

# How to Write Your First Novel

Gay Walley



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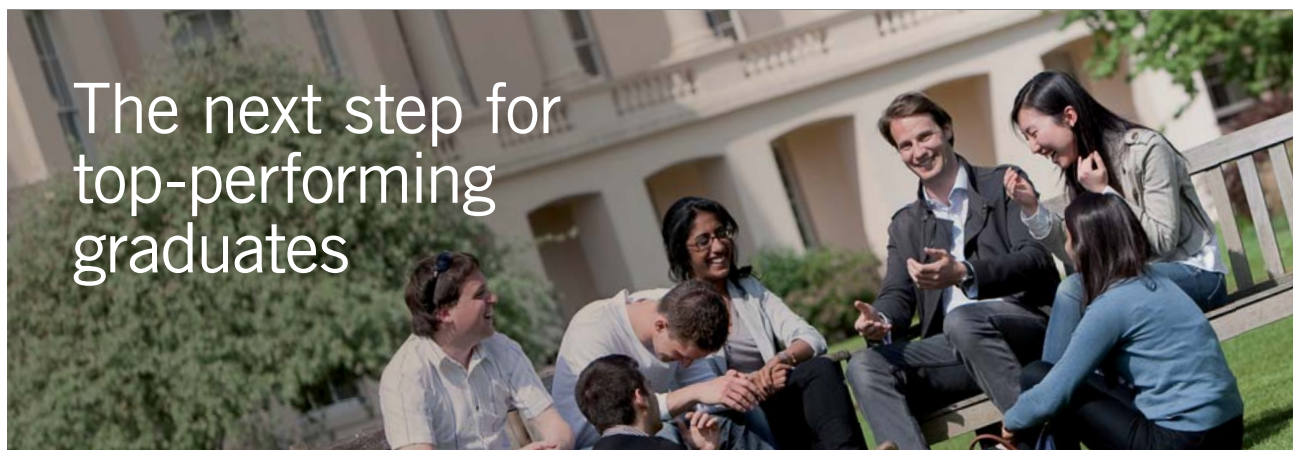
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# 1 The time is now

“How old one would have to become to have truly admired enough and not to lag behind with regard to anything in the world. There is still so much that one underestimates, overlooks, and misrecognizes. God, how many opportunities and examples that invite us to become something – and in response to those, how much sluggishness, distractedness, and half-will on our side.” Rilke

Well, if you are reading this book, you have decided to buck your sluggishness and distractedness. You are going to write your first novel.

You may have talked about it. You certainly have thought about it. You’ve said, “I have this idea and I just want to bring it to life.” Or you have a character who keeps popping up in your thoughts. You can hear that person speak. You can see them, the way they stand at a street corner. You take a stroll in the park or you are doing errands and heroic or heart-breaking events start to happen with that character in your mind. Or maybe there is a theme that you believe has never been addressed before in a novel and it should be.

Something inside of you knows that you will get some pleasure from writing this book. As Imre Kertesz, the great Hungarian Nobel Prize winning author wrote, “And even if that raw material looks fairly cheerless, the form is able to transform it and turn it into pleasure, because writing can only come from an abundance of energies, from pleasure; writing – and this is not my invention – is heightened life.”

Something inside you knows that writing a novel will make you feel whole and excited. You will be living more than one life at a time.

Vargas Llosa writes, “What is the origin of this early indication, the source of the literary vocation, for inventing beings and stories? The answer, I think, is rebellion. I’m convinced that those who immerse themselves in the lucubration of lives different from their own demonstrate indirectly their rejection and criticism of life as it is, of the real world, and manifest their desire to substitute for it the creations of their imagination and dreams.”

So the rebel in you needs a voice. The rebel in you wants to create his or her own reality. The rebel is demanding his or her say.

But how do you actually sit down and begin? It's daunting. There are so many places to lose your way. In the voice, for example. You begin to wonder should it be like your own? Should it be entirely different? And what about dialogue? Will you be able to know when not to be pedantic? Should your story be first person but then you won't be able to move around the story so easily? Should it be third, in the omniscient voice where you play God and are all seeing, but will that feel a little too nineteenth century? Should it be third person limited which is when you are the camera on top of your main character, seeing the events in the story from your main character's point of view?

All questions to be solved.

Then, you ask, who are you to even write a book? You've never done it before. What would your strengths as a writer be? Do you know about the world you're writing about? Are you a good storyteller? Do you see into the subtleties of character well enough? Do you have those talents? "Okay," you say, "I am willing to find out but what if I fail miserably?"

You won't fail if you work at it. Of course, you will have inherent weaknesses as a writer that need to be worked out. All writers do. But you also will discover your strengths. Perhaps with you dialogue comes easier than anything else. Or you just intuitively know how to advance a story. Perhaps you have originality of insight. You'll find out by doing it. Whatever comes a bit easier is your strength. Stay close to that.

But you have to also know how to manage your weaknesses. Some writers are not good at plots. Even Raymond Chandler got lost in his plots but his writing and characters were so good that no reader minded. Or are you inclined to make cardboard characters who are all good or all bad? No one is one dimensional and no one will believe they are unless you're creating a comic book. You need to show your character failing and winning.

Every writer has to face all these hills and valleys as you commence a book. And face all those hills and valleys, even on your eleventh book.

But before I help you begin, let us look at some little ground rules before you start.

Don't talk your book. The first draft should just be you and the story. You don't need your dry cleaner's or therapist's opinion on what you are writing. They are not fiction writers. You need to write a messy, full of holes, sometimes sloppy in language first draft. Hemingway famously said, "All first drafts are s\_\_t." He's right. I think Muriel Spark never had to rewrite but she is in a minority of .000010 percent of writers.

If you don't talk the book out to your friends, you will work out its depths on the page. Your unconscious will be in charge and you can take secret risks without worrying what other people think. You will remain true to your own unconscious who is in charge of selecting scenes, dialogue and the movement of the book.

And speaking of your unconscious, who is your main assistant in the writing job, you must honor it. How do you do that? By writing every day. Even if it's only for 10 minutes. Why? Because the story will advance, much to your surprise, and your unconscious will stay in constant contact with the book and be thinking about it, giving you ideas when you least expect it. If you start your novel, and then take three months off from writing the book, you will lose impetus and drive and forget how to truly advance the story.

And now for a brief discussion of genres. There is an axiom and I subscribe to it which is your style is probably akin to writers you like to read. I personally never read mysteries so it is unlikely I have a gift for that genre. So if you like literary novels, you probably are going to write one. If you like magical realism, you might end up going towards that. You have to write in a genre you enjoy, admire and one that your imagination easily travels in.

The other suggestion I might make is don't try to write a "commercial novel" or a "romance novel" for the money. It doesn't work like that. You have to write what is inside of you and that MAY make money (although writing, except for a miniscule percentage of writers, has the remunerative rewards of being a coolie) but if you try to outfox the market, you won't.

How you outfox the market is by being uniquely yourself. By bringing your wisdom and vision and voice to the page and story and if you are as specific to that as you can be, you will then touch the universal and people will want to read your story. In other words, stock characters won't work but a flesh and blood character who comes alive in all his or her idiosyncrasies will capture the heart of the reader.

So don't be shy about your secret story or passion. That's where the gold is. Don't mock the reader, give them your highest self. Your deepest thoughts. Your most intuitive look into humanity. If you copy a best seller, you will simply be a copy cat. Readers see through that. Be your truest self on the page.

