

a complete guide to the basic
skills of writing novels

54
**THE WAY TO
WRITE**

• **Novels**

PADDY
KITCHEN



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The Way to Write Novels

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Contents

1	Intention	1
2	Beginnings	4
3	For Those of You who Want to Reach the End as Soon as Possible	8
4	Some of the Practicalities of Publication	12
5	Back to the Beginning	19
6	Grandmothers and Paragraphs	24
7	Opinions and Participation	32
8	Types of Novel	38
9	Some Other Arts and Entertainments	46
10	How Can I Improve My Novel?	56
11	Amateur and Professional	68
12	A Postscript Prompted by Mr Cary Grant's Insomnia	73
	<i>A note to teachers regarding exercises</i>	76

Chapter One

Intention

Your Intention

It would be impertinent of me to assert why I think you may have begun to read this book. The variations of motive that prompt writers and would-be writers to find out more about their potential are incalculable. But I will try to plot a range of experience within which you may find an equivalence.

You may already have completed one, or more, novel-length manuscripts. Perhaps you have submitted them to publishers without success. Perhaps you are diffident about showing your work. But you are still interested in those piled-up pages — they are unfinished business.

Some of you may have begun novels, and then faltered. You may wonder how to go on, or whether it is really worth going on.

There may be those who cherish the idea of writing a novel, but are too modest or unconfident to begin. Usually such people are diffident because they are discriminating and admiring readers.

And some may have had experience in completing, and perhaps publishing, short pieces, but are daunted by the idea of setting out on a journey of some 60,000 words.

A few of you may have a theme, a life-experience, that seems to need a novel for its expression, but don't know where to begin.

And perhaps some of you enjoy writing, would like to earn some money, and wonder whether it is worth just having a bash — at weekends, after the children are in bed, between jobs, or during the holidays.

What I assume we all have in common, however, is an interest in the idea of writing a novel. By which I do not mean an interest in achieving literary fame or a particular life-style, but an interest in the novel itself. Should you find novel-reading rather a bore, and the things you write pretty dull, then no amount of ambition to become a novelist because it sounds glamorous will do. *Interest* —

shining, intense, exuberant, painful, painstaking, passionate interest in the existence and creation of prose fiction is essential.

'I think everyone who does not *need* to be a writer, who thinks he can do something else, ought to do something else,' said Simenon in an interview. He added that he considered writing to be 'not a profession, but a vocation of unhappiness.' I don't share that extreme view, but I would never recommend it as a comfortable occupation.

The two things most often said about being a writer are that it is hard work and that it is lonely — bald statements that by themselves do not mean very much. It can be hard work, but so can nursing, mining or deep-sea diving. And it is lonely in the sense that you work by yourself, but it is that very condition that so often appeals to people. To have an occupation that requires only a quiet space, paper, and a writing instrument — what heaven! As someone who likes to work on my own, I agree. But working entirely on one's own can be difficult for two reasons.

The first concerns discipline. While writing can be a fluent, joyous process, it can also be the difficult chore you want to avoid at all costs. However, like singing, swimming, dieting or meditating you have to keep at it regularly if you're to achieve anything. The second reason is the lack of feedback. Most jobs and occupations bring contact with other people. That contact is not always pleasant, yet the actual process of commands, consultations, assessments, disagreements, achievements, failures — mostly on a very minor scale — carry one through the working day and give it automatically a content and a tempo. But whether your writing day consists of sitting gloomily in front of a blank piece of paper or enthusiastically finishing two whole chapters, there will be no outside feedback; just the blank page to greet you the following morning, or a pile of manuscript to read and correct.

Which is not to say that the intending novelist must have iron self-discipline and unshakable self-sufficiency; that could mean a lack of sensitivity or imagination. But anyone who is chronically disorganised and normally needs constant company does start with a handicap.

My intention

I will not be able to tell you *how* to write your novel, and certainly not how to sell it. But I will try to illuminate and share aspects of the process of writing, and I will describe some of the practicalities that surround the business of being published.

I have no set of rules which, if followed faithfully, will lead to success.

And, incidentally, what did *you* think I meant by that word

'success'? A tax exile's mansion? A single published volume? Or a laudatory review in the *Times Literary Supplement*?

