



When you go in a **museum** and **slow down** and really look, your **whole body** participates. It's like getting a **deep massage**.

Natalie Goldberg

With Robert Wilder

Photography by Blair Clark

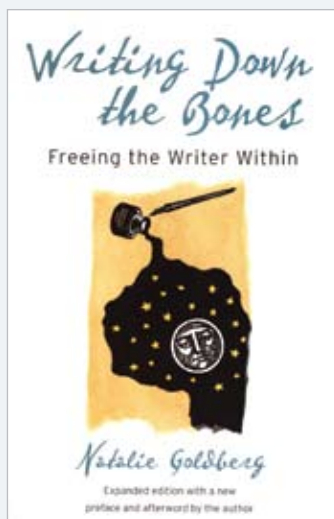
Natalie Goldberg is the author of eleven books including *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, which has sold over one million copies and has been translated into fourteen languages. Goldberg has been teaching seminars in “writing as a practice” for the last thirty years all over the world. Her new book, *Old Friend from Far Away: How to Write Memoir*, will be released from Simon & Schuster in 2008. Robert Wilder spoke to Goldberg, a Santa Fe resident, after they visited the New Mexico Museum of Art in downtown Santa Fe.

Wilder: You just celebrated the twentieth anniversary of *Writing Down the Bones*. How does that feel?

Goldberg: It feels enormous. I can't believe twenty years has passed. I had no idea when I wrote it that twenty years later the book would still be alive. But, of course, I didn't know anything when I wrote it. I didn't know that books died. And I feel like I've given something to the world, and if it helps a lot of people, I'm happy about that. If *Writing Down the Bones* came out in 1950, it would have died. I met America at an extraordinary moment. And that doesn't happen very often.

Wilder: You're a painter as well as a writer. How did you start painting?

Goldberg: It was sort of like spontaneous combustion. In 1974 in Taos, I started meditating, painting, and writing. And each one took different positions in my life. And painting became my darling pleasure. I'm allowed to do it, sort of like you get candy if you do your work. So after I've written, I can paint. So sometimes I'll say, Nat, if you write today, tomorrow you can paint. But in 1997 I came out with a book about painting [*Living Color: A Writer Paints Her World*], and I really looked at what part painting plays in my life. So people got to know that



I'm a painter, too. [She shows at the Ernesto Mayans Gallery on Canyon Road in Santa Fe.]

Wilder: I know you're deeply in love with museums. When you travel, you always go to the museums. When did your love for them begin?

Goldberg: Well, you know, interestingly, I had the thing about museums like a lot of people do, that you feel overwhelmed and you get very sleepy. Suddenly when you're in a museum, you feel exhausted and want to lie down and take a nap. It was when I was writing *Living Color* about painting, I had to really pay attention because I wrote an essay in the book about Matisse and one of his shows. So I had to start going to museums with a purpose, to really understand the mind of a painter. And when I had that, the world opened up. And now, if there's a show, a Diebenkorn show for instance, I'll fly anywhere. When I drive across the country, I stop at museums. Lincoln, Nebraska, has a fabulous small museum. I go there. I go anywhere. So my interest really began when I had to pay attention to write.

And now, I teach my students how to go into a museum and look. Stand in front of one painting for a full minute and see what you can get out of it. Then after you go through a room, pick your favorite painting in the room. So you give them little activities and tasks. And they begin to study it. And there's not just you look, like a dead horse, walking from painting to painting. It becomes alive.

Wilder: I know you love to tell stories. Do you have any museum stories?

Goldberg: Oh, I have great museum stories, one after the other. The amazing thing is, in Fort Worth, Texas, there

are three world-class museums. They have the Amon Carter, the Kimbell Art Museum, and the Modern. And I'd been dying to go there. But I kept saying, how could I go there? Just go to Fort Worth? Nobody goes to Fort Worth. Finally, after about ten years of wanting to do it, I flew there. And as I'm

going, I smell cow manure, because it's near the [Will Rogers Coliseum and Equestrian Center]. But there are just these amazing museums.

