation on the form.

What do you see as the relation of your opening essay to the pieces that follow?

When I began writing 'The Queen of Everything Soup', I intended it to be a full-length work but the piece itself had other ideas and decided to be shorter. Subsequently, I realised that some of my earlier work, with some new work added, might be combined to create a coherent whole. I imagine the reader may discover resonances between 'The Queen of Everything Soup' and the rest of the collection.



Your earlier fiction sometimes use lists as a means of telling a story, and lists are one of the recurring themes in *Still Life*. Have you always written lists? Would you say that lists are a kind of poetry?

I've always loved lists and collected them in notebooks when I was a child. In a prose work, lists can function in many ways: showing character, to advance the plot, as a segue to lighten the mood, as a poem within the text. Lists are found everywhere in literature, from Dickens to Shakespeare to Borges, and indeed can be a kind of poetry. They are language condensed and can be many things: funny, sad, strong, strange, poignant, magical.

In *'The Mirrored Surface'*, you say I have thirty-seven years crammed with stories. How did you decide which writing to explore and include in this collection?

This book came together like a lucky jigsaw. After completing 'The Queen of Everything Soup', I submitted a selection of my fiction, essays and poetry to Fremantle Press, who had expressed an interest in the book. I'm older than thirty-seven now, so I had a reasonably large body of work to select from. An architecture began to present itself, although I chose with intuition rather than logic. My editor Georgia Richter had the wisdom to remove most of the fiction and to organise the material into a rough shape, suggesting where the gaps might be. I wrote some new material to fill the gaps, and we found that the work fell into three fairly tidy categories, which was rather nice.

Food is a consistent theme throughout *Still Life*. Can you tell us about the roles food and cooking play in your life and in this book?

As actress Lisa Harrow once said, *Anyone who doesn't like food, I don't like them*. Food is as important as breath: without it we would die. I savour growing my own vegetables, cooking for those I love, reading about food, and watching shows about food from other cultures. Ordinary life and the sacred come together in the kitchen. I've long been fascinated by the role food plays in everyday life, how we use it to comfort, punish, beguile. Cooking keeps us touch with the seasons, with our senses and our appetites. What we love finds its way into our writing, often unintentionally. One of my earliest published poems was about eating a plum and although it was not deliberate, I realise that nearly every piece in this book has food references in it. One of my favorite food quotes is by Jean Anouilh: *I like reality. It tastes like bread*. Or as my Zen teacher Ross Bolleter says, *Nothing is more important than breakfast. Nothing is more profound than lunch*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What function do lists serve in these pieces?
2. What is the role of Marlena's character, and her relationship to the author in the book?
3. In 'On Writing', the author takes on the subject of writer's block, and offers her own advice: *Either write, or don't write*. Do you agree with this suggestion, and her other insights on this topic?
4. How has this book been structured? What is the role of each literary form in the collection?
5. What is the connection the author draws between religion and creativity?
6. What is the relationship between a spiritual practice such as Zen to areas of creative expression, such as cooking, dancing, or gardening? Is Zen creative in itself?
7. The author suggests *treating life as an adventure, not a problem to be fixed*. What are your thoughts on approaching life in this way?

8. The author comments that *the more condensed the form the more difficult the task*. Do you agree with this comment in relation to poetry over prose?
9. Throughout the collection, the author explores the connection between the habits and experiences of childhood, and their influence on adult life. In what ways is this connection visible in the author's work?
10. The author writes that *the cultural message that we are not enough and that we didn't have enough is pervasive and insidious*. Do you agree? What alternative mode of being does it suggest?
11. What themes of family are present in this book? How are they played out through different pieces and characters?
12. How would you define the genre of Lowry's piece 'Dear Pat'?
13. In what way is life writing (creative non-fiction) like a fictional story, and in what ways is it not?
14. Can memoir tell 'the truth'? What vulnerabilities does an author expose when they undertake to write in this form?

CREATIVE WRITING – FOR YOURSELF OR TO SHARE

1. Write your own list or lists using some of Lowry's or Sei Shonagon's prompts. What do your lists say about you? How do your lists differ from those of others? How revealing can a list be?
2. Take a list, or a few lines from one of your lists and turn it into a poem.
3. Practise haikus to explore Lowry's comment: *The more condensed the form the more difficult the task*.
4. Write a short story based on one of your lists, or swap lists and write a story based on someone else's.
5. Write a piece of creative non-fiction about an event or a chapter in your life. Look at ways in which you can deploy the tools of fiction writing (character, dialogue, scene, plot) to write about your 'slice of life'.
6. Write about how has the world changed inside and around you as you have aged. Is your perspective determined by age, or experience? Write about the relationship between a younger you, and the you of now.
7. Write a piece inspired by one of the influences of your own creative process: e.g. religious or spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, and Zen, or activities such as cooking, travelling, and reading.
8. Discuss your own solutions for writer's block.