

# **The Art of Creative Writing**

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## **PART ONE ~ WRITING AS A LIFESTYLE**

### **The Four Keys**

At some stage in our life, almost all of us experience the urge to transcribe our thoughts and experiences on paper. Hard on the heels of this desire come a flood of doubts. 'Do I really have the talent to write anything worth reading? Am I good enough'? A better question to ask ourselves might be: 'Do I have sufficient passion to express my thoughts on paper?' Every one of us has things to say that will be of benefit and interest to others. There is no reason why the great majority of us

cannot hone and sharpen the talents we already have and learn to write well, provided only that our desire and determination are strong enough.

My intention in this publication is not primarily to point the way for developing niche markets and lucrative contracts, but rather to explore how we can develop our creativity and come in touch with the source of inspiration. After that we are in a better position to explore in parts Two and Three the ‘nuts and bolts’ that are integral to the craft of writing.

The sequence is logical. Without genuine inspiration, no amount of technique will ever be quite enough. But even if we possess great ability there will still be battles to face. Part Seven is completely different in the subject matter that it covers, but equally as important for writers at any stage of their development. This is where we examine the emotional pressures that stall and stunt our creativity.

Four central themes weave their way in and out of almost every section of this book. These are not sequential steps but rather that, at any given moment, one of them will prove the most appropriate response. The secret lies in having the wisdom and the experience to know which one to apply.

### **1) Cultivate the Still Small Voice**

All artists possess some form of a ‘sixth sense’. It taps into our subconscious store of experiences and supplies us with fresh insights, as well as warning us when something needs amending or sharpening. So far from merely being something that we are either blessed with or not (and many of us might instinctively feel that we are not) we shall explore some of the many things we can do to cultivate this all important source of inspiration.

### **2) Maintain Friends and Activities away from the Word-Bank**

As we shall be seeing, priceless insights often come our way during seemingly ‘fallow’ periods. Certain types of wordless recreation are as important as hard graft for releasing our creative potential.

### **3) Hold up Banners of Truth**

Discouraging thoughts bombard the writer’s mind. To help us refute their persistent suggestions, we have suggested mentally unfurling specific “banners” for each theme that we address. Repeating and insisting on these slogans will highlight

the key principles we are eager to communicate. Best of all, we can apply these principles to any size or shape of writing project.

#### **4) Resolve to Pursue your Vocation.**

How can we refocus our gaze in the face of pressing worries and distractions? By making the pursuit of our vocation our first and last resort. By doing this, we will rapidly increase the size and scale of our output and increasingly master the tools of our trade.

#### **The One Per Cent of Inspiration**

'Tis God gives skill,  
But not without men's hands:  
He could not make Antonio Stradivari's violin  
without Antonio'. (George Eliot)

No workshop rack stocks it, it cannot be bought and it can barely be taught, yet it is utterly essential to the writer's calling. What is this vital element which enables us to share our insights effectively and creatively? In a word, inspiration.

In a celebrated newspaper interview, Thomas Edison claimed that 'Genius is one per cent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration'. Most of us are familiar with this quote and approve it readily. We may, however, merely end up subconsciously glorifying the great work ethic and miss the vital point. Of what value is the ninety-nine percent hard graft if the all-important one per cent ingredient of inspiration is missing? It would be as meaningless as knitting metres and metres of wool without thought to pattern or design.

We can balance our text according to rhyme, rhythm and reason at any stage of the revision process. What we cannot do without is the still small voice of inspiration, which provides us with our distinctive starting point and particular way of expressing our central themes. This 'still small voice' is a combination of flashes of genuine intuition and the fruit of sound judgement. It enables us to embrace new thoughts, to see the potential in life's many different experiences, and to single out and follow promising leads.

The ancient Greeks used to speak of ‘The Muse,’ and of the ‘*chairos*’ – the special moment at which revelation is imparted and matters become clear. To a greater or lesser extent, all successful writers know that they are dependent on it. They also know how important it is to cultivate it by getting away from our noise-driven world and to be in places where conducive to receiving inspiration. Whether it takes the form of a hobby, walking, or doing the housework, it will almost certainly come under a ‘non-academic’ heading and involve something that might appear monotonous and repetitive to outsiders.

Herein lies our first great paradox: to bring something distinctive to the word-face requires spending time well away from it. Writers have perfectly legitimate reasons why they adopt mildly eccentric and antisocial social habits!

A few days ago I was dandling our two-year-old on my knee when I suddenly ‘knew’ how to solve a thorny issue that had been stumping me for over a year. Being unsure of which way to develop one of the central themes in a novel I was sketching out, I reluctantly laid it to one side. Knowing there was nothing more I could do until this problem was resolved, I ‘possessed my soul in patience,’ to use the Biblical expression, and pressed on with other projects.

One single unexpected moment of illumination imparted the direction and the impetus I so badly needed. Now I can face the mountain of hard work that lies ahead because I have received the one percent of inspiration.

Let me give another illustration. I am currently writing a manual on Grief, to which I gave profoundly original working title of ‘Grief’. I read extensively and by the end of several weeks’ hard work I had produced – no surprise this – a manual on the Grief process. We printed a limited number of copies and distributed them at a retreat we held for those who were mourning. It served its apprenticeship and fulfilled its purpose, but even though I had poured my heart into the text, it still felt too impersonal, too cerebral. The worst thing was, I could think of no way of making it less stiff and stilted. And then, a few weeks ago, while having a bath, it became crystal clear to me that the book could be rewritten much more creatively in the form of an extended meditation.

The longed for ‘*chairos*’ had occurred. In an instant the project moved from head to heart. The still small voice had spoken and a far more original title sprang to mind: ‘*Veil of Tears*’. Most of the material I have prepared will doubtless end up being incorporated in one form or another, but the theme and tonality will be infinitely sharper.

We cannot always trace the coming of inspiration so precisely to one date and place. Often, it emerges over a period of time, like dew drops accumulating on the grass. But since we prize the Tool of Inspiration so highly, we must not be deterred by its apparent intangibility. Although it may often seem tantalizingly elusive,

there is much we can learn about making ourselves more receptive to it. If we can learn to coral and cultivate the insights and half nudges that come our way, we can provide far richer light and shade to enhance both the fore and back-grounds for our writing.

As the second of our maxims suggests (Maintain Friends and Activities away from the Word-Bank) our best ideas often come when we are farthest from the writing desk. It is these precious steering touches which make it possible for us to make sense of apparently disparate and random elements, and to integrate them into our work.

We can see, then, that the real process of writing begins long before we pick up a pen or switch on the computer. It is already under way, as we subconsciously process the stimuli and experiences of life. Most of us never do anything about these half-formed ideas that flit through our mind, except perhaps to share them as casual thoughts with close friends and intimates. But we, as writers, cannot permit such promising material to escape so lightly. To limit the events and happenings of life to casual conversation would be to lose forever the possibility that they could one day be turned into something worth reading.

At all costs, therefore, we must translate these thoughts and ideas onto paper. Whatever form they finally assume, whether reflective meditation, white-hot article of protest, or, at several stages removed as fictitious episodes, the most important thing is to record the core experience: not only what happened, but how did the people involved feel about what happened. The material itself can be shaped and fashioned at leisure, but the original moment of inspiration can never be fully recaptured. There is no second chance to record first impressions.

Why pretend that this process of transcribing seemingly random thoughts and experiences onto paper is an effortless one? That would be as naive as to suppose that top runners are merely blessed with a better than average pair of legs. Writing well requires something of the same degree of commitment that it takes to run a sub four minute mile.

Since this one per cent of inspiration provides both the bedrock substratum of our work and the final top soil too, we must be prepared to take whatever steps are necessary in order to cultivate a lifestyle that is conducive to receiving such revelation.

This brings us to the first of the many key banners we shall be unfurling: **'Be open to receive inspiration at unlikely times and in improbable places'**. Right alongside it, however, we must place another: **'Record these insights in an easily retrievable form'**.

## Excruciating Excuses

‘Hell is paved with good intentions

And roofed with lost opportunities’. (Anon)

I met a new friend unexpectedly for lunch the other day in the hospital cafeteria. ‘Writers,’ he mused, pondering my profession. ‘They spend most of their time making excuses for not doing it, don’t they?’ Unpalatable though it is to admit, I have a sneaking feeling that he is probably right.

How pertinently Browning put it when he asked, ‘Does he write? He fain would paint a picture. Does he paint? He fain would write a poem’. Anything, in other words, rather than get on with the hard work of writing. Jesus made it clear in two of His parables that feeble excuses could cause people to miss out on His heavenly kingdom. Laziness, likewise, can cause us to forfeit many achievements we could achieve if we were prepared to stretch ourselves a bit more.

In the story Jesus told about a banquet in Luke 14, people came up with a variety of excuses for not accepting the invitations they had received. The least convincing was the person who had just bought a field, and who felt an overwhelming need to go and inspect it. After all, the field would still have been there the following day. Another had just bought a tractor (well, five yoke of oxen at any rate!) and was keen to put them through their paces.

I have rather more sympathy for the person who had just got married, but when we take these excuses together we find that they centre on property, possessions, and priorities. All of these are perfectly good things in themselves, as long as they serve rather than quench out calling to write.

When it comes to overcoming our excuses, we have to move beyond the need to ‘feel’ inspired, and to write, pray, paint or whatever it is that we are called to do. To keep proffering the pretext that we are too tired / unqualified / or lacking in inspiration effectively dooms us to getting nowhere.

We shall plumb the reasons for our emotional reluctance to write in Part Four. For the moment, we need to come face to face with our proneness to making excuses. Our primary need is to develop frameworks that will facilitate our creativity. Are there simple practical steps we can take to make our writing environment more conducive? Even something as simple as switching the answer phone on can spare us time-consuming interruptions and free us to attend to the business in hand.

Where our resolve is fixed, we can usually find solutions. Baby-sitters can be brought in to give us time to write, and the care of elderly parent be swapped with others in order to buy ourselves a few precious writing hours.

But perhaps something even more radical may be called for: structural changes even to the house in order to carve out the seclusion that we need. Staying up late, or getting up way before dawn may well be the only way in which we will ever bring a cherished project to completion. After all, if students are willing to do this to complete their studies, then should we do less in pursuit of our goal? Anything is better than failing to finish our work!

If at all possible, keep the writing zone separate from the area where we attend to administrative tasks. The reason for this is simple. The Craft of Writing can seem at times so dauntingly demanding that we would cheerfully put anything ahead of doing it – even to the point of attending to repairs we have successfully been putting off for months.

It is the willingness to overcome excuses that separates would-be writers from real ones. When the talking horse, Bree, escapes from Archenland in CS Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, he is under the illusion that he is pushing himself hard. In reality, he has forgotten what it is like to have a rider who would have spurred him on to considerably greater efforts. Can we recognise that our proneness to making excuses has made us somewhat lazy?

It is here that we face our first and most crucial obstacle. There are serious psychological barriers to writing that need to be overcome. Like a bucking restless horse, our inner reluctance to pick up our pen must be broken. How will we advance beyond pointless reverie while we remain a-bed a-dreaming?

There is nothing easy or automatic about defeating these deeply-ingrained excuses. Competing and complicated circumstances are hard enough to deal with, but the plaintive whines of our inmost being are still more inveigling. 'I need another hour in bed,' we protest, vehemently or sluggishly, depending which mode we think stands the most chance of prevailing against our better intentions. 'Surely there's no harm, in that?' Wrong! Such attitudes may actually matter a great deal. It is only by constantly overcoming our inertia that we will mature as writers who have the unique capacity to inspire others.

Let me go still farther. If we are not prepared to exercise this sort of discipline, our writing will remain forever a chance affair; a 'hit' when times are good, but a distant 'miss' when competing attractions or difficulties come our way.

By careful observation and experience, we must learn to recognise which people, places and situations stimulate and refresh our creativity, and which hinder the freedom of our spirit. Our goal should be that when we return to our work we feel refreshed by our chosen activity. If walking, cycling, swimming and watching or playing ball games are our thing, then step out and enjoy them to the full – but be aware that not all forms of recreation will prove equally conducive to writing. While some plays or films may inspire us profoundly, others will drag our

emotions into dead-end alleys, and leave us feeling confused and distracted. Why? Because we have shared too deeply in someone else's vision and, as a consequence, drifted too far from our own writing projects.

Maturity as a writer consists of knowing when it is perfectly in order to rest and relax, and when we need to dig deep and push through external obstacles and our own inner reluctance. As surely as people following a diet must avoid certain foods, so those who are serious about developing the Craft of Writing must take care not to fill their minds with unhelpful material. '*Do not be deceived,*' St Paul warns, 'bad company, (like bad reading or undisciplined viewing habits) *corrupts good character*'. (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Our banner reminds us of the maxim "Develop the Resolve to Pursue our Vocation" and prods at our conscience: '**Excuses are inexcusable**'.

### **Pause and Ponder.**

What are the excuses you most frequently use to avoid getting on with some writing project? What underlying attitudes do these indicate? More to the point, what are you going to do to overcome them?

### **Moment-Mosting**

'What shelter to grow ripe is ours?

What leisure to grow wise?

Too fast we live, too much are tried,

Too harass'd to attain

Wordsworth's sweet clam,

or Goethe's wide

And luminous view to gain.' (Matthew Arnold, *Obermann Once More*)

There is only one thing in life that can never be redeemed, and that is wasted time. Every day is a gift to treasure: a unique chance to love and cherish others and to use the time we have been given to create something beautiful.

As always, the big picture is best achieved by making the most of the small opportunities that come our way. Rachel Simon describes how a former French Chancellor, d'Aguesseau, used to write each evening for a quarter of an hour, while he waited for his wife, who was regularly late for dinner. How much more creative than calling her names while the soup got cold! One year later his book was complete. It proved to be a best-seller!

Since most of us lead pressurized lives, we are deluding ourselves if we hope to be able to find enough time to write. We need to be more pro-active than that and make it. This is a vital distinction.

If at all possible, we should aim to complete the targets we set ourselves each day. Rachel urges beginner writers to find seven hours a week in which to write. One hour a day may not sound much, but most of us have to juggle competing commitments to the point where this slot needs to be factored in carefully. Two things will help us to achieve this:

- i) The ability to prioritise.
- ii) The flexibility to write wherever we are.

If we are making pursuing the Craft of Writing our priority, we will find that far more activities than we would ever have thought possible can be postponed or set aside. The world will not come to end. To compensate for the things we no longer have the time to attend to personally, then maybe we are opening a door and giving that person the break they were looking for. Just as families routinely make complicated child-care arrangements if both parents go out to work, so we must look upon this writing hour as a priority engagement.

We are writers, and we must give ourselves permission to escape for our hallowed hour away from the television, the kids and everything else. Politely but firmly we may sometimes have to insist on being 'antisocial' and turn down attractive-sounding invitations. We know from much experience that we will never complete our quiver of writings so long as we remain set on living a full social life. We rush after so many things that are, in reality, peripheral to our calling. We waste time and energy rehearsing endless 'what if' scenarios, trying to fathom out hypothetical issues we are not actually required to face at this moment. Why not just get on with the real work instead?