I must bear in mind that you might privately want to emulate any novelist from Jackie Collins to William Golding; bear in mind too Henry James's remark that the novel 'will stretch anywhere — it will take in absolutely anything'. And I must remember also that perhaps you do not want to emulate anybody, but to produce work that seems as innovatory and exciting as *Ulysses* did sixty years ago.

Incidentally some of you may wonder whether to believe those who say that writing can't be taught. Obviously it can't be taught like French or mathematics — progressively more difficult dollops of information handed out for inhalation at regular intervals. But if teaching is in this case regarded as a dialogue, an exchange of perceptions, which involve a tutor willing to adapt to differing students, and students willing to listen to criticism and think hard about their work, then creative writing can be a heady subject both to teach and to learn. After all, most professional painters have been to art school.

Chapter Two

Beginnings

To decide to write a novel is a curious business. Unlike swimming the Channel, you do not need to tell anybody, to elicit aid. Not in the beginning.

But if it is ever to get further than just a beginning, a brief scurry into prose, the idea that sparks the novel has got to set in your consciousness with the potentiality and privacy of a seed in good soil.

The best time to embark on the writing is when the idea has been lodged in your mind for some time but you still show no signs of losing interest in it. To begin a novel when you are already slightly bored with the idea is futile. It needs to be running alive — nagging, unfolding.

You may already have notes or diaries or short pieces that connect with a theme. Get them all together and take a dispassionate look at them. Do they seem to add up to something, point towards further development? Do they still interest you? If so, perhaps try writing some more, filling in the gaps. Or re-writing what you already have: expanding it, drawing it together.

If you have not yet written anything that connects with your theme, sit down and do so. You don't necessarily have to begin at the beginning. Choose a key scene, or a particular emotional experience that is part of the complex that clusters around the theme, and write it out. Write as strongly, as feelingly, as you can. Don't be afraid. No one need see it. Then come back the next day and see what you've got. Perhaps continue that process for a week or two. Try to write something every day; that way it will become part of your life. As Hemingway said, 'You can write any time people will leave you alone and not interrupt you. Or rather you can if you will be ruthless enough about it.'

Now, having stepped on to the edge of a territory which may or may not turn into a novel, where do we go from here?

Briefly into the real world, the place where you live.

This is not true for everybody, but on the whole I think we all

need a *place* to write. It is of course possible to write away from base — in the office, at the back of the classroom, on the beach — but it is helpful to have a base to come back to. It may be a dressing-table, one end of a sofa, a kitchen table, a bunk-bed in a shared room, or for the lucky a desk, but it is the place you claim for your writing. You may not tell anyone about it, but you claim it in your mind and return to it frequently, probably when you can be alone.

Privacy and space can present a problem. I personally believe that a writer *must* have both a place to write and a space to keep his 'things'. Indeed, I think you don't have to be a writer to need these facilities. Ideally everyone from the age of about ten should have a desk with drawers (lockable if preferred) or its equivalent. How else do you deal comfortably with letters, diaries, study, reading, and generally fiddling around with your thoughts?

What you keep in your space is an entirely personal matter. My own list of essentials would include: a good dictionary, *Roget's Thesaurus*, rough paper, A4 typing paper, carbon paper, envelopes, stamps, typewriter and several Edding 2100 pens in different colours.

The question of whether you do or don't work straight on to the typewriter is again entirely your decision.

Is it essential to type? No, if you can afford others to do it for you and have clear handwriting which they can read. But it makes life much, much simpler if you do. Even if you have final manuscripts typed professionally, it helps to distance you from your work at the early stages to see it in type. And you can at some point make a carbon which prevents that nerve-racking business of leaving one's only copy of a 400-page masterpiece on top of a bus on the way to the typist.

Having made a bid for space in the real world — back to the novel. Writing in the eighteenth century, Edward Young declared that original composition 'opens a back-door out of the bustle of this busy, and idle world, into a delicious garden of moral and intellectual fruits and flowers . . .', while Richard Ellmann in our own century has written, 'What seems to set off the creative process is a deflowering, a brutalisation of the soul by experience, experience which in some sense must be wished for.' Both statements are true for both centuries. It is very seldom that a good novel does not contain passages emanating from both states of mind — and many in between.

This is all very well, you may say, but what should my novel be *about*? I mean I have this experience at the back of my mind of when I was a refugee in Wales during the war and it links to my parents going to the seaside to retire — I can't really explain why — but is that likely to turn into a novel?

