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3 DAYS AGO EDIT

Nurses and Creative Writing

Nurses and Creative Writing: An Interview with Nurse Author Jeanne Bryner

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How many of us have purchased novels written by nurses or other healthcare providers about their experiences in the field? During my time as a critical care nurse, I read with fervor any descriptions of emergency room nursing. Many nurses considered a profession in healthcare after reading youth literature that described the lives and work of nurses, such as the Sue Barton or Cherry Ames series. In my original nursing education, I was assigned to read *The Cry and The Covenant* by Morton Thompson, (1949), historical fiction about the impact of Ignaz Semmelweis and his efforts to control puerperal fever through handwashing. I found this story far more riveting than any textbook description of hand hygiene!

Inherent to the careers of most nurses are a rich variety of knowledge and experiences to share with audiences of all backgrounds and ages. Most nurse authors use scholarly writing as a form of dissemination for their completed works, such as research studies or clinical projects. Their writings may include formal publications in peer reviewed journals, invited editorials, and textbooks.

The journey to scholarly publication requires dedication and persistence, thus the satisfaction of seeing one's work in print. However, there are options for nurse authors who may enjoy other styles of writing for different purposes. Nurses who pursue creative writing often do so as an outlet to process their experiences and find meaning in the journeys of a caregiver and the recipient of care. Examples of creative publishing can include short stories, novels, poetry, plays, and even photo documentaries. I recently had the opportunity to interview a colleague, Jeanne Bryner, RN, BA, CEN who has successfully pursued both her clinical career and her passion for creative writing for 40 years. Jeanne has published nine books; her work is been adapted for the stage in national and international venues.

As we talked about her experiences, Jeanne offered a number of valuable suggestions for nurses who wish to consider writing about nursing or healthcare in the creative writing genre. Among the wisdom that she first offered is, "Write about your passion!" Jeanne has done just that as much of her work reflects health-related experiences from her childhood that influenced her decision to pursue nursing as a career. Her work also significantly reflects her Appalachian roots, which through her writing has become a source of pride. Her most recent work has concentrated on preserving the



Jeanne Bryner

stories of nurses. A biography of Jeanne's work and education is included at the end of this article. .

WHERE DO I START?

Jeanne began writing as a nursing student. She wrote about patients who received her care; she wrote about her life. Her mother died when she was 17, and as she continued her nursing education in mental health, she learned what had been the source of her mother's illness, something that she could not realize at the time. She started writing poetry while simply trying to figure things out. Another example was an upsetting incident that occurred while she worked in the intensive care unit. This spurred her desire to increase advocacy for children, and she achieved that through more writing. Writing it down would help her to clarify the issue at hand.

As you write, let the topic come to you. Start with a question. The question that Jeanne often asks is, "Why is this important? Who gets to be remembered?" For example, Jeanne said she never saw anything about her Appalachian culture or photographs of people who looked like her family. The culture shaming that she had felt in school dissipated as she began to write about it. As the volume of her writing increased and her skills improved, she was able to represent her culture in a meaningful and positive way. Letting the topic come to you can be a journey in itself. You may write it first as a poem, and then rewrite it at a later point as a play or a story.

Read as much as you can on your topics of interest and in your preferred genre. If you wish to write poems, read many different types of poetry. Early on, Jeanne realized that she had never read contemporary poetry. It was through extensive reading in the genre, studying different types of poems, and eventually meeting several poets, that she came to understand that poetry was a fit for her ideas.

WHO CAN HELP?

When we have not yet learned the specifics of something new, we seek those who can answer our questions. We look for mentors. This strategy also works for creative writers! It can be intimidating to communicate with someone who is “famous,” but keep in mind that most people enjoy talking about what they know best with people who show genuine interest.

Sign up for classes. While working as a nurse, Jeanne made the decision to return to school for a bachelor’s degree in English. She signed up for as many different classes as she could on the advice of a mentor who said, “You never know which class will be the one that will spark your writing.” Also consider workshops and conferences which may be shorter and more focused and do not require a large time commitment.

Become familiar with nurses who have published in similar genres. Read their work. Investigate the publishers or journals they have used for publication and consider submitting your work to one of them. Not only are these published nurses potential mentors, they have paved the road that you wish to travel. Let their successes inform your growth as a creative writer. Other publishing options included local or regional publications, or a university press.

Copyright in fiction writing and publishing is an important issue and it is fundamentally different than the approach used for copyright in scholarly journals for scientific publications. Jeanne noted that a thorough discussion of this issue was beyond the scope of our conversation, but she did stress that it is important to authors to be informed and knowledgeable, so that your work is not misappropriated. Seek advice from appropriate legal and informational resources.

In sum, make an intentional effort to find the persons and resources to inform your writing journey. Table 1 lists a few resources that have been helpful to Jeanne.

Table 1. Examples of Helpful Resources for Creative Writers

Resource	Description
Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) https://www.awpwriter.org/	<p>“AWP provides support, advocacy, resources, and community to nearly 50,000 writers, 550 college and university creative writing programs, and 150 writers’ conferences and centers. Our mission is to foster literary achievement, advance the art of writing as essential to a good education, and serve the makers, teachers, students, and readers of contemporary writing.”</p>
<i>The Writers Chronicle</i>	<p>Published by AWP. According to the website, this magazine offers articles, news, and information for writers, including authors, students and teachers. Published four times during the academic year. Examples of helpful resources include in-depth essays about writing; author interviews; trends and controversies; and information about funding, awards, publication venues, and writing conferences.</p>
<i>The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity</i> , by Julia Cameron (1992/2002), Tarcher/Putnam	<p>A book in the self-help genre that helps people to find creative skills from within. The author uses strategies such as “morning pages” and “artist’s dates” to build skills and decrease self-doubt. Especially helpful for those new to creative writing.</p>
<i>Poets & Writers Magazine</i> ; Poets & Writers website: https://www.pw.org/	<p>A non-profit organization that serves creative writers with a magazine and website with resources. Examples of resources include current news about writing; writing prompts; links to tools for writers such as large and small presses, literary agents, grants and awards, and retreats.</p>

HOW CAN I BALANCE WORK AND WRITING?

