

Striving to Be Selfish

Ruthann Robson

SUMMARY. In “Striving to Be Selfish,” Ruthann Robson explores the different kinds of selfishness it takes to be a writer and a dyke, especially the necessary focus on the higher self. Distinguishing the writer from the author (and the dyke from the lesbian), she argues that there is an almost spiritual dimension to the practices of writing and sex. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>]

KEYWORDS. Self-writing, selfish, sex, dyke, writer

Being a writer, like being a dyke, is essentially selfish.

It takes a tremendous amount of selfishness to become a writer or a dyke. In both instances, one must put oneself first and foremost. A

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: “Striving to Be Selfish.” Robson, Ruthann. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 4, No. 4, 2000, pp. 125-130; and: *Lesbian Self-Writing: The Embodiment of Experience* (ed: Lynda Hall) Harrington Park Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2000, pp. 125-130. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-342-9678, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com].



Ruthann Robson
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writer must write, which is a solitary activity requiring the forestalling of those who would claim one's time and attention. A dyke must disappoint others who had expectations that she would be heterosexual.

Selfishness has a bad reputation, of course. It's an accusation we level at others when we feel as if we're not getting our due. It's something we may worry over if we suspect it in ourselves. But, the selfishness I think of as negative is displayed by a narrow anxious self, what Freudians would call the ego. A writer's selfishness in those instances might be displayed when she worries over the placement of her work in an anthology or the misspelling of her name. A dyke's selfishness could be apparent when she finds herself resenting her lover's stories of a former lover. The self's anxiety—its "ishness"—concerns its felt necessity of proving its own importance.

But I want to argue for the significance of another kind of selfish-

ness, call it capital “S” Selfishness. For the Self involved in this instance is the capital “S” Self. Forgetting the Freudians and their super-ego, I would prefer to think of this Self as being the drive to connect with something higher and more grandiose than daily life. Some call it Soul, or Spirit, or Goddess, or even God. And some do not name it at all. But practicing this kind of Selfishness paradoxically takes one out of that crabbed and insecure self which is prone to the kind of grasping selfishness we rightly abhor.

Too mystical for many, I suppose. Certainly not trendy in these postmodern times, when it is fashionable to reject any claims to truth or authenticity. Yet as a writer and a dyke, I feel I connect with something higher and more powerful when I engage in those selfish practices that make me a writer and a dyke. Meditation or ballet or pottery or tantric heterosexuality may work for others, but for me it’s writing and sex. I like to think of these practices in broad senses; writing is not just pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), just as sex is not just a finger on a clitoris. It’s the idea scribbled and then crossed out; it’s the flirtation; it’s the car pulled over and pen pulled out to write a phrase; it’s the kiss at the door goodbye and the smile hello. I might even call it a discipline. Working on a stanza because one word sounds wrong; looking at one’s own body with love despite its scars. These practices forge a connection between the daily self and the expansive Self.

Not that I always connect. The struggle is to make that connection and to sustain it. This is not always easy, especially since the writer and the dyke are always in danger of being colonized—or in the term that I prefer, domesticated—by two other identities, that of the author and the lesbian.

Resisting the Author’s domestication of the Writer is often difficult. It requires one to be Selfish. I strive to be Selfish by not allowing the Author much influence. It is the Author who looks at sales figures, who reads reviews, who gives readings and signs books and carefully considers the electronics rights clause in publishing contracts. These things may be necessary, but the Writer’s Self must be protected against them lest they masquerade as the reasons the Writer writes. For I don’t think the Writer writes to be an Author, she writes to explore some core of life that is otherwise inaccessible. Once the Writer concerns herself with sales figures or reviews of her last published effort, then the Writer’s practice of her new work is affected. She might think

of a reviewer's critique that a book did not have a happy ending, for example, and decide to have her new novel have a happy ending. When the impetus for writing comes from a desire to please others, the Writer is paradoxically locked inside her most parochial self.

Being Selfish as a Writer means writing for one's highest most expansive Self and exiling the Author. I have been heavily counseled to write about subjects and in genres other than the ones I am choosing. Replace poetry with a lesbian mystery, I've been told, by persons who believed they had my best interests at heart. Make my characters more likable, it's been suggested. Write shorter, write longer, take out the sex, pen erotica. The advice is often contradictory, but it consistently ignores the Self in favor of the market driven concerns that would interest the Author.