What should you know about genres? Well there is literary which is an attention to language, character analysis, where something psychological happens. A book that people will think about. Where the form of your writing is part of the content. As an example, Henry Miller wrote *Tropic of Cancer* in an exuberant playful way in language because the subject of men and women and sexuality was exuberant in itself. Marguerite Duras is spare in her language since she wants to create images and the reader lives the story emotionally through her very poignant images and thoughts.

You have mysteries and thrillers, where plot is all important and the reader never knows what is going to happen. Place is important and the characters move around to establish a chess game where the reader watches every move to know when to say, checkmate. A writer in this genre must be a good storyteller and know his/her universe really well. If your book is about money laundering, then you must know money laundering. If it is about art thievery, you must know about that. It is best always to bring something new to the reader in this genre, since TV and so many books have covered certain universes. In a sense, the reader has been overexposed to certain scenes and plot lines in this genre. The author here must have something new up his or her sleeve.



Romance novels are bodice rippers and quite formulaic and actually publishers are stringent in the number of pages you must write, when the girl meets the boy, when the obstacles must appear, and I suspect all the information is on line under writing a romance novel.

A comedic novel or spoof is always fun although extremely hard to pull off. JP Donleavy has done that, as does Woody Allen in most things he writes. It's a marvelous gift and rare and, if you have it, you were born to it. It's understanding where to overstate and where to understate. It's a sense.

So now we have agreed. You are to begin your novel. You are set upon it. How do you begin? Do you need a set time every day? That is entirely up to you. Some people do that and some don't. The marvelous thing about writing is that for every pronouncement I give you, there is an exception that proves me wrong.

In essence, you write each day when you find the time and quiet. When you can put the cell phone away and be alone, at least at your desk. When you turn away from the internet. A time when you feel like a child, and you say, "Let me just try this. This idea may or may not work. I don't have to know but let's see. When I get to the second draft, I'll decide if I should cut it or not. In the meantime, let me build this scene." Minimally you will be getting to know your characters better as you write away.

But for now, let's agree. You are committed. You are nervous. You are excited and thou shalt begin.

You will have to have some attention to craft and this we will discuss in the following chapters. First novels often can "hit" because there is often a rawness to them and a going for broke that works. But they also can miss because the left feet in the writing doesn't get excised. Often a first novel is a writer's private MFA program. It is a learning document. But if you keep learning with it, and keep revising, you may be able to publish it.

Keep in mind, there is nothing like a book. As Nancy Banks-Smith said, "Agatha Christie has given more pleasure in bed than any other woman."

So... let's begin. It is a dark and stormy evening and you were thinking, Maybe I should try that first novel....

Then what happened?

## 2 Do I need a coach?

Before we begin, you probably are wondering should you work with a coach or not? That is a good and complicated question. Yes, you should, if you can afford it, work with a coach who has published work and has a very adept knowledge of craft issues in a novel. A coach can gently guide you out of shoals you could get stuck on for months.

What kind of shoals? That you shift out of the scene just when the subject matter is getting emotional... (if you do that, it means you yourself don't want to feel the feelings.) Another shoal is that you insist on being oblique because you think it is "interesting", when all it can be is confusing and distancing to the reader. Another shoal is that your opening sounds like a journalistic précis about the story, rather than throwing the reader into the story. Another shoal is using the passive voice, "The shoes were put on." (Never never do that.) A coach can pick up these problems that can ruin your book and cut them out of your repertoire right away.

But there are some caveats about a coach. If the coach is someone who wants you to write in his/her style, or tells you that you should be writing a whole different story, then that is not good. If the coach is rapping your hands on details of spelling and sentence structure only, before you have worked out the story, you will feel deterred, and weakened in the freedom you need to create. A coach should be exciting you to the possibilities, not making you feel badly about yourself.

Novels are often the products of rebels and one can well imagine a mediocre coach telling Faulkner, "Straighten out your language," or telling Joyce, "No more five dollar words." Your coach must be someone who allows your novel to unfold in your own voice and in your own style and only assists you in making what YOU want to do communicate and engage the reader. A coach is not to judge your material or the type of novel you are writing. I am a coach and I work on many novels that I myself would not read, not my taste, but I admire how good they are in their own genre. It is my job to help the novelist get into the psyches of his characters as truly and provocatively as he or she can, and to help the novelist make scenes that the reader wants to read and not fall asleep to.

So if you leave your coach, feeling "She or he doesn't get it," or you leave feeling decimated by what the coach said, something is wrong. If you leave feeling energized, "Oh I have to fix this and that and why didn't I think of that myself?"; that is a good coach.

It may be your coach says, “Listen you don’t need 5 pages of what it’s like to be drunk. The reader knows what it’s like,” it might seem to you that the coach is “killing your darlings,” as Virginia Woolf said. In cases like that, heed your coach. At least try out what he or she says. If his or her defense of his or her suggestions is cogent, then listen. If they are merely arbitrary, “I know someone who had Alzheimer’s and they never stuttered,” make your own judgment. If they say, “Well the character would react violently to being adopted,” that is editorializing on the coach’s part. Your character may not be the type of person to react.

A coach has to have a good ear to what you want to do, and help you accomplish it.

When the coach is right, you’ll know it. Their comments will “stick.” If they are wrong, you’ll forget the comments easily.

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Now to the question of writers' workshops. I used to be against them since the author is getting input from ten people, some of whom can't write and some of these comments can be inadvertently damaging. But I have come to change my mind. Authors learn about styles from other people. They see their own flaws in other people's work and this helps them in their own revisions. There is, of course, the pleasure in the camaraderie of sharing the difficulties and joys in writing. And there is the wonderful information for the author of seeing how people respond to his or her work. Do your readers get excited by a character or the narrative? Did they notice your language? Are they interested in what happens next? If you get that response, it will spur you forward and that is not to be understated.

A writing group usually cannot help with plot issues because they don't see the full book. In other words, a chapter can be good but the novel may not be since the group hasn't had a chance to see the entire 150 or 200 pages! No worries. When you have finished your third draft, you can ask people to read the whole novel. Choose wisely there too. Your mother might love it (or hate it) blindly, and not be bringing a literary acumen to her prejudice. Your spouse may only find spelling mistakes.

It is best to give your book to some writers whom you admire or to intellectuals whom you admire. Also give it to people who like your type of book. If your friend hates books in a child's voice, best not to give it to him or her if that is what you have written. Philip Roth has five readers read his book, once he thinks he's gone as far as he can go with it, and he listens to their comments and then he does his final draft. That seems to make excellent sense to me.

To return to the question of a writing group: It will give you courage and some insight and make the process a bit less lonely and daunting. You will see that all writers struggle with form, content, voice, storyline, details. You will see that writing a book is a tremendous arduous process and one that every person alive who writes struggles with. All writers are a bit frightened and tell themselves they don't like their own work one day, love it the next, and so on. This is all normal. It is hard to be objective.

But you will come to trust the process where often 8 pages read terribly but, after being worked on, these same pages become stunning. You will discover that the way to make a wonderful first novel is to rewrite and rewrite. You'll get there.

If you start your own writing group for your novel, I find it helpful to make one rule. That the author, whose work is being discussed, cannot answer back criticisms or comments. Why? If the author is busy defending his or her work, he or she won't hear what is being said. Keep in mind, you won't be able to "explain" your book to readers as they read you. The author is silent. The words on the page have to do all the work.

Alright, now to begin.

# 3 What should I write about?

“I look on my life as raw material for my novels: that’s just the way I am, and it frees me from inhibitions.”

