The most valuable tool I employ in the writing of a private eye novel is the working journal. The process is one I began in rudimentary form when I first started work on “A” Is for Alibi, though all I retain of that journal now are a few fragmentary notes. With “B” Is for Burglar, I began to refine the method and from “C” Is for Corpse on, I’ve kept a daily log of work in progress. This notebook (usually four times longer than the novel itself) is like a letter to myself, detailing every idea that occurs to me as I proceed. Some ideas I incorporate, some I modify, many I discard. The journal is a record of my imagination at work, from the first spark of inspiration to the final manuscript. Here I record my worries and concerns, my dead ends, my occasional triumphs, all the difficulties I face as the narrative unfolds. The journal contains solutions to all the problems that arise in the course of the writing. Sometimes the breakthroughs are sudden; more often the answers are painstakingly arrived at through trial and error.

One of my theories about writing is that the process involves an ongoing interchange between Left Brain and Right. The journal provides a testing ground where the two can engage. Left Brain is analytical, linear, the timekeeper, the bean counter, the critic and editor, a valuable ally in the shaping of the mystery novel or any piece of writing for that matter. Right Brain is creative, spatial, playful, disorganized, dazzling, nonlinear, the source of the Aha! or imaginative leap. Without Right Brain, there would be no material for the Left Brain to refine. Without Left Brain, the
jumbled brilliance of Right Brain would never coalesce into a satisfactory whole.

In addition to the yin/yang of the bicameral brain, the process of writing is a constant struggle between the Ego and the Shadow, to borrow Jungian terms. Ego, as implied, is the public aspect of our personality, the carefully constructed persona, or mask, we present to the world as the “truth” about us. The Shadow is our Unconscious, the Dark Side—the dangerous, largely unacknowledged cauldron of “unacceptable” feelings and reactions that we’d prefer not to look at in ourselves and certainly hope to keep hidden from others. We spend the bulk of our lives perfecting our public image, trying to deny or eradicate the perceived evil in our nature.

For the writer, however—especially the mystery writer—the Shadow is crucial. The Shadow gives us access to our repressed rage, the murderous impulses that propel antisocial behavior whether we’re inclined to act out or not. Without ingress to our own Shadow, we would have no way to delineate the nature of a fictional killer, no way to penetrate and depict the inner life of the villain in the novels we write. As mystery writers, we probe this emotional black swamp again and again, dredging in the muck for plot and character. As repelled as we may be by the Dark Side of our nature, we’re drawn to its power, recognizing that the Shadow contains enormous energy if we can tap into it. The journal is the writer’s invitation to the Shadow, a means of beckoning to the Unconscious, enticing it to yield its potent magic to the creative process.

What Goes into the Journal and How Does It Work?

At the outset of each new novel, the thing I do is open a document on my word processor that I call “Notes” or “Notes-1.” By the end of a book, I have four or five such documents, averaging fifty single-spaced pages apiece.

In my first act of the writing day, I log into my journal with the date. Usually I begin with a line about what’s happening in my life. I make a note if I’m coming down with a cold, if my cat’s run away, if I’ve got company coming in from out of town. Anything that specifically characterizes the day becomes part of the journal on the theory that exterior events have the potential to affect the day’s work. If I have a bad day at work, I can sometimes track the problem to its source and try correcting it there. For instance, if I’m consistently distracted every time I’m scheduled for a speaking engagement, I can limit outside events until the book is done.
The second entry in the journal is a note about any idea that’s occurred to me in the dead of night, when Shadow and Right Brain are most active. Often, I’m wakened by a nudge from Right Brain with some suggestion about where to go next in the narrative or offering a reminder of a beat I’ve missed. Sometimes, I’m awakened by emotion-filled dreams or the horror of a nightmare, either one of which can hold clues about the story I’m working on. It’s my contention that our writing is a window to all of our internal attitudes and emotional states. If I sit down to write and I’m secretly worried about the progress I’m making, then that worry will infuse the very work itself. If I’m anxious about an upcoming scene, if I’m troubled by the pacing, if I suspect a plot is too convoluted, or the identity of the killer is too transparent, then the same anxiety will inhibit the flow of words. Until I own my worries, I run the risk of self-sabotage or writer’s block. The journal serves as a place to offload anxiety, a verbal repair shop when my internal writing machine breaks down.

Generally, the next step in the journal is to lay out for myself where I am in the book. I talk to myself about the scene I’m working on, or the trouble spots as I see them. It’s important to realize that the journal in progress is absolutely private—for my eyes only. This is not a literary oeuvre in which I preen and posture for some future biographer. This is a nuts-and-bolts format in which I think aloud, fret, whine and wring my hands. There’s nothing grand about it and it’s certainly not meant to be great writing. Once a novel is finished and out on the shelves, then the journal can be opened to public inspection if I so choose.

