

[Happy Twentieth Birthday, "Bird by Bird" \[1\]](#)

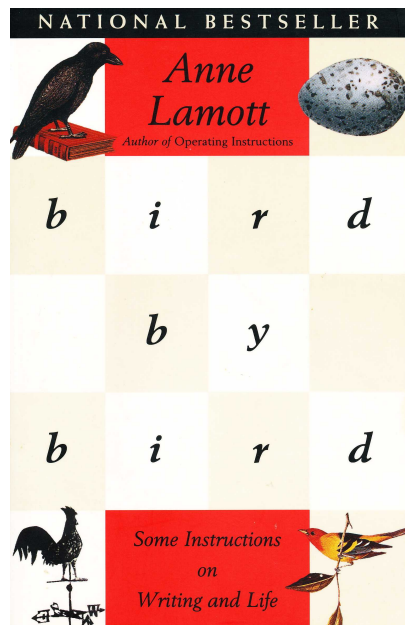
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Tribute Essay by Kathy Curto

Why Anne Lamott's Iconic Guide Still Resonates

My writing mentor Steve Lewis happens to be the author of seven books and father of seven children. He's a creative guy in all respects and not one to coddle my melodramatic cries of angst. Recently I told him, "I planned to revise that chapter we talked about. And I had every intention of making those revisions in the introduction—really, I did! But I got sidetracked."

Steve just shook his head. "We can talk about this all day long," he said. "The bottom line is this: You've got to put your ass in the chair and write."



We both laughed. But everybody knows that what lies under humor is hard truth.

Twenty years ago, Anne Lamott launched her version of that truth in *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Twenty years later, sentence makers and truth tellers still worship this book. My paperback copy, first purchased in 2004, is tattered and coffee-stained with faded Post-it Notes peeking from the top. Its pages are sprinkled with bright blue stars and underlined words, sentences, and phrases (I'm a fan of blue ink for scribbling notes in books). My *Bird by Bird* also retains the faint but crisp smell of eucalyptus-scented bath powder, the result of countless late-night soaks with Lamott's wisdom in tow.

To say this book offers *instructions* is a serious understatement. For this worshipper, it offers literary lifelines straight from the heart. As Lamott says in her opening:

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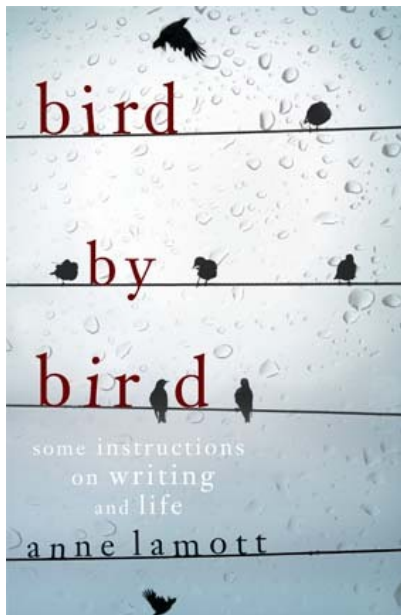
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What follows in this book is what I've learned along the way, what I pass along to each new batch of students. This is not like other writing books, some of which are terrific. It's more personal, more like my classes. As of today, here is almost every single thing I know about writing.

Lamott is a master at broaching some of the most important issues in a writer's life, and she introduces these topics in quirky, unexpected ways. Some chapters have names as predictable as "Getting Started" and "Short Assignments"; others are titled "School Lunches" and "Broccoli." This range, from ultralight to industrial, mimics Lamott's voice and style. She has the skill and compassion to cover big emotions in few words and still pack a punch. And the idiosyncratic recipes she offers are precious and hilarious.

On perfectionism: "Besides, perfectionism will ruin your writing, blocking inventiveness and playfulness and life force (these are words we are allowed to use in California)."

On strong plot and its similarity to dreams: "Think of your nightly dreams, how smoothly one scene slides into one another, how you don't roll your closed eyes and say, 'Wait just a minute—I've never shot drugs with Rosalyn Carter, and I don't even own any horses, let alone little Arabians the size of cats.'"



The book's subtitle does not lie, either. As funny as she is, Lamott is also as self-aware, faith-filled, and honest as they come about the craft and about being human:

Writing can be a pretty desperate endeavor, because it is about some of our deepest needs: our need to be visible, to be heard, our need to make sense of our lives, to wake up and grow and belong.

Bird by Bird is strong enough to lift up these heavy ideas. When I first read such passages, they went straight to my core—yet then and now, I find Lamott's perspective on writing exhilarating, not depressing. She asks writers to open up, work hard, and know the job:

To participate requires self-discipline and trust and courage, because this business of becoming conscious, of being a writer, is ultimately about asking yourself, as my friend Dale puts it, 'How alive am I willing to be?'

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Thank you, Anne Lamott, for keeping us alive.

Publishing Information

- *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott (Pantheon Books, 1994).



Kathy Curto is an adjunct professor of writing at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Her work has been published in *Junk*, *The Inquisitive Eater*, *The Asbury Park Press*, *Italian Americana*, *VIA-Voices in Italian Americana*, *Lumina*, and several newspapers covering the Hudson Valley.

Kathy's essays have been featured on NPR as well as in other live performances. In 2006, she was awarded the Kathryn Gurfein Writing Fellowship of Sarah Lawrence College. In 2012, she was selected as one of the cast members of the first NYC *Listen to Your Mother* show, a national series of original live readings. Kathy lives in the Hudson Valley with her husband and their four children. For more information, visit [Kathy Curto's website](#) [4].

Editor's Note: Steve Lewis is a TW contributing writer and columnist.

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