As for trying to meet everyone else's expectations for our lives, we are on a hiding to nothing. Unless we set the boundaries carefully, placing ourselves on an endless

merry-go-round. Of course, one reason we may be trying so hard to take care of other people's needs and feelings is that we are subconsciously deriving a large part of our own self-worth from trying to meet these needs. Psychologists call it 'co-dependency' when we transfer our attention away from ourselves and focus instead on the needs of others.

In relational terms, our empathy with others is proof of our sensitivity and generous spirit. In terms of pursuing the craft of writing it tends to make us inefficient and prone to burn out. Worse, leaping to meet the needs of others gives us the excuse we were subconsciously looking for to avoid putting in the long hours of hard work that are needed to bring our projects to completion.

Moment-mooring is all about putting the stray opportunities of life to good use and turning wherever we happen to be a special writing place. Many are the times I have sat on benches in shopping malls and leisure centres revising texts, while family members complete their activities – just as I have scribbled countless ideas on trains, planes and buses. I have even spent long hours in freezing cars revising texts in the chill of the pre-dawn hours, afraid to turn the engine back on once the motion has finally rocked my all too wide awake baby back to sleep. For the record, I began this section in a leisure centre waiting for my son to finish his kayak session, and revised it on a ferry boat, waiting to get into a fog-bound Aberdeen Harbour.

If we find our home environment too constrictive for creative writing, then why not ring the changes and use a friend's house instead? It makes an excellent alternative to a public library and may be a real haven of peace during the working day. If we find other places conducive, then go there again.

As we progress farther into the calling, the distractions become more sophisticated. Because writing is such a solitary calling, it is only natural that we should seek out like-minded people. Before we know where we are, however, we may find our new interest leading us to attend (or teach) so many writing classes and conferences that we end up mistaking our first hand acquaintance with the literary world with actually doing the nitty-gritty hard work of writing.

### **Pause and Ponder**

Make a simple audit over a four-week period of how you spend your time. This will quickly show you whether or not you are on track for finding the seven sacred hours a week to write. For the professional, this figure should be more like twenty five or thirty hours.

If you are regularly failing to meet your quota, what activities are there that you can legitimately shelve or jettison? Is there anyone who can be recruited to help you with your non writing activities? Or, if they are competent on computers, to type in your amendments?

No matter what constricting circumstances we may have to contend with, there are always ways to make the most of the time. Take a look at how you plan your holidays, for example. Are you able to make them ‘combined affairs’ – necessary time-out to recharge minds, bodies and family life but also a priceless opportunity to see new sights and to record fresh thoughts and experiences?

Our banner for this section is the nearest thing I know to a magic shortcut for achieving a finished result. **When leaving a piece of work, make a mental agreement with yourself to return to it again soon.** Respect this engagement as a firm commitment, and treat it as a high priority. This will avoid leaving a project so long on the back boiler that we lose touch with it. Such a firm arrangement will increase our output, maintain the unity of thought and tone in the writing – and prove to ourselves if to no one else that we are committed to becoming a ‘real’ writer.

### ‘Cultivating a Receptive Spirit

The Muse, nae poet ever fand her,  
Till by himself he learned to wander,  
A down some trotting burn’s meander,  
An’ no think lang’. (Robert Burns)

It may come as a shock to westerners reared on the ethos of hard graft and long hours to realise that it is at moments of apparent idleness that we are at our most receptive to our sharpest insights and impressions. The more we appreciate this paradox, the more willing we will be to allow ourselves to close down the busy bustling of our brain for a season and to nurture a ‘slower’ pace of life. Not so slow that we fall asleep and rust away; just relaxed enough to tap into the endless resources of the still small voice.

The better we understand this link between recreation and inspiration, the more willing we will be to give ourselves permission and take time out. As our third key maxim reminds us, it makes every sense for writers to escape for a season from the word-bank and indulge in wordless recreation. Dorothea Brand’s masterly book

*'Becoming a Writer'* focuses almost exclusively on the crucial role of the subconscious in the writing process.

Deep within our subconscious lies an almost inexhaustible stream of ideas and experiences, along with the emotions that accompanied these episodes. We may suppose most of these to be long since forgotten, yet they are not beyond recall. If we can find ways to tap into this vast fund, we will rediscover a pool of events and anecdotes and release a deeper degree of identification to illustrate the points we are eager to convey. Even the most painful experiences can be reworked on paper and used for the benefit of others.

We must co-operate, too, with our body rhythms. We were designed to alternate between active hours, when our senses are on full alert, and quiescent ones, when our inner being has the chance to catch up with itself. It is because society's norms are so out of kilter that unbridled stress places such demands on people and wreaks such havoc in our lives.

For many years I was tempted to regard my propensity to feel sleepy in the afternoon as an embarrassing weakness. Seen and used creatively, this quieter period often proves to be a time of enlightenment as well as of much needed refreshment. A semi-drowsy state can restore our soul to peace and reward us with solutions to problems that had long been defeating our 'conscious' minds. Other experiences and associations that come to mind can be 'processed' and turned into insights that will come across as both fresh and interesting.

There are times when artists must refrain from looking guiltily across at their curriculum-driven hard-working peers and stop and stare into space. This is not to be confused with the deadness induced by exhaustion. Neither is this idleness. We are speaking rather of the essential preparation which frees the subconscious to achieve its deeper work within our soul. Liberated from the excessively rational critiques and limitations of our conscious minds, our writing will soon show new signs of vigour and freshness.

Since the subconscious is such a promising well of inspiration, it is unfortunate that Freud has corrupted the way we view it – almost to the point where we are tempted to look down on it, as though we are dealing with a lesser species. Perhaps we should dispense with the term 'subconscious' altogether and speak rather of developing the life of the spirit within us.

Rest and 'play' times are as important for grown-up writers as they are for children. Did the Lord not create children with an instinct to play because He was putting something of His own nature into them? Referring to children's willingness to play the same game over and over again, G. K. Chesterton delightfully declared, 'Our Father is younger than us'.

We can develop this life of the spirit in us by cultivating what I have rather euphemistically termed 'The Daily Review'. (I believe in the value of this concept passionately, however intermittently I manage to perform it!) At the end of the day I play back the key events as if watching them on a video, recalling the emotions associated with them as well as what actually happened. Sometimes I 'pause the video frame' and replay particular scenes to see if there were pointers hidden within them: 'nudges' to nurture or which require further action, or – more painfully – attitudes I have struck and comments I have made that need to be put right. The Daily Review helps us recover lost insights, and brings back to our consciousness insights that would otherwise have been lost for ever.

And then we must write them down. As we hinted earlier, inspiration arrives at the most unlikely times and place, but because it is normally so fleeting we must train ourselves to write these insights down in an easily retrievable form. We will be grateful later that we took the trouble to do this.

In this quest to move beyond a world dominated by words, there are deeper links to explore between music and inspiration. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called music, 'The universal language of mankind'. Martin Luther went so far as to describe it as 'The Art of the Prophets – the only Art that can calm the agitations of the soul'.

Do you know which styles of music regularly inspire creativity and which divert from it? Try putting some music on while writing: music that moves, smooths or inspires; that expresses our emotions and which helps us to identify with other people's hopes and griefs. Now try an entirely different style of music. How does it affect the way we approach our subject material?

In all this we are seeking to make it easier to hear the still small voice speak. To be led by the spirit means having the eagerness of a child to learn and discover new facets of life. Why settle for the safe and predictable? To recognize that our preoccupations and mental horizons have shrunk may be the first stirring towards an inner awakening. The more commitments we take on board, the more quality time off we need to compensate against the increased demands. It is in these seemingly fallow moments that our pool of experiences and insights being is constantly renewed.

We can look on the thoughts and ideas which come during these moments of quiet inspiration as being like dormant seeds that await a latter-day flowering. What we receive at such times distils like dew into our hearts, and from there passes on in due time to water many other lives as well.

For many of us, the waking moments are all-important. Before we find ourselves overwhelmed by the thought of all we have to do today (and all we failed to do yesterday); before the radio and television bring us tidings of the world's disasters,

and the bills arrive to challenge our bank balance, and with it our mental equilibrium, it is good to still the soul and to open ourselves to new thoughts and possibilities.

Because writing is such a lengthy and emotionally stretching process, we must be gentle with ourselves. Berating ourselves is nearly always counterproductive – but gentleness should not be confused with flabbiness. In the original Greek, I am told, the word contains the notion of breaking in a wild stallion. Gentleness is strength harnessed and put to its proper use.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

When we reach a place of stillness, beyond the clutter of words and troubling thoughts, we may be close to the borderlands of inspiration. This requires regular practice. Try going to quiet places and practising being still. What are the sounds that fill the air and catch our attention? Are we hearing too many of our own conflicting thoughts, or are we tuning into our surroundings? Don't start thinking about current writing projects unless they force themselves on us. Just absorb the atmosphere and listen.

Practise holding the mind still. If we can manage to do that (and we may not be able to do so every single time we try) then now is the time to think our way into our material. Focus intently and in turn on each character or detail of our latest writing project. Let aspects of their personality and actions become real. The more fully we can envisage them, the more passionate and convincing each scene will be when we come to write them up. It is this inner conviction and authenticity which draws readers to identify with the themes we are exploring and the world we are creating.

### **Tuning Up and Tuning In**

Orchestral musicians tune up carefully before the music begins, just as athletes warm up thoroughly before a race. We too as creative artists must warm up and tune in. We do this best by simply giving freer rein to whatever thoughts and ideas are uppermost in our minds. Most writers find that they are at their most receptive in the distraction-free early hours. But whether we gravitate towards predawn, mid-noon or post nightfall will depend on our circumstances as well as on whether we are larks or owls.

Much that we write during this warmup period between being sleep and wakefulness may stray and ramble, but that is of no consequence. For the moment, all that matters is to be guided by the ideas and concerns that seem most pressing.

To pursue the metaphor, we could liken these early morning jottings to musicians tuning their instruments, and athletes warming up. The only difference is that whereas athletes do not break records and musicians do not make recordings while they are practising, it is entirely possible for us to record thoughts and impressions we may later be able to shape into something of real value.

Many people like to warm up by journaling first thing in the morning. The great advantage of doing this is that we do not need to concern ourselves with how some imaginary 'outside reader' might view our text; we are writing for our own edification and nobody else's. In this sense, it is akin to 'stream of consciousness' writing. As we record the flow of interests, ideas and hurts we may long have been storing up, the mere fact of setting them down on paper helps us to find clarity and release.

The crucial need here is not to allow pride and self-protectiveness a landing strip. They invariably reduce the truth and honesty flow. Why make the effort to portray ourselves in a good light? It is not as though anybody else need ever read these scribblings.

The one thing I would not recommend is starting the day with anything that demands too much thought. If there is any room for manoeuvre, leave the heavy stuff till later. We will find it much harder to switch back later into a more creative mode.

For the same reason, I prefer to leave writing letters and e-mails till later in the day. Occasionally, however, I do start here. Taking time to address people's concerns can play its part in sharpening our literary craft, as well as keeping us in touch with their real needs.

Rather than seeking to stoke our intellect to fever pitch too early in the day, this is the time to be instinctive, to allow our spirit to have its day. We can afford to let the rationalistic editor within have a lie-in. When this fellow wakes us, nothing will stop him from wielding his blue pen, and having a heyday – but for the moment we are creators not critics. Our only concern is to capture our innermost thoughts and ideas. Later, as we reflect on what we have written, we may be able to see threads that connect and make sense of the jumble of thoughts, impressions, memories and anecdotes that come to mind; for the moment, we can be content just to write and record. Our banner for these times is a prescriptive one: **'Don't analyse – just write'**.

## **Part Two ~ Starting Scenarios**

## Lead on Macduff

The time has come for us to move beyond examining the sources of our creativity to examine key stages of the writing process. We have chosen fiction writing as our default template, but most of the principles we will be exploring can be applied equally as effectively to any form of writing.

The first principle to bear in mind is that there is no such thing as a second chance for readers to obtain a first impression. If our openings fail to impress, people may quickly lose any incentive to continue just as a poor opening in a game of chess virtually dooms the novice to defeat. We have somewhere between a page and a page and a half to set the scene and convince them to read on.

In our favour is the fact that we can start our work in any way that we like. Most readers will be inclined to give us the benefit of the doubt, at least for a certain period of time. Whether they warm to our theme depends on whether we succeed in establishing a powerful setting and a conducive tonality.

A novel is more leisurely than a short story or a piece of tabloid journalism, but we still need to insert effective ‘hooks’ to draw readers in. Otherwise, we merely leave them facing a succession of facts or events.

We must be prepared to make as many revisions as we need before we discover the best way to couch our openings. Once we are reasonably satisfied that we have conveyed what we set out to do, then we will be in a position to entertain less and to inform more.

Given the important role the opening has to play, this particular banner takes the form of an all-important question which bids us cast a critical eye over the way we begin any of our writing projects: **Do our lead-ins lead in successfully?**

## The Big Bang

‘It’s a terrible plan – you’ll be damn lucky to get back alive’. Colin Forbes, (*The Palermo Ambush*)

Thriller writers frequently favour the fastest route possible into the action. Colin Forbes’s dramatic start draws readers in and makes them desperately concerned to know the outcome of this unknown plot. Anything that raises suspense – ‘reader worry’ as we call it in the trade – is promising. A punchy question or a strongly phrased statement may be a perfect way to make readers want to join the writer in search of answers.

To start with a threat, and someone's response to that threat usually makes for a strong opening. Threats predispose the reader to expect a sudden and abrupt change of circumstances. Change precipitates action, and because people are feeling vulnerable they often act out of character ways, or, alternatively, reveal characters strengths and weaknesses that would not normally be apparent. It is change which precipitates action and which brings people to a completely new stage of their lives. Our banner urges us boldly to **'Start with the main person or point'**. This is, after all, what the reader expects.

Elizabeth Goudge's sensitive writing has nothing whatsoever in common with Colin Forbes' more upbeat style, but she too shows that she knows how to land a strong punch, if the opening line of *'The Scent of Water'* is anything to go by.

'Mary, you will regret this'.

Opening thunder blasts make for compelling reading, but they give readers nothing to measure the threat or challenge against. In both examples referred to above, the 'gunpowder' tactic is effective, however, because it leaves the reader eager to find out what is going on. Many lesser writers would find it difficult to live up to such high expectations such after such hard-hitting openings. If we land mighty punches or insert powerful hooks, we must make sure that the rest of our text does not leave readers feeling anticlimactic. Although Colin Forbes is more than able to maintain the level of tension throughout that particular book, it is worth considering alternative opening gambits. It can often be more strategic to place the hook not in the first line, but a few lines further in to the story.

Take the following example, which admirably conveys the 'Zeitgeist' – the prevailing sentiment of the period. The opening perfectly evokes the time, the place, the social class, the bright hope, and the invincible confidence of youth that were so prevalent at the outset of the First World War, but which were so shortly to be dashed amid the horrors of the trenches. The skill lies in the effect being achieved by what people say rather than by direct authorial comment.

I stood with Maynard Greville on the stone terrace outside the School House studies at Oundle in the spring of 1915.

"I vote we chuck all this at the end of term and join up," said he.

"Wouldn't it be fine! But they won't let us."

"Why not? We're almost seventeen."

"But old King says you can't get a commission in anything until you're eighteen."

"Rot! What about the Flying Corps? They'll take you at seventeen. They want young chaps."

"Shall we speak to Beans?"

"No, he might stop us. I vote we write to the War Office and see what happens."