And I can't answer that one. All I can say is — go to your writing

space every day and get something down. Does the actual production of words, the immersion in your idea, make the theme more firm? Does it take hold? Does it, like a skeleton under flesh, seem to have a form to hold it together?

Or does it all just leak away, like a puddle in the lawn after a storm, and leave you with nothing you feel you can really work on? (Warning: don't answer that question two minutes, or even two days, after writing something; look at it two weeks, or preferably two months, later.)

To some this will all seem far too vague. You know the story you want to write, be it based on your experience as a social worker or a fantasy set in Atlantis, and you don't want to begin in the vague, unplanned way I have just described. You will begin at the beginning. But how far should you map your journey?

If you are going to have a complex plot, and particularly if your narrative is going to depend heavily on the development and pace of specific events, then it is essential to plan out the story. There is nothing more maddening than writing 150 pages only to discover that the confrontation you had intended around the end of Chapter 4 can't happen because one of the protagonists was unexpectedly imprisoned in Chapter 3. Obviously any story which relies on suspense and surprise must be carefully thought out. This doesn't mean that things can't be changed during the writing, but you do need to be assured from the start that your intended story actually contains the right ingredients to produce shocks and reversals.

And are you confident of depicting the scenes which you plan? You don't need to be run over to write about an accident, but can you describe it convincingly? It is possible to set a book in a continent you have never visited — Saul Bellow did it in his African novel *Henderson the Rain King* — but that continent needs to have quite a hold on your imagination. It is no good thinking your spies will go to Berlin just because John Le Carré's spies go there. Can you *see* Berlin in your mind? Your Berlin, I mean, not Le Carré's.

Above all, of course, are you going to sustain an interest in your characters for a whole book, and do you know enough about them to understand how the action will affect and change them? Some writers go so far as to have a card index with details of their characters' background, behaviour and appearance neatly recorded, though others would find this a cumbersome apparatus.

Don't stultify yourself with planning, but don't embark on Chapter 1 with just a whim and an anecdote.

Iris Murdoch finds planning the most important part. 'I invent the whole thing in enormous detail before I start writing at all. That can take longer than writing.' Others sail rather blindly into the first fifty pages or so and then stop and take stock. Is it going to work, is it

worth pressing on? If the answer seems to be yes, then this is perhaps the stage to work out details of the rest of the plot. If the answer is no, well — put the pages away in a drawer. In a couple of years you might suddenly see how the idea could be developed after all.

Don't plead ignorance as a reason for not jumping in at the deep end. Some people pretend that they can't begin their novel until they've found out from the pros how many chapters it should have, or whether incest is an acceptable theme, or whether it should be typed on A4 or quarto, bank or bond. That is just prevarication. There is no point in believing you can only write a novel after you have gained access to a set of rules. Those rules don't exist. Stop looking over your shoulder and simply begin.

Chapter Three

For Those of You who Want to Reach the End as Soon as Possible

Some people need to prove to themselves that they can actually finish a full-length novel before they can begin to think of examining their work critically. I have much sympathy with them and this chapter is about the process of pulling oneself willy-nilly from page one to the end for the first time.

'I couldn't write a book,' a student will say. 'How do you ever finish so many pages?' My stock reply is, 'If you write one page a day for a year, you'll have quite a long novel.' And that would be one method of getting to the end.

Françoise Sagan's main problem when she started *Bonjour Tristesse* at the age of eighteen was whether she would be able to finish it. 'I wasn't thinking about "literature" and literary problems, but about myself and whether I had the necessary will-power.' In the end she completed it in three months, working two or three hours a day.

I wrote my first published novel during a month's holiday in a rented cottage with my mother and six-month-old son. I did fourteen pages every morning while my mother looked after Dan, and managed to complete the first draft in three weeks. I could not write that quickly, that freely, now. In those days I found it almost impossible to criticise something I had just written. Now I find it almost impossible to leave one sentence alone and go on to the next.

The first writer friend I had, Ann Quin, who published four highly original novels before her early death in 1973, remembered in an interview how hard she used to work when she first came to London in the fifties. 'I was working in a job from nine until six and going back to my room every evening, writing my first novel. I was about twenty, twenty-one and going back every evening and sitting down and conscientiously writing page after page every evening from seven until about midnight and I did this for about eighteen months.' That novel was never published, and nor was her next — an

apprenticeship much more common than Françoise Sagan's immediate, youthful success.