Imre Kertesz, Dossier K

Now you have to really commit to your subject. Commit is not a casual word because it can take 8 months to 5 years to write a novel (unless you’re a reincarnated Georges Simenon who only needed 3 weeks)... so this is a long term relationship. You will be living with these characters and working on their issues and trajectories for some time. That is why it is not a bad idea to have some of their issues be your own issues, because “their” issues will have to thoroughly interest and fascinate you.

How do you choose your subject?

“Like a gambler. I like playing for big stakes, and I am quite ready to lose it all at any second. As we must all die, we have the right – even a duty – to think boldly,” Imre Kertesz writes about writing. Herman Melville puts it another way: “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.”

A mighty theme is an unfolding of characters struggles with a particular issue or event. To some extent you will be unraveling a mystery on the page, even if it is not a mystery novel. You will be unraveling the psychology of a situation or place or set of characters and this unraveling must intrigue you deeply since you will be immersed in it for quite a while and quite obsessively.

Many first novelists work with childhood traumas or childhood events because our minds are so vivid as children and hence it is easy to remember much of what happened. We are all emotion then and this emotion comes back to us in scenes and colors and textures and we can use these images to infuse our characters with life.

Sometimes you can intersperse some of childhood with a philosophy that you are wrestling with. In my first novel, I took the position that a relationship with the other sex parent affects the narrative of one’s marriage. I played that out in the novel.

But there is nothing that says you have to work with childhood memories. You can choose your deep caring for the homeless. You can choose to dramatize the period of your life where you worked as a dominatrix. You can bring to life a spy story and all the twists and turns of that. You must only pick a subject that you are sure will fascinate you over the long haul.

A novel is a journey of sorts and so you must choose a subject of which the journey is one you wish to travel thoroughly.

For a novel to truly resonate, the theme is illustrated through the subject matter. To use my own first novel, the subject of the story was a girl brought up by her father in an unconventional way, their attachment and the journey of that. Then there was the journey of whom she chose as a husband and what happened to her marriage, with all the misinformation she brought to the table by being raised by her father. These “subjects” reflected my theme.

In other words, you have to have a “story” to illustrate your theme. Northrop Frye explains it another way: “Beauty and truth may be attributes of good writing, but if the writer deliberately aims at truth, he is likely to find that what he has hit is the didactic.” You need to tell your truth through story, not through lecture and grandstanding.

So think what is the moral (or immoral) center of your novel, what philosophical or psychological issue you want to unravel and explore. Write that down. Write it down another way. Write it down yet another way.

**YOU WOULD NEVER ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO DO THIS**

**SO WHY LET THEM DO THIS?**

It's a scary thought. If you have a crash, the impact is much the same as falling from the roof. And should your child be flung from the car during a crash, possibly worse. It's worth remembering the next time you set off in your car.

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Is it large enough to sustain a whole novel? For example, the fact that a certain mother doesn't listen well enough to her child won't sustain a whole novel. A whole lot more has to happen. Even a murder isn't enough. You need the effects of it and what it does to the characters. You need events that keep turning on themselves, all driven by your characters' demons or strengths or by external forces outside the characters purview.

But always keep in mind that novels are, even thrillers, psychological. People evolve. People learn something. People are up ended. People experience something. That is the essential journey in a novel.

So think out what your characters are going to learn and, in their way, will enlighten the reader about.

Interestingly, non-fiction is where we learn about the world around us. Conversely, fiction is where we learn about our own lives through the lives of the characters. "Would I have this type of bravery?" the reader asks himself as he reads your novel. "Have I made this bad a choice in love?" the reader asks herself as she watches what happens in your book. "When I think about getting married, should I ask myself the same questions as this character does?" "How would I hold up hiding someone from the authorities?" "Would I be able to buck religious mores in my community?"

Your novel will help the reader know him or herself better.

So when thinking of your subject or theme, think of the human condition. I know a person working on a book about wolves, but he is giving them anthropomorphic characteristics so their battles (against humans) are our own battles against outside forces.

Another book I wrote, *LOST IN MONTREAL*, takes the whole concept of a sexual competition between a daughter and mother, showing the daughter really wants the love of the mother when doing her flirting with her mother's boyfriends. She wants the mother's respect as being a worthy adversary.

You need to find stories/subjects that are complicated in their psychological dynamic. Stories that show how humans behave in different circumstances. How does your spy behave when captured? How did the crook end up saving the lives of the very people he was thieving against? That is the human story you are telling.

So think about the humanness of your subject, what you want your reader to leave the book having learned, felt, experienced and deepened with.

That is your theme.

## 4 Location, location, location

One of the main characters in your book is location. Yes there are postmodern books where no one knows where the scenes are located but then the location-lessness is part of the story, a character itself in the book.

So “place,” however one defines it, is entirely important. I remember one time I was blocked about what to write next and a writer friend said to me, “Think of a place for the story,” and out of that was born the novel *LOST IN MONTREAL*. I thought of my time walking the streets avidly as a young girl and what I saw and what led me to walking the streets and all of that became the ore for a story.

Raymond Chandler used Los Angeles as a character. Conrad used the sea. Dickens of course, we know where he used. And on it goes. Place will ground you so to speak. Hemingway always said mention the weather in your scenes which is another way of talking about place. What he really means is that the reader likes to know where they are and see and feel the scene. So, if your book has many beach scenes, give us the sounds, the light, the heat, as well as where that beach is. An English beach is different than one on Cape Cod, the reader should always know where they are.

To return to place, you probably have also noticed that readers love seeing a city, complete with street names. Street names can have a kind of poetry to them. Writers use Seville, Barcelona, Lisbon, Paris – all as characters. The traffic the characters have to deal with, the particularities of the city become part of the story. Readers like the “feel” of a place. The people walking, the clothes they are wearing.

Of course Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* also shows the countryside to romantic affect, as do many novels, so I suppose the message is mostly to remember that the setting of your novel is a deep part of the story. The location is part of the characters’ personalities.

Another important point is that the “place” details you make a point of illustrating in a novel should be specifically selected not only to let the reader settle into the scene, but also to dramatize the emotions in the story. If you are writing a passionate love story, the disarray of clothes on the bed will evoke that. If you are writing about a stiff family, the way the table is laid out will evoke that. Details are emotional and chosen selectively to further your characters’ lives. What you select to show us is part of your talent. “We are as much informed of a writer’s genius by what he selects as by what he originates,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson.

You don’t have to give every detail of the location of the scene, but you do have to select those that enlighten us to the character, and stay in the emotions of the story.



Let me try another way of saying this. If I am describing a writer’s living room, I do not need to mention every item on her coffee table but I will mention what betrays her particular character – stacks of pages of someone else’s work, a picture of Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and Anthony Powell, for example, a pencil sharpener, a lipstick...I don’t need to itemize but just list the details that give away that writer’s particular mindset that is relevant to the scene that I will be depicting.

But always keep in mind you have to never leave the dramatic tension of your story. No one wants to take a break from a heartfelt scene to describe the clouds in the sky that day. So know that the setting of your novel, like a set in a play, is one that communicates and enhances the story but is not the story itself.

So as with all novels, this is a tricky business. It’s selectivity. Not too much detail so we think we are reading a subway map, but not too little detail so we lose some of the world your characters are living in and interacting in and with.

The best guide for when is enough detail is to watch carefully that you do not break the action of a scene... that you make sure the story is always moving and that the location in the background simply adds to it. Do not interrupt the emotion of the scene for a coffee break about the history of the city fifty years ago or the environmental changes in the terrain unless it has something to do with the plot.

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Anticipate —Accelerate —Achieve



# 5 What makes up a great character?

Typically readers attach to novels over characters. They are the most important arrow in your pouch.

A great character, or one who resonates, is someone whom we identify with. Someone, as William Faulkner said, whose “heart...is in conflict with itself.”

