

# Drowning the Children

*To a writer,  
interruptions are life*

Alice Mattison

Before I had children I wrote intermittently, but that was impossible once I had a baby. When my first child, Jacob, was a year old, it occurred to me to hire a sitter, who came twice a week for two hours. I carried a cup of coffee to the basement of our little house in Sonoma County, California. In the basement I did laundry, listened to Jacob's rapid footsteps above my head, and wrote. I'd been writing poems off and on for years, but for the first time I had some I wasn't afraid to offer for publication. At the public library, I copied addresses of seven magazines that published poetry, typed seven envelopes addressed to them and seven addressed to me. I sent three poems to the first magazine and they came back. I put them into the second envelope, which was addressed to the *New American Review*, a good magazine that lasted for a few years in the seventies. Richard Howard was the poetry editor, and he took one. So I thought it was easy to publish.

The magazine paid me thirty-five dollars for my poem, and printed it. I put the money toward a better typewriter, a refurbished portable Olympia, and then longingly eyed it as it sat shut up in its case. By this time, we'd moved. The California house, under redwoods, was dark all day, our cats were killed by feral dogs running by in packs, and cars on our road drove at 65 miles per hour. I told Edward, my husband, that I couldn't raise my child without sidewalks and a playground—we'd both grown up in New York—and we moved to New Haven, where we'd lived happily before, and rented an apartment on Canner Street. It was light and roomy, but there was no place I could escape from my ever-present son, no convenient basement. Once or twice I hired a sitter and went to the library, but I missed my typewriter and coffee, and the librarians' talk made concentration impossible. Soon I was pregnant again, sleepy and distracted. I wasn't writing.

At the playground in East Rock Park I met two fathers who

turned out to be working their turns at the Children's Co-op, a day-care center in the basement of the Church of the Redeemer on Whitney Avenue. Parents ran the place, with just one teacher. There were long parent meetings, parents took turns bringing food for the group, and each parent worked four hours a week with the children. The women's movement was new and feisty, and the day-care recruiter took delight in rebuffing traditional families in which meek wives offered to work turns and do food weeks for their important husbands. That day at the swings, I liked the daddies' banter, their easy way with the children. We joined, though Edward, a legal-aid lawyer, had to leave his office for four hours a week to work a turn, just so I could write poems in our bedroom. I felt guilty, and I knew I dawdled and wasted time as much as I wrote, but I insisted anyway, and Edward put up with occasional nastiness at work about his absences each week, which he took as vacation time. When I told people that my child went to day care while I wrote poems, I knew that to some I seemed to reject my baby in order to do nothing, but I wanted the writing time too much not to make it happen. When someone who lived near the church complained that naked children ran in the yard, within seconds I imagined my intensely political fellow parents refusing to put pants on the children, the minister closing us down—and no more writing.

I didn't sell another poem for three years. Like many new writers I made a collage of rejection slips and hung it on the wall, taking some comfort from its colors: if my arrangement needed more green, I'd send a few poems to a journal with a green rejection slip. Ben was born in the midst of Watergate, the week John Dean testified. He couldn't start daycare until he was a year old, but his babyhood was easier than Jacob's—Ben was a sleepy baby, and I wrote while Jacob was at day care and Ben slept. When his naps grew shorter I hired a sitter and tried various solutions: bringing my typewriter to an unused room at the church, where people walked in on me; typing in a friend's attic, which grew too hot as spring came.

The daycare didn't close, and after a long year at home, Ben

began to spend his afternoons there. While Nixon resigned and Ford was succeeded by Carter, I finally published some poems in journals, got an adjunct teaching job at Albertus Magnus College, and gave birth to our third son, Andrew. We bought a small house with a study for me. I gave a few readings: there was a Festival of Arts and Politics; there were group readings to which I was invited on the basis of my few published poems. A room called the Theater in the Space, up a rickety flight of stairs on Orange Street, held readings with open microphones. Poets shouted over the sound of dishes being washed at a vegetarian restaurant where food was served by "waitpersons," a term I'd never seen before. Edward and six friends came the night of my reading and sat in a circle. I didn't know the woman in charge, and it seemed to epitomize my writing career when she said, "Tell me something about yourself, so I can let these people know who you are."