"All right! Oh, Maynard, wouldn't it be ripping! (Cecil Lewis: '*Sagittarius Rising*')"

The big bang opening has a concomitant: a little sting in the tail. It is always a sound ploy to leave readers at the end of each chapter with at least one insight that makes them reflect, or some sort of a hook to lead them onto the next section.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

Study the opening sentence of widely varying books and articles. Then do the same with the start of different chapters. Why is it that certain styles and phrases succeed in capturing our imagination whilst others do not?

#### **ii) In medias res**

'Seigneur La Grange' . . .

'What is it?' . . .

'What do you think about our visit? Were you completely satisfied with it?'

'Do you think we have any right to be?'

'Not entirely'.

'As far as I'm concerned, I must confess to being completely scandalized by it!'

(Molière, '*Les Precieuses Ridicules*').

If the aim of fiction is to create something more vivid and more dramatic than everyday life, then introducing readers right into the midst of a scenario that has already been under way for some time can be an excellent way to open a story, especially if a crisis is approaching! The great advantage of this is that it gives us the opportunity to create a detailed context and to introduce characters in ways that will make readers watch out for them when circumstances change for them. Starting 'in medias res' affords readers a strong sense of participating in the ongoing chain of events. Our banner hints at how rich this vein can be. **'Show real people facing real dilemmas, dangers or disappointments. Then watch how they respond to these stimuli'.**

Although we may have to do some mental gymnastics to leap from Molière to D.H. Lawrence, something of the same approach can be seen in the opening to *'Lady Chatterley's Lover'*. The pace of this book is leisurely, almost at times to the point of being turgid, but the one thing we can be quite certain of is that the family situation as it is depicted for us on the opening pages will not remain static.

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we must refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.

This was more or less Constance's position. The war had brought the roof down over her head. And she had realised that one must live and learn.

### **Pause and put into Practice**

Practice writing an opening that introduces readers to an on-going situations, preferably where conflict looms and characters are about to be unsettled.

### **iii) Scene-setting**

Many confident and important novels begin in a circumstantial, almost deceptively mild tone. They tell us such prosaic things as what kind of weather it is, who is walking along what road, the date, the time, and what is going on in the nation.

Jane Austen, for example, opens her classic novel *'Persuasion'*, with something considerably more measured than a thunderclap or firework display.

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations arising from domestic affairs changed naturally into pity and contempt as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century; and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed. This was the page at which the favourite volume always opened: 'ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH HALL: "Walter Elliot, born March 1st, 1760, married July 15."' (Jane Austen, *Persuasion*)

In just a few words we see set out before us the shallowness, the snobbery, the selfishness, the cocoon of self-satisfied stupidity. We instinctively pity the family and tenants of such a man!

Another strong way to open a book (or a chapter) is to put the emphasis more on the place than the characters. If the locality is portrayed in a sufficiently interesting, or mysterious way, then the 'plot' will develop out of the setting – and the setting will aid the plot. The example below (actually the beginning of the third chapter of an acclaimed novel by François Mauriac) shows how effective this approach is for bringing readers right into the midst of an ongoing situation. It may sound a leisurely approach to adopt by today's fast-moving standards, but a carefully selected setting still makes a highly effective starting point.

Argelouse is, in reality, an extremity of the earth: one of those places beyond which it is impossible to go. People in this region call it a district: a handful of farms but no church, town hall or cemetery. It is spread around a field of rye, six miles from the township of Saint-Clair, to which it is linked by a deeply pitted road. This rut-strewn road, overflowing with mud and puddles, becomes a mere sandy track beyond Argelouse, and from there until the ocean there is nothing except a sixty-mile stretch of marshes, lagoons and slender pine trees; sandy heathland on which, by the end of winter, the sheep have taken on an ashen hue. The leading families of Saint-Clair were born in this out of the way region. (François Mauriac, *'Thérèse Desqueyroux'*)

To Mauriac, the region of sandy heaths and moors that skirt the Atlantic Ocean to the south of Bordeaux is an integral part of his narrative. The scene-setting is almost an extension of the action itself.

The technique works less well when a carefully crafted description revolves around something less pivotal to the main thread of the tale. Thus, for example, Sebastian Faulks opens his well-written novel, *'The Girl at the Lion d'Or'* with a beautiful description of a French railway station in the 1930's. But since the railway theme is by no means central to the way the storyline, it tantalises rather than inspires and makes far less impact than it otherwise would do.

As to whether we choose real or imaginary places, this is clearly a matter for careful thought. Many readers are delighted to recognise places that are dear to them, and locals are usually glad to have their region immortalised. But imaginary or 'composite' places have their advantages too, particularly if we need to stretch geographical boundaries or over exaggerate certain features in order to induce a certain mood.

One important word of caution is in order here. Every time we write a description, we are effectively slowing the pace of the story down. In extreme cases, to open with a description might be somewhat akin to a referee blowing the whistle to start a football match and the players then meeting in the middle of the pitch to have a discussion.

Equally, if we begin a narrative by filling the reader in on what has been going on in the past, it might be likened to watching the players pass the ball back to the goalkeeper. To use another metaphor: does it make sense to ask the reader to stop for a cup of coffee on page one? Despite all these caveats, we may still be guilty of serious underwriting if at some point in the action (not necessarily the beginning) we ignore this banner: **'An inspired setting greatly aids a book's development'**. We will take this thought further in the section 'Distinguished Description'.

#### **iv) Flashback and Prediction**

Certain films and novels begin as it were upside down or back to front, either pointing the way forward by showing us something that will only make sense at the end, or drawing us backwards to something crucial that happened in the past. *'Enigma'*, based on Robert Harris' novel, opens with a woman striding imperiously through the city streets. Who she is, and what her significance may be only becomes clear later on.

Alfred Hitchcock's first Hollywood film, *'Rebecca'*, was an adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's gothic novel. This film quickly established itself as the classic

Hitchcock thriller. It is both a powerful ghost story and a thriller based around a tortured romance. The film begins with one of the most famous opening lines ever recorded: a recollection of times past that is narrated by the heroine of the film.

Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited. Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. And finally, there was Manderley. Manderley, secretive and silent . . . I looked upon a desolate shell, with no whisper of a past about its staring walls. We can never go back to Manderley again. That much is certain. But sometimes, in my dreams, I do go back to the strange days of my life which began for me in the south of France . . .

The narrator begins in flashback to tell the story of her life. The film cuts to a rocky coast, with waves crashing against the cliffs, the camera zooms in on a smartly dressed man who is standing at the cliff's edge, staring out to sea. When he moves toward the edge, an attractive blond young woman walking nearby, concerned that he may be contemplating suicide, shouts at him.

Woman: 'No! Stop!'

Man: 'What the devil are you shouting about? Who are you? What are you staring at?'

Woman: 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare, but I, I only thought . . .'

Man: 'Oh, you did, did you? Well, what are you doing here?'

Woman: 'I was only walking!'

Man: 'Well, get on with your walking and don't hang about here screaming!'

Her story gradually emerges. This painfully shy young woman becomes attracted, and gets engaged to an introverted aristocrat who lives at Manderley, a large house in Cornwall. After the marriage she finds that Max de Winter is still mourning the death of his first wife, Rebecca, whose unseen presence overwhelms her. The dead woman is the cause of the unease and fear the young bride feels during her time at Manderley – much of it inflicted on her by Mrs Danvers, Rebecca's devoted but tyrannical housekeeper.

Manderley itself is an integral part of both book and film: it is precisely the sort of mansion we would expect to find in a gothic novel, with rising turrets, menacing woods, and a long winding drive. It is only at the end of the film, as the Manderley estate goes up in flames, that we learn the real secrets of Rebecca's character and death.

The 'predictive' quality that comes from telling a story in the form of a flashback is not always so successful. For example, in A.J. Cronin's *Keys of the Kingdom* my awareness of the circumstances the priest (who is the central character in the book) would be in at the end of the story makes me reluctant to embark on the long account of how he reached that sorry point – no matter how brilliant the writing in between, and the unexpected change of heart Sleeth (the Bishop's cold blooded envoy experiences on the very last page.

Another drawback with making the end known from the beginning is that it effectively removes a potential source of tension. Perhaps that is what made me reluctant to watch the award winning film *Titanic*. I knew full well that the film was a love story – but the thought of spending nearly three hours watching the boat go down in freezing cold waters felt exceedingly unattractive. Perhaps these examples merely highlight my preference for a happy ending!

Flashbacks and predictive pointers are best used sparingly. As a general rule, we are on safe ground if we unfurl the banner that reminds us to **'Keep the action in the present whenever we possibly can'**.

In much the same way, using remote tenses such as the pluperfect conditional tense ('he could have had') takes the reader further away from any sense of immediacy. The principle is a sound one. If we start proceedings a long time after the change has happened, the story risks feeling too remote.

Exceptions include brief references to events that happened a long time ago and which are, as it were, the seed bed that explains things that are happening now. Frank Peretti includes such an episode at the very beginning of *The Oath*. To go back in time to deal with the events that led up to a present crisis is a perfectly permissible technique. When I wrote an account on the reign of the Jehoshaphat, one of the more interesting Hebrew kings, I did not start with an account of how he came to power, but began at his hour of greatest peril, when a coalition of enemy powers were advancing against his kingdom.

**Pause and put into practice.**

Be on the lookout for books and films that open with a flashback or prediction. Do these effects ‘work?’ To put it another way, would the book or film be complete and satisfying without it?

#### v) Inside the Protagonist’s Mind

‘A prolonged bleating drifted up from the coombe, partially muffled by a row of frozen bushes. The sheep had smelt the presence of the man from afar. Despite being alone, Isaiah Vaudagne burst into laughter and increased his pace, his head bent against the wind, his cheeks streaked by the cold. His footprints left their mark on the thin layer of snow which covered the ground. He was in a hurry to look his sheep over. (Henri Troyat, *La Neige en Deuil*)’

Whilst many books observe the central character from a distance, enabling us to pick up various clues about their character and personal history, a perfectly valid alternative is to begin a book inside the mind of the central character. Just as the struggle between two protagonists locked in mortal conflict is the warp and woof of most thrillers, so the sight of someone gripped with anxiety and locked in a battle with himself makes for compulsive reading in the case of ‘psychological’ novels. The aim here is to show people struggling with real dilemmas through complex thought processes. In fiction, ‘thoughts are actions,’ just as the mind is the centre of our own joys and struggles.

We can transpose this struggle on paper by presenting certain information and insights as coming from inside the head of at least one of the characters. When the action begins in earnest, we are psychologically prepared to watch out for them. As everyone knows, **readers will do anything to follow a character they have taken to.**

To take an example from a very different genre, and one which are not attempting to explore in any detail in this publication, William Morris’s poem creates a powerful impression because the doom is so personal and particular. It describes ultimate loss in a nondescript setting. Not only is it raining, but the countryside is flooded; the haystack itself is presumably in danger of rotting, a reflection on the state of the country (as a result of the civil war).

Had she come all the way for this,

To part at last without a kiss?

Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain

That her own eyes might see him slain

Beside the haystack in the floods? (William Morris, *'The Haystack in the Floods'*)

### **Pause and put into Practice**

Readers feel more affinity for characters whose inner workings they have discerned. Create a character you can 'get inside. How will you help others to do the same?

### **vi) Information-sharing**

Continuing our search for openings that combine insight, challenge, passion, facts and fantasy in a cocktail that whets the appetite and draws readers in, few things are more effective than a bold statement or piece of information.

Martha Hailey Dubose begins *'Women of Mystery,'* her substantial overview of the lives and works of notable crime novelists, with the words,

'In the 1800's, murder was decidedly not a proper topic for well-bred ladies and gentlemen'.

The effect works. The central theme is introduced; the prim and proper attitudes of a previous generation are clearly stated and the scene is set to show how public attitude has changed. The noted historian H. Trevor-Roper began his essay on Thomas Hobbes with a short sentence that summarises well the issues he goes on to elucidate.

'When Thomas Hobbes, at the age of eighty-four, looked back on his life, he found the key to it in fear'.

Since ours is undoubtedly the information age, there is no reason why we should avoid presenting our readers with information. If music is a central theme in a book, for example, then there is nothing wrong with presenting some information about it. On the other hand, we do not want to be like the 'children who are up in dates, and floor you with 'em flat'. (Such children were, of course, prime candidates in Gilbert and Sullivan's *'The Mikado'* for the Lord High Executioner to behead).

Winston Churchill's first volume about the Second World War '*The Gathering Storm*' likewise opens with his classic epigraph that embodies a stinging criticism of national policies that ultimately led to the millions of lives being lost. Alone among western leaders, Churchill knew that Hitler could, and should, have been stopped in his tracks at a much earlier date: had anybody had the courage to stand up to him.

After the end of the World War of 1914 there was a deep conviction and almost universal hope that peace would reign in the world. This heart's desire of all the peoples could easily have been gained by steadfastness in righteous convictions, and by reasonable common sense and prudence. The phrase "the war to end war" was on every lip, and President Wilson made the concept of a League of Nations dominant in all minds.

We have cited below Churchill's opening paragraph, with its measured diction springing from the classics of English historiography. The tone is of serious irony and gains immeasurably in authority from the author being who he is.

HOW THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING PEOPLES  
THROUGH THEIR UNWISDOM  
CARELESSNESS AND GOOD NATURE  
ALLOWED THE WICKED TO REARM

A popular gambit is to open with an attention-grabbing or even provocative statement that says the very opposite of what might commonly be expected. In the extract below, Philip Larkins adopts an attitude towards children in the first three sentences that is sufficiently caustic to make one read on, even if the rest of the material is not, perhaps, as satisfying as one might have hoped. (He does, however, modify his opening polemic).

'It was that verse about becoming again as a little child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies. If the Kingdom of Heaven could be entered only by those fulfilling such a condition, I knew I should be unhappy there. It was not the prospect of being deprived of money, keys, wallet, letters, books, long-playing records, drinks, the opposite sex and other solaces of adulthood that upset me (I should have been about eleven) but having to put up indefinitely with the company of other children, their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness. (Philip Larkins, '*The Savage Seventh*')

There is always mileage in opening with something stimulating or controversial. Thus Eiseley's opening sentence in 'The Snout' is simply this:

'I have long been an admirer of the octopus'.

Loren's interest (real or feigned) in this rather unlovable creature is sufficient to make the uncommitted give him the benefit of the doubt and to examine whether they have missed something that ought to make them, too, aficionados of the octopus.

The information we share does not need to be strictly accurate. It can be enlarged, exaggerated, or reduced according to taste, humour and intention. Whichever route we choose, it will pay to remember the banner for this section: **'Whenever possible, share facts from an interesting or unusual angle'**.

Bearing in mind the risks we considered earlier of slowing the action down too much in the opening pages, let us suppose that I am writing up an account of Rosalind's trip to the west coast of America.

Mrs Weston began by saying, "I quite like travelling, even to places like the west coast of America, which I visited last year."

The commas are less intrusive and a redundant phrase ('even to places like') has been removed. What is still missing is the hint of a carrot, that anything special happened on that last visit which will make us want to read on. Another change of emphasis and both word order and phrasing become considerably more dynamic:

"Travelling!" Rosalind exclaimed. "I love it – especially the west coast of America. You won't believe what happened there last year."

This third attempt hooks into readers' latent interest in the west coast of America, and makes them curious to know what happened to Rosalind.