You won't have a novel without characters. You may have an exciting plot, a revolution being stayed from becoming more bloody by some heroic actions but it will mean nothing without vibrant characters. E.B. White wrote, “Advice to young writers who want to get ahead without any annoying delays: don't write about Man, write about a man.”

Vibrant characters are human. They struggle for whatever they are searching for. It doesn't come easy. They have to fight themselves. Or fight the outside world. And as they struggle, we identify with or learn from them. Their challenges become ours. They yearn for love. It escapes them. How will they find it? People die. How will they go on? Characters sabotage themselves. Then they come up with a brilliant solution at the last minute. Just like we do.

Bad guys can be all bad but bad guys for some reason are always seductive (usually). That's how the good guys get involved with them (unless it's outright kidnapping etc but to keep the tension of a story you never really know...will the bad guy suddenly do something kind?) Bad guys can sometimes be one dimensional but the rest of the characters have to be complex and take action in their own or others interest.

People generally do not like to read about passive characters although Anita Brookner has made a whole successful career writing about passive women (as did Jean Rhys). So there are no formulas in writing but usually people want to root for someone attempting something, even if it's as simple as getting a bicycle they're not allowed to ride.

It is best to try, if possible, not to write about characters who are television types, people we've all seen before. Many first time writers think some clever banter makes for a novel and it doesn't. There has to be meaning, drive, the characters have to be moving and living out from their own unique particular specific hearts and going toward something. It could be leaving home, it could be choosing not to drink and then what happens to them as they make these new efforts. The characters have to be involved in growing or, conversely, being unable to grow. But we witness their attempts.

I recommend before you start your novel that you sit down and write out your main characters and who they are. Write out what their trajectory in the novel will be. Moving toward marriage and then sabotaging it? Being a six year old who is alone in the world and has to make sense of the rich interior life he has built? What is real, he asks himself, the interior or the exterior? Write down who your characters are and what they will be going through in your novel because you will have to write a series of scenes that deliver on their emotional path. As Edith Wharton said, “In any really good subject, one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears.”

You may find as you write your novel that some characters turn out to be more important than you expected they would. They insist on their voice and want to come to life. Those characters need to make more appearances than you originally thought. Go with it. Usually these are characters that people end up being affected by.

Your characters as you get to know then in your soul will become easy to hear. Never tell the reader who they are. Show them doing what they do. It’s fascinating how actions hold within them the backstory. For example, if a woman is tentative in bed with her new lover, we know that something is going on in her life otherwise, or something did go on. It is better to show that, rather than go into a diatribe, “She had an abusive lover etc etc”. People don’t want facts. They want motion and to see how people act in situations.

As you know, you have a lot of play in a novel. A character can be an unreliable narrator, telling us one thing but doing another, or your character can be baldly honest and affect us with his or her perceptions, as in *Catcher in the Rye*.

Here are some ways great novelists illustrate character:

*“So when Mr. Henry arrived on a Saturday night, we smelled him. He smelled wonderful. Like trees and lemon vanishing cream, and Nu Nile Hair Oil and flecks of Sen-Sen.*

*He smiled a lot, showing small even teeth with a friendly gap in the middle. Frieda and I were not introduced to him – merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don’t open all the way.”*

*The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison*

*“There was something touching about the fact that Murray was dressed almost totally in corduroy. I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he’d associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree-shaded place.”*

*White Noise, Don DeLillo*

*“Poor Beli. Almost until the last she half believed that the Gangster was going to appear and save her. I’m sorry, mi negrita, I’m so sorry, I should never have let you go. (She was still big on dreams of rescue.) She had looked for him everywhere: on the ride to the airport, in the faces of the officials checking passports, even when the plane was boarding, and, finally, for an irrational moment, she thought he would emerge from the cockpit, in a clean-pressed captain’s uniform – I tricked you, didn’t I? But the Gangster never appeared again in the flesh, only in her dreams. On the plane there were other First Wavers. Many waters waiting to become a river. Here she is, closer now to the mother we will need her to be if we want Oscar and Lola to be born.”*

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Diaz*



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## 6 Your story will now unfold

“I keep six honest serving men. (They taught me all I know.) Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.” Rudyard Kipling

And now for the story, the plot. Write out a loose map of the story for yourself. Why do I say loose? Because it will change as you write your first draft, and you also don't want to feel you are writing a legal brief. Give yourself freedom to take unknown twists and turns but have a loose guide of events for you to follow so you don't feel too lost in the storm of the story.

What must each chapter do? Each chapter advances towards your end game. Make sure each advancement is in a scene. Show people doing something together, betraying themselves. Make sure your plot is tight. You don't need to add in the grandmother's backstory into your plot unless the whole thing hinges on that and then it shouldn't come in as backstory anyway.

As I've said, you don't have to be exact about your plot plan as you write your first draft. “Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” EL Doctorow.

But never forget that readers like to move forward in a story. Of course, people use flashbacks but they should not be a crutch. They can sometimes be a poetic support, transition, lyrical interlude but usually the readers are thinking, “Let's get on with it.”

That said, your plot does not have to be hijinks and high speed car races. Your plot can be simple but as long as there is movement of the heart, you have a plot. So don't feel, “Oh I have to do 10 thousand twists and turns.” Deus ex machina acts of god at the end are not plot twists. They will feel contrived. Don't kill the main character off for no reason other than you don't know how to end the book. Everything that happens must happen from the consequences of your character's actions.

Time is always a safe plot because things happen with time. All books are about what the characters think their longings are and then the brutal discovery of what the characters are really longing for. This plot line is good enough if you have vibrant characters we care about.

Dostoyevsky, Balzac and many nineteenth century novelists wrote about money. How the lack of it or the abundance of it created a person's circumstances, revealed character. Nothing revealed the baldness of character more than the grasping for money.

American literature of the twenties and thirties dealt with the hardship of living. The forties were how to participate in a mad world. The fifties and sixties literature became interested in the vagaries and loneliness of the mind. The seventies showed how family can stultify. The eighties became preoccupied with dealing with cancer and AIDS. The nineties became madly interested in people of different ethnicities. This next century begins a literature sustaining humanity as the antiseptic of technology takes over.

There are hundreds of ideas for plots although Aristotle I think said there are only 9. In a way that is true. We have relationships, we want things and if one was to put geometry to plots, they really are all about wanting love, freedom, making mistakes, and learning. We struggle for something and that journey/struggle is the plot.

Since no rules for a novel hold up (you can always cite a great novel that broke the rules) and since many great novels do break rules, I don't want to set out a set of precepts for you. I am of the school that if you write from the heart and make sure the story advances, then you may have a novel. You do need an initiating event, as they say. Why is this day/hour/moment different? Some set of events are set in motion. But then we think of the book, *REMAINS OF THE DAY*, by Ishiguro and seemingly nothing is happening till we realize what is happening without being said. So, as I said, there are no rules.

But there must be a story. Somerset Maugham put it, "If you can tell stories, create characters, devise incidents, and have sincerity and passion, it doesn't matter a damn how you write." What he means is that everyone loves a story. Everyone likes to be subsumed into a narrative where the characters want to get somewhere or love someone or be someone and they have to deal with the vicissitudes of the responsibility of that desire. That is your plot. Along the way, the characters will be thwarted, they will be betrayed, they will be surprised by kindness but they will deal with issues as they go towards where they are going.

