

Writing with MS

Helen Fowler writes about her experience living – and writing – with multiple sclerosis

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Discovering you have an incurable illness attacking your brain is bad news for anyone, but perhaps especially so for writers, since we rely on such complex neurological circuitry for the planning, memory, imagination and stamina involved in our work.

For many – if not all – of the 2.3 million men and women around the world living with multiple sclerosis (MS), news of having the disease is cataclysmic, as I can testify. I was finally diagnosed with the disease myself six years ago, aged 46, after what felt like a lifetime of people asking why I was stumbling so much.

Doctors finally worked out what was wrong with me after I became unable to walk without falling over or remember my own children's names. My memory and mobility have slowly come back since that last attack, with the help of medication and physiotherapy, though not completely. The illness has forced me to reassess every part of my life, including, of course, my work. I'm no longer a journalist; my short-term memory is too damaged.

Although sad at giving up work I loved, I've begun to pursue a long-held dream of writing fiction. I'm at university in Stirling, studying for an MLitt in creative writing and finding solace in my new craft.

Other writers who suffer from MS say that writing represents a refuge for them too. A hunger for escape has been one of the biggest impacts of her MS on Caroline Dunford, author of the *Euphemia Martins* mysteries. 'The worlds I create are places I can go,' she says. 'It's the relief of being in a world where I'm not ill, where, through my characters, I can do the things I can't do in real life.'

Writing has offered refuge to American-British author Nicola Griffith too. Paralleling my experience, Griffith's 1993 diagnosis with MS forced her to re-think her career. She dropped her work as a self-defence teacher and reinvented herself as a full-time writer. Since then, Griffith has become, perhaps, best-known for her 2013 novel *Hild*.

The mystery surrounding the disease – its etiology remains unknown – might also encourage people in their writing careers, suggests Dunford. 'Maybe that exacerbates our curiosity as writers,' she says.

Writing as comfort

MS can propel us into writing before we even know what is wrong with us. I was so bad at games as a teenager that I gravitated unthinkingly towards more sedentary pursuits such as hanging out in the library. No matter how hard I tried to play hockey, school reports used to bemoan my 'lack of coordination' on the pitch. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, I suspect my clumsiness

was an early sign of my MS.

While writing can be a form of escape from physical limitations, for some writers, it can also, paradoxically, be a way of facing up to the reality of those problems. When newly diagnosed, I wrote first-person pieces for *The Scotsman* about the indignities and challenges of living with the illness. It helped bring me a measure of peace.

Sometimes the act of writing can bring much-needed closure on harrowing episodes in our lives. In her 2012 essay 'Hardy Animal', published in *Granta*, novelist M.J. Hyland writes poignantly of the 'comfort' offered by a neurologist who tries to reassure her by saying, 'On average it's at least ten to fifteen years before you need a wheelchair'.

Having MS can dictate how we go about putting words on screen, and assistive technology can be invaluable here. Nowadays I write sitting up in bed on a tablet. In the past I had to struggle with a desktop computer. Video-conferencing services such as Skype and Zoom allow writers to interview and carry out research with people across the world, without needing to leave the house.

Some damage cannot be so easily side-stepped. Memory loss, for example, means writers with MS have to plan meticulously. Says Griffith, 'It does affect the intricacies of plot, for example, when rewriting – not doing things I set out to do because I forgot. It's that seventy-thousand-foot level that's hard to maintain with MS.'

Frustrating though the memory loss, fatigue and physical limitations can be, there are times when the experience of MS contributes more positively to my writing. For example, the illness has given me more compassion for other people's struggles. Griffith echoes my experience, saying: 'What's happened has made me who I am as a writer.'

I'm now writing a memoir about my old life as a journalist, before I knew I had MS. Learning that I've probably had the illness since my teens has caused me to rethink the intervening years, and I'm exploring that in my work.

In the past I used to castigate myself for being lazy if I slept late. Now, finally, I understand that the fatigue was a symptom of MS. I wasn't being flaky or work-shy, I was genuinely unwell. Much as I might resent it, MS is having an inescapable influence on my writing. ●



Helen Fowler is studying for an MLitt in creative writing at the University of Stirling and writing a memoir about life as a journalist in 1990s London. More recently, she has contributed to titles including the *Daily Mail*, *The Scotsman*, *Woman and Home* and *The Journalist*.