Openings that purport to instruct but which really set out to entertain also provide an excellent platform. Near the beginning of *'Ten Rules for a Happy Marriage'*, James Thurber writes,

I have avoided the timeworn admonitions such as

'Praise her new hat,' 'Share his hobbies,' 'Be a sweet heart as well as a wife,' and 'Don't keep a blonde in the guest room,' not only because they are threadbare from repetition but also because they don't seem to have accomplished their purpose. Maybe what we need is a brand-new set of rules'. And aren't we, the readers, eager to find out what these might be?

It should also be possible for every writer to devise openings which draw on a sufficiently broad experience-base to draw people in, even to something that they themselves have not experienced. Thus Lewis Thomas starts his essay *'To Err is Human'* with the bold statement,

'Everyone must have had at least one personal experience with a computer error'.

On other occasions, the focus is on someone who has done something distinctively different from the majority of us. How about Henri Nouwen, who forsook his role as a popular lecturer at Harvard University and went to care for the handicapped at L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto? Faced with no longer being in a university environment, he found to his immense distress that he had all too much in common with the elder son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is how he recorded his first steps in this complete lifestyle change.

The move from Harvard to L'Arche proved to be but one little step from bystander to participant, from judge to repentant sinner, from teacher about love to being loved as the beloved. I really did not have an inkling of how difficult the journey would be. I did not realise how deeply rooted my resistance was and how agonising it would be to 'come to my senses'. (Henri Nouwen, *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'*)

Few of us are called to quite such a radical change of lifestyle as this great man, but do we not all feel a desire, almost a compulsion, to see what happened when a senior lecturer exchanged the stimulating life of an Ivy League University for intimate communion with a group of people to whom rational academic arguments and logical thought mean less than nothing? To these people Nouwen became a true father—and in the process overcame much of the pride, jealousy, moaning, anger, sullenness and subtle self-righteousness which he now realised he had secretly harboured for so long.

Whichever style of starting scenario we opt for (and there really is no limit to the number of permutations possible) certain basic detail will always need to be addressed. In one form or another we must convey – and at some early stage in the proceedings – sufficient information concerning time and place, as well as formulating the outline of the crisis or issue which will be at the heart of the book.

All our literary skill must be deployed to 'earth' our readers, and to retain their interest. Everything must therefore contribute to a sense of leading somewhere. We can no more afford to have loose ends floating around in the beginning than we can in the conclusion. If details are included in the opening, they must serve a purpose. Our final banner in this section reminds us to view our work as a whole:

**‘Whatever threads or threats we insert must be there for a purpose and be properly outworked’.**

### **Endings that do Justice to the Beginning**

‘Everything has an end, except a sausage which has two’. (Danish Proverb)

‘A beginning, a muddle and an end’. (Philip Larkin)

‘Great is the art of beginning, but greater the art of ending’. (Thomas Fuller)

It is time now to consider how to draw our work to a close. One of John Major’s most memorable put downs was when he said of his chief political opponent, that ‘he has nothing to say and therefore goes on for so long because he doesn’t know he hasn’t said it!’

Unkind though his remark may have been, it is a poignant reminder that once we have made the point we intended to make, we should be looking for the nearest exit. As soon as we find ourselves thinking along these lines, ‘In conclusion, we can learn, note, deduce, suggest, it is time to be looking for a suitably apt and original ending. We cannot afford to allow the reader to lose interest at a crucial moment simply because we have run out of fresh ideas.

A satisfying conclusion leaves a pleasant aftertaste, and causes readers to remember a book with favour long after they have finished the final page. The ending is all important to the short story, because the whole account is geared to lead up to the climax. The novel, being more spacious, may not require quite such clear-cut resolutions.

Some novelists, indeed, prefer an open-ended conclusion; not so much petering out but deliberately finishing in medias res, leaving many things to be played out by the characters. This may be less a case of the author being unable to pull the threads together than a subliminal protest that since so many issues do not resolve conveniently in real life, why contrive to establish such orderly patterns on paper? Plausible though such arguments may sound in the cold light of a writer’s workshop, the reality is that most readers are eager for all the loose ends to be tied up neatly.

Just as ‘surprise’ episodes inject life into the main storyline, so some special twist towards the end is always a sound idea. We are not speaking of some jack-in-the-

box concoction that would be entirely out of keeping with the rest of the work, but something that will keep readers from feeling as though they are merely being served up a rehash of things they had long since perceived.

Often, we will want to develop themes we mentioned earlier on. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Seasons*: 'In my beginning is my end'. As we unfurl this particular banner, it will make us reflect more analytically about our concluding sections. **'Have we tied up all the loose ends and answered all the questions we have raised in readers' minds?'** If we have then we are indeed well on the way to developing a profound art form; one that belies the hard work as well as the artistry that has gone into the preparation.

## **Part Three ~ The Art that conceals Artistry**

### **Select-a-Style**

Successful gardeners do not toss seeds randomly into the ground. They are conscious of the type of soil they are dealing with, and they know which season to plant in. In much the same way that 'black' fingers become 'green' ones through studying and experimentation, so we, as we become more experienced as writers, learn to sense instinctively which style will best express our material. As Ovid poignantly put it, 'The art is to conceal the artistry'.

Since most non-fiction writers set out with the subconscious desire to write the definitive book on their chosen subject, we are usually better advised to seek to cover less ground, but to bring out some specific emphasis and angle.

Half a millennium after he wrote it, Erasmus' maxim still holds true, no matter what our subject matter: 'Almost everyone knows this already, but it has not occurred to everyone's minds'. In other words, we are fulfilling a really useful purpose if we are able first to present and then to interpret things that people may be instinctively aware of but have never taken the trouble to describe or define.

One exception to this principle is when we are dealing with scientific or specialist themes. Unless we are writing a text book for advanced students, the best policy here is to assume that readers know next to nothing and steer them firmly towards a sound grasp of the most important facts. Without these they will remain forever incapable of making any sense of the subject. Just because the theme is technical, however, there is no advantage in preferring obscure or over-elaborate vocabulary. Anything is better than sounding pompous and jargon-laden.

Many people still instinctively associate writing with storytelling. We shall have more to say about this shortly, but the vast majority of material that is published today is better classified as non-fiction. (Curiously, this percentage has increased substantially since the Second World War). All sorts of specialist subjects are being opened up to intelligent laymen by writers skilled in choosing an appropriate style to make accessible to non-specialists.

Much depends on whether we are seeking to sound involved or detached, casual or intense, ironic, censorious or downright humorous. This will profoundly alter the way we phrase our dialogues, and develop both the plot and the characterisation. If in doubt, experiment. Try writing a page in different styles. Then sit back and invite a few close friends to assess the merits and drawbacks of each approach. It will usually become clear at this point. Ponder this issue. **‘Which style best conveys my theme?’**

### **Writers Read in order to Write Readably**

‘Books give . . . New views to life, and teach us how to live;  
They soothe the grieved, the stubborn, they chastise;  
Fools they admonish, and confirm the wise.  
Their advice they yield to all: they never shun  
The man of sorrow, nor the wretch undone;  
Unlike the hard, the selfish and the proud,  
They fly not sullen from the supplant crowd;  
Nor tell to various people various things,  
But show to subjects, what they show to kings’.      (*The Library*)

Behind apparently effortless pieces of writing lie much thought and craftsmanship. The best way we can grasp the range of options and approaches open to us is to read widely. As Rachel Simon described it, ‘Reading is the best way beginner writers have to teach themselves, and advanced writers have to continue their education’. No wonder that another writer called reading the ‘Siamese Twin of Writing!’

We can learn a great deal by studying the technique of successful authors and seeing how they deal with scenes and concepts we know that we would have difficulty expressing. It is by no means uncommon for writers to transcribe whole passages from a well-crafted book in order to study the author’s technique at close

quarters. The idea of dissecting a book in this way might appear cold-blooded. We fear we will never be able to enjoy a book again if we learn to read with so critical an eye. In reality, we will actually enjoy books more for being able to see how and why certain techniques and styles work – and why some do not.

Paradoxically, reading an unsatisfactory author can sometimes be almost as enlightening as studying how experienced writers achieve their effects. For few sound reasons (other than the adrenaline kick I must derive from the experience) I regularly read the novels of one particular best-seller whose story line is vigorous, but whose powers of description are decidedly thin. He writes to a successful formula, relying on the speed and intensity of the action to ensure consistently high sales.

It is fascinating, if frustrating, to reflect how much more satisfying his books would be if more time and effort were directed towards word-smithing rather than to creating a whirlpool of violent episodes. Characters we have had insufficient time to become acquainted with are summarily disposed of – and the reader feels barely a trace of sorrow for their demise. A death ought to matter, even in a work of fiction. But all is subsumed to the feverish pace of the action and a vital level of empathy and identification is missing as a result.

Reading, like travelling, helps us expand our experience of life. What richer source of inspiration can there be than our bookshelves or local magazine shops? It makes sound sense to familiarise ourselves with books that have already been published in our chosen area of interest – although this can prove painful as well as instructive. The fact that others have succeeded in writing about our chosen topic can induce feelings of envy or even of forlornness that others have succeeded where we have merely dreamt of doing so.

The best way to handle these emotions is to ignore them altogether. Remember the fourth maxim and get on with pursuing the Craft of Writing. And even if reading the works of others in our chosen field is not wise whilst we are in our most intensive phase of composing, it is a good habit to return to once things are quieter again. As our title reminds us, **‘Writers Read in order to Write Readably’**.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

It is often easier the second time we read something to gauge how well written it really is. Try picking up a favourite book and studying it from a technician’s perspective. Since we already know the points the author is seeking to communicate, and how the conclusion develops, we are free to study the means by which the writer achieves this end. Further on, we shall be exploring in more detail

many of the points touched on in this section. For the moment it is useful for us to become aware that these are issues we will need to focus on.

Linger long over well-constructed passages. How does the author evoke the feelings that arise in us as we read them? Did the author intend us to feel that way, or has the material hooked into something that has 'resonated' in our own lives? Was that perhaps the author's intention? Give the writer the credit for having presented something in just such a way as to have brought us to this place of self-awareness (or sympathy or revulsion). Pay attention to the range of words used: for instance, the length of syllables – the weight and responsibility that each adjective bears (or, more impressively, the inspired choice of nouns and verbs that eliminate the need for spurious adverbs and adjectives). Notice, too, the comparative rarity of those adverbs ending in 'ly' which so clutter the text of inexperienced writers.

Consider the vocabulary. Words used in real-life situations are generally more effective than ones we have dredged-up from the bowels of a thesaurus in a mistaken bid to be original. But study authors who get away with using a plethora of unusual or exotic words.

Study the flow and the rhythm of the sentences. How do they compare with our own efforts? Are there redundant passages which do little to advance the action, or to convince the reader that a character has a 'life' outside the immediate sphere of action? Is the dialogue full of vital cut and thrust (preferably leading to a particular outcome) or does it feel as though it is merely there in order to fit in with the author's personal preferences?

How about the denouement? Does it come as a let-down or as a surprise? Ideally it should be unexpected, but not out of keeping with the tenor of the book. Have clues been skilfully woven in along the way? If so, were they too subtle or too obvious? Does the finale do justice to the rest of the book, or does it take away from all that has gone before?

Does the viewpoint keep our interest? Or does it flit around too much from one character to another? If the action is not 'visible' has the author slipped into a mere recounting of events that happened in the past, or far offstage? If so, has this lowered our perception of participating in the action?

How has the author conveyed the difficult matter of time passing by, or any changes of mood or circumstances which have taken place? It is easy to underestimate the importance of signposting these transitions. All too commonly, novice authors plunge readers into the thick of the action but leave the timescale and context unclear.

The simplest way to solve the problem of a gap between events may be to leave an additional blank line or two in the text. It is usually best to insert some reference

point, too, preferably at the start of a chapter. Words such as ‘yesterday,’ ‘today,’ ‘tomorrow,’ ‘later,’ ‘during the last few weeks,’ — even ‘meanwhile’ can help to orientate readers. Remember, we are doing this for their benefit, not for ours.

Consider next a piece of writing that left you unimpressed. Taste is not entirely a subjective matter. Our impressions and observations may well be those with which others would concur wholeheartedly. Try and analyse the reasons why a particular passage, or indeed a whole book has failed to grab our attention, and left us feeling dissatisfied. Was it too skimpy a plot, too superficial (or too prejudiced) a treatment of a serious subject, too much background detail (or too little), too remote a viewpoint?

Turn next to newspaper and magazine articles. What style of writing and range of subject matter do specific publications favour? Read them with a view to understanding the technique by which writers succeed in making their point – and brush up on possible publishing opportunities at the same time!

### **"Tell me a story!"**

Here is the heart-cry of children in every generation! For drawing readers and hearers into realms of creative imagination, what can beat a story? When the Lord Jesus came to earth, He did not set out to share the scientific formulae of how His Father had created the night sky, but to demonstrate the reality of the heavenly Kingdom. The beauty of the parables He told is that they work in their own right as stories drawn from everyday life, but they also point to a truth beyond themselves.

The *‘Art of Creative Writing’* is all about finding fresh forms for expressing well known truths, and simple ways to explain even the most complex issues. Often, the most effective vehicle for describing real dilemmas and for expressing real emotions is to tell a story.

When King David forsook all bounds of decency and slept with the wife of one of the most loyal officers in his army, he seems never to have contemplated that she might become pregnant. When she did, he devised a seemingly fool proof strategy for reuniting the beautiful Bathsheba with her husband, by having him recalled from active service and offered an extended period of home-leave. The plan should have worked – but he had reckoned without Uriah’s exemplary scruples. The man simply refused to make love to his wife while his fellow officers were fighting for their lives on the field of battle!

Now David was really at his wit’s end. In a moment of reckless desperation, he shamefully arranged to have the unfortunate man betrayed by his unit and sent to his death. This left the upright men at his court facing an excruciating dilemma.

What David had done was profoundly wrong, but how could they challenge a king who held the power of life and death in his hands?

Fortunately, there was at the court a man of such profound wisdom that he was widely held to be a prophet. His name was Nathan, and as he pondered the problem he found a way to break the Gordian knot. His brilliant stratagem involved telling the king a parable, a story with an application, confident that this would work its way beneath the king's first level of defences and prepare the way for a more direct challenge.

"There were two men in a certain town," Nathan began, "one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb whom he loved dearly. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. One day a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

For all his faults, David was a wise and sensitive man. When he heard of this flagrant injustice, he burned with anger.

"As surely as the Lord lives," he declared, "that rich man deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such an outrageous thing and showed no pity on the poor man."

Nathan had set the stage brilliantly. First he had kindled the king's empathy and now, turning to face the king, he declared the real implications and consequences of his tale.

"You are the man! You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife, his precious lamb. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. From this day forth, the sword will never depart from your own house!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7f)

Nathan's challenge had worked to perfection. To his credit, David acknowledged his guilt and bewailed it deeply. Who knows? Had he tackled the king more directly, he might have met with a wall of denial, and in the process have aroused the monarch's extreme displeasure. As it was, he helped the king to see his fault for himself and to accept the consequences his actions entailed. At the same time he went on to communicate some ray of hope and comfort to the crestfallen king. Is this not a perfect example of how powerful storytelling can be?