So write your plot out for yourself and look forward to the changes along the way. You may surprise yourself by suddenly deciding your character needs dogs and then perhaps a jealous boyfriend will kill the dog walker (that's a bit much, I know, but I use it as mega-illustration to prove a point.) You may decide that you will get the main character back together with the man you originally thought would disappear. Or you won't. That you might leave it ambiguous (which means the reader thinks they might get back together.) Ah, hope.

Some people can write a story without any road map at all. One thing leads to another. This can be a lot of fun for the writer and it means that the editing process can be arduous because there will be wrong turns, but what is true is that the writer is trusting his or her unconscious to give the writer the story. It means the author knows that he or she is so in touch with the characters that the author knows he or she will choose the right next action. If you feel you are one of those people, then write that way.

One of the many interesting parts of writing a novel is discovering that what you thought you were writing about becomes something different. As an example, I have a student writing about a child and she told me that the father was a villain in the story. Once she finished the story, she discovered what she had written was a story about missing the father and almost a love story to a man who could not function as a normal person. She ended up making the father the hero, without knowing it.

Authors are just as surprised sometimes by what they write as the reader. You may not know what your unconscious is up to, but trust it because what you can be sure of is that your unconscious is honest. And a great assistant as you write your first draft.

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## 7 It's all in the voice

“An original writer is not one who imitates nobody, but one whom nobody can imitate.” Francois Rene de Chateaubriand

The voice is so important. The voice of the story sets the tone and the mood of the story. How do you get a good voice for a story?

By being natural and true to the story. By not thinking, “I must sound like a professor or Dickens or Oscar Hijuelos.” No, you must write in a relaxed way, in the persona of the story. If you write in first person, write in the sound of your character and be simple about it. If you write in the third person, still be relaxed in your voice, open, detail oriented, as if you are speaking to someone. Your language of course will be better than if you were speaking, but the effect should be that when I open your book, I feel I am being communicated with. We are in a relationship, I am in the story.

Thoreau says it beautifully: “As for style of writing, if one has anything to say, it drops from him simply and directly, as a stone falls to the ground.” Robertson Davies said it otherwise: “The most original thing a writer can do is write like himself. It is also his most difficult task.” Or, as Gertrude Stein said, “I write for myself and strangers. The strangers, dear Reader, are an afterthought.”

In other words, wash out all pretentiousness and look to be honest about your characters and what they feel.

The voice of the novel is the seduction. It's what we curl up around a book and listen to. But don't be confused. It's not a place for you to vent your political opinions or your anger at your mother. You have to tell a story, and show pictures of other people being who they are and living out their complexities and the vagaries of their circumstances. We have to hear them and see them. If you are writing an internal story, then the internal story must be told in images and pictures too.

Your language is a big part of your voice. You must write in a natural voice, but you must show your “chops” in language. When we speak, we are lazy. “I ran into Annette and she said, How's it going?” This is boring on the page. You need to have style in your language and this contributes to your voice. The reader wants to be enthralled by your word choices, images and point of view, be it you are writing in first or third person.



Here are examples of different openings of books and their different voices:

In this novel, we get a Southern voice. We know there has been a dissolution of personality. We know that the narrator has been undone, is sensitive, and is about to tell a story.

*“Ray is thirty-three and he was born of decent religious parents, I say.*

*Ray, I didn't ever think it would get to this. The woman I love and that I used to meet in the old condemned theater and we would wander around looking at the posters and worshipping the past, I just called her Sister like her parents, the Hooches, did. Her mother lives in that house with that man. Her grandmother was Presbyterian missionary killed by the gooks.*

*Ray, you are a doctor and you are in a hospital in Mobile, except now you are a patient but you're still me. Say what? You say you want to know who I am?*

*I have a boat on the water. I have magnificent children. I have a wife who turns her beauty on and off like a light switch.”*

Ray, Barry Hannah

In the following novel about a writer, the author plays with language. This novel is a language novel, as well as a story of a writer who gets hoisted on his own petard chasing women and whatever else will happen. But the reader knows they will be entertained by style as well as story:

*“There's Springer, sauntering through the wilderness of this world.*

*Lurking anent the maidens' shittery, more the truth of it. Eye out for this wench who's just ducked inside, this clodhopper Jessica Cornford.*

*Girl's a horse, stomps instead of walking. Most sedulously ill-dressed creature's ever wandered into the place also. Remorseless. Blouse tonight's all archaic frill, remnant from a misadvised Winslow Homer.*

*Paradox there, however. Catch her in repose and that profile's patrician. Unendurable cheekbones. When she's not lurching after that cow.*

*Tall, she is, and Springer's particularly enamored of her neck as well. Springer's a writer. Neck's sensuously cartilaginous.*

*Springer also sanguine about good boobs?*

*Dotes on such speculations, Springer does. Pretty much an intrinsic inflection of the saloon anyway. Joint's awash in authors, prime them indisputably'd be gelt. Pussy and/or baseball running a right second, however.*

*And after all Springer's forty-seven.*

*Springer's Progress, David Markson*

The following novel sets up a woman in Paris, alone. We can tell by the initial action that she is aimless. The author's detail gives that away:

*"It was about half-past five on an October afternoon when Marya Zelli came out of the Café Lavenue, which is a dignified and comparatively expensive establishment on the Boulevard de Montparnasse. She had been sitting there for nearly an hour and a half, and during that time she had drunk two glasses of black coffee, smoked six caporal cigarettes and read the week's *Candide*.*

*Marya was a blonde girl, not very tall, slender-waisted. Her face was short, high cheekboned, full lipped; her long eyes slanted upwards toward the temples and were gentle and oddly remote in expression. Often on the boulevards St Michel and Montparnasse shabby youths would glide up to her and address her hopefully in unknown and spitting tongues. When they were very shabby she would smile in a distant manner and answer in English:*

*"I'm very sorry; I don't understand what you are saying."*

*Quartet, Jean Rhys*

This opening is very direct language, intimate, and shows humour will be part of the voice:

*"This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what that means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave, either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. It is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant."*

*The MovieGoer, Walker Percy*

This opening shows the story will be told from the girl's point of view and the sensuality of the language will tell the emotional states of the characters:

*“There’s a boat coming toward us,” screamed Charlee in the car.*

*Maybe her vision was not so good anyway, because she felt a little sick from the cigar smoke’s growing interior fog. It was nighttime. She and her father had been driving all day, they had left Montreal for the back roads of Vermont.*

*Her father enjoyed going to another country, as he would say, for a drive. He felt sort of powerful, she thought, going through customs, telling the men in their uniforms that he and his daughter were just out for the day. Back that evening. They would be waved through. Her father answered the custom’s men’s questions with a secret smile, his dark eyes unfocused, as if he had something to hide and he dared them to discover it.*

*Strings Attached, Gay Walley*

As you can see, there are many ways to begin and many voices but you must be specific, paint the picture for the reader – a picture of what is going on emotionally and physically. The reader should know where they are, who the characters are and what game is afoot.

Your voice will let the reader know if the book will be humorous, philosophical, fast paced, eccentric, highly sensitive about detail. All that will be evident by your voice in the first paragraph.



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## 8 Oh, when do I find the time?

“Writing – the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.” Mary Heaton Worse

Your writing schedule. I know there are people who say it should be at the same time every day and if you are lucky maybe you can arrange this. I have known people with children to get up and write at 4 in the morning before the house wakes up. There are others, like me, who write when the time is available to them. BUT there is a caveat: One must write every day.

Even if it is only for ten minutes. Why? Your unconscious is working on it. You remain in the mood of the story, the “call” of the story. You are attached. You are a homing pigeon who goes back and forth to it. This is incredibly important. So you must write 6 days a week. Either at a set time or at a time that you can find in your schedule.

