

# A *novelist* and her *journals*

**Gail Godwin** draws from a wealth of raw material in her notebooks to create vibrant fictional worlds

By Elfrieda Abbe

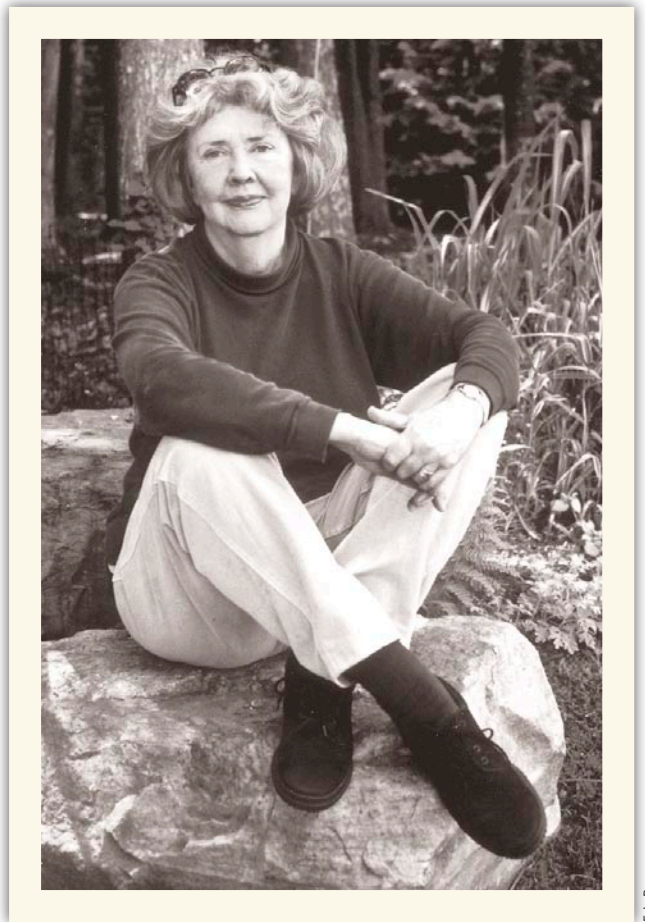
At 13, Gail Godwin began keeping a journal, a practice that has been at the heart of her writing ever since. “I simply wanted some privacy and some secrets,” she says. “I wanted to write about my day at school and all the crosscurrents between friends and enemies.” It wasn’t long, however, before the budding writer’s diaries became more

than adolescent gossip and angst. As revealed in Godwin’s recent book, *The Making of a Writer: Journals, 1961-1963*, her journals are an integral part of her writing, providing a stream of inspiration and raw material for her work.

Comprised of 11 notebooks, *The Making of a Writer* represents only a fraction of the author’s archives. The entries cover her successes and failures while a rookie newspaper reporter for *The Miami Herald*, her travels in Europe, her life in London while working for the U.S. Travel Service, and her struggles as a young fiction writer. She alternates between youthful bravado and insecurity, optimism and despair. She muses on literature, plays, movies, friendships, love affairs and emotional crashes.

If you read Godwin’s most recent novel, *Queen of the Underworld*, concurrently with her journals, you’ll recognize some of the young Godwin in Emma, the novel’s protagonist. Emma is an ambitious journalist, working for the first time at a daily Miami newspaper, a job from which Godwin eventually was fired.

But the bestselling author has no reason to dwell on past failures—except in the service of fiction. Her work includes 11 novels, two short-story collections, one novella, one nonfiction book and several librettos,



Eric Rasmussen

which she wrote with her longtime companion, the composer Robert Starer, who died in 2001.

Godwin draws upon questions and themes that run through her journals, not necessarily actual events. Patterns emerge. In her early work, she often wrote about women “looking for ways to get out of traps or confinements.” They seek, she says, what José Ortega y Gasset called “the unique untransferable self.” More recently, her focus is on characters, such as the “queen of the underworld,” “who have made interesting or dangerous life choices.”