In the safety of the journal, I can play “Suppose . . .” and “What if . . .” creating an atmosphere of open debate where Ego and Shadow, Left Brain and Right, can all be heard. I write down all the story possibilities . . . all the pros and cons . . . and then check back a day or so later to see which prospects strike a chord. The journal is experimental. The journal functions as a playground for the mind, a haven where the imagination can cavort at will. While I’m working in the journal, I don’t have to look good. I can be as dumb or goofy as I want. The journal provides a place where I can let my proverbial hair down and “dare to be stupid,” as we used to say in Hollywood.

The beauty of the journal entry is that before I know it, I’m sliding right into my writing for the day. Instead of feeling resistant or hesitant, the journal provides a jump-start, a way to get the words moving.

To demonstrate the technique, I’ll include a few sample pages from the journal I kept during the writing of “G” Is for Gumshoe. I do this without
embarrassment (she said), though I warn you in advance that what you see is a fumbling process, my tortured mind at work.

“G” Is for Gumshoe is essentially a “road picture.” In this seventh novel in the series, Kinsey Millhone discovers she’s on Tyrone Patty’s hit list, targeted for assassination in retaliation for her part in his arrest and conviction. The following passages of the journal begin some three chapters into the novel. Earlier notes, unfortunately, were lost to me in the transfer of the work from an old computer system to newly acquired equipment. My intention here is not to try to dazzle you with my song-and-dance work, but to demonstrate the mundane level at which the journal actually functions.

1–2–89

Just checking in to have a little chat. I’m in Chapter 3 and feeling pretty good, but I’m wondering if I don’t need some tension or suspense. We know there may be a hit man after her. She’s currently on her way to the desert and everything seems really normal . . . nay, even dull. Do I need to pep it up a bit? She’s almost at the Slabs. I’ve been doing a lot of description but maybe I need to weave it into the narrative better. Flipping back and forth from the external to the internal.

What other possibilities are there? I’ve noticed that with Dick Francis, sometimes when nothing’s happening, you sit there expecting something anyway. I could use the external as a metaphor for the internal. I know I’ll be doing that when Dietz enters the scene. What could Kinsey be thinking about while she drives down to the Slabs? She’s talked briefly. . . .

1–4–89

Can’t remember what I meant to say in the paragraph above. I did some work last night that I’m really happy with. I’m using a little boy with a toy car at the rest stop. Added a father asleep on the bench. Later, he turns out to be one of the guys hired to kill her.

Want to remember to use a couple of things.

1. When the mother dies, Kinsey goes back down to the desert with Dietz. They search, finding nothing . . . maybe a few personal papers. What they come across, in an old cardboard box under the trailer, is some objects . . . maybe just old cups & saucers (which may trigger memories in Irene Gersh . . .). But the newspapers in which
these objects are packed dated back to 1937... Santa Teresa. Obviously, the mother was there at some point.

When Kinsey checks into the mother’s background, she realizes Irene’s birth certificate is a total fake. The mother has whited-out the real information, typed over it, and has done a photocopy. All the information has been falsified. She’s not who she says she was during her lifetime... father’s name is wrong... I was thinking it might be Santa Teresa, but then Irene would know at the outset she had some connection with the town. Better she should think she was born in Brawley or someplace like that.

Kinsey tries to track down the original in San Diego... or wherever I decide to place the original... no record of such a birth. Once Kinsey finds the old newspapers, she decides to try Santa Teresa records, using the certificate # which is the only thing that hasn’t been tampered with. Up comes the true certificate.

Must remember that a social security card... first three digits indicate where the card was issued. That might be a clue.

Irene Gersh is floored. If mom isn’t who she claims she was, then who am I?

Must also remember that mom is frightened to death. That would be a nice murder method.

In addition to storyboarding ideas, I use my journal to record notes for all the research I’ve done. I also make a note of any question that occurs to me while I’m writing a scene. Instead of stopping the flow of words, I simply jot down a memo to myself for later action.

Journals often contain the ideas for scenes, characters, plot twists, or clever lines of dialogue that don’t actually make it into the book I’m working on. Such literary detritus might well provide the spark for the next book in the series.

Often, too, in the pages of a journal, I’ll find Right Brain leaping ahead to a later scene in the book. Since I don’t actually outline a novel in any format or detailed way, the journal is a road map to the story I’m working on. If dialogue or a descriptive passage suddenly occurs to me, I’ll tuck it in the journal and come back to it when I reach the chapter where the excerpt belongs. This way, I find I can do some of my writing in advance of myself. Right Brain, my creative part, really isn’t interested in working line-by-line. Right Brain sees the whole picture, like the illustration on the box that contains a jigsaw puzzle. Left Brain might insist
that we start at the beginning and proceed in an orderly fashion right through to the end, but Right Brain has its own way of going about its business. The journal is a place to honor Right Brain’s ingenuity and non-conformity.

