

Author yoga

Jill Dawson

Writers spend so much time hunched over a keyboard that we often need something physical – a walk, a swim, the gym – to get us up and out, get the blood circulating again. For me the gym is a place of horror (to tell the truth I've never been to one) but I discovered early on that yoga suited me perfectly.

I first encountered yoga in a community hall in Hornchurch, Essex, in the 1970s. I was nine years old and there with Mum and her glamorous friend Auntie Joyce. I can't remember much about the teacher, but I do remember the thrill of discovering that I was superbendy, and unlike PE, netball, hockey and just about everything else I'd ever tried, I was quite good at Hatha yoga and could fold in two with my head on my calves like the closing jaws of an alligator. My inspiration was Tanga Pearl the Elastic Girl, from the girls' comic *Tammy*.

The suburban housewives of the 70s from Essex to Yorkshire (we moved there when I was ten) were all watching a yoga programme led by guru Richard Hittleman. He would grimace and look a bit constipated while breathing out and sucking in his stomach; ironically this was a posture to improve digestion and 'massage internal organs'. Mum bought me the book and I have it still. *Happy 12th Birthday Jill: Teach yourself Yoga in 28 days*. And I did, fingers poised on alternate nostrils as I practised the breathing and studied Hittleman's students: the becalmed slender blondes with serious faces that I would now turn into.

In fact the calm state never arrived, but I did continue the daily yoga practising. I also began training to be a yoga teacher. I would schlepp over to an old school hall in Poplar in East London to study the eight limbs of yoga, the ancient Sanskrit texts and how to mirror the students' postures ('Raise the right arm', the teacher has to say, facing the class and raising her own left one – trickier than it sounds). There was a vague mention of going to India to study with BKS Iyengar's daughter (I was studying the Iyengar style of yoga) but I had no

funds for that, being unemployed and a secret novelist at the time. This time my bendiness was both blessing and tyrant. 'You're over extending!' Peter, my teacher-trainer said crossly, but he thought nothing of tying me with straps into a backward bend over a gym horse so that I could 'feel the space between each vertebra'.

I began teaching in the early 80s and had no idea how much I'd hate the teaching part. Standing in front of people! Doing asanas in your lycra leotard with them all looking at you! Saying embarrassing things by accident like 'men tend to be stiff here' meaning the inner thighs but indicating the groin. My dread meant I had a serious stomach cramp before every class.

I tried some private tutoring, and this I did for three years. If I tell you that I charged £3 an hour you might guess why that job also failed. I did enjoy individual teaching more than groups though, and it meant there was time for my writing and to improve my own yoga. By the '90s yoga was at last fashionable and I could probably have made some kind of living by teaching it. But I'd published my first novel by then and gone off the idea of yoga teaching as a career.

Still, a lifetime – over 40 years – of doing a little yoga every day really does have benefits. My mum's glamorous friend Joyce is now 94 and can still touch her toes, and (more usefully) walk to the local shops, and she is my inspiration. It might be luck rather than yoga, but I've never suffered from insomnia: I sleep like a felled tree. I am rarely ill. I have never had a back problem of any kind (even throughout two pregnancies) and am amazed how unusual this makes me. I do have focus and find it easy to switch off from other things in order to concentrate on writing.

I've eschewed all that hot yoga and trendy stuff in favour of the 1970s Richard Hittleman version which served the suburban housewives of Essex so well and which I do for only 15 minutes a day. I recommend to all writers who'd like to improve concentration, help prevent back problems, relieve shoulder and neck aches or headaches, or lift their mood that they learn some



Jill Dawson's new novel *The Language of Birds* tells the story of the nanny murdered in the Lord Lucan affair of 1974.

Photo © Jenny Riffle.

basic yoga from a class and then find a way to make it a daily habit.

A few years back I went on a week-long yoga retreat to Ibiza with my friend and fellow novelist, Louise Doughty. Irina, the Spanish yoga teacher, would not have been out of place with the becalmed Hittleman blondes, but all of us, no matter what our age and flexibility, got something out of the postures, the breathing and ‘tuning inwards’ she taught us. Yoga helps our immune system, lowers our blood pressure, improves posture and circulation.

The spiritual benefits concerned Irina more than the physical and it was good to be reacquainted with the yoga philosophy I’d started to study 30 years previously. But I have to admit that my best moment was the end of the class when we lay down for the Corpse Posture. (I’ve always been skilled at that one.) The posture requires you to lie on your back, relax deeply from toes to head, letting your limbs become

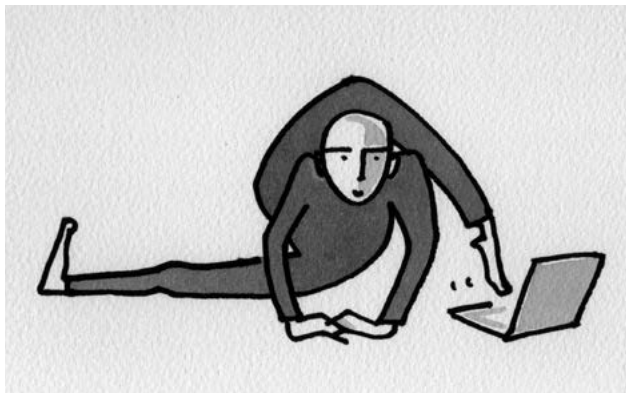


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heavy and imagining your body melting into the floor. Meanwhile your mind drifts into a liminal, dreamy state perfect for conjuring up scenes, dialogue and characters.

A confession: most of my novels have been created this way. ●