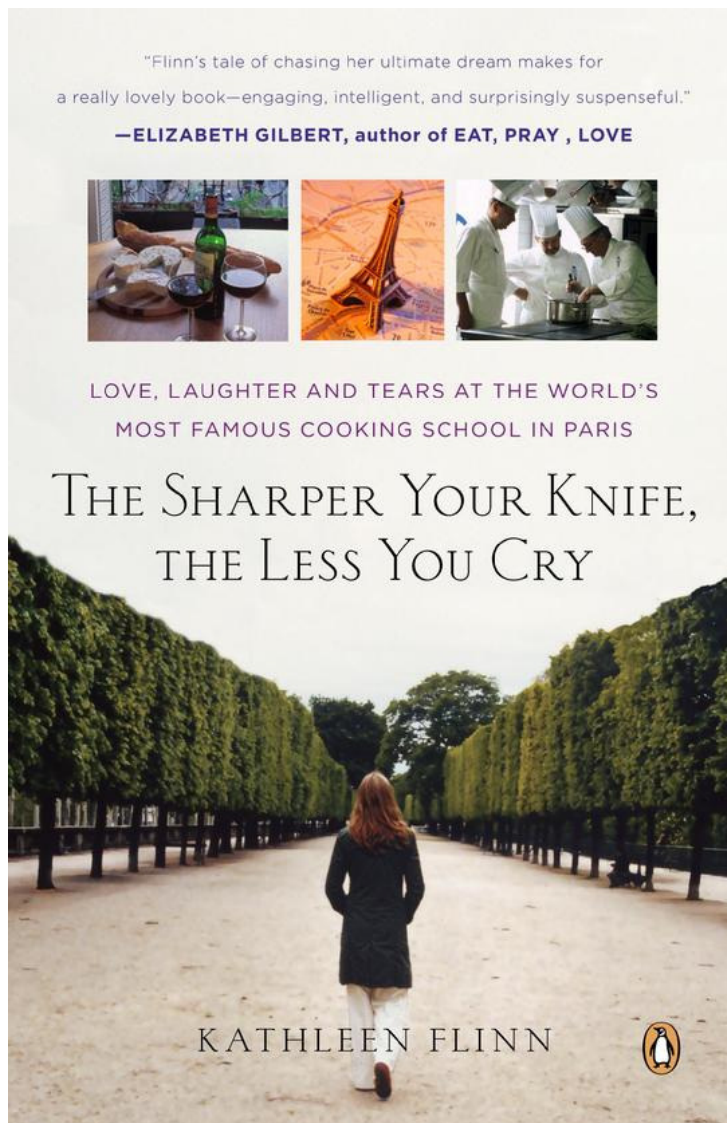


[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Announcements](#)
[Interviews](#)
[Fiction](#)
[Poetry](#)
["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)
[Writers' Craft Box](#)
[Writers' Contest!](#)
[Book Reviews](#)
[Exploration of Theme](#)
[Archives](#)
[Submission Guidelines](#)
[Feedback & Questions](#)

Come in...and be captivated...



The Sharper Your Knife, The Less You Cry book cover image

This month we interview Kathleen Flinn, author of *The Sharper Your Knife The Less You Cry*...

Flinn takes us on an adventure through France as she takes on her grueling courses at Le Cordon Bleu.

This is a non-fiction account of a writer going out there to make her ultimate goal a reality and chronicling the journey to share with readers through decadent recipes, colorful anecdotes and copious notes taken during her trial by culinary fire.

How she perseveres through this course to not only meet her goals but to also take her skills to a level of mastery is an awe-inspiring tale of dedication, unshakable focus, and passion. The story is alive and engaging, filled to the stew pot brim with love and humor. It is a must read if you enjoy food, the vibrant sights and sounds of arm chair travel through Paris and falling in love.