Sometimes I use the journal to write a note directly to Shadow or Right Brain, usually when I’m feeling blocked or stuck. These notes are like writer’s prayers and I’m always astonished at how quickly they’re answered.

In the “G” Is for Gumshoe journal, you can see that by March, some three months later, the book has advanced almost magically. I’ll do a hop-skip-and-jump, picking up entries here and there.

3–12–89

Finally got Dietz & Kinsey on the road. They’ve stopped for lunch. She’s asking him about his background & he’s being good about that stuff. Want to keep them moving . . . let information surface while they’re heading for Santa Teresa. Don’t want the story to come to a screeching halt while they chit chat. Must keep defining his character through action . . . not just dialogue. Once I get the book on bodyguarding techniques, I can fill in some technical information that will make him seem very knowledgeable. For now, I can do the small touches. At some point, he should give her some rules & regulations.

What else do I want to accomplish on the way up to Santa Teresa? Don’t need any action at this point . . . don’t need jeopardy per se. Must keep in mind that Dick Francis plays relationships very nicely without jamming incessant screams and chases into the narrative.

3–13–89

I wonder if chapter nine will last all the way to Santa Teresa. What does Kinsey do when she gets home? She’ll call Irene to make sure Agnes has arrived, which she will very soon. She’ll introduce Dietz to Henry Pitts who’ll be briefed about the situation re: the hit man. Security measures (if I knew what they were. . . .)

Want to dovetail “A” & “B” plots so both won’t come in a ragged stop simultaneously.

Within a day, Agnes Grey will have disappeared from the nursing home.
Soon after, her body will be found.

Haven't quite solved the problem of how Kinsey gets hired to track down the killer.

Can't quite decide what the next beat is in the attempt on Kinsey's life. Dietz will get her a bulletproof vest. Does he jog with her? She won't really feel like it and he'll advise against. He'll have her take a different route to the office & home every day . . . always in his company.

Maybe Dietz has to make a quick trip to Carson City . . . or somewhere. Papa sick? Mama sick? An unavoidable personal emergency. If I played my cards right, his absence might coincide with Kinsey's second trip to the desert. I guess I'll map all this out as I get to it but it does feel like a tricky business to make the story move smoothly through here.

Why do I worry so much about boring the reader? I don't want it to look like I've sacrificed the mystery and the pace for mere romance.

And skipping ahead to August . . .

8–12–89

Trying not to panic here. In the dead of night, Right Brain suggested that maybe Kinsey gets locked in the very storage bin Agnes was locked in. Nice claustrophobic atmosphere.

As a reader, I don't object to being privy to the reasoning process a detective goes through as long as it makes sense to me and seems logical. When the leap comes too fast, then I object. I like for the detective to consider every possible alternative.

My problem here is one of transitions . . . forging the links between the scenes I know are coming up.

8–15–89

Book was due today but so be it. Just closed out Chapter 23 and opened 24. I'm going to write notes to myself for a while and then print pages 30–35 so I can have them handy.

Need to set up “It used to be Summer . . .”

Maybe Kinsey & Dietz go back to Irene's & confront her with the true information on the birth certificate. If these aren't my parents, then who am I?
God, I’m tired today. I’d really love to sleep. Let’s see what I can accomplish in a stupor. Can’t wait for this book to be over and done.

Dear Right Brain,

Please be with me here and help me solve and resolve the remaining questions in the narrative. Help me to be resourceful, imaginative, energetic, inventive. And patient.

Look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sue

I could pull up countless other samples, but you get the point I’m sure.

One comfort I take from my journals is that regardless of where I am in the current private eye novel, I can always peek back into the journals I’ve kept for previous books and discover that I was just as confused and befuddled back then as I am today. Prior journals are reminders that regardless of past struggles, I did somehow manage to prevail. Having survived through two novels, or five, or even twelve, in my case, there’s some reason to suppose that I’ll survive to write the next.

If you haven’t already incorporated a journal or its equivalent into your current bag of writing tricks, you might try your hand at one and see how it works for you. Remember, it’s your journal and you can do it any way you choose. If you don’t use a PC, you can write yours in crayon on the ten-by-fourteen-inch sheets of newsprint. You can type it, write longhand, use a code if you need to feel protected. You can log in every day or only once a week. You can use it as a launching pad and then abandon the practice, or use it as I do, as an emotional tether connecting me to each day’s work.

To help you get started, I’ll give you the first entry just to speed you on your way:

Enter today’s date.

Just sitting down here to try my hand at this weird stuff Sue Grafton has been talking about. A lot of it sounds like California psychobabble, but if it helps with the writing, who really cares?

In the book I’m working on what worried me is . . .