

# DEAR ENGLISH MAJOR

Pursuing the next page.

## Melissa Pilgrim: Writer, Editor, & Writing Coach



**Name:** Melissa Pilgrim

**Age:** 45

**College & Majors/Minors:** University of New Hampshire (1990). B.A. in English, Minor in Theatre. Graduate of The Institute of Children's Literature (1993).

**Current Location:** White Mountains, N.H.

**Current Form of Employment:** Writer, Editor, & Writing Coach

### Where do you work and what is your current position?

For the past seven years, I have run my own writing, editing, and script/writing coaching service called Your Writing Muse <<http://www.yourwritingmuse.com/>> from my home office (which started in Los Angeles, but is now in the White Mountains of N.H.). In the course of my career since leaving college in 1990, I worked all over the country for seventeen years in all mediums-- theatre, film, TV, and book publishing-- and based on all of those experiences I am now able to help others with their own writing goals.

You can see my full bio on my website, but in short I have had 16 plays produced, four screenplays optioned, one TV show optioned, one children's book and app published, have either edited or ghostwritten over twelve books (both in nonfiction and fiction genres), been a judge in two screenwriting contents, and have been hired by many producers, authors, and companies as a writer-for-hire on various projects (including Martin Sheen's ESP Productions). I also co-write songs as a lyricist with musicians.

Besides doing all these types of creative writing projects/jobs, I also work on business websites helping clients with all their business-related writing and editing needs including their page content, blogs, articles, reports, and newsletters.

As a writer I've found it's great to be able to always stay both creative and versatile, for you never know what kind of writing someone may need help with! Working in all fields has kept me both marketable and employed, for when it's slow in one medium it's normally not in other ones. (Plus, it keeps life interesting!)

### **Tell us about how you found your first job.**

My actual first job out of college was very hard to get, for when I graduated in 1990, the country was in a recession. I went all over Boston and N.Y.C. hoping to find work in theatre, film, or publishing, but no one was hiring. But, one interview in N.Y.C. led to a lead for an interview for a job as part of the "starting crew" of Universal Studios in Orlando, which I got. So I moved to Florida where I did a variety of things at Universal, including working in casting for one of Nickelodeon's TV shows. This experience showed me that I really wanted to work with kids more as well as write more. So I started sending out my resume and writing samples to different children's theatres that I knew of in the area, and I was soon hired by one of them.

I found that having great writing samples was very important to get the playwriting/directing job in children's theatre I was looking for, so I always kept writing and trying to improve my craft. It also helped to keep studying in the craft (especially within the children's writing market, specifically), so in the early '90s I also did The Institute of Children's Literature writing program to really learn how to write for every age group of children and teens. This knowledge has helped in many job interviews later on dealing with children's projects in all mediums, for clients can tell I know the field very well.

### **What was another writing-related job that was important in your career?**

I have worked in different community theatres in several states with both children and adult groups, and not always, but most of the time writing the plays for each group basically "came with the job," and so I was very fortunate to be able to be paid for my writing skills as well as my directing and producing skills all at once. But I wouldn't have gotten hired just on my writing abilities alone in any of these theatre jobs. I found it was an asset to have a variety of skills to offer when interviewing for positions in the field of theatre. People who can handle many types of jobs and responsibilities are more likely to get a job in most small theatres. (But as you work your way up to bigger theatres, this changes and you can then be more specialized into doing only one job, or at least let one job be more of the focus overall.)

For instance, I really got into playwriting even more when I spent five great years as the artistic director for The Sheil Park Players in the Wrigleyville area of Chicago where I wrote plays for the children and teen groups. I also did writing workshops for adults to develop new plays out of it for the adult group and helped new playwrights' original work get showcased. Many of those workshopped plays went on to be produced in other theatres in Chicago, New York, and even London.

During this whole time I was also focused on evolving my writing in other areas-- I started writing screenplays and sending them out to writing contests. One of them placed as a quarter-finalist in both the Nicholl's Fellowships and the Writer's Network Screenwriting Competition, as well as a semi-finalist in the Illinois/Chicago Screenwriting Competition. An agent from Beverly Hills then noticed it, and I moved to L.A. to start writing for film and TV. I went on a lot of what Hollywood calls "meet & greets" and got four of my screenplays optioned over time. I was hired to do a lot of rewrites, script coverage/critics, became a

judge in two screenwriting contests, and helped many clients develop their own ideas into screenplays or book manuscripts. The biggest break of these kinds of jobs came when I was hired to work for ESP Productions (Estevez-Sheen Productions), which is an independent production company in Los Angeles founded by Martin Sheen and his son Ramon Estevez. (It is now run by Ramon and his brother Charlie Sheen.) I worked for them as a writer when it was under Martin Sheen. They are a wonderful family and it was a fantastic experience when they hired me after reading one of my original TV series pilot scripts I had being pitched around Los Angeles at the time. I didn't sell that TV series (yet-- I'm still trying!), but it just shows you never know what is going to happen when you're showing your projects!

