

Andreas Weber

Confessions of An Irritated Man

WHY

Let me start with a confession: I have never before thought to question why I write. But when I received the long list of interesting themes from the IWP I misunderstood something and chose three or four different ones, and when Joe asked me to confine myself to one I said to myself: why not think and talk about the basic question of my professional existence. For the first time, for a change, as a sort of challenge.

So I sat on a bench by the lake near my house in Pichling, which is a suburb of Linz in Austria, where I usually sit and think and read and write, and the first thing I understood was why I had never before asked myself why I write: I want writers to tell me stories, to open my mind and soul and whatever there is in me to be influenced by their work – but I'm definitely not very interested in knowing why they wrote their texts. Well, one might say, what about Hemingway? His life was one of the biggest adventures of his time and an important influence on his literary productions, no doubt. You definitely understand more about the character Robert Jordan's desperate sentimentality when you know about Ernest's participation in the Spanish Civil War. But I'm not Hemingway. And I did not write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. And for me it always has this slightly embarrassing smack of vanity, when someone who writes tells me why he has to do so, without me having asked him.

O.K., I was asked. I chose to be asked by the IWP.

And I decided to be as honest as possible: I write professionally because I'm completely spoiled for proper jobs. Spoiled by literature. I took it literally, when I read Thomas Bernhard—one of the greatest Austrian writers of the 20th century—and came across sentences like: *everything is ridiculous, thinking about the death*. Or when the French existentialist writer Albert Camus said: there is no meaning in life and man should be a rebel and not accept what society expects, but do what he wants. What a relief this was! I knew exactly what I did not want: children, a family, a house with a garden, an eight-to-five job with two weeks of summer and winter holidays. I was interested in women, soccer, the Rolling Stones, movies, literature and philosophy. I worked various jobs and slid into journalism. My vague idea of freedom had to be realized by means of freelance work. Then my friends married one after the other, got their houses, families and proper jobs. I felt irritated and increasingly dissatisfied with my jobs, journalism and my life. To this day I don't know why, but in 1991 I decided to write an existentialist novel. I knew this was impossible in Austria, where I had to hold down various jobs to pay my bills. So I applied for a job as a so-called foreign language assistant when I was 32, and went to Devon, in southwest England, where I held conversational exercises for 12 hours a week and had plenty of time to write.

It did not work. I simply did not know what and how to write, only that there was so much I had to write. And one day I sat on a bench in Ilfracombe, looked out onto the Bristol Channel, saw Wales in the

distance and read Arthur Schopenhauer's book *The World as Will and Representation*. It may sound elevated, but the first sentence of this book changed my little life. It says: "The world is my representation."

I said to myself: Write what YOU want, don't care about publishers, success and what people might say, it's YOUR world. I went to my flat and started to write my existentialist novel, but somehow eight stories fell out of the novelistic idea. And when I wrote, I took things seriously, which had not been my strongest point before then. Through writing I understood myself and so many things and feelings and fears and pleasures much better than before. I still want to understand and feel as much as possible. And that is why I write.

WHAT

I write about my life, which started without television. My parents had lots of love for their four children, but not much money. We lived in a 56 square-meter flat and my father, who was a soldier in the Austrian army, said: "There is no room for a television set, it would ruin any family-life." I think he was right. I started to read when I was very young.

I finished grammar school and when my friends started to study useful things like business, medicine and technology—pushed or at least influenced by their parents, who paid for them—my parents said: You can do whatever you want, but you will have to pay for it yourself, all we can offer you is a place to sleep at home. So I studied Literature and History. The first 9 semesters I was supported by a grant awarded by the Austrian social system, but I studied for 19 semesters and in the end I had not only my degree but also some special non-academic experiences, which saved me from being bored by my life.

I went to England, where the eight stories of my first book are located. I wrote about people who once had high ambitions and great ideas—soccer-players, writers, teachers, businessmen—and their way of living when they had to cope with the reality of everyday life and not being someone special. My first novel is about a crime committed by a mob in my home-town two days before the end of World War II and how people react when a stranger comes to town in 1968 to charge the people involved with their responsibility. My second collection of stories is about the lives of writers and the ways they handle their success or their daily fiascos. My third novel, which I hope to finish in Iowa, is the story of a son who after his father's death translates his dream of being a writer into reality. You probably won't be amazed to hear that my third novel, which is already sketched and partly written, deals with a guy from Austria who gets in touch with the former bass player of the Rolling Stones, an experience that changes his life completely.

HOW

I handwrite. The very first draft of all my stuff I quickly write by hand, because this writing is a little bit like breathing. The typing with the computer is the first and a very important step of development, where thirty handwritten sentences turn out to be three or vice versa. Then I take the printed text and sit on my bench at

the lake, or in a place with a view or in the train or somewhere else beautiful, and work on it. Print it again. Go over it and print it and go over it and print it, until it is finished.

Let me end with another confession: now, I live in a house with a garden; I have three grown-up children, who I didn't procreate; I've lived with my wife, to whom I'm not married, for 20 years - and I am very happy. But that's another story – and maybe my fourth novel.

As I said, I'm an irritated man.