You don't have to write 6 hours in a sitting and, if you are doing that, something is wrong. You can complete a whole novel in less than a year if you write every day for just one hour. The idea of being tethered to your desk is fantasy and people who spend six hours “writing” are probably doing anything but. (Of course there are exceptions to this and, as I said, there are exceptions to everything I write, but for the most part, no one has the energy to write six hours a day.) The fact is writing is highly demanding physically and this you will find out when you try to write when you have a cold or when you are tired. You just won't be able to. Writing requires enormous concentration. One can only sustain that for a certain amount of time.

Sometimes people who are busier are more productive than those who are not because, when they finally get a chance to sit down and write, they focus. They get to the story and produce. So don't lament you are not on a trust fund (it would be nice, I agree), just make sure to write every day. As Epictetus wrote, “If you want to be a reader, read; if a writer, write.”

It has been my observation that people who want to write do so no matter what. I will paraphrase Goethe when I say that creativity is in the tension. So if you only have an hour, so be it. You will get a lot done if you focus and are deeply in the story.

And don't be upset that life is bubbling around you. If your life is too full, use it. “If you have other things in your life – family, friends, good productive day work – these can interact with your writing and the sum will be all the richer.” David Brin

So use all that abundance of emotions and observations and sneak them into your story, transpose them. It will give energy to your book.

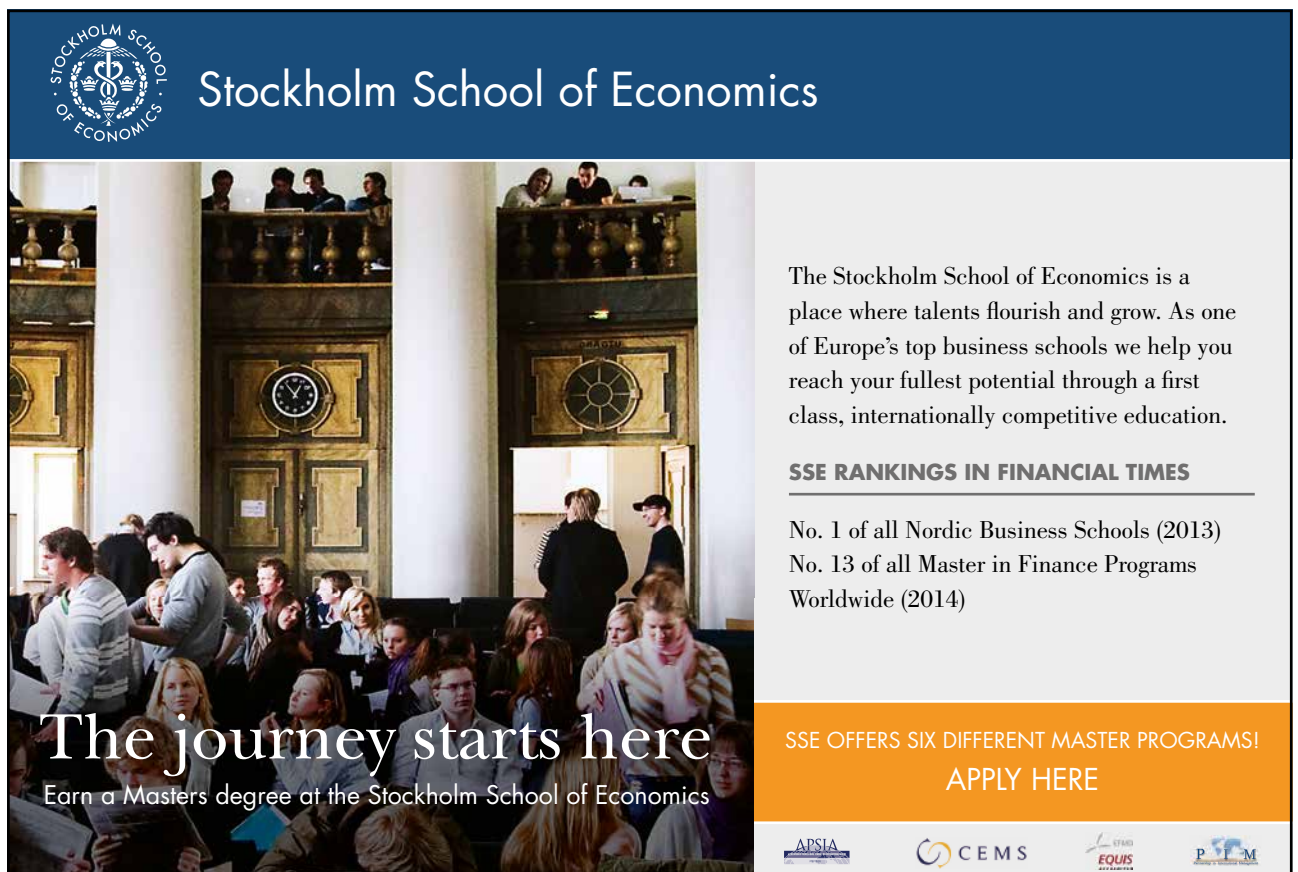
One of the great things about writing is that you can rewrite and so if your work today is a bit sloppy but you did advance the story, good, you can rewrite the quality and specificity of language when you are feeling more relaxed. It takes writing the story to know what it is really about. On your third draft, you will say, “Oh this is the crux. I need to tighten the screws on this.” But you will only really get there if you write the first and second drafts rigorously and attentively and committedly.

The main thing is to write every day and push the story forward. Some people are inclined to write and rewrite the first chapter. This is a way of avoiding diving into the story and having success. A story is a journey and you may get lost along the way (and so what?) but you can only write it if you take the journey itself.

So go to your schedule now and note that you will work on your novel daily. Either after work, or before, or on the train getting there. (I remember a French writer being interviewed and the host said, “Your book has so much energy.” The writer said, “Yes I wrote it on the subway to and from work.”) Take your time wherever you can. I have a friend who works on her book as she sits the four hours getting chemo. This is I do not wish for anyone but it shows the drive.

We are lucky that most of us now have laptops so if you are sitting in the sun on a Saturday morning, move away from people and spend 45 minutes or more with your novel. The good thing is that once you start, you will get lost in it and lose sense of time. But if 20 minutes is all you have, you still will get somewhere.

So right now, add your novel into your daily schedule. Only you know where it fits in.



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## 9 Now you can dive in

The first draft.

This is not the draft that you will show anyone. This is the one you belt out for yourself. This is the version where you get to know the characters intimately. You experiment with plot twists. You take some wrong turns. You overwrite so you can cut later. You underwrite so you can fill in later. You give it your all. You trust your intuition. You don't edit yourself. You don't imagine anyone will see it. You let go. You only listen to your imagination.

Max Perkins had it right when he said, "Just get it down on paper, and then we'll see what to do with it."

This is the raw gold that soon you will burnish. But this is where the gold lies. You are open to anything and open that you may be making mistakes. You attempt. You encounter characters you did not know were going to be in the story. You dead end on characters you thought would be in the story but who end up not being that interesting to you when you put them down. You let the story unfold. You are working with the story, finding out what it is.

There is no judgment, just risk. In language, in plot, in character, in scenes. You follow your loose roadmap but you detour if you feel you should. William Faulkner said, "Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good."

If an image strikes you, you write it down. Maybe it is too much. We'll decide later. If you think, "What if I take the characters to Vienna and maybe they just stay there," and that feels right, then do it. There was a reason that popped into your head.

This is where you are creative, free, intuitive and you ignore limitations of thought.

That said, the action must always come out of the characters' personalities and not be forced by the author simply because he or she wants to build a universe of his or her own making that has nothing to do with the characters. Every action has to be the result of the characters' personalities and complexities.