My poems were mostly about the intensity and wildness of having children. I'd spend my mornings with them, then trundle them off to day care in a big stroller, and, unless it was my day to work a turn, go home and have three-and-a-half hours off. I'd do the *Times* crossword puzzle, fix a cup of instant coffee, and write. Then I'd rush back to daycare. Putting my hand on the gate seemed to waken me, to divert my attention from the inside of my head, making it possible to greet people coherently and organize my kids into their shoes and jackets and out the door. A moral problem arose when other daycare parents wanted to trade turns with me. Presumably I could work a turn anytime and write anytime, but I hated schedule changes, and felt wrenched out of myself if I had to be with people on what should have been a writing day. I slowly learned to say no. I'd feel guilty, but say it anyway.

By the time Jacob started school, Ben was in day care. When Ben went to kindergarten, Andrew was in day care, after his baby year at home—during which I began writing short stories as well as poems. Eventually the stories took over and I became a fiction writer. A long time later, Andrew went to kindergarten—but kinder-

garten was all of two-and-a-half hours long. One day a month—Parent Inconvenience Days, Edward and I called them—kindergarten lasted for only an hour and a half. Finally the kids were all in school, and I had time to write—as long as it wasn't summer, wasn't one of the mysterious days children were sent home from school early, wasn't February vacation or some other vacation, wasn't a snow day, wasn't a day I had to teach. I was ungracious when my children were home sick.

One summer, my only writing time was during *Batman*. Every afternoon at four the kids would gather in front of the TV and I'd run up the stairs yelling "Bat poems!" Half an hour later I'd hear their footsteps approaching. Once, a two-week Christmas vacation was followed by a week of snow days, and I was so frantic with pent-up writing that I descended, willy-nilly, into that inward place, and for twenty-four hours couldn't speak. When the kids finally went to college, one by one, they were gone except for phone calls—but when they came home on their many vacations, they were altogether present, along with their friends and lovers. I don't write easily when anyone is in the house. Now they all have lives of their own. I miss them keenly and am delighted to see them—and of course, they're still an interruption.

In the winter of 1979 my sons were 8, 6, and 3 years old, and I was teaching one course in writing or literature each term, usually on Saturday mornings. I wrote poems and stories when Jacob and Ben were in school and Andrew was in daycare. By that time I'd published a dozen or so poems and had completed a book manuscript, which had been turned down more than twenty times. I hadn't published any fiction. A few days before the start of the spring term at Albertus Magnus, that January, my boss in Continuing Education, Sister Jane McDermott, phoned to tell me my class had been canceled for insufficient enrollment. I was so upset I hung up on her, and as the weeks passed I was still distraught. I liked teaching and wanted the money, but I had another difficulty as well. Despite all that writing, I was accustomed to describing myself—defining my-

self—as a teacher: before having children I'd taught English full-time in a couple of community colleges and earned a Ph.D. in literature. If asked what I did I'd always said I was a teacher or an unemployed teacher; lately I'd added, mumbling, "and I write." But if teaching could vanish so casually, maybe I wasn't, fundamentally, a teacher. I'd been writing much of my life, seriously for the previous seven or eight years, yet I wasn't sure I wanted to be a writer. As time passed and Sister Jane phoned periodically, trying to cheer me up, I explained to myself, week by week, what I didn't like about writing. I thought of eight disadvantages, then no more. Eight, after all, wasn't a thousand, so I decided I would be a writer, and have never changed my mind. Though Sister Jane found work for me in the fall, and I've taught in one setting or another ever since, I've never described myself as a teacher again. I'm a writer. And (mumble) I teach.

The eight disadvantages are: No money. No respect. No response for a long time. No certainty that what you're doing will benefit anybody. No certainty that the particular project you're working on will turn out worth keeping. No colleagues. No structure helping you to get started. No structure warding off interruptions.