Whether writing about Emma’s striving to be a writer, relationships (*The Perfectionists*, *A Mother and Two Daughters*), artistic vision (*Violet Clay*) or spiritual conflicts (*Evensong*), Godwin demonstrates her own “untransferable self” in her distinguished voice. She draws us into her stories with the warmth and intimacy of a trusted friend. But also like a good friend, she never lets us or herself off easily. The same probing intelligence, emotional honesty and yearning for understanding that come through in her journals drive her fiction and forbid complacency.

In a series of telephone conversations, Godwin talked about her methods for transforming life into art and other aspects of writing fiction.

### How have your journals changed since you began writing?

Now, my journal has so many voices in it. I've used it always as a tool for writing to figure out what I wanted to write about. I've used it to try to get into other people's minds. Emma, the character in [*Queen of the Underworld*], calls it *transmigration* into other souls. For instance, when I was 16 or so, I was in love with a boy, and he hadn't called. I would try to create a person from his side and write about a boy who hadn't called and why he hadn't. And now, I have dialogues with everybody.

### How much of the material in *Queen of the Underworld* did you draw from your journals?

I had the kind of journal that Emma kept, and it was actually in one of those [University of North Carolina] "Go Tar Heels" notebooks. I was able to get my researchers to go through all that dreadful microfilm and get all my old stories from the *Herald* and all the news stories for those three months. The stories that Emma writes are stories that I wrote, and all the daily things, even down to the jokes in the newsroom, really happened there at the time. So, the novel comes from a combination of the journal, of course my memory, and the newspapers. I also read a lot—not only about Miami, but about Cuba, things that I really didn't know about then.

### Is your journal a starting point, then? What else goes into your fiction?

I think I start from somewhere else. In fact, I have waited this long to write [about that time at the newspaper] because I don't think I could have written it sooner. I didn't want to dwell on my one huge failure.

You have to reach the point where you see that all these things that really happened make up a pattern, then you work according to the pattern rather than what really happened. All these things that happened in the newsroom, and some that didn't happen, are put inside a pattern where Emma one minute is despairing because she doesn't know anything and the next minute she's thinking, "Why don't they send me to Cuba?" [a plum assignment that was given to a veteran reporter]. That makes for a nice little tension.

Then you even get into the mythical [aspect] of it. For instance, it never occurred to me at the time, I didn't even think of myths very much then, but the woman with the thick glasses in the

[newspaper] morgue—Moira Parks—is like the Fates or Moirae in Greek myths. One of the Fates is the one with the scissors. Knowing that now, I knew to play that up without ever saying it and never letting Emma say it, because she didn't know about the Fates. She does say that she thinks of Moira as cutting up people's stories and filing away their lives—also filing their last story.

The other thing I use ... I do a lot of drawing. Especially in the last seven or eight years, I seem to have gotten my drawing back. I drew a picture of a young woman in a sweater with pearls and a glass in her hand standing at a bar, surrounded by these older men, most of them shorter than she was.

So, you know, the novel started from there. I had three things: I had visual images, which I drew; I had a pattern that I saw of a young woman who was desperate to make it and was afraid she wouldn't; and then I had this whole mythical element of not only the fate lady cutting out the stories, but Lucifer, the god of ambition, strolling around the newsroom. It's almost like making a quilt or something. You have the stuff, but you have to make a pattern that adds up to more than what really happens.

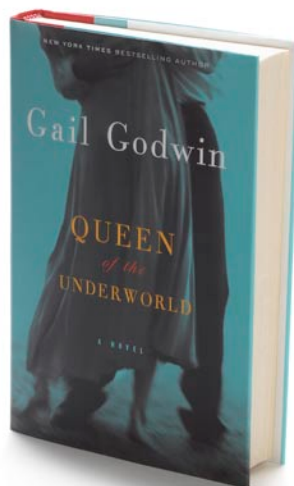
### You've said that it's good to write where the "hot wand," the fire, is. Could you give me an example of how that happens in your work?

You know, when you're mulling over things, your thinking goes in circles like a spotlight at the airport. It goes round and round and lands on something that compels you like a magnet. Then it hits upon a memory or someone's behavior—sometimes it quivers and rushes off to a particular object. It galvanizes you like you've been shocked. You go with that part of the writing that keeps attracting you.

