

## **Does the writer have a responsibility?**

Diana Evans

There is an old idea, among some people who don't write, and sometimes people who do, that writing is not 'work'. It is not 'a job'. Indeed, it comes with no boss, no office hierarchy and, more often than not, no commute. By extension, it has none of the positive aspects of a real job, such as a pension, holiday pay, a free gym and financial security. This may imply, on a fundamental level, that there is no responsibility that goes with the act of writing. It is not essential to the world. The writer is not accountable, valuable, answerable to anything larger than herself.

I have often considered this idea when in the throes of writing a novel, and meanwhile my children are growing up, presidencies and premierships are changing, ice caps are melting, seasons are shifting. I ask myself whether what I am doing in this room at the top of the house is important. Is it necessary? If I did not complete this novel, for instance, if I did not climb the spiral stairs and sit down for five or six hours at my desk in the sky, and apply the images, voices and movements in my head to paper, would the world mind, or even notice? The answer is always probably no, and this is a sobering thought. No one is making me do this, this sometimes painful, difficult, demanding thing. The writer has only herself to insist that she climb those stairs the next day and the next and the next, except maybe an

agent or editor who is waiting with some gentle urgency, but then, too, as Toni Morrison once said, 'You're all you've got'.

In the face of this, what always keeps me climbing – for a novel is a mountain and the summit often feels unreachable – is the very opposite answer to the question, an answer without which writing would not be sustainable as a life's work. Yes, it *is* important. It is essential. It is meaningful and crucial and of value to the world. This belief, which can get entangled with self-belief, is at the heart of my faith in any project I embark on. I believe, in some way, in the work's slight and nebulous ability to change the world, even simply by showing what and who we are, by offering ways and other pictures of living, by documenting human and societal experience, the way Tolstoy's work provided a record of nineteenth-century Russian life, or Dickens showed us his ugly yet beautiful London, or Lucia Berlin gave us an insight into American lives not often witnessed in the country's national letters. Because writing is voicing, a facilitation of expression and agency and visibility. The world becomes larger where it can sometimes feel small, or indeed becomes more felt, more specific, more emotive where it can seem too expansive or impersonal. Every book should have in its soul a desire to change the world, to make it better, to do something good. Now more than ever, a writer's responsibility is clear.

### **Diana Evans**

Diana Evans is the author of the novels *A House for Alice*, *Ordinary People*, *The Wonder* and *26a*, which was the inaugural winner of the Orange Award for New Writers. *Ordinary People* won the 2019 South Bank Sky Arts Award for Literature and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize

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A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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