Q&A e-mail correspondence interview with Kathleen Flinn
Questions by Denise Bouchard, Assistant Editor

1) From the opening quote of *The Sharper Your Knife the Less you Cry* I was hooked: *"Cooking is like love. It should be entered into with wild abandon, or not at all"* - Harriet Van Horne

I think of writing in that same respect. I used to write with every friend, foe and critic in my mind's eye, censoring the work to meet non-existent expectations. Even then I would hide my manuscript away. In the last few years I've really gotten out there and been well-received, arms open, free-falling into the work and I've never felt so liberated. I finally said, 'to hell with censoring myself.' How do you turn off your inner censors and enter the page with 'wild abandon' to get to the heart of your writing?

That's a great question. Like so many people, I've always been my toughest critic. I used to edit myself all the time, and not just my writing, I called it the Doubting Voice. Who doesn't have that voice in their head? It's amazing the hurtful, mean things that we can say to ourselves, words that we'd never dream of telling a friend.

At some point, I realized that beating myself up doesn't make me do anything better or faster. It succeeded only in making me feel bad and fat, even in my favorite blue dress. The first step to "wild abandon" is to tell that voice to shut the #%@! up. The process of writing is hard enough. You're sitting down with a blank page and creating something from nothing. It's easy to see it as you, just on paper.

My husband, Mike, gave me some great advice when I sat down to write the book. "Give yourself permission to write a terrible first draft." It's an old saw, but so true. Just know and assume it's going to be terrible. Then, just write it. Then, write a slightly better second draft. And so on. With this in mind, I'm delighted to finish a decent first draft. I'm sure that even Ernest Hemingway wrote a shitty first draft sometimes.

Hard feedback makes everyone a better writer. The more you listen to feedback, the easier it gets. Over time, the more confident you'll get at listening and either accepting or discarding that advice, too. When I was writing *Sharper*, I did readings of my work in progress to audiences consisting primarily of friends and acquaintances. I let them give me anonymous feedback and encouraged them not to hold back. I can't underestimate how valuable that was to the outcome.

Writing is an art, not a science, and thus it's fundamentally subjective on the part of the reader. When I first read a couple of negative reader reviews of my book, it genuinely hurt my feelings. But even the best-selling, Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning books get drop-kicked with one-star reviews on Amazon. Two of my best friends, both writers whose opinions I value, simply can't stand William Faulkner. William Faulkner. I can't tell you how much this helped me get over bad reviews. If someone says, "I just didn't like it," don't take it personally.

2) Your book reads like a miracle of manifestation and intention at work. You had to grow up very fast when your father passed away, cooking for your family and nourishing your mother back to well-being. Even before that, however Paris called to you and your sister. You knew in your heart before you knew in your mind that you would go there, as you woke up every morning to pictures of Paris on the walls of your childhood bedroom. Do you believe in the concept of having visual stimulants such as photos, paintings, prints or posters of what you want to manifest surrounding you?

Absolutely. Humans are visual creatures. There's something to the old saying "Keep your eyes on the prize." Static fills so much of our daily lives, and seemingly everything screams for attention, whether it's email, your job, the dishes, relatives, deadlines, Facebook, the television news – no wonder it's hard to keep track of what's important.

Funny, I found the ad for Le Cordon Bleu and the obituary when I was unpacking my final boxes from London last year. Those two pieces of paper are yellowed and brittle, scarred with tape residue and pocked with tack marks. If I'd never put them up in a place where I could see them every day, would my life be different? Would I have let that idea drift to the back of my mind if they weren't there

to haunt me? I wonder.

Until recently, I didn't have any kind of visual cue for the next part of my life. An acquaintance of mine said that when she tried to write a business plan for her blog, she couldn't get into it. Instead, she made a "mood board," cutting out images and words from magazines. She tried to articulate visually what she wanted her life and success to look like. When I had trouble getting clarity on the proposal for my second book, I spent an afternoon doing the same thing. Among other things, it has images of mothers and daughters cooking together, the words "healthy," "strong" and "nourish." It's on my wall now, and keeps me focused.

I put up inspirational quotes, too. My favorite in times of dismay is one by Joseph Heller, "Every writer I know has trouble writing." There's an instructional one from Stephen King: "Everything you write can be cut by at least 10 percent." As inspiration, I keep a postcard sent to me by a reader who simply wrote: "Thanks to you, I finally went to Paris – for my 72nd birthday."

