



“You can’t wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club.”
— Jack London*

Dear Faithful Reader,

A friend recently asked me, “So, how does the whole writing thing work? Do you sit down and write when the inspiration strikes?”

My answer: “No, I sit down and write when the alarm clock goes off.”

Possibly the most frequent question authors get asked is, “Where do you get your ideas?” Their answers nearly always boil down to some version of this: “They’re all over the place. It’s not a question of where to find them — it’s a matter of opening your eyes and looking at what’s there.”

I believe inspiration is like opportunity. It can seem like an external force that comes at you randomly, in moments and in ways over which you have no control. Out of left field.

But you do have control. Inspiration — like opportunity — is mostly an inside job. It’s right there in its raw form, scattered throughout the environment. Except that most of the time it’s not obvious. It wears disguises. It hovers about, wrapped in the tissue-paper camouflage of the mundane, the unnoticed, the dismissed and discarded.

Right now I’m in the earliest stages of work on three different book ideas, trying to nail down the core idea or “narrative spine” of each one. So far all three feel as elusive as wisps of smoke from a distant candle. My job is to sit down every morning at five when the alarm goes off, pen and blank pad in hand, open my eyes and start looking.

I know they’re there. I know I’ll find them.

Here's my New Year's wish for you: Whatever you dream of or aspire to this year, that you ignore the tissue paper of circumstance and go after it with a club.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jack London". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

* ABOUT THE QUOTE

Those who know me know I have an abiding commitment (“commitment” seems a nicer word than “obsession”) to getting quotations from famous people right. Bogus quotes drive me nuts. They show disrespect to the original source, to the reader, and to the value of truth.

So in the spirit of accuracy, the quote at the top of this email, while it’s been cited a gazillion times and is one of the most popular writer’s quotes there is, ain’t quite the real McCoy. Here is what London actually wrote:

“Don’t loaf and invite inspiration;
light out after it with a club,
and if you don’t get it you will nonetheless get
something that looks remarkably like it.”

(From a London essay titled “Getting Into Print,” in *Practical Authorship*, Ed. James Knapp Reeve, 1905, The Editor Publishing Company, New York.)

Jack London published dozens of novels and hundreds of poems and short stories, becoming the most popular author of his day, before dying at the age of 40. He set himself a writing target of at least 1,000 words a day. Somewhere in those thousand words inspiration showed up, again and again.

London is today best known for his dog-centric novels ***White Fang*** and ***The Call of the Wild***, both of which I adored as a boy. But the London book I loved most was his last, left unfinished at the time of his death and completed by another writer, called ***The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*** It was the first thriller I ever read.

I didn’t know it then, but London’s last book became part of the club I would use half a century later to go after ***Steel Fear***.