### What was the hot wand in writing *Queen of the Underworld*?

One day my bureau chief [in Hollywood, Fla.] told me to call Dr. So and So. He was an osteopath and married to the former Pat Ward, who was a famous call girl. A society man in New York had turned her into a prostitute and [told her], "I'll marry you when we have enough money." It became a huge trial. Later she turned state's evidence, and he went to jail. She moved to Florida and married the osteopath. Then every year she would try to commit suicide. This was all true.

My boss said, "Gail, call up this



man, this is her third attempt, and see what kind of story you can get.” I was never a very good reporter because I was really shy. I called him up. I said, “I’m Gail Godwin from *The Miami Herald*, and I just want to know how you all are feeling.” Brutal.

He said, “You know, I understand that you have your job, I just want you to know that we’re in pain, and I don’t want to say any more.”

“I’m so sorry, please give your wife my best regards,” I said, and I hung up.

Out of that, years later, came this abiding fascination, that’s never really gone away, with young women who, because of falling in love with the wrong person or because they want money and good things, go briefly into that underworld.

A second incident in Miami was when my date took me to this very plush private supper club, very dim lights, everything so elegant. And he said, “Do

you see those beautiful young women over at the bar?” They had on cashmere sweater sets, stockings, high heels, pearls. “They look like sorority girls, don’t they? But they’re Tony’s girls.”

“Who’s Tony?” I asked.

Well, there was a stable of young women, and [Tony] trained them. He sent them to school and trained them in the graces, and then they made huge amounts of money in the evening. So those two things just sat there for years.

That is why there are all these levels. What’s involved when I’m writing is what I have written in my journals, what’s out there right now, what I remember from my past that won’t go away, and then these patterns that I now see formed by incidents and snippets.

### **When you read your early journals, what strikes you most about yourself as a young writer? How have you changed with experience and maturity?**

When I read old journals, I’m sometimes surprised or even appalled at how ferociously ambitious and self-doubting I was. For example, I wrote this passage in 1961:

I have a disease. I am trying to think of a word to describe it. It is that I want to be everybody who is great; I want to create everything that has ever been created. I want to own everything that everybody owns. In short, I have a desire for universal acquisition. Just looking at an issue of *Esquire* arouses a hundred different hungers. I want to have written all the good stories, said all the clever things. I want to buy all the clothes, try all the gourmet suggestions, and travel to all the countries.

Then, I have to say: “But wait, you’re still ferociously ambitious and self-doubting.” However, a hopeful thing is that keeping a journal eventually reveals to you your own besetting patterns and may lead to your altering them.

One thing that’s changed is that now I know it. I realize that’s a big part of my personality. The other thing is that when I read over some of those entries —“Oh, will I ever publish?” “Oh, these journals are useless.”—I feel such a protective love toward that young girl. I think Henry James wrote somewhere something about how when he read his old notebooks, he felt like extending his hand to that young man. That’s what I feel.

### **You write so vividly about Miami. Do you sometimes think that the memory of a place seems more real than when you are actually there?**

When I was writing *Queen of the Underworld*, my

## The Gail Godwin file

**BORN IN** Bessemer, Ala., and grew up in Asheville, N.C. Earned a degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa.

**GODWIN’S MOTHER**, Kathleen (Godwin) Cole, an avid reader of *The Writer*, was a reporter and teacher who also wrote love stories for pulp magazines. Gail Godwin has written several articles for *The Writer* and serves on its editorial advisory board.

**STUDIED WITH KURT VONNEGUT**, along with fellow students John Irving and John Casey.

**WORKED AS A** general assignment reporter for *The Miami Herald*, where she had a “flair for leads.” She says of those days: “I let my boredom show. ... After I had completed my one or two assignments for the day, I actually took frequent trips to the hairdresser down the block and came back freshly coiffed with different shades of hair.”

**TAUGHT AT** the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Vassar College and Columbia University.

**IN 1979 PUBLISHED** her first novel, *The Perfectionists*, about a psychotherapist and his young wife who believe they are perfectly suited for each other but are oh, so wrong.