Too many of us have ‘trained’ stories out of us. We have allowed hard-headed pragmatists to impose their prosaic reality on us. Surely now is the time to recapture story telling as a means of presenting truth and wider realities to a generation that has grown all too accustomed to seeing life through narrow-band core curriculums. Hugh Luckton speaks of his longing to use poetry, anecdotes, stories and song to ‘re-story’ the land, as well as drawing on the research of historians and scholars to maintain a continuity between the present and the past. For stories can deepen relationships within and between communities.

Many of the local stories where I live in Shetland, have been collected and codified, rather as Vaughan Williams and Percy Granger collected the folk songs of rural England a hundred years ago. This has done much to foster pride in another generation to keep the Shetland dialect alive. (Shetlandic is a fascinating language, a mixture of English and Scots, based on a sub-stratum of Norn, the predecessor language of modern Norwegian. An entire dictionary has been consecrated to words that no southerner could hope to understand).

Some years ago my wife, Rosalind, wrote a thesis entitled ‘*The Influence of Birth Stories on Primigravida Women from Friends and Family Members*’. She set out to discover what effect was made on first-time pregnant women by the stories that mothers, sisters and friends told them, particularly concerning the decisions they make concerning their place and manner of birth. She found that such stories give people a sense of personal history and shared memories, and in this way help to provide a focus not only for their private world but also for the local community.

There is no limit to the pool of potential stories. Part of a writer’s gifting is to encourage people of all ages to tell their stories. Nobody can gainsay a personal testimony, and our anecdotes and reminiscences add interest and colour to the pool of those already in existence.

Storytelling itself is less about drama and performance than about letting a story live: in other words, being a channel for a story. The basis for our stories must be honest or it will not be convincing. We have to feel it, and to mean it. But the same story may communicate diametrically opposing things to different people. For every person who identified with Harold Abrahams in ‘*Chariots of Fire*,’ another may have agonized passionately for Eric Liddell.

In other words, it is too much to expect that our style or central protagonists will appeal to everyone. In ‘*Celtic Quest*,’ a novel I set in seventh century Northumbria, I took the high-risk decision to make a young woman the story teller in the full awareness that certain men would find this viewpoint hard to swallow. Outwardly they wondered aloud whether a woman, even a royal ward, would have had the freedom to do the things Elfreda did. Since various women most certainly did rise to positions of considerable seniority in the early Anglo-Saxon Church, I suspected there were other influences at work besides a concern for historical perspective.

Was some hidden prejudice perhaps against a woman occupying the central place I had elevated my protagonist to?

Other personal factors were probably at work too. People who have long known me in one particular capacity may well have had difficulty adjusting to 'hearing' me through such a different persona. I was aware beforehand that all this would probably happen, but I remain profoundly convinced that it was the route I really wanted to take.

I was also aware that I might be in danger of 'using' Elfleda to convey the essence of the contemplative life. Fiction that sets out too explicitly to illustrate certain points runs the risk of turning into a tract – but where we have created convincing characters and an active storyline we can normally succeed in drawing people right in. It is at this point, whether by osmosis or sound technique, that we can properly convey valuable insights and information.

The key is to include nothing that does not legitimately fit the story line. In the early draft of another novel I was writing for young people, the "omniscient narrator" appeared at the start of one chapter to give specific background to a particular problem. It was the easiest thing in the world to amend this later on by having the viewpoint character go to the library and find out the same things for himself. He could equally as well have seen it on television or heard it from a friend.

Storytelling is precisely what its name suggests, and we must not cheat by cutting corners and supplying all the questions and answers. If my leading character could not have come across this information by some plausible route, then perhaps it did not need to be included at all. Don't be influenced by the fact that we put a lot of effort into procuring the information in the first place – that is our problem, not something to impose on the reader. This point is sufficiently important to serve as our banner: **'Does our material 'fit' – or does it slow the story down?'**

## **Purposeful Plots**

People today speak of someone 'losing the plot'. It is a common cliché – but no author can afford to lose track of their plot. Sub-plots, facts and descriptions may all have their place, but for our writing to be purposeful, **never lose the threads of our central thesis**. Otherwise, to return to an earlier image, we are in danger of merely knitting metres of wool without thought to pattern or design.

This is not the place for an in-depth examination of the range of plots we can develop, it is only common sense to realize that our storyline can 'emerge' either from convincing characters acting true to their nature or from the setting we have

chosen. Whilst many plots are formed purely out of the writer's imagination, others will have their basis in facts.

For example, the great historical sea-novelists scour the archives of Royal Navy journals for specific events from the wars against France, Spain and America. These engagements may be less decisive than the Battle of Trafalgar, but can still make for an exciting story.

Whatever plot we opt for, we are sure to face technical challenges. For example, it takes most of us a long time to master the balance between action that advances the story and background details that make it convincing. Ideally, the background should not be too prominent, nor the foreground too bare. Otherwise, like Winnie the Pooh sitting astride the honey pot in the flood, neither we nor the reader will ever be quite sure whether we are controlling the material, or the material controlling us.

Our aim is to keep the tension taut and the reader waiting with baited breath. Even if we are not composing a genuine thriller, we can still achieve a certain degree of suspense by starting scenes somewhere other than where the reader is expecting. Why be in a hurry to resolve all the questions we have been at such pains to raise?

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

You are probably awash with ideas for books, articles and reports, but sometimes it is worth constructing a plot just for practice. If you are short of an idea, however, here's a starting point to toy with. A certain Shaun Cotts disappeared from Maitland, New South Wales at the height of the gold rush. People assumed that he had gone to join in, until a newcomer to a farm had a vivid dream. As the direct result of this dream, the police were persuaded to dig up part of a farmyard. Cott's body was found, and the farmer was charged with his murder. Fancy writing a brief synopsis (or telling a story) about this episode?

Bible stories are another excellent starting point for developing stories. They have all the twists and turns of a modern day 'soap', but with the added advantage of describing real people and events. The following represents was my attempt to pen a few of Moses' thoughts. He has just received the call to lead more than a million Israelites in an attempt to escape from Egypt and head back to the Promised Land, and he is left pondering the implications. It is more an account than a plot, but it represents one way to view these remarkable events. After all, it is not every day that the Almighty calls an eighty year old shepherd to such an impossible task. We get out of touch with developments if we are away from the office for a few short weeks – but it was forty years since Moses had fled from Pharaoh's palace. Here was a man who had long since given up any expectation of ever being recalled to

the limelight. No wonder the Lord gave him such a dramatic encounter with the burning bush; He knew it would take a lot of convincing to induce him to forsake his comfortable desert-existence.

Which way would you develop the story? Here's my attempt.

Forty years ago it would have been a very different matter. I would have leapt at the chance of fulfilling the role of saviour-leader. But I had proved unfit for such high office by taking matters into my own hands. Who wants to follow a murderer? When news got round that I had killed the Egyptian who was mistreating the Hebrew, I knew I was in real trouble. I panicked and fled into the desert.

This has been no short sojourn. Forty years later, I have become almost indistinguishable from my surroundings. And I have to confess, I have grown comfortable, in the way that people do in later life. Life may be exceedingly monotonous in the desert, but at least it is conflict-free. I've got my wife and sisters-in-law to attend to my needs; I've enough sheep to make a living with and the last thing I want to do is to go back and face the challenges I thought I'd left behind for ever.

Did God really mean what I think I've just heard Him say? Doesn't he know what that stubborn old Pharaoh is really like? I know perfectly well what sort of answer He will give. I might as well ask for the hand of his wife in marriage as to demand the release of a million of his best slave labourers.

And then there's Princess Dinah. Will she still be at court? I've missed her so much, but how proud and scornful she will be when she sees me as an old man in a shepherd's costume." It's been alright wearing it in the desert – but it would look so out of place in the palace. She'll mock me until the tears are falling from her eyes. And then she'll get me chucked out like a vagrant. And how about . . ."

On and on the Moses' thoughts would have churned – and his worries were by no means without some validity. So far as the Egyptian upper classes were concerned, shepherds were the dregs at the bottom of the social pile. But all of that gives special relevance to those well-known words in Psalm 23 that 'The Lord is my shepherd'. It is almost like saying 'The Lord is my dustbin man; He takes all my garbage away'. It says something too about the Almighty's unorthodox choice of workmen for His most important tasks. He seems to look for people who know they cannot do it, and then proceeds to enable them to do far more than they or anyone else would have believed possible.

The rest, as they say is history. Perhaps we might dare to say ‘His Story’. Moses’ courage and perseverance dovetailed perfectly with the Almighty’s determination to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, despite the overwhelming odds against them. The image of Moses and the Israelites with their back to the Red Sea, mountains hemming them in on either side, and Pharaoh’s elite troops in close pursuit. The camera lingers as it were on Moses, armed with nothing other than the word of the Lord, but who can do nothing until God tells him what to do next. There he stands, still while others are panicking, waiting for the Lord to reveal His strategy to them. Then the dramatic moment when he raises his staff and stretches it out over the Red Sea. For a moment, nothing happens. The waters pile up in a heap, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry and, before returning with a roar to sweep away the pursuing troops.

Another powerful alternative would be to construct a plot around the powerful but paranoid king Saul, who became so pathologically jealous of his unbearably successful young captain. The trouble was, young David was not only winning all his battles for him, he was also the only musician in his court who could play the music that soothed his temper. Surely David cannot for ever dodge spears and leave stuffed bales of straw under his bedding as a decoy dummy while he makes a quick getaway? Desperate Dave – the desperate Dan of three thousand years ago. His story would have been on everyone’s lips as he dashed from cave to cave, often only hours ahead of the king’s elite troops. It is an ongoing soap of the highest calibre – and it is right there in the Bible for everyone to interpret and explore for themselves.

You might like to start this short ‘patchwork’ story by retelling the story as Moses experienced it, using the first words of the ‘Song of Moses’ in Exodus 15.

"I will sing to the LORD,

for he is highly exalted.

The horse and its rider

he has hurled into the sea’.

Or take the opening verses of 2 Samuel 22 as a starting point for retelling some of the ways by which the Almighty enabled David to triumph over his foes. How did David feel during his years on the run? Where is the fulcrum between his trust in God and his ‘normal’ fear of his opponents? Try continuing the poem as a reflection on his life, as best you understand it, either as a short ‘psalm’ summary or in more graphic detail. (The book of 1 Samuel will fill in your historical gaps).

David sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:

‘The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;  
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.’

## **Convincing Characters**

‘Readers value and remember extraordinary characters long after tricky plots are forgotten’. (Sol Stein)

In creating our characters, ‘personal’ touches make all the difference to the reader’s appreciation. Our plot may be skimpy, and our descriptive abilities minimal, but our writing can still sparkle provided that our characters are convincing. Bearing in mind what we shared earlier about fiction being more everything than ordinary life, most readers do not buy paperbacks to go in search of the people sitting opposite them on the train. They want characters they can identify with, whose reactions as well as their actions stir their emotions and ‘resonate’ with their own experience. They want to be entertained and to be informed; to have the boundaries of their mind expanded.

In almost every story, one person will be at the centre of the action. For better or worse, this person thereby establishes themselves at the centre of the reader’s heart and mind. This is the person who has the most to gain (or lose) by the events that transpire. Effectively, this becomes the viewpoint character, through whose eyes the action is narrated. If we choose this character carefully, we are well placed to write an excellent story. Choose a poor model, and nothing will succeed in holding the reader’s interest.

For example, what would be the point in making a weakling our central character? Although Daphne du Maurier gets away with basing most of her books around dejected individuals, Jack Bickham takes a more robust line when he pleads for authors to steer well clear of creating ‘wimps and windbags’.

Wimps are unattractive because they lack the courage and the initiative to do the things that make for an exciting story. Never mind real terror, even the simplest setbacks cause them to lose what little courage they had. Would you want to call your hero ‘Walter’ or ‘Wally?’ That is why it is strong and stirring characters who stand out in our mind’s eye. They are initiators rather than victims, overcomers rather than the overcome.

As our characters struggle to resolve the horny dilemmas we have placed before them, we provide them with the opportunity to display great initiative as well as courage. All our reader sympathy goes out to those who do not give up but who persist through their trials and sufferings. As our characters wrestle with their trials, we must ensure that it is their own skill and courage more than a series of coincidences which enable them to escape from their dilemma.

Coincidences are best used sparingly. If a person works hard to achieve the desired outcome, then it isn't a coincidence, even if unexpected events intervene to make the outcome easier. Desmond Bagley could have rescued his stranded victims in *'High Citadel'* by the arrival of some providential rescue party. Instead, the crisis causes all sorts of tensions and strong characteristics to emerge amongst this ill-assorted group, and we are into a cracking story, made the more enjoyable by the ingenuity displayed by a medieval historian who first designs and then uses in action an intriguing assortment of old-fashioned but entirely serviceable weapons.

Just because our characters are that much more 'larger than life' – indeed more everything – than the rest of us – does not mean that need to be paragons of virtues. Most readers find characters more interesting if they are given complex and even contradictory characteristics. Even the antiheroes we create (and who cause our other protagonists so much trouble) must be endowed with some good points if we are to avoid descending into the world of melodrama, where Sir Jasper's every appearance is greeted with a boo. Who knows, some aspects of their behaviour may even cause readers to reassess the way they treat other people themselves!

The secret of good character sketching is to leave room for the reader's imagination. But not too much, in case they fail to spot the key characteristics we are seeking to convey. If it is important for us to show that Mr Bloggs is rude, or that he stammers, then we need to demonstrate him doing this repeatedly. The beauty of fiction is that we can show people's motives for doing things much more precisely than can ever be the case in real life.

In all this, we should bear in mind the emphasis we placed in the first part of this book on taking time to reflect. All successful writers develop some method of meditation to progress beyond the superficial and to get into the heart of whatever it is that they are trying to share.

If we are working on a work of fiction, how else can we become 'acquainted' with our characters? We will want to feel 'at home' with their whole way of life: not just their physical appearance and their principal exploits, but where their interests lie and how they would react in different circumstances. Many of these details may never see the light of day in any published story, but it is important for us to 'know' these people inside out, so that we, ahead of our readers, can anticipate how they will react in any given context.

It is the sign of a well-written book if its characters continue to 'live on' long after we have reached the end of the book, even if we have not been given much physical description to aid our imagination. Lovers of Arthur Ransome's *'Swallows and Amazons,'* for example, are given the barest handful of clues concerning the physical appearance of the children in many hundreds of pages of narrative, yet because each responds in such a well-defined manner, we feel as though we know these children through and through.

We should make it our aim to ‘gift’ each character we create with at least one special ‘feature’ or distinguishing trait. It may be something physical, like a limp, or something that the person wears, carries, hides in their pockets, admires, reads or watches. The way they keep their house, for example, may reveal a great deal about their personality.

In order to keep track of all these details, we need either an outstanding memory – or, more realistically, some sort of card index for our characters, describing any particular characteristics that might prove relevant: their social class, their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, hopes and fears, dialect, intelligence, body language, health and wealth, taste in food, friends or dress, relation to parents, attitude to self and so on.

Our banner will help us create convincing characters. It is an adaption of a quote from Ernest Hemingway: ‘**A writer should create living people**’. Why did Hemingway emphasize people? Because he believed that characters are caricatures and that we, as gifted writers, should aim for our characters to be remembered as ‘real’ people in their own right.