We are all at the mercy of unexpected deaths, love, goodness and the bad. So let these events happen to your characters and let the actions show how your characters handle them.

Your first draft should have chapters full of scenes, dialogue, a kinetic knit. You most likely went a little awry. You'll find out you left out some important transitions. Some important character development. Overwrote some sex scenes when you were bored. But you have your draft.

Now you've got something to work with. Something with great parts in it and something with terrible parts in it.

Now what?

It's only an opportunity if you act on it

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# 10 Cleaning the chaff

That is the work of the second draft. You are ready because you just sat on the couch and read the first draft by yourself and saw where you got bored. Where the plot did not quite move. Where you repeated yourself. Where you forgot about a character. Where you brought the Russians into it and then dropped them. Why did you do that? you ask yourself. Do you need them at all?

You get the idea.

You made notes on the pages. “Add more here,” you wrote in the margin. “Lose this.” “Do I need a chapter here to develop the love affair more?”

You cut ruthlessly wherever you found yourself wondering as you were reading, “Did I buy the coffee this morning? Should I go check my email?” You cut where you find yourself indulging your desire to get on a pulpit and lecture. Out.

Readers want to be in a story and follow the characters. They are not the least interested in what an author thinks.

This is the work of the second draft.

Once you have finished reading and notating the first draft, you will know specifically what you need to fix to make the story move better, to make the story calibrate and be believable. You will know where you need to add more information about a character. Give a character more time on the page. You might have short shrifted someone.

Now you sit down and make your changes. It’s quite fun because now you can see the novel coming together. It’s not as difficult as writing the first draft because you now know what the story is, what the characters are made up of. The second draft is where you begin to see the novel take shape and have urgency.

This is where you sort the plot out. This is where the story begins to really make sense. You have excised any unnecessary detours and built transitions for what explains story advancements.

This is where you literally cut out all the rough edges.



# 11 The words, the words, the words

“This morning I took out a comma and this afternoon I put it back in.” Oscar Wilde

Now it's time for the third draft. Okay you most likely have ironed out the plot kinks. You have already gone over your dialogue to make sure it is subtle and does not repeat information that the reader already knows. This draft is where you go over, and over, and over, and over, the language. This is usually a pleasurable activity for a writer. This is where you pay minute attention to each word and phrase and show your sensitivity to the language you love.

You cut out any clichés. You cut out any repeated words. You find a better word here. You describe that emotion a little more strongly, a little more specifically. You take risks in your language and describe places, people and emotions using your own personal love of words. You can always go back over it if you went overboard. But you push yourself to use the most exuberant, original language you can.

Sometimes when I am in this stage, I begin my writing “time” by reading a paragraph or so of writers I admire. This puts me in the “zone” and raises the bar.

This draft is very fun and where your style becomes most evident. This is where the words match the story match the plot. Where everything works together to give the reader the experience you want them to have.

Here is where you reveal images only you have. Where you elevate the language so that reading becomes an auditory pleasure for the reader. This is where you get rid of anything that sounds as easy as an email. This is where the sensuality of the writing comes forth.

This is where you will be remembered as a writer. Because if your language is excellent, it raises the level of the thought. This is where you show your style. Since most plots are the same (we lose our fathers or someone we love, we fight against a system/person/nature, we make mistakes), it is the language and the intelligent way the scene is brought to the reader that tests the mettle of a writer. It is the selectivity of how the writer delivers information, and since this is an art form of words, your words are critical to the story.

So be exacting, energetic and in love with words as you create this draft. Be rigorous. “I can't write five words but that I change seven,” Dorothy Parker said.

This is where you have enormous attention to small detail and the novel becomes like a gem. This is where you build, word by word, a work that shines.

## 12 Your first readers

Now is the time to ask for comments from other people, and only now. Whom do you show it to? You can hire a writing coach to get his or her thoughts. The advantage of that is that their comments will be geared to help you solve problems, and the coach will not know you so they will have sincere distance on the work. And/or you can give it to a writer friend or someone you trust.

Trust is primary. Someone whose openness of mind and kindness you respect. Someone who does not have an agenda such as they always wanted to write a novel themselves but never settled down (they would be brutal on you, just as revenge). Don't choose someone who just loves to find fault. This kind of person is not your ideal reader and giving it to them smacks of a kind of self-sabotage on your part.

You should select a reader who is the kind of person who likes your genre of novel. If the person hates thrillers, why give them one? They won't really know the genre and will not give you helpful information. If the person hates thought novels, well, why give your quiet literary gem to someone like that?

That said, getting comments is helpful. You will hear and see things you did not notice yourself and will wonder, Why didn't I?

Don't listen to all the comments you receive because some of them will just be peccadillos of the readers and have nothing to do with your novel. But those comments that resonate, implement. My agent told me that the ending to my last novel was not right. "Push it a bit," she said, and I did and I am glad I did. So some comments are very good.

As you receive your "readers" initial comments, mark them in your margins or on your draft, and then use these to get ready for another draft.

If you get high praise, don't go mad with hope. Selling a novel is hard and there will be many who won't like it. If you get terribly negative criticism, weigh it and know that it is not the final say either. Many great books started as terrible early drafts.

If the comments are personal, "You never show your own traits to advantage," ignore them. You didn't write a memoir. You will know which comments to take seriously because they will stick, they will not "hurt you" but, instead, open your mind to new and better possibilities for your book.

This fourth draft is making changes to comments that you have found helpful and enlightening and you are sure will enhance the book.

# 13 Scat thoughts: Epilogues, Prologues, Epistolary novels, Titles and other choices

As I think we've discussed, one of the many pleasures in novels is that there are no rules. The only rule is excellent execution. There are different "flourishes" you can add and this chapter will be a brief tour of those, in not any particular relevant order. (Think of this as the post-modern chapter about some old fashioned techniques than can still feel new.)

Let's start at the end, an old saw for many novels but here we're discussing the real end: Epilogues. I always like them. You get to find out what happened to the characters five or ten or twenty years later. You get to know if they ended up happy or with the right person and whether it lasted and you also get to say goodbye to them. It's a kind of way of ending a book, I think, for the reader. It acknowledges that we've all been on a journey together and it lets the reader know that life went on and life always goes on, and this is, in essence, comforting for us all.

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Prologues are different. They set the tone. A prologue is the first note in the symphony of your book. It's the theme. If the book is about a character longing for love, the prologue shows the extreme of that, a scene that may not even be relevant to the story you are telling, but where the character is screaming for love, if you so choose. Or maybe the story is about a woman and how she vanquishes difficult odds late in life but the prologue shows a terrible beginning in her childhood. The book, however, may not take place in her childhood but the prologue has an emotional connection to the story which is to come.