**AWARDS AND HONORS:** National Book Award nominee for *The Odd Woman and A Mother and Two Daughters*; American Book Award Nominee for *Violet Clay*; editor of *The Best American Short Stories* (1985); chairman of the National Book Award judges (1986); Distinguished Alumna award from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1988).

**LIVES IN** Woodstock, N.Y.

friends kept saying to me, “Let’s go down to Miami. Don’t you want to see it again?” I said, “No, not until the book is finished.” I wanted to remember it, because you remember with longing. It may have to do with having been young. I have three events in Miami for my book tour, and I’m totally looking forward to it. I haven’t been there since I left all those years ago. Now I’m ready to go, but if I’d gone before, it would have been confusing.

### How do you come up with a primary character, one you want to spend time with while writing an entire novel?

It’s usually the person I want to follow at the moment. For instance, with *The Good Husband* I had been in London and picked up a book there, which made me so mad that I left it behind in the hotel room. It was a book that said that it would be good to know you were dying because then you could lie there and say, “Well, I don’t have to answer my mail. I don’t have to pay my bills. Life could go on without me.”

It was like the pearl/oyster thing; it just rubbed me and rubbed me. And then I just started thinking about this strong woman, this egotistical woman, a professor who was told she had advanced cancer, and she takes to her bed and thinks of the rest of her life as her final exam. It became very important to me to follow her through and see what she would do, how she would die and who would be around her when she died. There ended up being four major characters in that book: two men and two women. Each of the characters was a part of myself. There was the laid-back husband (of the dying woman) who had been in the seminary and dropped out to marry her. He’s the housekeeper and very calm. There’s the young woman who gave up her job in publishing and married a very egotistical writer [the second man]. The four of them were like different instruments in a little sonata of my personality, and they played themselves out.

It is an emotional urgency that lodges in some characters that makes me interested.

### What is your writing process?

It’s usually the same. Some hot thing hits me. I have to start as soon as I get up. Sometimes I start in bed if I’m writing something in my journal or something I’ve thought about in the middle of the night. Then I go to the other side of the house and work from about 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Then I read the mail and go exercise. I’m always thinking about the book I’m writing. It’s part of my life. I have a long table with the screen and keyboard on it. I use the mouse with my left hand and by my right hand are

stacks of legal pads—and a thesaurus—to work out those difficult sentences.

I have expectations of myself. It’s three typed pages, which is about 270 words. If I do three pages, that’s a wonderful day. Once in a while I do five pages. I revise as I go along. I can’t stand looking at it if I know it could be better. In the old days, I would just retype the page. Now I just go back and change it—cut and paste.

Then I’ll get to a point that I realize that because I added something, I have to go back and tinker with lots of earlier scenes. With the computer, I just go back and read through and find the places where changes would take place.

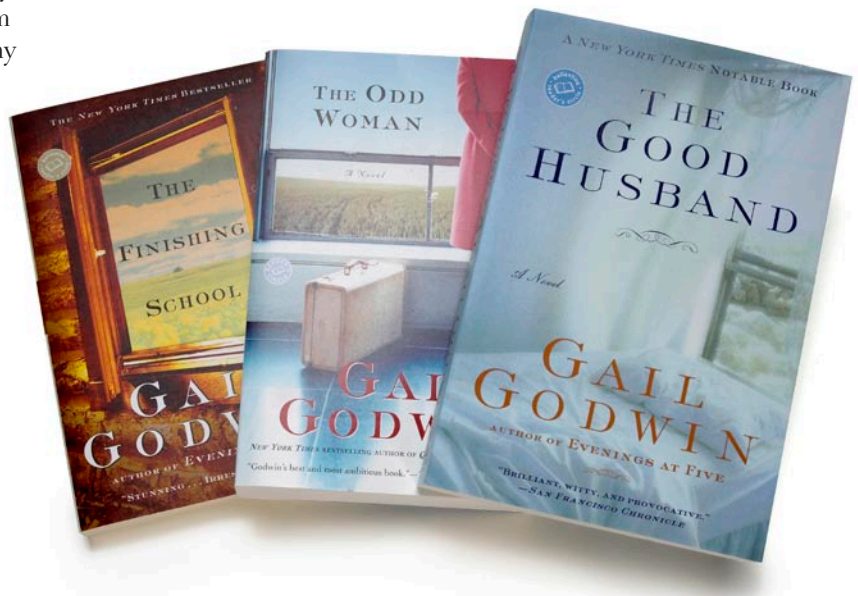
### What’s the hardest part of writing?