### **Tip**

In a play, the size of the cast determines how many characters we bring to life. In a novel there are no such considerations, but we still need to avoid overloading and confusing the reader. If we have created a plethora of minor parts, might we not do better to reduce the number, and see if it is not possible to redistribute their roles amongst the surviving cast?

### **Distinguished Description**

Let observation with extensive view,  
Survey mankind, from China to Peru;  
Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,  
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life'. (Samuel Johnson)

Most of us have often found ourselves skipping long descriptive passages in order to rush on to where we think the action starts again. So why not cut our losses, spare ourselves a great deal of hard work and just dispense with writing them altogether? After all, there is no way we can possibly hope to match the stunning landscapes (and effects) of the cinematic media.

Nice try, but no go. There is nothing that makes a text more convincing than striking and accurate details. And certain effects can actually be more successful on paper than on film.

Just as painters develop their craft by practising portrait or still life painting, so we must take time out to practise the art of describing things: objects, events, landscapes . . . Take, for example, Britain's highest mountain. How shall we approach the subject? We could choose a strictly factual approach of course – but it would be desperately dull to do so. 'Ben Nevis is just over 4,000 feet high. It has claimed the lives of numerous climbers in bad weather'.

There again, we could try following in the footsteps of those who have made travel writing an art in its own right. Consider H.V. Morton's description of the mountain:

I hear the most horrible sound on earth – the sough of wind coming up over the crest of Ben Nevis . . . It is a dreadful sound; an evil, damnable sound . . . The precipice is 1,500 feet deep. I take a stone and fling it. Seven sickening seconds and then, far off, an echo of the fall and another and another. I stand chilled to the very marrow, watching the weird snowfall veer and shift in the wind, blowing aside to reveal dim, craggy shapes, rocks like spectres or crouching men or queer misshapen beasts. And the dreadful ghost of a wind moaning over the precipice with an evil invitation at the back of it, moaning up out of space, through distant spike gullies . . . moaning with a suggestion of inhuman mirth, causes me to face the ravine as if something might come out of which would have to be fought . . .

And on my way down a great hole is suddenly blown in the cloud, and I see, it seems at my feet, an amazing, brilliant panorama of mountains with the sun on them, of blue locks, a steamer no bigger than a fly moving up Loch Ness beneath the arch of a rainbow. All around me are the Highlands, magnificent among the clouds, the evening blueness spreading over them; peak calling to peak, the Atlantic like a thin streak of silver, the bare rock beneath my feet fading to brown bog land and heather. (*In Search of Scotland*)

What does it take to create such powerful descriptions? Careful observation and hard work! Arthur Rubinstein, the pianist, used to practice for up to eight hours every day. He claimed that if he went more than a couple of days without practising he could sense the difference, and that if he went any longer than that, then others could tell too.

How should we practise? By making routine writing observations, just like an artist with his sketchbook. Those people we have just met – or that event we have

recently attended – how can we express it on paper in ways that will be of interest to others? Such considerations must become a lifelong habit – and a far more interesting one than most.

We must resist the temptation to look for shortcuts. Merely piling up adjectives that describe every shade of colour, temperament and texture is rarely as effective a means of evoking an atmosphere or a character as highlighting some telling detail and then leaving the reader's imagination to do the rest. Our banner bids us bear in mind that **we should *show whatever can be shown rather than tell it all.***

Though this is far easier said than done, we can start with some symptomatic detail: a look on a person's face, or their body language, or something that reveals a person's inner or outer behaviour. One striking characteristic may be all that is needed to stigmatise the person and create the effect we were seeking.

The aim of our description is not simply to convey an accurate picture but to draw out implications and conclusions. Consider these two contrasting passages. The first is the conclusion of a short essay by Rebecca West, written in 1913. Today it reads prophetically; at the time it must merely have appeared provocative.

‘Good God enlighten us! Which of these two belongs to the sterner sex – the man who sits in Whitehall all his life on a comfortable salary, or the woman who has to keep her teeth bared lest she has her meatless bone of seventeen shillings a week snatched away from her and who has to produce the next generation on her off-days? . . . I had a vision of the world fifty years hence, when we have simply had to take over the dangerous adventures on the earth. I saw some bronzed and travel-scarred pioneer returning from the Wild West with hard-earned treasure, buying a fresh and unspoiled bridegroom who had never stirred from the office of, let us say, the Director of Public Prosecutions. I saw a world of women struggling, as the American capitalist men of today struggle, to maintain a parasitic sex that is at once its tyrant and its delight . . . We must keep men up to the mark’.  
(Rebecca West: *‘The Sterner Sex’*)

The second is from an article by A. W. Tozer entitled *‘Wanted: Courage with Moderation’*. Warren Wiersbe described Tozer as having the gift of being able to take a spiritual truth and hold it up to the light in such a way that, like a diamond, every faced can be seen and admired. Tozer makes you reflect on themes and issues people thought they already knew as much as they needed to know. This is a typical sample of his writing.

The Bible gives no record of a coward ever being cured of his malady . . . How desperately the Church at this moment needs men of courage is too well known to need repetition. Fears broods over the

Church like some ancient curse. Fear for our living, fear of our jobs, fear of losing popularity, fear of each other: these are the ghosts that haunt the men who stand today in places of church leadership. Many of them, however, win a reputation for courage by repeating safe and expected things with comical daring.

Yet self-conscious courage is not the cure. To cultivate the habit of 'calling a spade a spade' may merely result in our making a nuisance of ourselves and doing a lot of damage in the process. The ideal seems to be a quiet courage that is not aware of its own presence. It draws its strength each moment from the indwelling Spirit and is hardly aware of self at all. Such a courage will be patient and well-balanced and safe from extremes. May God send a baptism of such courage upon us.

By remaining alert and observant, and taking the trouble to record our insights on paper, we will gradually build up a library of insights and 'sketches' in our notebooks from which we can later craft meaningful writings. Even the stray remarks we read or hear can one day find an interesting and appropriate home.

I heard the other day that a lobster's nervous system is ten times more sensitive than a human being's. When it is boiled in water in a restaurant for the delight of the pampered rich, its sufferings are so acute that dogs, with their heightened spectrum of hearing, are said to be intensely aware of their distress for up to a mile in the vicinity. The effect this stray morsel of information had on me was to make me identify profoundly with a sensitive person who is going through a time of extreme emotional turmoil, and whose sufferings could, with some justification, be compared to that of the unfortunate lobster.

To conclude this section, we shall turn to Ewan Clarkson's *'The Running of the Deer'*. (Arrow) Although the writer includes a number of character-revealing, tension-inducing episodes and dialogue duels, the long descriptions provide the main source of action. The opening provides both the setting and tonality for the book:

'His name was Rhus, and he came with the dawn, to lie sprawled and shivering on the short, dew-drenched turf of the combe'.

The growth of the young deer is set against the actions of the local people. Poachers and deer stalkers are represented, but above all, there is tension between the Hunt, symbolised by its aptly named leader, Colonel Baskerville, and those who are opposed to all that he and the hunt stand for. Human cruelty and selfishness are much in evidence as the story leads inexorably to the tension of the final chase, in which Colonel Baskerville plunges to his death in the late twilight as

he seeks to head off the stag. The build-up is long and measured; his fate commensurate to the way he has oppressed the people in his charge.

Many years ago, on a stormy night in November, as the moon hid behind racing clouds, a vole had scampered over the cliff face, an ash seed in its tiny jaws. For a long second, the treacherous moon revealed the presence of the vole to a hunting owl, and the vole died, the seed falling from its grasping jaws. The seed lodged behind a rock, a massive sandstone slab, and from the seed sprouted a shoot. For a while the tree flourished, until a gale tore it up by the roots, and tumbled it down into the tide, leaving a gaping hole in the cliff. Then the slow and inexorable forces of erosion got to work, and as the years ticked by, second by second, the wind and the rain, the hot sun and the stinging frost on the cliff face. Then came the wettest summer in living memory.

Thus from small events, the death of a vole, the loss of a seed, the destinies of men are shaped . . . Baskerville did not, could not, know that only the previous evening the cliff face had crumbled and fallen away.

The nearest thing we find in the book to a wise elder statesman is the imposing figure of the solitary Isaac, a man with a hidden act of violence in his past, but who has long since vowed to subdue that side of his nature and to put it to better uses. He it is who talks the persecuted Duncan Turner out of taking his own life and who points the way to his starting over in a fresh environment. It is fitting that it is through his eyes that the last scene in the book is played out: Colonel Baskerville being laid to rest in the ground. Isaac's ultimately idealistic hopes and dreams are highlighted, and Rhus himself makes a brief symbolic appearance, the colour of his hide contrasting with the darkness the rest of the passage exudes.

As his gaze swept the crest of the hill he thought for a moment he saw a lone stag, his antlers arched like the spreading branches of a great oak, his hide red in the sun. When he looked again the stag had gone, and only the sombre oaks stood dark against the sky.

Yet Isaac was certain his eyes had not deceived him, and the appearance of the stag had seemed to him at once a reassurance and a warning. After the funeral he walked alone, up through the leafy trees and out onto the bare shoulder of the hill, where the grasses trembled in the breeze from the sea, and the ghosts of the bronze men whispered to the sky. Sitting there, it came to him that greed and avarice, power and self-interest, were no more than names men gave to a built-in urge for self-destruction. It seemed to him that if man could not destroy himself in any other way, he would succeed by destroying his own world.

Yet even if the holocaust came, and whole civilisations crumbled and decayed, it might still be possible that some would remain, those who remained in harmony with their surroundings and in sympathy with the rest of the living world. Maybe the meek would inherit the earth. He would not see it, but it was a good thought to carry with him, wherever he might go.

## **Pause and Put into Practice**

Creating powerful moods and impressions requires time and effort. The aim of these starter exercises is to produce pen pictures that highlight whether something (or someone) is grim, joyful, negative, positive, hopeless or hopeful. Let who the people were (or are) shine through the description. If we can regularly achieve such effects, then most readers will have no difficulty discerning the authority that is present in our writing.

i) As a first exercise, close your eyes and cast your mind back to the first teacher(s) you can remember. In all probability you will not be able to recall more than a handful of the thousands of words they must have spoken in your hearing every day. You probably remember what they were like rather than what they said. Words have power, but character ultimately speaks louder than words. Describe these people and the effect they had on you, for good or bad. Try switching the viewpoint between ‘I felt . . . ’ (subjective) and ‘She was . . . ’ (objective). The details and descriptions you include effectively control how close readers can come to your material – and how close you want them to come.

ii) Describe the first date you can recall. What angle will you choose to present this from: the worldly-wise person who is writing now, or the clumsy and naïve person you were then? In other words, are you writing this as a vivid first-hand account, or as a mature recollection? Why not try writing it from both points of view? What do the differences point to?

iii) Describe a meeting in which something far-reaching (for good or bad) was decided concerning your fate. Don’t alter any of the facts, but take time to explore the emotions that you felt and the consequences involved. It is entirely possible that in the course of this

strong emotions may surface as you revisit this scene. With the advantage of hindsight, however, you may find whole new dimensions and perspectives emerging, which help you to see the matter in a new light.

## **Dynamic Dialogue**

‘What counts in dialogue is not what is said but what is meant’. (Sol Stein)

On the face of it, writing dialogue involves nothing more complex than capturing conversation and turning it into tightly written prose. In practice, to reproduce lifelike and yet purposeful dialogue calls for considerable skill. For dialogue to work smoothly, we first need to make sure that we get the ‘right’ people on-stage together, and remove everyone else from the scene.

The next thing is to provide the dialogue with a focal point, a reason for it to take place. Someone is bursting with news, or trying to pry out a piece of information, or is beginning to show signs of falling in love, or going mad. The more we hold the purpose of this dialogue in the forefront of our mind, the more likely we are to succeed in keeping it from drifting off course.

Dialogue is at its most effective when it raises questions, heightens suspense and introduces a confrontational note into the proceedings. It is less effective when authors use it as an excuse for downloading all the fruit of their hours of research. If this really does merit inclusion, most of it can be unobtrusively woven into the characterisation or descriptions.

Dialogue imparts a sense of immediacy to the text. It helps readers to feel involved and to draw conclusions for themselves. What a character says shows us at least as much about them as if the author told us more directly.

Good dialogue is never merely there to punctuate the gaps between events: in many ways it is the action. That is why the most important thing is to write the first draft of our dialogues down at top speed. Almost certainly we will write too much, but that is neither here nor there. We can edit and portion what we have written out between the appropriate characters later on.

This is the stage when we must ensure that everything in our dialogue justifies its inclusion, even those occasions when the characters are plainly speaking out of character or are twisting reality. There is no time or space for padding. All the ‘ums’ and ‘ers’ of ordinary life must be left out, too, unless we are deliberately setting out to reveal a hesitant character. The golden rule is to keep exchanges

short. Three or four sentences at a time are quite enough for any one character to speak before someone else should respond, or an external event break in.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

Study how different authors achieve these effects. Does their dialogue draw the reader into the heart of the action and lend variety to the story? Or is it merely being used in order to disguise the author's lack of descriptive ability?

Now consider your own writing. Are there ways you could make it more succinct or more confrontational? Have you taken the trouble to give each of your characters their own distinctive voice? Is the language and tonality in keeping with their rank and disposition? All of these things are embraced in our banner: **Let the characters reveal themselves by saying too much or too little.**

Try putting together various 'what if' scenarios. For example, what would happen if the two people you least wanted to meet each other suddenly arrived at your house at the same time? Can you find ways to bring out how you feel in the ensuing dialogue, especially how afraid you are that they may find out certain things you desperately want to keep hidden from them?

If this starting point does not appeal to you, think of some real-life equivalent. Will you put your emphasis on the humour of the situation or on the deeper emotions involved?

### **Humorous Happenings**

Many consider the account of the cricket match in *'England their England'* by Archibald Macdonell between a literary team led by Mr Hodges and the villagers of Fordenden to be one of the most sustained piece of humorous writing in the English language. No single passage stands out from the others and that is why I am referring to it here. It is neither slapstick nor vulgar. The reader is unlikely to split his sides in the opening descriptions, but the humour builds up and grows out of the context. I will quote from part of the lead up to the match and leave you to track down a copy of the story in its entirety.

All round the cricket pitch small parties of villagers were patiently waiting for the great match to begin. A match against gentleman from London is an event in village, and some of them looked as if they had been waiting a good long time. But they were not impatient. Village folk are very seldom impatient. Those whose lives are occupied in

combatting the eccentricities of God regard as very small beer the eccentricities of Man.

Blue-and-green dragonflies played at hide-and-seek among the thistle-down and a pair of swans flew overhead. An ancient man leaned upon a scythe, his sharpening-stone sticking out of a picket in his velveteen waistcoat. The parson shook hands with the squire. Doves cooed. The haze flickered. The world stood still.

Treating immensely serious historical matters as the stuff of humour has long had its following, none more so than the pioneering humour Sellar and Yeatman developed in '*1066 and All That*'. The more familiar we are with the actual events they are taking off, the more we will appreciate their material. Typical of their style is this account of the ill-fated Mary.

### **The Queen of Hearts**

A great nuisance in this reign was the memorable Scottish queen, known as Mary Queen of Hearts on account of the large number of husbands which she obtained, eg Cardinale Ritzio, Boswell and the King of France: most of these she easily blew up in Holywood.

