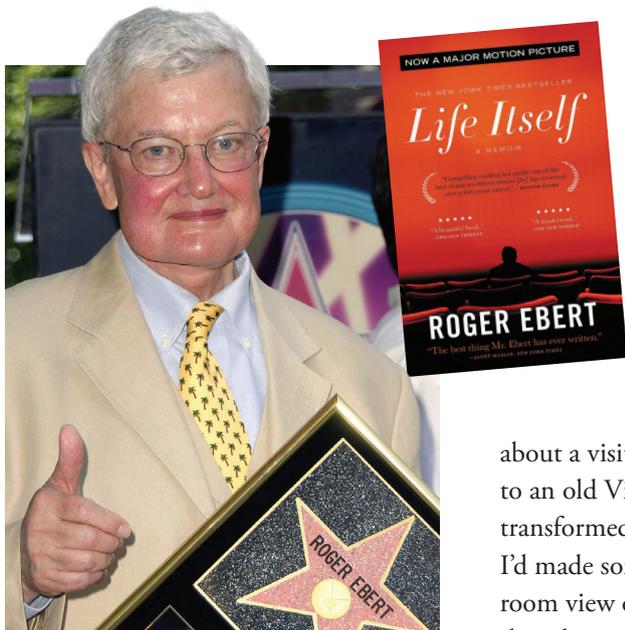


## SURPRISE CAN BE WRITING'S BEST GIFT

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR



Celebrated film critic Roger Ebert was surprised by what emerged on the page as he wrote his 2011 memoir, *Life Itself*. Those kinds of unexpected turns can inspire practiced writers to keep going. Photo provided by Everett Collection / Shutterstock.com.

My grown daughter took a pottery class over the summer, something she did just for fun. There were basic lessons in technique – general principles about the best way to make bowls, vases, or trays that are both useful and beautiful. Skill is critical in shaping the outcome, though a potter quickly learns that the clay has a mind of its own. The peculiar feel and qualities of the material can take a piece of pottery in unexpected directions. What emerges is a kind of conversation between artists and their work, a connection that yields something no one could have fully anticipated.

That's the pleasure of any art, and it's an abiding satisfaction of writing, too.

When I write an essay, for example, I have a basic idea of what I want to say, but in the crafting of a piece, a first draft will point me to other insights I hadn't really planned. This happened the other day while I was writing a travelogue

about a visit my wife and I had made to an old Victorian house that had been transformed into an inn and restaurant. I'd made some notes about our dining room view of the sunny garden and the relaxing quiet of the afternoon – all nice details to place within a paragraph about the ambience.

But seeing the passage on the page, I was struck by how generic it felt. There are lots of restaurants with quiet corners and nice views, after all. This essay in progress was asking me a question I wasn't quite ready to answer: What had *really* made our time at that old inn so memorable?

Mulling things over, I came to understand that it was the *sound* of the house that still lingered in my imagination, an element of the story I hadn't originally jotted in my notes. That's what led to this sentence, a part of the essay that wasn't included in my outline:

*In the soft creak of the floors, we could hear the past murmuring its little secrets.*

Even professionals who have written for years will often be struck by the

*The unexpected parts of the work are writing's biggest challenge — and often, its best gifts.*

odd little turns a writing project takes. The late film critic Roger Ebert made this point about writing his lovely 2011 memoir, *Life Itself*: “When I began writing this book, memories came flooding to the surface, not because of any conscious effort but simply in the stream of writing. I started in a direction and the memories were waiting there, sometimes of things I hadn't consciously thought about since.”

When writers embark on their work, they're seldom fully sure where it will go. That uncertainty can be scary, a challenge that keeps some novice writers from starting at all.

But every surprise on the page can be a revelation, the reward that keeps veteran writers going back for more.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing

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