If you choose a work rhythm, be it a page a day or twenty each weekend, an hour before breakfast or four hours after supper, try to stick to it. The only way to make the pile of pages grow is to write another page. Once you reach half way, the end becomes not only possible but probable. You've proved you can reach the middle of the tunnel so you might just as well press on to the light at the end.

How many words, how long? The tiresome but true answer is — whatever length seems right. 60,000 to 75,000 words is average. Anything under 50,000 is short — but that didn't stand in Sagan's way. And something like *The Far Pavilions* is about 500,000 words. This book is around 30,000.

There is one technical warning I will make here to those anxious to complete at all costs, and that is about the point of view or narrative voice. It is usual when students begin writing a story for them to adopt a narrative voice quite unconsciously.

It may be in the first person: 'I woke up and looked at John and for the first time during our marriage I had an urge to hit him, as he lay on his back, bald and somnolent and smelling of whisky.'

Or it may be in the third person, told mainly through the eyes of one character: 'Hélène woke up and looked at John and realised that for the first time during their marriage she would like to hit him. He lay there, bald and somnolent, smelling of whisky.'

Or it may be in the third person, with more than one viewpoint: 'Hélène woke up and looked at John and realised that for the first time during their marriage she would like to hit him. He lay there, dimly aware she was leaning over him, and knew that he smelled of whisky and that his bald head revolted her.'

Or it may be in the third person, but from an objective, general point of view: 'There were two heads on the pillows: one covered with soft, curling black hair, the other quite bald. The black-haired one moved, showing the pretty face of a young woman who yawned and propped herself on one elbow. As she leaned over the man, whose eyes were closed, she wrinkled her nose with what looked like disgust bordering on hate. A slight movement of the man's eyelids revealed that he was perhaps not quite asleep.'

These four openings reveal both some of the problems and the freedom which confront the novelist. It is possible to leap into a short story without thinking too much about the narrative voice, but it can lead to tangles and disappointments in the case of a novel.

If you adopt the first person, and it does have some advantages for the beginner, you restrict yourself from ever stating what any of the other characters are privately thinking, or from directly

reporting action in which your main character is not involved. The advantage is that you need not be much more knowledgeable or sensitive about other characters' backgrounds or behaviour than your narrator is. I found this useful in my own first novel, since at that stage I could not go inside the heads of a varied cast of characters at all credibly.

With the third person, used mainly from one point of view, you avoid the trap of never being able to allow any but the central character to think (unless it be via speech), or to act separately. If, as in the first person narrative, one is mainly involved with, and anchored in, one character, it is necessary to bear lightly in mind that a switch to other characters needs to be done convincingly and not merely for convenience.

The narrative told from several points of view gives a wonderful freedom both in the exploration of emotional and psychological behaviour and in the development of a story. It is, however, more difficult to orchestrate: to balance the weight of each character and to pace the story. In my second novel I found I automatically switched to this type of plural viewpoint, but that there was a difference between my main characters and the minor ones. The four main people — two men and two women — came very much from inside my own head; I could quite easily assume their voices and their thoughts, although many of their characteristics were collected from outside observation. The minor characters, however, were altogether objective, 'heard' rather than 'spoken', 'seen' rather than 'felt'.

The fourth kind of narration I cited, the distanced, general view, is not often used continuously throughout a book but is intermingled with more personal narration, especially for descriptions of place and milieu, or as the equivalent of a film camera observing a total scene before it zooms in to focus on one particular character.

Again, it is clearly possible to have both first and third person narrative in the same novel, though this is quite difficult to bring off successfully.

In all these cases I am talking in terms of more-or-less conventional prose narrative. Those who are anxious to assimilate the complexities of unconventional writers over the ages, and to lay down their prose fictions in new forms and from original angles of the mind, will be pursuing singular paths and not wishing to tumble somewhat blindly through their first full-length manuscript.

'Blindly?' you might ask, in a critical tone. 'Surely one should write with awareness, not blindly?' Yes, on the whole; but here I am just trying to encourage those who want to finish in order to prove something to themselves. Sometimes it is necessary to hurl yourself

at a difficult obstacle, forgetting all the techniques you were taught to enable you to clear easier ones elegantly. Henry Miller once said, 'You see, I think it's bad to think. A writer shouldn't think much.' Not an axiom for all time, but for some occasions.

