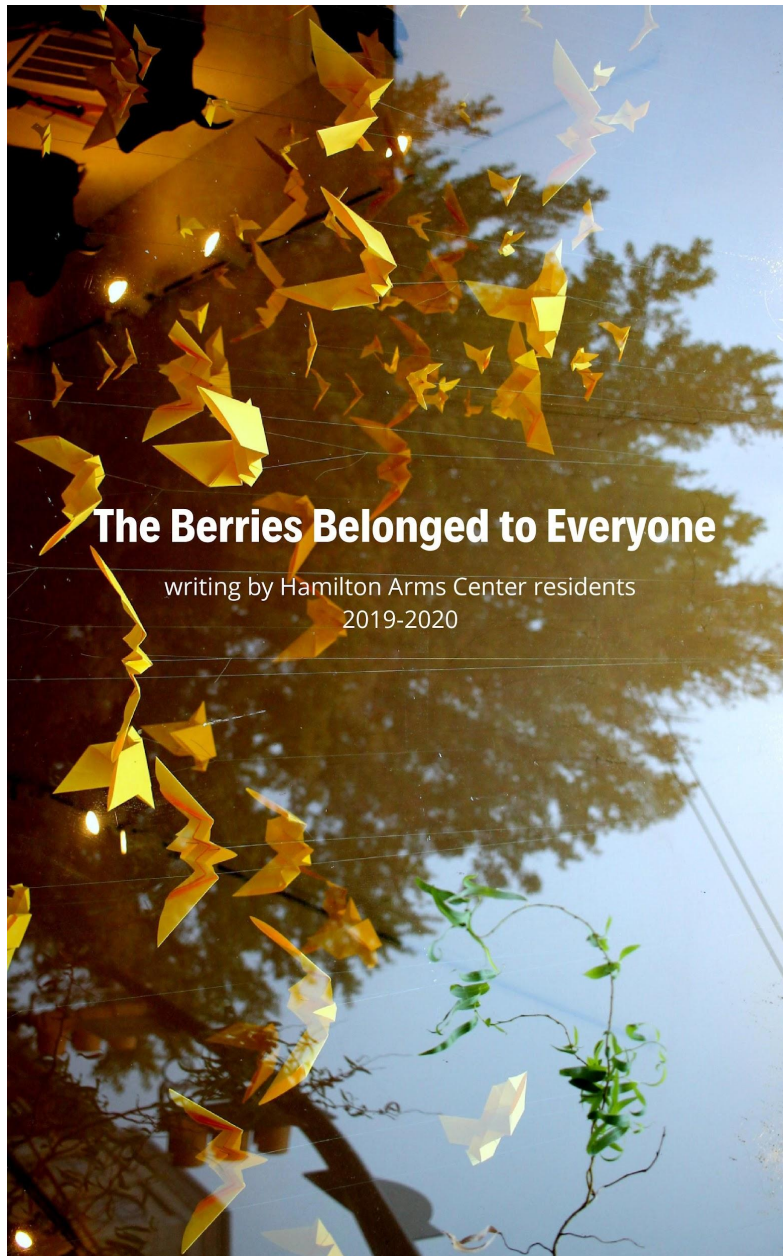


ELDER LIT: Hamilton Arms Center Writing Workshop

Main page: <https://tsbarton.com/elderlit/>

The Berries Belongs to Everyone: [Link to download book](#)

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Overview

This free, twelve-week writing workshop took place at an assisted living facility (Hamilton Arms Center) in Lancaster, PA between October of 2019 and February of 2020. The project culminated with the publication of a chapbook anthology of the writers' work, called *The Berries Belonged to Everyone*. This webpage serves as a primer on the project and a resource for other writers, artists, parents, and loved ones who wish to do writing with the elderly. Below you will find a link to download a pdf of the anthology, a brief rationale about the importance of writing with elders, tips for hosting a workshop or writing session, a list of prompts, and links to other resources.

Due to COVID-19, many of the writers involved in the workshop passed away March and April of 2020. This project is dedicated to them: names...