A prologue should be short. Here is an example of a prologue from my first book. The book is really about a father/daughter relationship primarily but the prologue tells the mood of the story:

*I want to know why, as I begin this story, I want to call my old lover who does not love me. I want to dial his phone, which he never picks up, he has a whole life separate from me, you know, mysterious and wide as the night, and then I want to go to every bar on the Lower East Side and find him, standing tall and surrounded up at the bar, drinking his beer from the bottle, and I want to drag him out, pull his cotton sleeve from a shirt that I know his aunt gave him, pull at the woolen vest he always wears, I want to pull at him, I don't care if his clothes rip, I want to use all my force and just drag him out. He'll go because he'll think they think poor guy, she's crazy, and I don't care, I want to get him out on the street, away from the bar and the glowing people dining together and making promises together and hinting at things together, I want to get him alone in that hot night with just a street lamp lighting us and I want to force him, make him stand there and see there is no choice. He'll stand there pained and skinny, clenching himself because this time he's run for good. He'll close his eyes when he looks at me, why, why won't she just leave me alone, why doesn't she just go away, and I want to punch him right then, hard on the nose as he stands there wishing me away, punch him for not loving me, and then push his chest in, as if he's weak, push him for the way he never moves softly toward me.*

Many people, as you know, place quotes from the Bible or other writers in the front of their books. This also is a first note to the symphony. It gives the reader an idea of the quest we are going on. An example of this is the quote in GOING SANE by Adam Phillips: "...if, by some mischance, people understood each other, they would never be able to reach agreement." Charles Baudelaire, Intimate Journals

Now let's discuss diary novels and epistolary novels. Of course there are great one such as Bridget Jones Diary by Helen Fielding, Any Human Heart by William Boyd and The ScrewTape Letters by C.S. Lewis. These are wonderful to write if you can keep the drama up. The difficulty with this technique is there can be a tendency to drone on and on and not feel compelled to make scenes. But we have to because the truth is we read with our eyes and so the reader must see what is going on and the diary or letters must still show the reader the story, not tell them what it is. So if you choose this technique, keep a sharp eye on yourself to still write in narrative and almost in a filmic way.

Which brings me to the issue of books as films. Many critics now lambast writers with “Obviously this was written to be a film.” This is a complementary insult. On one hand, it means the reader can see the story (a good thing), and on the other hand it is saying the book lacks writerly skills and perhaps depth. Interestingly, many films are taken from short stories (LEGENDS OF THE FALL, BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN, as an example) because short stories are usually economically plotted and this is ideal for film. When novels are made into films, they usually have to leave out a lot because the visual resting on characters’ responses takes up screen time which eliminates plot time. So the criticism that this book reads as if for a screenplay may be more kindly stated as this book would be a better short story.

Titles are another choice you will reckon with. Sometimes you come up with a great title easily. I once had a title I loved, THE BED YOU LIE IN, but could never write a book that was good enough to match it! Other times, you just can’t get a title that works until you get a title that works. It will eventually come. Some people use a line or phrase from their book. Sometimes it will come to you as you are talking about the finished book to a friend. They might come up with it. There are no rules here either. Some people say one word titles do well. So what does that say about THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING? Some people use the name of their main character: JUSTINE, MRS. DALLOWAY and so on. It works. I guess the only thing to stay away from is vagueness. The title has to be somewhat arresting therefore THE NEWSPAPER is a bit generic, A TOWN, could be improved upon by being specific. As always in writing, specificity, specificity saves the day.

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# 14 Selling your novel

Once you have heard what your advocates think and you have written another draft, you are ready to show your book to agents.

If your friends know someone, go to that person. A personal contact is marvelous.

If you do not have contacts, go online and find out the agents who represent and are looking for your genre. Study whom your favorite authors (in the genre of your book) thank in the front of their books. Look those people up and find out if they are accepting submissions.

Most agents won't take the whole book. They will want the first 2 chapters or first 20 pages. That's how they can tell if you can write and if the story "pulls" the reader in. So make sure your first 20 pages are scintillating. It will make all the difference.

The other effort you have to make is in creating your cover letter to agents where you describe the novel. Give the genre, the length, the place where the novel is set. Also write out a brief description of the plot line. You don't have to tell the agent it is a great book and will sell as many copies as Dan Brown does. In fact, if you do that, it's guaranteed they won't read your book.

Let them decide how good it is.

There is no question that writing about your book and synopsisizing it is more difficult than writing the book. You know the inside of your book so well that it is very hard to "sum" it up in cogent words. It seems like you may be leaving out the most important information. But you're not. Give a synopsis of the main characters and the plot line and try to make it a novelty, curious. Tell what is unusual about your book. Don't say it is just like *Gone with the Wind*. No one will believe that or admire it if it is. There is only one *Gone with the Wind*.

Don't be frightened of a little humour. Writers who show humor also show intelligence and agents can use a break from the suffocating egos of want-to-be writers.

Have some sympathy for these people reading endless upon endless manuscripts, most of which are not that good. The agents look for reasons to say, No thank you. What drives them is encountering a manuscript where the voice is fresh and makes them sit up and say, "Oh I would like to live in this world for the next 5 hours."

So make that world seductive and riveting.

You will receive many rejections but then, astonishingly, in comes “interest.” You will never forget what you were doing the day you receive your first novel’s acceptance.

So persistence is a huge part of selling a novel. Send your book out to competitions. Send your book to many agents.

One thing about a book, it does not grow stale. So if you get tired of rejections, take a break but then send it out again. It can take two to four years, even more, to find a publisher. So be undaunting and read your rejection letters with curiosity, openness but do not take them that seriously unless they all say the same things.

One will say, “The beginning is strong, but the end is weak.” You will agree with it. The next day you will get one, “The end is strong, the beginning is weak.” Now you will agree with that. I used to joke I should get a job writing rejections to myself. I agreed with all of them. But soon I would get a letter admiring my work and I was totally confused.

In other words, writing is subjective and you have to wait till you find your reader. The only time to agree with your rejection letters is if they all say the same thing. Then it is time for a rewrite. They are showing you what is wrong. But if they vary, wait. Someone will eventually write you something helpful.

Most importantly, persist, persist, persist.

Oh and the last piece of advice I have for you: There is only one way to handle the ups and downs of writing a first novel.... And that is to begin the second novel.

Your mind will be there and you will hardly be affected by the rejections or acceptances. You are on a new journey.

So I wish you luck, happiness and dedication.

You are about to take one of the most magical journeys of your life. Where else can you be the author of all the events and people you want to spend time with?

Enjoy, and then the reader will enjoy.

# 15 To self-publish or not?

Yet I cannot leave you without raising the issue of self publishing. As most of you know, it's virtually free to publish an e-book on the kindle (except for the cost of designing your cover) and it is becoming increasingly cheaper to self publish a paper book.

I will give you my thoughts that, like everything else about book publishing, can immediately be disproved. But that said, here are a few tips.

Novels do not have targeted markets like "How to get over a Broken Heart" where the author can tag the book all over the net and people will come to it. Very few mainstream book publishers have ever figured out how to get a novel out there successfully. Books are sold through word of mouth. Someone says over dinner, "I'm reading X, and you must get it because..." Advertising rarely works for novels.

So if you self publish, I recommend hiring a social networking genius and preferably one not from publishing who will come up with brilliant ways of getting your book's name out there. It's all you can do. From there, we hope people will talk about it, one to the other.

If you self publish to paper, some bookstores will take the books, but not all.

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There is no shame anymore in self publishing and, famously, Walt Whitman, among many great writers, have done it. The woman who wrote FIFTY SHADES OF GREY self-published and we all know how that ended.

There is nothing to lose in self publishing except a bit of money and, as a writer, that is going to be part of your new life! But I do recommend hiring a social networker/pr person to try and give your book some life.

You will need to find distributors who specialize in self published books to ensure they get out as much as possible. They are listed on the net. Or you can go to a friend who has self published and set up a publishing company and go under that umbrella. She/he may have more clout with distributors because there is more than one book in play.

I know a man who self published, set up a site, submitted to many self published book competitions and became a finalist. I think he probably is selling copies here and there, which is the best so many of us can hope for.

A book does not have a shelf life, thank God, so self publish and play the long game. Someone may rediscover it, someone may option it, anything can happen. This is the beauty of imagination on the page and imagination in life.

Put it out there and keep promoting it. Something will eventually happen.