When you have a thought or intimation of something and can’t figure out how to express it. As I’m writing, I see what’s happening, like I’m following a movie in my head. There will come a point where I perceive what the character is perceiving, but it’s so complex. I have to find images to convey this perception to the reader. People don’t think in linear ways.

There’s a whole cluster of things that go with a perception or experience. You want to get it all in, but you don’t want it to get in the way. I try to find an image to [get it across]. T.S. Eliot called this device an “objective correlative.” To me, the image or thing has to have a vital energy. It has to be strong and unforgettable—like the clothes on the back of the chair in “Mr. Bedford” (see box, page 23)—that connects us with an emotional current in the story.

### Do you draw characters from real people?

Emma was. *A Mother and Two Daughters* was



actually based on my best friend's family that I grew up with. *Finishing School* was totally made up. The novel was inspired by a house Robert and I rented in a country setting up here [Woodstock, N.Y.]. It was also inspired by the fact that I was 44 at the time, and I realized I had several young women who really did look up to me. They were in their teens or early 20s, and I thought, "What a powerful time that is." You could really influence a young person. I remember how Mother Winters [one of her school teachers] had influenced me for the best. What if this older person had needs of her own? You know, something that hasn't been satisfied, like she's a failed actress. What could happen there?

You ask a question, and that question pulls out things beyond the literal person.

**When you have a bestseller, as several of your books have been, publishers are eager for your next novel. Have you ever felt pressured to come up with the next book?**

I have been under the strain of having a two-book contract. This happened right after *Father Melancholy's Daughter*. Ballantine brought me in and

said: "What's the next one about?" The next one was going to be called *My Last Protégé*, about this woman who comes back to her hometown for a funeral and meets a young man she knew in high school. He was fat and unpopular, and she just made him over. Now he's a gigolo. I made her an architect, and I did lots of research. I kept the most beautiful notebooks, which are now in my archives. I even met an architect who since became a good friend. I was so into it, but I got to about the third chapter and thought, "What am I doing in this book?" I just dropped it.

I had a whiny, whiny evening conversation with Robert. "What am I going to do?" The book I really wanted to write was about this woman who's dying, her husband and another couple. "Just write that," he said. So I ended up writing *The Good Husband*.

The [abandoned story] was a year of work. You might say it went for nothing, except the architect in that book became the best friend of my heroine in *Evensong*.

I think it does your soul good, your character good, to realize there are things that aren't for you, there are things you can fail at, and if you fail well, it becomes another little pearl in your destiny.

Now that I'm getting older and more focused, I have everything backed up waiting to be written. I just have to find enough time and hope I can make it and finish. But if I don't finish, so what? It's another one of those things in your destiny.

**You wrote several librettos with your partner, the composer Robert Starer. Did that experience affect how you write fiction?**

I lived with Robert for 30 years. Way back when we first got together, I had written a failure of a story called "Indulgences." I tried to modernize the story of the apocryphal St. Pelagia. She was a famous medieval prostitute who met a holy man and decided she would become a holy man. So she disguised herself as a monk, went off and did good deeds, but the devil, who was her last lover, caught up with her and punished her, and so on and so forth. Trying to modernize it was a complete mess.

At the same time, Robert had just gotten a commission from the Dorian Wind Quintet. They wanted him to do some piece to be performed at Caramoor [near New York City]. He kept looking for librettos, and they were just awful. I said, "You can have my story. Or we can just try it." I had never tried before, but it certainly freed me up, because then I could go right back to the saint's story as a legend and think it out in scenes.

It was a whole different approach, because I was

## A Godwin sampler

### NOVELS INCLUDE

**Queen of the Underworld** (2006) A young reporter and aspiring writer in Miami in 1959 learns some truths about herself and the people she writes about.