Of course, I also have to tack all my bills up to a corkboard, too, or I'd completely forget about them.

3) I loved how you told the story of an obituary you had to write while working for your hometown newspaper. You said it was the shortest obituary that you had ever seen. No accomplishments, interests or hobbies mentioned. At that moment you declared that you wanted your own obituary to read that you had earned a degree from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. That obituary and an ad for Le Cordon Bleu then followed you from job to job, taped up on your walls.

I know that got my attention- I was so motivated that I gathered up all of my material for my novel and organized it. You state that your parents used to say that life is not a dress rehearsal.

I've heard that writing your own obituary is sometimes used as an exercise to get yourself moving- an ironic call to life. Do you advise doing that? Talk to us a bit about overriding the built in system of procrastination.

There's something deeply sobering about writing obituaries at age 23. I think that everyone should have to do it, like compulsory military service in some countries. In many ways, it was the best job that I've ever had. At the very least, it will be the only time that anyone will ever laminate my work and put it in the family Bible. But it also struck me at an impressionable age that life does not go on forever. Often, it ends abruptly, and "someday" never arrives.

Not many know that the Nobel Peace Prize came about due to an obituary. Alfred Nobel was originally famous as the inventor of dynamite. When his brother died, a newspaper ran Alfred's prepared obit by mistake, one that referred to him as "the merchant of death." Mortified by that characterization, he established the foundations of the Nobel Peace Prize. When he died years later, it was a very different type of obituary. I advise people to think, 'How would you change yours?'

The first thing that I ever did in journalism school was write my own obit, and yes, I think it's a terrific exercise. If memory serves, I referred to myself along the lines of "Kathleen Flinn, noted author, journalist and philanthropist, died at her beach estate on Anna Maria Island." But what would have happened if I never lost that job I hated? What if I worked there for another 20 years? I might be "Kathleen Flinn, unremarkable corporate middle manager, died alone and unloved in someplace uninteresting on Thursday."

4) An acquaintance sends you and your then friend Mike out to get a bottle of wine for a dinner party. As you're walking through London, he asks if you could do anything, anything at all with your life, what would it be? You then voiced your intention aloud: "My secret dream, I told him, would be to work in London for a couple of years and then quit to go live in Paris and study French cuisine at Le Cordon Bleu."

At that moment, it seemed like you plugged electricity into a focused current so that the dream could become a reality. It was as though what followed allowed you space to pursue that dream. You lost the corporate job in London you'd come to hate a few years later and the option of Paris lay waiting. Are you of the opinion that sometimes the universe steps in to meet us halfway in our

intentions? Can you talk to us about making that brave leap- from dream to action?

This may sound a bit New Age-like, but I believe that we're always contributing to the collective energy of the universe. Call it karma or fate, but if you adopt a positive attitude, if you believe that certain things will happen, somehow they do.

When I was 17, I threw a dart at a map. It landed in Gary, Ind. Since no one would willingly move to Gary, I drove from Florida to Chicago. I didn't know anyone and I had only a vague plan. But I knew that I wanted to write. I talked my way into a job at a local newspaper, which led to another job in the Sun-Times building and that led to work for the paper, which in turn brought on other writing jobs. It was a series of happy coincidences. Or was it? I never turned down an assignment or missed a deadline. I networked and met lots of people. As a result, I was often in the right time at the right place since I was somewhere. Does that make any sense?

Of course, at age 23, I dropped it all to move home after a family member was diagnosed with cancer. That's how I ended up at the obituary desk in Florida. In many ways, I had to start all over. That was all right, too. I never looked at it as retreat, but rather advancing in a different direction. Inertia is easy, change can be hard.

I genuinely believe that if you take a chance and follow your passion, everything has a way of working out. It helps to be nice to people and keep a kind heart, too.