Why Elder Lit?

1. Creativity is healthy for the mind and the spirit.

Seniors often find themselves with a lot of time in their day. Just like physical exercise, even a small, daily dose of creative activity can have a plethora of positive impacts for humans. Writing is a place to express thoughts and opinions, but it's also a way to discover new things. When you make something out of nothing, such as filling a page with sentences or lines, the act of discovery is happening with every sentence. Often we don't know what it is we truly think, know, remember, or feel, until we express it in some concrete way. Creative writing is a healthy way to express feelings of all kinds, including negative or painful ones. It's important to remember that an older person's life is not over when they enter the late stages of life--desire, wonder, and ambition can all be pursued and explored safely and simply through the act of writing

2. Writing about the present and the past can help maintain and strengthen memory

Countless studies link active, intentional thinking (including critical and creative thinking) to improvements in short-term and long-term memory. Responding to a writing prompt and aiming to fill half a page with words is a mental challenge that will train the brain to focus, recall, and make connections more efficiently. You'll see that some prompts below focus on the now, on what is happening in the daily life of the writer, and not solely on the past. This is because remembering what happened last weekend or even this morning can shore up synapses that create our short-term memory.

3. Families & friends deserve stories, and many elderly are eager to tell them

Writing is a way for people to share stories from the past and present with their families, by creating a record of the yarns many may have heard at holidays, but also by documenting stories that have never been told, answers to questions that have never been asked. When elderly writers eventually pass on, their families will cherish, share, and learn from these priceless written artifacts.

4. Creative activities builds community within a facility or group

Though technology has made communication more efficient, it has not necessarily made it more effective. Many contemporary thinkers theorize that we're living in least connected times, with loneliness, disillusionment, and alienation at an all time high. The elderly face these threats to well-being more than most. A writing workshop is not all about the individual, either. It creates an open, trusting community within the realm of the long-term care home or assisted living facility. In all relationships, writing can bring the writer closer to others. Friendships are deepened through sharing creative work by helping people to learn about one another and better understand their perspective. Basically, a great writing prompt is like a boundless conversation starter.

5. It will make you a better writer, listener, and empath

One thing I've learned through my work with the elderly for the last four years is that they are not the only ones who benefit. I have been changed greatly as a writer by learning to tell simpler, less-adorned, more honest stories. I have been changed as a listener by learning to ask questions that may deepen a conversation or uncover new details. I have been made a more empathic and kind person by learning what it is that people near the end of their lives find important, entertaining, frightening, and hopeful.

Tips for Writing with the Elderly

1. Try opening a writing session by asking everyone something that they noticed within the last day or so. This could be any small, seemingly insignificant detail. Give an example of something you noticed (a dog with one blue eye, a shape in the sky), and then ask everyone to share an observation. Some may be resistant, but it's good to focus from the start on what writing is all about: specific details. If a participant draws a blank, encourage them to notice something about the room they are in, or something internal about how they are feeling.
2. It may help also to begin the workshop with an example or "mentor text". I always try to bring a page of writing by another author (I use many contemporary examples— poems, short essays, or excerpts of longer works) that exemplifies or displays a theme or style of writing we're going to do today. This helps ease us into the workshop and creates a shared reference point. ("Try writing an opening line the way Patricia Smith does in her poem we all read earlier...").
3. Older writers may need you to be their scribe. If you're doing a workshop at a facility with multiple people at once, you should have the participating writers identify whether or not they'd like to write or have someone write for them. Volunteers can be of use for this, or other staff members at the facility. I always pair up with a writer who would rather dictate and I write for them. My handwriting is poor, so sometimes I type as they talk, as long as the laptop isn't interruptive in any way. Don't worry much about craft, editing, revision, or mechanics. Many writers will already have reservations about their spelling or punctuation abilities, and may say that this is why they won't make any good writing. I always edit their work before publishing an anthology, but the time spent in workshop should be about getting words on the page, no matter how they look or what order they are in.
4. Always provide time to share. At first, some writers may not understand the "point" of doing any of the exercises unless someone is going to be reading it / hearing it. I save sharing for the last 20 mins of a workshop, where the first 10 mins is settling in, the middle 20 minutes is writing, and the final 20 - 30 is sharing, talking, reflecting, and closing up the workshop. Please remind participants that no one is required to share, but they are welcome to do so if

they please. After someone shares, I always try to point out one or two specific things I liked. I invite others to also give feedback on what they liked or connected to. This is the strongest component for building community.