Unfortunately for Mary, Scotland was now suddenly overrun by a wave of Synods led by Sir John Nox, the memorable Scottish Saturday Knight. Unable to believe, on account of the number of her husbands, that Mary was a single person, the Knight accused her of being 'a monstrous regiment of women,' and after making this brave remark had here imprisoned in Loch Lomond. Mary, however, escaped and fled to England, where Elizabeth immediately put her in quarantine on the top of an enormous Height called Wutheringay.

As Mary had already been Queen of France and Queen of Scotland many people thought it would be unfair if she was not made Queen of England as well. Various plots such as the Paddington Plot, the Thredneedle Conspiracy and the Adelfi Plot were therefore hatched to bring this about. Elizabeth, however, learning that in addition to all this Mary was good-looking and could play on the virginals, recognised that Mary was too romantic not to be executed, and accordingly had that done.

Peter Spence's delightful '*To the Manor Born*' details Audrey fforbes-Hamilton's plight following the death of her husband and her move from her ancestral manor at Grantleigh to the small lodge on her former estate. She is traumatised by the realisation that she is no longer receiving all the social invitations she craves for.

‘The mantelpiece at the manor positively bristled with stiffies,’ she recalled indignantly to Marjory, who was always round at the old lodge helping her to settle in. Dinner parties, balls, coming-outs, society weddings, Henley, Ascot, Goodwood, Glyndebourne,’ she listed nostalgically, to think that I won’t be going to Glyndebourne this year, and I used to so enjoy it – apart from having to sit through all those interminable operas. Fair weather friends all of them – suddenly I’m a social pariah. No invitations – not so much as a Tupperware party in the village . . . We really were in demand till Marton died - now look what I’ve got to look forward to,’ She consulted the diary. ‘The Muslim New Year and High Tide in Aberystwyth. And nothing to wear for either’.

The drama focuses around Audrey’s pride and her bitter-sweet relationship with Richard de Vere, the new owner of the house. Her veneer of politeness is stretched to the limit before finally mellowing into something much more romantic.

Along rather different lines, we might sample Heath Robinson’s decidedly chauvinistic article on ‘*Early Married Life*’.

As every lion-tamer knows, the King of Beast cannot be expected to jump through paper hoops without a little preliminary tuition; and what applies to lions applies equally to wives. It is during the early days of his married life – when the honeymoon is but a fragrant memory and every pawnable wedding present has gone to its new home –that the wise husband will train his wife in the way that she should go – not with blows and curses as by the power of suggestion and example. Once a woman gets set in her ways, it is practically impossible to pry her loose without the help of gun-cotton; and it is therefore up to her husband to see that she steps off, so to speak, on the right foot . . .

More than one marriage has gone up in smoke owing to the wife’s inability to understand that an occasional night out with the boys is what every husband needs to preserve his reason and keep him from brooding on his care-free past. In the life of every man above the rank of moron there are times when the urge to go mildly gay [NB: not used in the modern sense of that word] becomes too strong to be withstood; and it is by her behaviour at such moments that the young wife proves herself.

If, when her husband timidly applies for the necessary leave, she at once assumes that his love is dead and scampers weeping to her mother, she may be held to have failed at her job. If, on the to other hand, she acquiesces smilingly and allows him an extra shilling from

his wages for buns, lemonade etc., she can be accounted not only a good wife, but a highly unusual one.

All considerations of political correctness and sheer decorum apart, I am grateful to be married to an exceedingly understanding wife! By the way, these four last examples can be found in '*Humorous Stories with Ronnie Barker*' (Octopus Books Ltd).

We may not instinctively associate CS Lewis' '*Chronicles of Narnia*' with *humour*, but I particularly enjoy this episode in '*The Magician's Nephew*'. The animals have just been given the gift of speech. and the jackdaw has just said something that makes him hide his head under its wings with embarrassment. All the other animals began making various queer noises, which was their way of laughing. They tried at first to repress it, but Aslan intervenes:

'Laugh and fear not creatures. Now that you are no longer dumb and witless, you need not always be grave. For jokes as well as justice come in with speech'. So they all let themselves go. And there was such merriment that the Jackdaw himself plucked up courage again and perched on the cab-horse's head, between its ears, clapping its wings, and said, 'Aslan! Aslan! Have I made the first joke?'

'No little friends,' said the Lion. 'You have not *made* the first joke; you have only *been* the first joke'. Then everyone laughed more than ever.

## **Part Four ~ In Search of the Right Viewpoint**

### **A Robust Viewpoint ~ Writing in the First Person**

Viewpoint; i) A vantage point from which something can be viewed.

ii) The angle from which a story or article is written, or an issue is presented.

In the early nineteenth century, when the first tourists ventured courageously north to the Lake District, certain places were prescribed as being the 'right' viewpoints from which to admire such wondrous sights as the Jaws of Borrowdale and Buttermere. Incredible though it sounds to us today, tourists were issued with appliances through which to view the lakes and mountains, apparatuses that were as much *de rigueur* as the camcorder today.

We may be freer today in our viewing habits, but from a literary point of view, everything that we write ultimately depends not only on the *style* in which we couch it but also on the *viewpoint*. Pitch it right and readers will barely give it a second thought; pitch it wrong and readers will notice almost nothing else.

We gain our first experience in writing in the first person form at infant school as we write our accounts of how we spend our days. Despite this valuable '*formation*,' it is commonly considered unwise to attempt to write a first novel in this form. To me the advice appears unnecessarily restricting. In today's experience-orientated society, what other style can draw us so intimately into the heart of a story or message? Such a close-up viewpoint has a great deal to recommend it, provided that we do not make the mistake of confusing the protagonist with ourselves.

Elements of autobiography may find their way into the text (and from the point of view of inspiration and authenticity, it would be a shame if such a ready-made source of inspiration were *not* put to good use) we must take the greatest care to sift original events through several layers of filters in order to avoid a possibly hurtful identification with real people and places.

Few of us lead such exhilarating lives, however, to escape the principle that fiction demands larger than life characters and episodes. More will need to be made of even promising material if they are to be sufficiently illuminating or dramatic.

Writing in the first person works is particularly popular in historical novels. The usual technique in these cases is not to make the protagonists the famous people themselves, but an *associate* who sees those people at 'close up'. I adopted this strategy in *Celtic Quest*, where Elfleda has the opportunity to learn at close quarters from the example of St Cuthbert.

I love dwelling on those passages of Scripture in which the Lord speaks in the first person. After the gospels, I find the writings of the prophets the most inspirational in this respect. There is so much we can learn here about the heart and character of a God who is so entirely different from us, and yet so intimately involved in the affairs of mankind.

Perhaps I have subconsciously absorbed this standpoint so deeply that it has served to heighten my expectations that I will share the narrator's standpoint when I pick up others publications too. I am predisposed to identify with them, whilst at the same time expecting them to be endowed with a great deal more virility, stamina and foresight than I could ever hope to achieve. I am not in any way put out, however, if I find their viewpoint to be a flawed one. As we mentioned earlier, this can be an asset – although we as writers may find it strange to set out with the express intention of creating an 'unreliable' protagonist.

What readers do expect is that the central character (because he is narrating the story) has a better than average chance of surviving to the end of the story. This greatly reduces, one possible source of suspense.

Where writing in the first person form does require great skill is in overcoming the potential limitations of the viewpoint from which we can present events. For example, we may find ourselves obliged to resort to indirect speech to report events that happen when we are 'off-stage'. And how can we legitimately provide certain descriptions except by the narrator going out of their way to mention them. Suppose we want to draw attention to the hairstyle of the woman our protagonist is speaking to. In order to supply the reader with the merest intimation as to what the woman may actually look like, the narrator needs to say something like, 'I love the way the hair falls over your eyes'. This calls for a degree of ingenuity and almost lateral thinking — but it should by no means be beyond our ability.

All this is summed up in our banner, which highlights the fact that first-hand accounts, if skilfully constructed, are always absorbable and often spunky to the point of being unputdownable. **'I was there so I can describe it!'**

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

Try writing a short account (in the style of an impersonal news report) about some bizarre incident that has recently taken place. If you are struggling to find a starting point for inspiration, here is a real-life example from our home town you might like to flesh out. An unattended 4x4 self-started its engine, and promptly caught fire. It then proceeded to lurch its way across the supermarket car park before colliding with another vehicle. Both were engulfed in the flames.

Now write the account again, but this time in the first person form, highlighting your own role (bystander, participant, perpetrator or victim). Notice how the two accounts bring contrasting emphases. Some of you will have written deliberately dull descriptions, but have come into your own when your own part in the story is allowed to come through in the first person form. Others of you may have written a brilliantly witty or concise third person account in which case the introduction of a first person character may actually take away more than it adds. For others again, both accounts will have been equally as good. This is a particularly interesting exercise for discovering where your strengths and interest lie.

### **A Focused Viewpoint**

Given that most authors ultimately opt for a third person viewpoint, the question we must ask ourselves is: to what extent are readers to be made privy to the thoughts of our central characters? Josip Novakovich claims that we will be able to answer that question best if we can decide ‘where the camera is filming from’. Is it from *inside* the character’s head - in which case we ought to be able to read their thoughts explicitly? Or is it from *outside* - in which case the narrator is more like an unseen cam cord operator, filming the episodes but remaining largely unaware of what is going on inside the character’s hearts and minds.

This last technique has the great advantage of permitting the reader to deduce the inner workings of the characters for themselves. Most authors ‘cheat’ slightly, of course, by prompting readers to the desired effect by the use of certain ‘intensifying’ words that make the matter plain.

The following sentences illustrate these two primary ‘camera angles’.

‘Thomas looked straight at Susan, his mind reeling as he reflected on what his hands had done to her the night before’.

‘Thomas looked straight at Susan, his fingers clenched together and his face wracked with guilt and grief’.

Because the first example comes from *inside* the character’s head, the stage is set for Thomas to go into detail both about the terrible things he did to Susan the night before, and how he is feeling about it now. In the second example, it is obvious that something terrible has happened, but the reader is given no clue as to what it might be. It is impossible to tell whether Thomas might not be feeling upset because of something he has done to someone entirely different.

We can either continue to *show* Thomas’ agony, as in the second example, until enough details emerge for the reader to *deduce* the full picture, or we can take a faster route and *recount* it in full. The choice is ours.

But so too is the responsibility effectively to ‘become’ the person around whom the story is being told. We have already stressed that our personal thoughts and actions need in no way mirror those of our protagonist, but we must take care to ensure that we present nothing *except* through that person’s consciousness. For example, we could continue the first sentence above, ‘Thomas *sensed*’, (or ‘*knew*’) that he had wounded Susan to the depths of her being’. Verbs such as these orientate the reader and leave them in no doubt as to where the viewpoint is coming from.

If we are take care to present the viewpoint as clearly as this, we will have little need to superimpose our additional comments into the story. At the same time, readers will develop a lasting sympathy for the viewpoint characters – which in turn makes it easy for them to be concerned for their fate.

Lack of attention in this respect leads to confusion. Suppose, for example, we have been following the storyline above exclusively from Thomas's perspective, and then come across some such line as 'Susan found Thomas's sudden solicitude profoundly hypocritical'.

This begs an important question. How do we *know* that Susan felt this way? Have we suddenly switched from Thomas to being 'inside' her viewpoint? The simplest way round this sudden change would be to keep the same viewpoint and to say instead, 'Thomas *sensed* that Susan was having difficulty coping with his new found solicitude. He wondered if she thought he was being hypocritical'.

By contrast, François Mauriac, a leading Catholic writer of the mid twentieth century, and a man blessed with profound insight into human nature, and a superlative ability, to evoke the stifling atmosphere of bourgeois life in south-west France, found it impossible to refrain from inserting heavy-handed authorial interventions into his text. Why should this be? *Thérèse Desqueyroux* is widely held to be one of six best French books from the first half of the twentieth century.

It succeeds because Mauriac creates a person he became fascinated by. Unable to leave Thérèse alone, he follows her fortunes through several other novels and short stories. Her history is a tragic one – inevitably, one is tempted to say, because Mauriac, like Thomas Hardy, veers towards a doom-laden fatalism in which character flaws lead inexorably to a disaster that seems almost preordained. From the outset it appears that Mauriac feels compelled to judge and denounce Thérèse's deviant life and thought processes, perhaps because he feared that his conservative clientele might be shocked by her moral stance, and assume that he was showing too much partisanship for the 'deviant' person he had created? How mild her rebellion appears by modern day standards!

Mauriac's viewpoint, traditionally known as the omniscient narrator, is less common these days. Nevertheless, authors must always know their characters that little bit better than they know themselves, and retain the right to share in their thought processes. What they should not seek to do is to 'use' protagonists to download all their own points of view.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

Our banner here takes the form of an exercise. Examine a few chapters or articles that you have written. **Underline every time the viewpoint shifts to anyone other than the primary character.** Are these alternative viewpoints really necessary? If they are not, revise the text to make it say what you want it to within the confines of what the principal character could legitimately experience.

## A Roving Viewpoint

Presenting material from alternating viewpoints cannot modify the basic realities of *what* happened, but it can certainly affect *how* the reader sees it. For example, ask any three witnesses for an account of what happened at a seemingly straightforward road accident. One, the driver who is at fault, might want to distance himself from his part in the episode and colour his account to such an extent that it is almost impossible to recognise that we are describing the same incident as the other driver (who is determined to prove that the other was driving 'like a bat out of hell'). If something so simple can prove so contentious, think what happens when we are dealing with multiple events and complex motives. (Marital breakdowns are notorious examples).

In the course of a novel, we would expect one viewpoint naturally to dominate, but there are times when the story benefits from a complete change of viewpoint. Here are some suggestions to try for creating unusual effects.

The first person plural form makes an intriguing alternative if a sort of "collective narrator" is required.

"We [the friends who had come to watch the match] ached for him as he missed chance after chance in the first half. How we rejoiced when he rediscovered his scoring touch with the last kick of the game."

Flaubert uses this form at the beginning of *Madame Bovary*, before modulating to a more conventional third person viewpoint. With consummate skill, Flaubert continues to swap between a traditional third party viewpoint, and third person 'omniscient'. (Josip Novakovich describes this as 'authorial interpretation' rather than 'intervention' because, unlike Mauriac's decidedly more flat-footed interjections, they neither grate nor slow the pace of the story down).

Another alternative is the second person form. This is particularly useful if the aim is to make people feel 'wanted' and included. I came across an example of this the other day in a glossy magazine that happened to be describing a sea cruise to Scandinavia. To paraphrase the delights on offer:

'You walk the teeming streets of *x* delighting in the *y* and then re-join your ship at *z* o'clock where dinner is waiting for you, before adjourning to the cinema...'

There undoubtedly is a flattery in being so directly addressed. The downside is that it can all feel somewhat prescriptive. 'You *will* return to the cruise ship in time for dinner and attend the cinema, whether you happen to like the film or not!' It may suit the crew to have everyone under their eye at all times, but what if we would prefer to skip the meal and stay ashore an hour or two longer? Nevertheless, this is

such an unusual viewpoint that it is worth exploring from time to time. And why restrict it to travel writing?