Many years after making that list, I've published that book of poems and eight books of fiction, and I've come to terms with most of the disadvantages. I earn modest sums from publishing fiction and from teaching in a master's program and in writers' conferences. I occasionally get heaps of respect, though publishing is so chancy I never feel secure. (I still encounter skepticism when I tell strangers I'm a writer. They still ask, "Do you publish?" I used to think I'd feel fine if I could just say yes. Now I do, and they say, "Under what name?") I'm used to the long lag between writing and response, to the uncertainty that my work will do anybody any good, and to the necessity for working hard on a piece that may come to nothing. I've found colleagues—fellow writers with whom I share manuscripts, anxieties, e-mails, and pleasurable talk. Eventually I begin new projects, even without a contract or a deadline, and occasionally

I have a deadline.

But week after week, year after year, I still struggle with interruptions, often blaming myself, often enraged, often at a loss—just as if I were new to the trade. I'm fierce; I never have lunch with friends on writing days; I make appointments in the late afternoon if possible; I tell house guests when to clear out. Yet too often interruptions prevent or destroy writing. Unless a writer escapes to an artists' colony—which I've done several times—there's never a structure warding interruptions off.

**People in every field are interrupted, of course—if not by children** then perhaps by frail parents who need care, or by sickness or disability. Everybody doing ill-paid, much-loved work is interrupted by the need for a day job. But those who work at home also hear from telemarketers, Jehovah's Witnesses, and roofers next door playing a radio as they work. If a writer were a Victorian gentleman with a protective wife and a staff of servants, a house might almost be an office, but most of us have to answer the doorbell ourselves—or lose time and concentration, wondering who it was.

Yet interruption has its place. Children were my main interruption for years but they made writing possible, and not just because staying home with them gave me a good excuse not to hold a full-time job. There are good interruptions—looking at art and listening to music are two of them. For all I know, some writer somewhere got a great idea during a conversation with a Jehovah's Witness at the front door, and much good literature has been written about illness. My parents took up much of my time in their last years, and their care has led, indirectly, to a great deal of fiction. Some interruptions, even unpleasant ones, foster creativity and make the imagination roomier and more flexible. Children are a good interruption—if they aren't around all the time.

I think it's not coincidental that I became serious about writing when I was a new mother. Until my first pregnancy, I was uneasy in my body—shy about sex, impossible at sports, unable to

dance. Childbirth did not particularly appeal to my imagination, but pregnancy fascinated me, and breast-feeding was the first physical activity that I was undeniably good at. My body gave the baby food and gave me pleasure: a captivating moment of physical euphoria each time the milk let down. Motherhood made me want to be clear and dramatic, like my temporarily big body and spouting breasts. Caring for Jacob instead of, for once, going to work, I found myself louder and more unkempt than I used to be, more interested in food and physical activity and sexual pleasure, more interested in the physical pleasure of words, their sound and sensation in the mouth and throat. The poems I'd written before were tentative and cerebral; the new ones were confident, maybe funny, and full of physicality. Being with children made me matter-of-fact. Like dogs, babies and small children don't swerve from their attention to the present moment, and they take no shame in the expression of strong feeling. They have an undisciplined sense of humor. Having children didn't give me confidence in my writing, but I learned to write whether the result would be good or not—as parents, too, learn to abandon hopeless perfectionism. My sons gave me subject matter, and offered three interesting consciousnesses that weren't mine, were unlike mine, and thus at times gave me a new way to think. When Andrew was little he noticed the moon downtown, then pointed out another moon near our house, and I wrote a poem called "Two Moons," which supposed that our earth had two satellites. One day Jacob and Ben ran past me in the middle of make-believe, and I heard Jacob say, "Pretend she's our mother," which became the last sentence of a novel.