5. Do not necessarily avoid writing about or exploring the same story more than once. Some older writers, especially those with cognitive or memory-related complications, may tend to repeat subjects, anecdotes, quotes, and jokes. These things have become components of their identity. Each time you hear the story about the blue scooter, consider asking new questions--what year or season was it? Can you remember feeling that way again in your life? What were you wearing? Writers may explore the same memory, but new details and directions can come from it. Usually, if they are "stuck" on a subject, it's because there is something very important about it, something much larger or deeper than a blue scooter. Each time it comes up, dig in a different direction.

Five Writing Prompts

1. *When I was ten years old...*

- What year was it when you were ten years old?
- Write that year at the top of the page. What was going on when you were ten years old?
- What was going on in America? In the world?
 - Any political events? Any major news? Weather, sports, trends? What was going on in your town, your state?
 - Anything new built? Any changes at school? Any scandals?
- What was going on in your home, with your family?
 - What was most important to you? To your mother? To your father?

2. *One way I was always different...*

- Write about something that you have always done differently. A habit, maybe. A way of doing something that stands out from how others do it. Something other people (parents, teachers, spouses, kids) have always told you you should do differently or stop altogether, but you never changed. Give details about what made this habit or behavior special to you, and why it drove others mad.
 - Alternate: Write about a habit you had that you broke. How did you break it? What did it take? Are you glad you broke the habit? Who helped you?

3. *The story of a photograph...*

- Start by describing what you see
 - Remember that the reader won't be able to see the photo, so make them see it
- Now write about the circumstances of the photo
 - Where was it taken? When? For what reason?
- Now describe what isn't in the photo
 - What *can't* we see?
- Write anything else this photo makes you think of— it's okay if what comes to mind has nothing to do with the photo itself
- Last part: What do you wish you had a photo of that you don't? A moment in your life you wish there was a picture for. What would it look like? Why is that moment important?

4. *What our names mean...*

- Start by writing your name as the title
- If you already have an idea of what your name “means”, write about that first. If you don’t, write a little bit about what you think your name might mean
- Use a website such as <https://www.behindthename.com/> to conduct some brief research on the meaning of your name.
- Then, record/summarize the “definition” of your name according to the site
 - The workshop leader could do this research beforehand and share with each participant what their name “means” when the time comes
- Do you agree with your name’s meaning?
 - Why does it or does it not feel correct? What do you think it *should* mean?
- Do you have a story about how you got your name? Why did your parents choose it?

5. *Where I’m from...*

- Share with everyone George Ella Lyon’s [“Where I’m From”](#)
- Write a poem about where you are from. This could mean the town you’re from, but also your house, and the things people say, and the things outside, and the smells, and the sounds. All the details of where you came from. Names too.
- As you write, try to include these 7 things:
 - The name of a specific place
 - A specific smell
 - Something hidden or known only to you
 - Something natural or of nature
 - The name of a specific person
 - A brief synopsis of an old family story
 - A quote, saying, or slang that people where you’re from use

Links to resources

- Love For the Elderly - <https://lovefortheelderly.org/letters>
- *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing to Old People* by Kenneth Koch
 - <https://bookshop.org/books/i-never-told-anybody-teaching-poetry-writing-to-old-people/9780915924530>
- Creative Aging - <https://creativeaging.org/>
- Time Slips - <https://www.timeslips.org>
- Alzheimer's Poetry Project - <http://www.alzpoetry.com/>