5) The actual dream of course is very difficult and takes all you've got-sometimes more. It amazed me to read of your perseverance and strength. What kept you going with such a great attitude that day that "the gray chef" said, "Vous perdez votre temps!" You really turned things around with him so that he ended up not only respecting you but also became one of your biggest supporters, saying that he knew you had it in you all along. Discuss with us the formation and maintenance of the right "just go for it" attitude.

I think that I'd give my parents credit for that. My mom loves a good cliché. Two of her favorites are "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," and "Iron has to go through fire to become steel." My father was a living example of those phrases. He grew up in poverty. My paternal grandmother, Della, was a tough woman who weathered two bad marriages and ultimately raised eight kids on her own in a one-room shack during the Great Depression. Despite leaving home and school at age 14 to work full-time, my father was the first person in his entire lineage to go to college. My mother grew up in humble circumstances, too. They both overcame a lot in their lifetimes, and it did make them stronger people. They remain two of the most optimistic people I've ever known, too.

I'm the youngest of five kids. All of us grew up believing that anything was possible, as long as you worked hard enough for it. When you hear stories about your grandmother walking five miles in the snow with cardboard strapped to her feet or your dad working two jobs and finishing the ninth grade on his own, it's hard to come up with an excuse why you got a "C" in math.

My father was diagnosed with terminal cancer when I was eight years old, and he died when I was 13. It was tough. We'd moved somewhere new, I had no friends. But it made me more resilient, and a stronger person, just like my mother's favorite clichés. I also know that he left a lot of things unaccomplished by dying at age 50. That paired with my stint on the obits desk may be why I started to feel a sense of urgency about life earlier than most people. I'm fairly sure that my mid-life crisis started at age 32.

6) I love the title, "The Sharper Your Knife the Less You Cry". You write of how "it's important to cut away the things that get in the way of your dreams" and also supply its literal meaning when applied to chopping onions. But I feel that there is yet another deeper aspect to this that I'd learned in a psychology class. There is a philosophy that if you ask someone to picture a knife, fork and spoon laid out on a table and then tell them to immediately pick one without thinking about it, that it will show the way they go through life. For instance, if one picks the spoon, they want to be spoon-fed life, taking the easiest route possible. One who chooses the fork will put in some effort to get what they want, battling

some resistance, but those who choose the knife are prepared to cut through obstacles, tackle resistance and invite a challenge. After reading your book, I know that you would fit the knife profile with your earnest dedication, unshakeable determination, and powerful mindset. Were you born 'ready' or do you think that the circumstances of your life forged this strength of will?

I'd never heard of that philosophy before but that's interesting. I'd probably pick up the knife just because I've developed a bit of a knife fetish.

As a source of energy, passion can't be underestimated. My parents also used to advise that we should "do what we love, and the money will follow." I went into writing, not the most lucrative career. Later, I studied cooking. I love both things so much that I can put in long hours and all my energy into either of them, and still never get enough.

7) Let's talk about 'Margo' and the bad houseguests. (It sounds like a peculiar rock band!) You demonstrate great integrity and kindness through your words and actions. How do you put up with the 'Margo's' of the world? So many of us have met this type of person along our paths- how do you so effectively deal with this sort of personality? [For our readers, Margo was an individual whose sole purpose was to rise to the top, never assisting others, interested in squelching the competition]

Margo was an interesting character and in real life, she's mellowed out. But to me she typified the American tendency toward a "win at all costs" attitude. We love the gold medalists, the top of the heap, the biggest celebrities. Our society rewards the winners. That's why we want to win. But in the end, life isn't about winning. It's about the journey, and the things that you learn and appreciate along the way. As a culture, I don't think we have much of a yardstick for that, much less a medal.

I understood Margo. She wanted to be the best. She reminded me of the corporate world that I had just left behind, an environment filled with petty politics, character assassinations and turf wars. Since I'm competitive, I'm sure that I took part in all of that behavior, too. That's why I tried to genuinely understand her motivations, and that's the key to dealing with difficult people.