The children listened when I talked about books and writing. We made up limericks together. I sing badly, so I recited poems to them, mostly Milton's "Lycidas," which is 193 lines long and would put any child to sleep. I'd memorized it in graduate school and had rarely found someone willing to hear me say it. The children put up with it until they learned enough speech to object—and Andrew, a literary scholar, has just published a book on *Paradise Lost*. They

read: for several years, Jacob took out more books from the New Haven Free Public Library than any other borrower, and the librarians were nice to me because I knew Jacob. I talked to my sons about writing because it was on my mind and they were there. When Ben was 5 I happened to say—thinking aloud—“Do you think I could write a novel?” and he said, “You’d have trouble with the cover.” As adults, all three are sharp about language and all have given me good advice about my work. Ben is an editor and writer. Andrew and I read and critique each other’s manuscripts; partway through one of my novels, he phoned to ask, “Was there another one of us whom you drowned?” He’d noticed something I didn’t remember: three times, in a poem and two novels, I’d mentioned a mother who imagines drowning her baby in the bathtub.

I never drowned anybody; on the contrary, I observe myself, with some bafflement, welcoming intrusions of interesting people and animals. I’ve served lunch in a soup kitchen every Monday for eighteen years. I have an active life as a mother and grandmother, wife, friend, sister, and cousin, and I spent many hours a week being a daughter as long as my parents were alive. I don’t want solitude all the time. Interruptions can mark solitude and set it off, as the outline of an image in a drawing defines the negative space where nothing is drawn. In the silence after interruption—once the rocks in the head stop knocking against one another—is possibility. An interrupted writer would eventually have nothing to write about.

Yet I’m not surprised that—loving mother though I am—my imagination came up with the image of infanticide three times. I don’t want to be left alone all the time, but I want solitude during working hours, and the truth is that I don’t see why I can’t have it. What writers want is what dentists have in dental offices and mechanics in garages: conditions in which they can do their work, and the expectation of people around them that work is what they’ll be doing. I like going to the soup kitchen partly because when I arrive people look up and grunt: here you are where you are expected to be. At home, my dog knows where I am supposed to be during my writ-

ing time, but sometimes it seems—even though I’ve been at this for thirty-five years—that nobody else believes I do this work, nobody else expects me to do it. One lesson: writers need dogs. The other: there must be something wrong with us, or else the rest of the world thinks there is.

When I’m interrupted I feel not rage as much as shame. The other day I stopped work (because work was impossible with rock music pounding in my ears) to go out in the cold, cross the street, walk down the block, and ring the doorbell of a house from which amplified band music emanated. What is wrong with me, I thought, that I have lived my life in such a way that at this moment, gray hair flying in the wind, I am standing on a porch, pounding the doorbell of five young terrible musicians? I scream at people who phone (like the woman who phoned me because she didn’t think she should disturb my husband at work) because I’m ashamed that I haven’t figured out a way to keep them from doing it. Preventing interruption is so relentlessly difficult for writers that I have to suspect foul play: the problem is worse than it should be, even given the clamor of present life. The other disadvantages of writing that I noticed all those years ago arise out of the nature of the activity or the nature of capitalism. Interruption is more disturbing. There’s a conspiracy to keep us from writing.

Making or appreciating art often means paying attention to truths one would rather not acknowledge, feelings one would rather not have. People claim to honor and admire writers—all artists—but they don’t, and that is why art is always in trouble. People interrupt us because they don’t want us to write, because strong feeling and the truth are terrifying. We write in messy houses because everyone knows nothing important happens in messy houses. Agents and editors—people in clean offices with clean carpets and assistants to keep out intruders (including me)—earn their living dealing with the writing of me and my fellow slob. When the dog vomits her breakfast, I stop writing and clean it up. They in their offices keep on talking.

Yet if I engaged the terrible musicians across in the street in

conversation, two of the five (given what I've observed in my years as a writer) would tell me they too want to write. (They want what I have. Maybe that is why they are keen to take it away from me.) My children say that the way to please their mother is to say, "I have mixed feelings." Ambivalence is my favorite flavor. I am ambivalent about children, ambivalent about interruption (even by rock musicians, who probably think they are artists too)—and I suppose the truth is that other people are ambivalent about writers. It's great that we wrote this stuff, they say. Great that we have the imagination, the discipline. No writer I have ever met has a shred of discipline—that's why, if we're to concentrate, we need a little quiet. Well, whatever it is we have, it's great. Incredible that we can perform this frightening magic. And now would we please stop.