

How to be a Midwestern Writer

by Peter Bognanni.

Step 1) Be born in the Midwest.

Step 1, section B) If you want to be a very famous Midwestern writer be born in the Midwest and be named F. Scott Fitzgerald. If this isn't your name, it won't work just to drink as much as F. Scott Fitzgerald. He was, after all, a professional.

Step 2) Write a book set in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska. Or, if you're really desperate, maybe the Dakotas. But that should be a last resort scenario.

Step 3) Write books about Midwestern things. These may include but are not limited to: small towns where people are very earnest and never laugh, farms where people are very earnest and never laugh, and small towns bordering farms where people are very earnest and never laugh.

You may also write about a love affair that never happens because of strong Midwestern values, an animal that wins people's hearts with its determination and/or detective skills, or the dark underbelly of a small town where righteous Midwestern people are secretly evil and whose children live in cornfields, worship a Corn God, and will chase you with farm tools and sew your eyes shut. (Side-Note: Stephen King is not a Midwestern writer, but he did live in Wisconsin for awhile).

Step 4) Avoid words like y'all, cornpones, and mamma. These are for Southern Writers.

Step 5) Avoid words like Philander, Ennui, and Existential Crisis. These are for East Coast Writer.

Step 6) Avoid words like partida, biblioteca, and cerveza. These are for Spanish-speaking writers. (and incidentally the only words I can remember after taking six years of Spanish).

Step 7) Try not to have a funny-sounding last name with silent "g"s and multiple "n"s in odd places. This will totally ruin your Midwestern Street Cred. Which is why I will be changing my name to Peter Goodheart for my next book.

Step 8) When an interviewer asks you if you are a Midwestern Writer, say yes.

Step 9) When an interviewer tries to trick you and asks if you secretly hate the Midwest and all of the people who live there, say no.

Step 10) If none of this works, leave the Midwest as soon as possible and move to New York to write novels about philandering academics who suffer from ennui and a chronic existential crisis.

Thank You Letter To Des Moines:

Dear Des Moines,

How's it going? Are you still the capital of Iowa? Just kidding, I totally know you are. Anyway, it's me, your old resident Peter Bognanni formerly of 3200 45th street and 4720 40th street (both pretty nice streets as it turns out). I lived in you from around 1979 to about 1997. Most of the time I lived there I was a skinny guy with a big nose. Ring any bells? Okay, full disclosure, Des Moines, I might have said I hated you a couple of times. But it was when I was young and angry for no discernable reason. Ah...now you remember right? Well, anyway, hopefully we can put that behind us, because now I'm writing to thank you.

First of all, Des Moines, thank you for not being Detroit. I've never actually been there, but it sounds like a tough town that might have broken my fragile artistic spirit. So thanks for that. Thank you also for not being located directly on the equator, in the middle of two warring nations, or on top of the dissolving polar ice caps. These are qualities I've always admired about you. And lastly, Des Moines, thank you for being decidedly un-exiting in these dramatic ways, and to be perfectly honest, in some ways that I might have hoped for as a teenager. Let's face it Des Moines, when I grew up in you, you erred a little on the side of safety and predictability. Don't be ashamed. That was just your style. You preferred Khakis to jeans. The Beatles to the Stones. And family parades to riots.

But even though I might have enjoyed the occasional riot when I was young, or even a concert or two not aimed at Baby Boomers, I'm glad you kept things mellow around here. Because instead of doing those things, I hung out in my room, or my friend's rooms becoming a more interesting person. For instance, I painted pictures (Okay, yes sometimes they were pictures of naked women, but it was still painting). I wrote bad poetry. I read amazing books. I listened to more music than a reasonable person should. I learned how to play at least 6 chords on the guitar (though I still have trouble with D-minor, and bar chords still hurt my hand).

Essentially, Des Moines, I learned how to entertain myself. Which is really good training for becoming a writer. Because being a writer is pretty much just entertaining yourself in a quiet room for at least 3 hours a day, and then hoping that someday, somewhere, a reader will share those feelings. It's about developing an imagination that is just as strong as your sense of reality. It's about learning to live in that imagination and mold it until it becomes something compelling and meaningful. It's about using your imagination as a form of communication with another human being that you don't even know. And along with giving me a great education, and amazing group of friends and teachers, and some nice Youth athletic and arts programs you made this possible, Des Moines.

So, Des Moines, I know you think you're pretty hip these days with your good restaurants, fun bars, and burgeoning art scene, but don't go too crazy. Don't give the kids too much to do. Because there might be a few of them who need time to cultivate something important in their bedrooms. And if you build too many skateparks and concert venues then they won't have time to try to become artists.

Thanks again, Des Moines. Keep it real,

Your friend,
Peter

P.S. Don't tell Detroit what I said about it. I am not very good at fighting.