The reality was that she was good, but she had a hard time forgiving herself for not being the best. The reality is that there would always be someone better, somewhere. Over time, she realized that and for her, I think that was the greatest lesson of all. Sometimes, you just do your best, learn all you can and forgive yourself for not being perfect or what you can't do.

People forget that in the movie Rocky, he doesn't win. He just hung with the champ, and that by itself was success and reward.

8) This was your debut book and it's a hit. A common saying is that the writer who expects results from a first book is like the man who drops a rose petal into the Grand Canyon and listens for the echo. Talk us to us would-be debut writers who are saving our best writing for that first novel. How, in this instance, do you ignore the 'outside' censors when getting your dream out there?

In 2005, I went to my high school reunion. I was unemployed and had a book proposal that I hadn't sold. I told a woman who had been one of the popular girls in high school about it, and she actually laughed at me. "Ha, my brother has been trying to sell his book for years. Good luck!" The book went to auction with 10 publishing houses two weeks later. Don't listen to the critics. They don't know what they're talking about.

Early on in the process of writing the book, I stumbled across *Making a Literary Life* by Carolyn See. *(Editorial note- you can go to the Archives and read our interview with Carolyn See in the Winter 08' issue) I recommend it to all writers. See suggests that you write 1,000 words a day five times a week for the rest of your life, and that you must have a dedicated place to write. I found both to be true. If I skip writing a few days, it's hard to get back into it. If I've got to move stuff off the dining room table to work, that's just enough of an obstacle to keep the pen from paper. That's about two pages a day. So, if you can write two pages a day, you'll likely have finished a book one year

from the day you start, perhaps even sooner.

Before starting my book, the longest story that I'd ever written was around 3,000 words long. It takes a lot of butt-in-the-seat time to write a book, and a lot more to polish it off. (You've got a lot of terrible first drafts to write remember?) My biggest advice to people is that if you're serious about finishing a book, schedule your writing time and stick to it. No one has "free time" anymore. If you write when you've got "spare time," you'll never do it. It took seven, long months of writing and rewriting my proposal for *Sharper* before I sold it. I found a cheap office and got up every morning and went to work just as if it was a job. I went to writing conferences and met people. I asked everyone one I knew if they knew of a literary agent. I tried to meet the universe halfway again.

"Saving" your writing is similar to those people who have fabulous china and silver that they're saving "for good" and thus never use. What are they waiting for, the Queen of England to drop by for tea?

Use your silver. Write every day. Meet other writers. Get feedback on your work. Writing is like a muscle. It gets stronger the more you flex it, the harder the push it.

9) Chef Gaillard often asked before class, "Est-ce que vous desirez un petite histoire?" A story of France would then follow. I particularly loved what Chef had to say of Normandy: "It's a shame that most people associate Normandy only with World War II." I have a story for you there- est-ce vous desirez un petite histoire? My father was there in Normandy during the second world war and as a young soldier of nineteen, he missed his mother's home cooking most of all. He befriended a French family there who turned out to have the same last name as his. My father would keep their family's cars in tires and they in return invited him for home cooked meals! Even in the midst of war, far from home and those he loved at a young age, food brought comfort.

Tell us an anecdote of food bringing great comfort and nostalgia while you were on your quest in Europe, facing difficult circumstances.

I think the time that hit me the hardest in terms of missing my mother's cooking was the first time that I was sick after moving to London in 1999. I had a flu that shifted into pneumonia, and I craved her chicken noodle soup like a gambling addict longs for a craps table. I bundled up and went out into the cold to get a whole chicken and the makings for it all, but on the way home, my vision started blurring. As I put my key in the door, I was nearly delirious with fever. Somehow I packed everything into the tiny fridge in my postage stamp-sized kitchen and stumbled into bed to sleep for nearly 18 hours.

At 4 a.m., I woke up in a daze and padded into the kitchen. Around this point, I discovered I'd made a huge blunder. None of my stuff had arrived from America yet and I'd barely cooked in my flat, so it didn't occur to me that I didn't have a pot to cook in. The only pan I had was a skillet left by the previous tenant. I collapsed on the floor and started to cry. I felt that sad, sobbing kind of lonely that you only feel when you're sick and away from home.