And to my mind much worse than thinking is talking — talking about the novel you intend to write, that is. For it is perfectly possible to talk a novel into still-birth. Angus Wilson, in an interview, put his finger on the main reason: '... fiction writing is a kind of magic, and I don't care to talk about a novel I'm doing because if I communicate the magic spell, even in an abbreviated form, it loses its force for me.' This is true. As long as the idea matures and effervesces inside your head, it has life. But if you tell it to someone, and they are critical or indifferent, the idea easily loses some of its magic. And even if it is well-received, thereby encouraging you to tell more people, you are no longer so excited about committing it to paper. In my experience the only people to talk to about would-be novels are one or two other novelists who know me well and who are perfectly versed in the art of tentative reaction that just verges on encouragement.

But in the beginning, before meeting any published writers, the only way to find out whether my idea could be turned into a novel was to sit down and write it out.

Chapter Four

Some of the Practicalities of Publication

Strictly speaking, this chapter should be the penultimate one. We ought not to be talking about publishers and money until we have finished discussing writing and re-writing. But since publishers and money will be the topic some readers want to know about most, and as a number of those who have proved to themselves they can finish a novel may want to submit their efforts, it seemed sensible to tackle such practicalities now.

There is another reason too: I do not want to mislead anybody. I do not want anyone to think that provided they go through all the motions suggested in the following chapters they are bound to have a book published. They aren't, and one of the functions of this chapter is to explain why.

It has never been easy to get a first novel published, and in recent years it has become very difficult indeed. A publishing house is a business enterprise, and many are now part of large commercial conglomerates even though they still carry the well-known names and imprints of their founders. This means that if they accept a book for publication they need to be as sure as they can that it will not lose money, and their financial overlords would prefer them to be as sure as they can that it will make a substantial profit. During frequent meetings and discussions with sales, promotion and production staff, an editor may find it very difficult to defend the publication of a first novel which he personally likes, but which no one can anticipate will sell more than 500 copies — if that. And you would be surprised how many quite well-known authors sell no more than 1000 copies nowadays. The reasons are obvious: increase in the price of books, cutbacks in public library spending, many people no longer able to spare money to buy fiction in hardback.

That last reason usually prompts the question, 'Why aren't novels published straight away in paperback?' In fact some genre novels (science fiction, romance, western, etc.) are, but it would not

surmount the problem for a conventional first novel. Paperback houses already publish too many titles for the bookshops to absorb all of them profitably, and in order to keep the price of a book down to a level acceptable to the public they would need to print far more copies than they could expect to sell of a first novel by an unknown author. Added to which there is the complication that not all bookshops devote shelf-space to paperbacks with limited appeal.

But some first novels become bestsellers, you may argue. To which I reply, 'Very, very, very (ad infinitum) few.' It's about as useless to hope that your first attempt (or indeed any attempt) at a novel will be a bestseller, as it is to imagine that should you be elected to your local council you will have a good chance of becoming Prime Minister. There are, remember, approximately 3,000 new novels published every year.

I do not believe that any of this is sufficient reason not to write a novel, but I think it should be taken realistically into account by anyone who is more interested in being published than they are in actually writing. Rejection slips can make people most dispirited. There might be better ways of employing valuable time.

Having said all that, however, I will just point to the obvious fact that publishers of fiction must take on some first novels or they won't have the steady-selling Lessings, Murdochs, Amises, Fowleses, Goldings and Highsmiths of the future for their lists.

The mechanics of submitting a manuscript are most adequately set out in *The Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* (published in paperback), which also gives the addresses of many British publishers, journals and literary agents, and much more besides. Briefly, a manuscript should be typed in double-spacing, most people use A4 paper, pages must be numbered, and a few corrections don't matter as long as the script is easily legible. Complicated binders are rather a nuisance — loose sheets in a cardboard wallet held by a stout rubber band will suffice. Do keep a carbon copy, publishers have no legal responsibility for the safety of any manuscripts they receive.

When selecting a publisher, choose one that publishes books which fall more-or-less into the same category as yours. Do some research in your local library and bookshops, and keep an eye on the book reviews. You can also request publishers to send you their current catalogue.

You may prefer to write in the first instance to find out whether the publisher of your choice would like to consider your novel. Give a brief description of it, and if it is in a particular genre say so (more about genres in Chapter 8).

When submitting a manuscript always enclose the wherewithal to cover return postage, and a short letter explaining that you are