I try to write for my highest Self, but I often start my writing process with the ideas that interest my embodied lower case "s" self. I write things I want to know, but don't yet know when I start the writing. I write to solve a problem or explore an issue, even if that "issue" is one that I construct as a character, a plot, or a setting. For example, in the series of linked stories that is *Cecile*, I was occupied by the daily lives of two lesbians who were in love and stayed that way throughout the book. Until that time, I had not read a book involving a lesbian relationship that did not involve either a getting together love story or a breaking up/death tragedy. In the novel *Another Mother*, the situation I set for myself was a lesbian who was admired and cool and a professional role model on the outside and totally messed up on the inside. And in the novel *a/k/a*, I worried over whether there were such things as an essential core of identity and love at first sight.

Although fueled by lowercase "s" self-concerns, the actual practice of writing can lead to the concerns of this higher Self. For example, in *a/k/a*, my interest in the phenomenon of love at first sight led me to places that I could never have anticipated. In a novella entitled *Close to Utopia*, which will be part of my forthcoming collection of fiction, *The Struggle for Happiness*, I started with the issue of animal rights and found myself contemplating communication between animals and humans. Often, however, there is nothing in the content of the writing that reveals connection with the higher Self. For it is not really a matter of subject as much as it is a matter of the process, the practice, the craft. It's the juxtaposition of images, alliteration imagined or abandoned, a structural problem solved. It's listening to the chant-like

sound of a line that no one else may hear or building the abstract scaffolding of a novel that will be invisible to most. It's sniffing out a word until it leaps out from behind the most unlikely bush, startling and almost scary.

Creative writing is most likely to manifest the epiphanies that mark connections with the higher Self, but I also try to practice Selfish Scholarship. Again, I strive to write about things that I want to know. What are the connections between the ways lesbians are treated in law and literature? How are lesbians treated when they are criminal defendants? How do critiques of narrative implicate lesbian narratives? What would happen if Sappho went to law school? Is it true that lesbians were never prosecuted for their sexual acts? In exploring these questions, I accessed what I thought were acceptable answers through the process of writing, supported by research and theorizing. As in fiction and poetry, however, I did not know what I wanted to say before I started the struggle to articulate it. Thus, I do not write to persuade or inform. I write because I want to know, even if what I want to know is only what I think about something.

I cannot always be Selfish, however, or even selfish. Like many others, writing is a part of the ways in which I earn a living. In my many years of working, as an attorney and a professor, I have written countless letters, more memos than I would like, a file cabinet full of exam hypotheticals and multiple choice questions, and probably hundreds of persuasive legal documents of all sorts. This type of writing is "work." Further, when asked, I do agree to do things that do not contribute to earning a living that I would classify as "service" rather than work or writing, such as encyclopedia entries, book reviews, and manuscript assessments. The Author rather than the Writer is asked to do these things and the Author rather than the Writer performs them. Nevertheless, I try to limit these activities and never allow the Author to write creatively. So when I am asked to submit a piece of erotica or a memoir or some science fiction, my possibility of submission is limited by pieces I have already written, even if only in draft.

My best writing—which may not be my most popular work or my most critically acclaimed work—occurs when my Self is caught making love with something higher than its self. Which brings me to the Selfishness of being a dyke.

Like the Writer in danger of being domesticated by the Author, the

Dyke lives in danger of being domesticated by the Lesbian. The Lesbian is the softer, more socially acceptable version, who struggles for the status of sexual subject in the context of political rights and who argues that her relationships are commensurate with heterosexual ones. The Lesbian is necessary, as is the Author, for she is the public figure whose goal is often to protect the private reality. Yet again, the inner Dyke needs to be protected from the outer Lesbian. The Lesbian would convince the Dyke that her reality is “equal” to heterosexuality. She would say that its ludicrous to believe that the practices of dykedom—whatever one believes them to be—come from some higher Self or connect with some higher Spirit.

I am not advocating that Writers or Dykes abandon the sensory or intellectual worlds in favor of some shapeless spirituality. In fact, I believe Writers and Dykes must live fully in these realms. The smell of ink and my lover’s sweat. The logical structure of a paragraph and a discussion in bed with my lover. But these are not the only realms that are accessible to me as a Dyke and as a Writer. Not the only realms that surface in conversations with other Dykes and other Writers. Not the realms which cause me to be Selfish.

To be a Dyke Writer is to be Selfish. Being a Dyke is attempting to communicate with this capital “S” Self through the body. Being a Writer is attempting to communicate with this capital “S” Self through language. Yet both the body and language are ultimately inadequate. It’s the fate—and the joy—of the Dyke Writer that we keep trying, in our Selfish determination and ambition, to get it right.