Achieving a balance of work and writing, in addition to other responsibilities such as family and self-care, also builds on the skills you already have as a nurse. Finding time to write successfully will require advocating for yourself. This is often a challenge for nurses who find it difficult to say no. But, just as with scholarly writers, creative writers must bring dedication and perseverance to the writing journey. This takes time and practice.

Jeanne found it helpful to set a goal and keep her eye on the prize. She recommends thoughtful consideration to determine exactly what you would like to accomplish. Think about the scope. Do you want to write a poem or a book of poetry? Once you know, write down the steps required and create an estimated timeline. Having this in writing will help you to stay on track and to advocate for yourself as you move forward.

Develop a network of supporters. Find persons with whom you can collaborate, schedule wise, to create a win-win situation. For example, Jeanne was able to work out a flexible schedule with another nurse that benefited them both, allowing her to attend classes and workshops. This worked for a while, but ultimately she had to make a case for her needs at a level above her immediate manager. Consider how your work may benefit the mission of the institution. Again, having written goals and timelines can support your requests. It is unreasonable to expect flexibility every time, so take advantage of it when it works and revise the timeline when it does not. Communicate your gratitude for support received. Persist!

Treat your creative writing as professional growth. As you build your work, it can be helpful to develop a portfolio of examples and include letters of support from one or two mentors. Your published work represents you personally, but also in a professional capacity at your place of employment. Continued evidence of growth

in any genre, including creative writing, is a source of pride and should also support your career progression. A portfolio can also be helpful to securing funding for classes or workshops.

Finding the balance of work, family life, and writing is in your hands. It will be different for each person considering factors such as responsibility for young children or frail elders, ability to work part-time, and one's personal health. Take heart in knowing that this is true for many writers. In the end, we make time for what is important to us. At certain points in life you may not be able to write at all, but that does not preclude returning to your efforts at a later opportunity.

LOWS AND HIGHS

I asked Jeanne to briefly reflect on some of the lows and highs of her 40 year journey in nursing and creative writing. As her success grew, she found that people she has known for years were sometimes less supportive than she anticipated. There was the occasional hurtful comment, not about the quality of her work, but rather about her accomplishments as a writer. This was a surprise and a disappointment.

The joy of having her hard work recognized, both through publication and as the recipient of awards, is always a pleasure. Although she began with writing stories and poems, throughout her time as a writer she has edited four anthologies. The ability to develop her writing skills to the point of offering writing workshops and the staging of some of her written work in the theater has been a source of great satisfaction. Finally, she noted that in writing she realized that, "Patients were teaching me how to love my own life more." Putting her thoughts in words, and working to capture it as perfectly as possible, served as a therapeutic outlet for the joy and heartbreak in both her work as a nurse and her life.

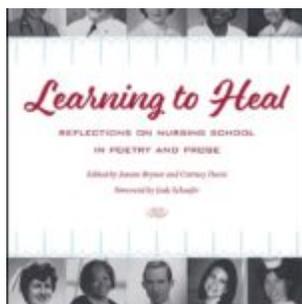
CONCLUSION: MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Jeanne left me with a very important point. Not only is her creative writing therapeutic for her own emotional healing but, similar to scholarly dissemination, it informs her practice. Jeanne has offered writing workshops for patients in a variety of settings, including nursing homes and oncology units. Real changes have occurred as a result of these workshops. People reflect, tell stories, and share memories. Jeanne recorded these stories and typed transcripts to share with the patients which becomes yet another avenue for growth.

I close with a few of her final thoughts for nurse authors. Take time to reflect on your life, and life calling as a nurse. Use creative writing as a resource to find stories about people. How do we survive, both nurses and patients? As you reflect, what parts of your thinking emerge as your passion? Start with that passion and your questions and build your skills. Most important, if the opportunity arises, use your creative writing to change your practice.

ABOUT JEANNE BRYNER

Jeanne Bryner, RN, BA, CEN, is a registered nurse and writer who was born in Appalachia and grew up in Newton Falls, Ohio. A graduate of Trumbull Memorial Hospital School of Nursing and Kent State University's Honors College, she teaches writing workshops in schools, universities, nursing homes and with cancer support groups. She has nine books in print, and her work has been adapted for the stage and performed in nationally and at the 2004 Fringe Festival of Edinburgh, Scotland. Her nursing poetry was performed by Cleveland's Verb's Ballet in Akron and Cleveland, OH, and Johnstown, PA.



Jeanne has edited four anthologies, *Safehouse: Women Living With Cancer*; *Song: Breast Cancer Survivors*; *All Night With a Glow of Fire*; and *All Night With a Glow of Fire II*. Her books are *Breathless*; *Blind Horse*; *Eclipse*; *Tenderly Lift Me: Nurses Honored, Celebrated and Remembered*; *No Matter How Many Windows*; and *Smoke*, which

tells the story of her nursing career. Jeanne's most recent anthology, *Learning to Heal: Reflections on Nursing School in Poetry and Prose*, received the 2019 Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing and the first place in creative works, *American Journal of Nursing Book of the Year Awards*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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