I learned early on in my various entertainment jobs that you always have to keep writing new projects all the time and keep pitching/showing your work. Perseverance is key when it comes to writing as a career, in all the mediums, and especially in book publishing... I have helped a lot of people with their book projects (in both nonfiction and fiction genres) over the years, and I really saw how long it took before many books became well known. This kept things in perspective for me as I created my first children's picture book, *Animal Motions*, which is a fun, easy-to-do, interactive book based on some of my made-up children's theatre improv games.

After pitching *Animal Motions* many different places (to both big and small publishers), I finally found a great publisher, Indigo River Publishing, who understood the book's concept and importance to kids right away and I got a publishing contract with them. They found a wonderful illustrator, Ira V. Gates, and we all worked together on the book's creation, with me using my theatre background to "direct" the design of each page as the story unfolded. So once again, I learned how valuable it was to know how to do more than one thing when it came to working on a project like this. An app for the book (published by Authorly.com) was also created in this fashion and it is being launched in February 2014, which is very exciting!

Each of these experiences have all been very important in my career, and I hope they show all writers reading this that working on any and lots of different kinds of projects is possible-- you just have to stay focused and keep writing all the time (as well as bring as many other skills you can to the table/project). If one medium isn't working for you (or you just need a change from it), then do a different one. It's all up to you to keep writing and trying until the right project falls into place at the right time, then you can go on to the next one.

## **What did you do in college to prepare for your post-grad life?**

I always knew that I wanted to write in a variety of mediums one day, but my first love was the challenge of writing for the stage. I felt it was a great way to learn characterization, dialogue, and plot development skills that would then always help craft any other kind of writing to make it even tighter, better, and stronger overall. So I became an English major with a creative writing focus while I also minored in theatre to really learn as many theatre skills as I could. (Even back then I was advised that to work in theatre you should have several different kinds of jobs/skills to be marketable in the field.) At the time, the east coast had the best programs in writing, but there wasn't as much opportunity for learning about how to write for film and TV, which I knew I also wanted to do. So for my junior year I did an exchange program with San Diego State University to learn the craft of screenwriting out west, where the best training for that was offered. By the time I graduated, I felt I had covered all the mediums and was ready to work in any of them!

At the University of New Hampshire, I was involved with UNH's concert choir, drama groups, several different writing groups, UNH's Student Exchange Club, and SCOPE (a music/performance club that got

professional people to come do shows and events at our school including rock groups like The Red Hot Chili Peppers and Inxs, comedians like Jay Leno, filmmakers like Spike Lee, etc.). They were all fun and great activities, but SCOPE was the one that put me around professional people who were doing creative, writing-related types of careers for a living, and that inspired me to know it was possible for me to do it too.

Also keep in mind that just because you're out of college doesn't mean you shouldn't stop learning about or working on your craft. For instance, I always knew I wanted to write for children as well as adults, so I enrolled in The Institute of Children's Literature writing program and studied how to write for children and teens pretty soon after I graduated from UNH. Always look for ways you can keep improving in your craft so others will see you're highly skilled and valuable to their specific project/job.

### **What is your advice for students and graduates with an English degree?**

My advice to anyone just starting out in the world of writing (beside perseverance, which I already mentioned) is to learn to have patience... things take a long time to get done in this whole "writing world," both the actual writing part and the trying to get it sold (and then hopefully produced) part. So patience is a big lesson in this field (along with a good sense of humor when a project you thought was all set to sell or go suddenly "falls apart")!

I'd also like to mention that it's important to always respect (and appreciate) other people's time and only pitch them something you feel is truly relevant to their own needs or goals (in all mediums, always). I can't tell you how many times I've worked for companies or people who say they only want to read romantic comedies at this particular time, yet get pitches for all genres anyway. Do your research before you pitch, always! For it only makes you look unprofessional if your project doesn't seem relevant to their current needs or tastes.

And lastly, if this is a career field you truly want to do for a living, then respect that it is an actual career choice and expect to get paid for it. Know that your skills--and eventually experience-- are worth being paid for. I see many "free/spec jobs" listed for writers all the time and it saddens me, for all forms of writing takes time, focus, and skill to do, and if someone is going to put all of that into a project they should also be paid for their time, focus, and skills. But for some reason people try to talk them into doing it for free or very little money. But I, like other professional writers I know, normally work on their own projects for free until they're ready to be pitched and sold. Working on other people's projects is then an actual job. Believe it will be for you, too.

**Visit Melissa on her professional website [YourWritingMuse.com](http://YourWritingMuse.com) for more examples of her work and writing tips. You can also check out her latest project at [AnimalMotions.com](http://AnimalMotions.com)!**

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