As if on cue, I saw a big saucepan tucked under the sink meant to catch a long-forgotten leak. I went from desperately unhappy to utterly thrilled that somehow the universe had delivered a pan. It was decent soup, but not as good as my mother's.

10) What's next for Ms. Kathleen Flinn? Mt. Everest?!

Ha! Sometimes writing a book feels like Everest! I'm working on a new book, tentatively titled *Changing Courses: A Mission to Get People Off the Couch and Into the Kitchen* for Viking/Penguin. It's due this summer so it should hit shelves in spring 2011. Like *Sharper*, it's a memoir about learning to cook, but this time I'm the teacher, rather than the student.

The story focuses on a project that I conducted in 2009 to try to learn what kinds of skills people could learn that would significantly impact the way that they feed themselves and those around them. I found a dozen people who all relied on convenience and fast food and then conducted a series of hands-on lessons. I later followed up to see what stuck with them. That research resulted in a condensed

remedial hands-on cooking lesson curriculum that will be taught through a non-profit foundation that I've developed.

I'm also hosting a series of communal tasting events called The Red Velvet Dinners in Seattle and Florida, and those have allowed me to realize my childhood days of playing "restaurant." I volunteer a lot, something that I've always done. Right now, I serve as the chair of the Food Writers, Editors & Publishers section for the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP). It's been a great way to meet loads of other food writers. I've got a couple of other projects in the works, including plans for two more books.

Before we go, a few more items to discuss. When you talk of de-boning an entire turkey for Thanksgiving because it didn't fit into the French oven (and this has to be done without tearing the skin) and you had a four star chef joining you for dinner, I'm sure I speak for many women here when I ask, how did you keep that incredible calm?! I can't even get the turkey into the oven on Thanksgiving without fighting with it and that's with my husband helping me. I am amazed and give you immense credit on that great feat.

The funny thing about that experience is that I've learned now that no one appreciates the work that goes into a big dinner more than a chef. Chefs make terrific dinner party guests, yet they're rarely invited to dinner since everyone fears they'll sit quietly in judgment and that's rarely the case.

Also, in the spirit of Valentine's Day, may we ask how that wonderful husband of yours is?

He's terrific. I have to say that marrying Mike was the best darn thing that I ever did in my life.

Mike has had a pivotal role in my development as a writer, too. He's a remarkably gifted editor. I retreat to my office during the day. Then, I come home and he reads the words back to me, all while offering feedback and advice. Sometimes we argue about it. But all of it works to push me to be a better writer.

Mike inspires me to be a better person overall. He's just one of those people who is genuinely good, you know? Here's a true story. On Christmas Day, we were on a Seattle-to-Florida cross-country flight. The flight was packed, not a single empty seat. I got bumped to first class. Mike insisted that I take it and settled back into a window seat in the bulkhead of the coach section. A young Japanese man asked if he would change seats with his girlfriend, a tiny young girl waving from a middle seat in row 27. "First time America, we go to Disney," he explained. Not long after takeoff, Mike swapped seats. His new seat mate, the woman on the aisle of row 27, remarked that she would never have done it on such a long flight. Eventually, they started trading stories. She'd read *The Sharper Your Knife*. The woman shrieked, "You're Mike?!" She told him that when she read it, she wondered if I'd just whitewashed his character, since he seemed too perfect. "But, wow, you really are that nice!"

Here, I want to thank you for the walk along the Seine, sights, flavors, Provence, the Rungis (world's largest wholesale market), tales of your friends, your inspiring quest and Le Cordon Bleu itself. I read Noel Riley Fitch's book on Julia Child and I'm glad to see that the school is brimming with new technology. Additional gratitude to you for the recipes! I'm looking forward to perfecting my crepe making for Nutella and Banana crepes with brown sugar. It was said by Somerset Maugham that once in awhile, a book you read becomes a part of you. This book held that transformational quality for me. I will, however, never de-bone a turkey!

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

© 2010 *The Write Place At the Write Time*

This on-line magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.