**Evensong** (1999) An Episcopalian pastor reflects on spirituality, sexuality, commitment and family.

**The Finishing School** (1984) A gripping story of betrayal in a friendship between a teenager and a worldly older woman.

**A Mother and Two Daughters** (1982) A widow and her two grown daughters navigate their changing relationships.

**Violet Clay** (1978) An independent painter refuses to give up her artistic vision.

**The Odd Woman** (1974) An accomplished intellectual reassesses her life.

### NONFICTION

**The Making of a Writer: Journals, 1961-1963** (2006) Reflections of a young writer developing her own voice.

**Heart** (2001) An exploration of the heart through myth, literature, medicine, philosophy and art.

### SHORT STORIES/NOVELLAS

**Evenings at Five** (2003)

**Mr. Bedford and the Muses** (1983)

## The creative journey from life to fiction

**GAIL GODWIN** transforms observations and details from her journal into vibrant fiction. She says she often finds “a little solid gem that contains the essence of why you want to write this story. You see something, and you can keep building on it. It means something much larger, a whole person or a way of life.”

In one journal entry that is included in *The Making of a Writer*, she describes an experience she had while staying at a London boarding house in the 1960s. Later, she used the material in a short story. “In the journal,” she says, “are the conversations



Gail Godwin's *The Making of a Writer* includes entries from 11 journals.

and the little daily doings in the boarding house—the angers and how everybody felt and what was going on at the time in England. Then much later, in fact, in the 1980s, I had a dream about Mrs. West [her landlady in London], and when I woke up I just wanted to go read these journals again. I realized the story that interested me was the story of this couple [the landlords]. They were kind of like extinct animals. I closely read the journals and from that I wrote my novella ‘Mr. Bedford’ (from *Mr. Bedford and the Muses*). I wouldn’t have remembered that if I hadn’t written it down.”

### Godwin’s original journal entry

April 14, 1962

Every time a person really feels like Mr. Smug, something ridiculous happens. Like tonight. I was on my way to the toilet, smugly disgusted with my complete capture of poor C., when the door clicked shut behind me. A brisk run through the dark in pajama top and no bra to get a key from the Wests brought me firmly back to earth.

(The Wests hang their clothes over the couch & chairs when they go to bed at night.)

### The fictitious account in “Mr. Bedford”

One night, very late, the door to my room had swung shut while I was in the bathroom. I ran shivering across the connecting garden to the main house to borrow the Eastons’ spare key. It took several knocks to wake them up. “Carrie! What’s wrong?” asked Mr. Easton, in striped flannel pajamas, when he finally opened the door. He seemed relieved when he learned I only wanted the key. From the doorway I could see Mrs. Easton under the bedclothes in their pulled-out horsehair sofa bed. “All right now, dear?” she drawled sleepily at me. I also saw his twills, the Harris tweed, and the maroon-and-gray tie laid out neatly on a chair, and her too-long skirt and baggy sweater draped on another chair, their shoes beneath their respective chairs. I found the sight both touching and sinister. As though they might have to get dressed in a hurry, I thought, recalling Nigel’s hints at their dark past.

doing it in scenes. It helped my writing. After that I wrote *A Mother and Two Daughters*, and that was the first of my books that had many voices. The book club scene in the novel moves like a libretto.

I miss writing librettos. Several people have asked me, but I’m not sure I could do it with anybody but Robert. We did so much just talking. Then I’d write loads of stuff for him and he picked what he liked—or he’d say: “A soprano can’t sing this word and be at that pitch, so let’s think of another word.”

There is so much clutter that isn’t you. You have to develop a focus and ask: Is this what I see, or is this what someone else told me she sees? What do I see? What do I feel? Your true voice is absolutely faithful to your perception. #

### Elfrieda Abbe

Editor Elfrieda Abbe’s last interview for *The Writer* was with Margaret Drabble (January).

### What advice do you have for new writers?

Try to remember that one sentence that comes straight from your perception is going to get you closer to what will be your voice than anything else.

 [writermag.com](http://writermag.com)

You can read an excerpt from Gail Godwin’s *The Making of a Writer: Journals, 1961-1963* at *The Writer* Web site. Just click Online Extra.