So there was a painter, Joan Mitchell—not the singer. But Joan Mitchell, a famous American painter who moved and lived in farms most of her life, an abstract painter, expressionist painter. They had a retrospective of hers at the Whitney in New York. I was drooling to go and I couldn't get there. I heard that the crowds were six-deep. It was just jammed. And I wanted to go so badly. The next place it went was to the Modern in Fort Worth, and I'd been to Fort Worth, and I kept saying I can't go. So I flew for Thanksgiving to visit my mother in Florida, and on the way back I had to change planes at the Dallas–Fort Worth airport, on a Sunday after Thanksgiving. Suddenly, I knew when I landed, I didn't care. I rented a car. And as I was driving to the museum, I prayed that my luggage would wait for me in Albuquerque. And I thought I'd just take a plane later on. So I drove to the Modern, I went in, it was a Sunday, and the museum was entirely empty. It was eleven in the morning. I was the only one in the museum with all these Joan Mitchell paintings. The same show that was at the Whitney, nobody but me was there, and I was in heaven, and it was eerie. I was a little in shock. I was supposed to be on a plane, and suddenly, I'm in this museum.

I'm walking around, and I hear footsteps, and they're really echoing, because I'm the only one there; it's empty. And I turn around, and this man across one of the huge galleries,

says, “Natalie?” I look. And he says, “I’m Gary, don’t you remember? I live in Kansas City, and I studied with you three years ago.” We spent about two hours looking at the paintings together. It was extraordinary: first of all to run into him, and to have the whole museum to ourselves.

Wilder: Which Santa Fe museums do you go to?

Goldberg: I go often to the Museum of Fine Arts [now called the New Mexico Museum of Art]. I go to the [Museum of International] Folk Art. I go to the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. I go to galleries a lot. You know, sometimes I look at the paintings in the public library downtown. I always look at paintings. I look at the paintings in restaurants. I look at the paintings in, wherever I go, office buildings, any place. When I have a meeting, I look. But, I mean, I really look.

I had a very pleasurable museum experience, just on Saturday. I have this person that I’ve known for ten years. She’s a lovely person but I hardly ever see her. And she’s going to Paris. I was very excited for her so I said, “Are you going to go to the museums and see the art?” And she crinkled up her nose and said, “Well, maybe one or two. I don’t really go look at art.” And I said, “Well, are you going to go to see Monet?” She didn’t really know who Monet was. I said, “Have you ever been to the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum?” She said no. I said, “We’re going on Saturday. I’m meeting you on Saturday, and I’m taking you to the museum, and I’m going to show you how to look at art.”

So we went to the Georgia O’Keeffe. I stood outside with her and said, “Look at this. This is the only museum in the country for a woman. Let’s take that in. And look around.”



She’s from New York, so she’s seen big museums. I said, “Look at this building. It’s a world-class museum.” We walked in and I made her sit and watch the movie, which is really fun.

I’ve seen it a hundred times, but I never grow tired of it. We went around slowly. I pointed out paintings I liked and why. And by the end, we got to some Alfred Stieglitz paintings in the back room and Stieglitz’s photographs as well. She was mesmerized, just mesmerized, and got that he painted, he photographed the moon, a waning moon. By the end she was oohing and aahing. When we left, I said, “Isn’t this deep pleasure?” She said, “Yes, especially to go with you.” When you go in a museum and slow down and really look, your whole body participates. It’s like getting a deep massage. If there’s a gallery that at first it doesn’t look interesting, walk through it. Don’t spend a lot of time because you’ll use up your energy. At first, just go with what draws you and follow that. And slow down. Don’t think you have to go through the whole museum. Better to take in a few things with pleasure. I had the most wonderful time. I thought, I just want to be a docent in the museum. It was so extraordinary. ■

Robert Wilder’s essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. He teaches English at Santa Fe Preparatory School, and his column, “Daddy Needs a Drink,” is published monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*. His first book, *Daddy Needs a Drink*, was released in paperback in May. His new book, *Tales from the Teachers’ Lounge*, will be published by Delacorte in Fall 2007. Photo by Jennifer Esperanza.