'You feel claustrophobic when you enter this church. It is not the surroundings which produce this effect; they are light and airy. No, it is the fact that you are expected to perform. You have to sing loudly and look cheerful or you stand out like an unregenerate mannequin. You want to sit down because your legs are aching, and you can't stand the ear-blasting music, but you don't want to look out of place, so you remain on your feet, opening and shutting your mouth like a goldfish and wondering how long it will be before you can decently make your escape'.

This particular viewpoint is most effective when used sparingly. It would be tiring on the reader if we persevered with it for too long. Why not continue the passage above by switching to the equally unconventional first personal plural narrator form in order to highlight the change of emphasis?

'And then we went to the Orthodox church. It was like a breath of heaven. The reverence and simplicity, the heartfelt depth of faith that shone on everyone's faces, but which in no way intruded on our space . . . We sensed a stillness that was born of something more profound than peaceful surroundings, as though the One these honest folk had come to honour was Himself in some mysterious way present and responding to their outpoured devotion. We felt, at last, as though we had come home'.

Although we will probably not often choose to write in these particular forms, it is always useful to have one particular 'target' person in mind. It is mind-numbing to focus on some unknown and impersonal audience 'out there,' but relatively easy to concentrate on someone we know and care for. The banner for this section reflects the effect this personalising influence can have: **'If my friends are interested, others will be too'.**

### **A Propagandist's Viewpoint**

There is one other point to be aware of in this context. This is the viewpoint which William Empson was hinting at in Milton's *'God'*.

"The central function of imaginative literature is to make you realise that other people act on moral convictions very different from your own."

Oh that people who are comfortably ensconced in their right-wing views would expose their narrow view of the world to thoughtful proponents of the left — and that those on the left would humble themselves similarly. We would soon find

within ourselves a longing for justice that renders all facile terminology of 'left' and 'right' hopelessly inadequate.

There is a sinister side to Empson's words. Propaganda is an enormously powerful weapon, and every cult and tyrant knows how to exploit it, just as every ram, stag or bull knows how to make good use of its horns. Corrupt regimes fear the power of the pen, rearing intuitively that it can achieve far more against their cause than any mere sword.

To some extent, we are all the victims of propaganda. In the face of a continual barrage from relentless consumerism and competing ideologies, our paramount need is for discernment. Consider, for example the following statement of intention – and the heart-breaking ways its author later put these thoughts into practice.

'I understood the infamous spiritual terror which this movement exerts, [he was speaking of the Social Democrats in Germany during 1919] particularly on the bourgeoisie, which is neither morally nor mentally equal to such attacks. At a given sign it unleashes a veritable barrage of lies and slanders against whatever adversary seems most dangerous, until the nerves of the attacked persons break down . . . This is a tactic based on precise calculation of all human weaknesses, and its result will lead to success with almost mathematical certainty.

I achieved an equal understanding of the importance of physical terror toward the individual and the masses . . . For while in the ranks of their supporters the victory achieved seems a triumph of the justice of their own cause, the defeated adversary in most cases despairs of the success of any further resistance'.

The author, of course, was Adolph Hitler, who used the dreary ramblings of his infamous biography, *'Mein Kampf'* to signpost so many of his subsequent atrocities. The same man declared later before launching his unfounded assault on Poland #

Propaganda rarely succeeds, of course, in completely convincing friends or in fooling everyone else, and yet it remains a terrifyingly potent weapon. Constantly repeated lies and exaggerations in time become accepted in the public consciousness as gospel truth — and the way is prepared for a reign characterised by distortions and deceptions. Are we discerning enough to spot where such things may be lurking in our own hearts and society?

We must allow no trace of the propagandist to defile our own writing. The moment we become tarred as partisan propagandists, the less credibility we will enjoy. How much better to make our goal to convey accurate information and incisive truths.

There is a fine line between writing enthusiastically about a cause that is precious to you, and the twisted perspective of the propagandist. Scrupulous honesty about one's motives and intentions is our first line of defence against falling prey to this pitfall. So too is a willingness to share our viewpoint with people of integrity who would not normally share our outlook and perspective.

### **Pause and Put into Ponder: A Case of mistaken Identity**

A friend rang me just now, assuming I was someone else I know.

It focused my thoughts on the person that I wasn't.

It made me wonder how I would have felt about the information that I heard.

They would have reacted to it in a different way to me.— and the consequences would have been entirely different.

It usually takes some apparent accident or setback to jolt us out of our own little world.

Just suppose for a moment that you were

Your wife or husband, or pastor, friend or boss.

Walk for a while as if you were in their shoes, and write a passage as if you were them.

It will help you to appreciate these people a whole lot more!

### **Passionate Prose**

'Nothing great is achieved without enthusiasm'. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Whichever viewpoint we elect to adopt, the one thing we can never dispense with is a simple passion for our subject in hand. If all our efforts to communicate on paper fail to make much impression in people's lives because our writing is sloppy,

then we can correct these faults by applying ourselves with diligence to the '*Art of Creative Writing*'. But techniques and principles alone will not suffice if we are lacking in passion.

Think what it is that first draws us to a piece of writing. More than any trick of style or technique, is it not the writer's *love* of their subject that speaks to us? 'Only connect the prose and the passion,' E.M. Forster urged in '*Howard's End*', 'and both will be exalted'. As we have seen, skilful communicators can draw us into subjects we would otherwise have had no interest in.

Listen to what Ian Clark has to say about Shetland in his forward to *Island Challenge* (the biography of one of the island's leading councillors). The style can by no means be described as top drawer - but perhaps it will help to make readers who know next to nothing about the Shetland Islands eager to hear more about them. Or perhaps I should say, 'to ken moore about a-them'.

'Taking London as the centre of a circle, the circumference of which passes through Unst [the most northerly isle], you find that Norway, Sweden, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria Italy and Spain are as near to – and Denmark, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France and Switzerland are nearer the political capital of the United Kingdom than is Shetland. Over and above this, a hundred miles of ocean separates it from the mainland of Britain.

The wonder is not that Shetland is different; it is that intelligent Mainlanders find this difficult to accept . . . Isolated but not insular, Shetland treasures the ethereal while remaining practical . . . What dwarfs everything else is that Shetland is a community and it is people that matter'.

I asked a fourteen year old friend who has just moved up here to write a few words about what they Shetland means to her. This is what she wrote.

To most people, they are cold, windswept islands, with nothing but sheep and sea. But to me they are oysters, concealing their treasure from passers-by. The harsh exterior is just an act, rather like a lonely man who pushes you away but is inwardly crying out for someone to discover his inner being. The weather is just a test . . . Are you passionate enough to endure the unpleasantries for the promise of greater beauty, never before experienced by man?

Another friend, on her first visit to the islands, came up with something similar.

Let me tell you about Shetland.

A great distance away. I don't mean I miles, although it is that too . . .

I mean that it is further from the place where man rules,  
And closer to where God imparts and impacts.

Out go the manicured gardens.

Out go the steaming queues of traffic.

Out go my decisions and my determinings—

And in their place?

Long fingers of land, stretched out into the sea . . .

Skies that dance and sing and streak . . .

And people speaking with softened consonants,

Looking directly at you, and beckoning —

How can they have guessed what's happening in my heart?

If your interest is beginning to kindle – then the reason is simple. We love Shetland, and we are succeeding in communicating our passion to you. Any subject becomes more interesting when someone perceives some fresh beauty or potential in it. That is why so many of us write best about the subjects that are closest to our hearts. To the enthusiastic writer, there are no inherently dull situations – there are only uninspiring authors. We can therefore fly this banner high: **'Let your love and passion shine through'**.

One final point. We may be writing passionately but are still making scant impression.. Quite possibly, our material may simply not getting into the right people's hands. No one person's style or subject material can possibly appeal to everyone. People who love the buzz of city life probably aren't ready to consider living in Shetland. It is surprising how indifferent most all-in wrestlers are to fly-fishing!

## **Part Five ~ The Writer's Two Hats**

### **Animus and Anima**

Let us suppose that we are clear about the general thrust of what it is we want to write about. We have set down our initial draft in a white-hot blaze of enthusiasm. But then, unless our deadline is extremely pressing, we will do well to lay it down again. We will find consistent benefit in allowing a ‘fire’ gap and sleeping on a passage rather than attempting to work on it again too quickly. Writings, like timber, requires seasoning. Receiving an idea is the all-important first step, but knowing what to do with it may be an entirely separate matter. We need time to reflect on the original idea and to find the sharpest way to present it to others.

When the time comes to read it again – and this may sometimes be months or years later – we must swap hats. Now we are no longer a free ranging creator but rather an impartial critic. All creativity needs and honing, and long before anyone else sets eyes on our material we must each assume the role of editor for ourselves. This is where we must humble ourselves and overcome any foolish sense that what we wrote in the course of our first outpouring was so inspired that not a word should be altered.

In all probability we will find that what we wrote is both better and worse than we had originally thought. Better in that certain descriptions and character traits are sharper than we could reproduce now at this greater distance our original moment of inspiration. But worse because the text is littered with clichés and non sequiturs and the material comes across as being too simplistic (or complicated). Now is the time to reshape it according to our taste and intention. First drafts are all about untrammelled creative flow; revisions about the cold light of day. To some extent they match Karl Jung’s categories that define the different ‘polarities’ of our personality: the ‘animus’ and the ‘anima’. Without tying ourselves to narrow gender-distinction, the terms are broad indications of masculine and feminine characteristics, the ‘anima’ representing our intuitive and emotional side, whilst the ‘animus’ thrives on logic, fact and order.

Left to itself, the animus would frown on creative flights of fancy, just as the anima secretly squirms at the thought of being rigidly constrained. Our banner for this section envisions a powerful and proper fusion of these characteristics: **The secret of good writing is to develop both strands in the right proportions.**

A well-developed ‘animus’ that is working in tandem (rather than in competition) with the ‘anima’ will usually be able to find effective ways to rework and incorporate this initial stream of ideas. This is where the ‘anima’ must step aside and permit for the ‘animus’ to make whatever sweeping changes are needed to sharpen the flow and presentation.

‘Off with his head’ is the regimental bugle call of animus-driven editors as they wield their pens. It is a slogan we should not be afraid of. When we have tinkered around with a phrase, but are still left with the uncomfortable feeling that the overall effect is less sharp than we would have liked, then the most effective way to deal with it may well be to adopt the Red

Queen's policy and delete it altogether. The reason we may have been having so much trouble with it is that it was never really worth bothering with.

One of the problems with word processors is that it is so easy to play around with text that we may end up endlessly tinkering around with passages that really ought to be omitted or completely rewritten. We must be prepared to apply the same principle to whole scenes and even chapters as well as to individual phrases.

## **Pause and Consider**

Most of us lean instinctively more to the animus or the anima. Review various pieces that you have written in this light. Can you discern where your own emphasis lies? Is this routinely the case, or only true for some of your writings? Would your work benefit by being less anima-flowery and more tightly focused? Or are you so straight down-the-line 'animus' that you have never permitted your 'anima' the freedom to spread its wings and soar? What (or who) might help you 'broaden out' in this respect?

For example, you might not think that the 'anima' would have much place in writing a report of, something so prosaic as, say, a football match. Yet everything we write will be infinitely the richer to read if we allow the anima its say. Fuller descriptions and more incisive metaphors will express concepts that will make the article a pleasure for even non footballing aficionados to read, as well as delighting true fans with richer insights into their beloved sport.

## **The Art of Rewriting**

'Then, rising with Aurora's light'

The Muse invoked, sit down to write;  
Blot out, correct, insert, refine,  
Enlarge, diminish, interline'. (Jonathan Swift, c.1790)

'If people knew how hard I had worked to get my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful after all'. (Michelangelo)

With all my heart I value the 'stream of consciousness' approach I advocated earlier. But we need to establish a proper balance between the spontaneous and the carefully planned. Improvisation is beautiful in music, but nobody expects a fully fashioned symphony to emerge every time we dispense with printed sheets. There is usually much editing to do when we revisit the texts we wrote in the white-hot

heat of the moment. It is the long process of revision that distinguishes a top class author from a fiery first-drafter.

When we go to the dentist for a check-up, what we are hoping for is expert reassurance that nothing is wrong. Sometimes, however, the dentist is obliged to tell us the worst: a tooth will have to come out.

Many of us revision-seasoned writers would wryly acknowledge the comparison between visiting the dentist and the need to revise our drafts. At worst, the flaws in our work may run so deep that nothing but a complete rewrite will suffice to put them right. We writhe at the loss of time involved, and at the humiliation of not having been able to get it right first, second, or even third time round.

To change the metaphor, however, what sense is there in continuing to patch up an old car if the mechanic is quite clear that it should be scrapped? Whenever we postpone making painful revisions, we are merely treading water – and that, effectively means losing headway. I am convinced that many songs and publications are presented too hastily to a wider audience. Revision and the courage to take tough decisions are another set of Siamese twins.

If you are one of the many who turn to writing as a means of getting something off their chest, it can serve as powerful therapy for helping you to relive or move on beyond painful traumas, and hopefully to move on beyond them..

The therapy value is high, and the writer may even be skilful (or fortunate) enough to find readers who will identify with their experiences. In commercial terms, however, this is rather like a passer-by who is armed with an air rifle taking a pot shot and hitting the bullseye at a specialized shooting event. We do not expect anyone to create a masterpiece the first time they switch on the electric plane or lathe. We are speaking of a craft.

Cutting out second rate material may call for considerable courage, but it will ultimately leave us with much the same satisfying feeling that gardeners have after pruning their roses. We have prepared the way for a far richer display later on. Ponder the message the following pearls of wisdom are sending us:

‘In the mind, as in the body, there is the necessity of getting rid of waste. A man of active literary habits will write for the fire as well as for the press’.

(Jerome Cardan, 16th century)

‘Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out!’ (Samuel Johnson)

Purple passages do not always impress. Do remember that it is possible to achieve subtlety and stylistic success by a judicious use of irony and understatement rather than by waxing lyrical. As Henry Thoreau suggested, ‘the story need not be long, but it will take a long while to make it short’. Some of our initial drafts could probably be reduced by up to a third without losing the salient points.

From time to time we need to remind ourselves that we are writing for our readers and not for ourselves. But who is this elusive person we cannot see? Storytellers can tell at a glance whether people are tracking with them or falling asleep, but writers have to think their way into their reader's emotions. Kingsley Amis put it this way. 'I always bear (the reader) in mind, and try to visualize him, and watch for any signs of boredom or impatience flitting across the face of this rather shadowy being'. Once again it is the still small voice which combines instinct with experience and helps us to sense that *this* approach will work, and *that* will not.

The time to consider the reader is during the pre-first draft thinking process. Once the writing process is under way, creativity tends to flow too fast and furiously for us to be overly concerned with how others might view the text. There will be time later on to consider this matter again, when the editor in us wakes up and takes our sheaf of scribblings and begins to edit the text dispassionately, and almost as though it were written by a complete stranger. This is the time to ask some fundamental questions:

- What style and viewpoint have we plumped for? Would another approach be better?
- Have we made the characters sufficiently rounded and convincing? Are they in the right relation and tension to each other? Are their hopes and dreams adequately signposted, and are the hurdles they face challenging enough? In what ways do they alter in the course of the story? Are these changes sufficiently prepared for and satisfactorily portrayed?
- How about the plot? Does it progress logically? Are we clear about that we were trying to achieve in each episode? Would other readers see this too?
- Is there enough tension, or too many side-shows and digressions which draw the reader's attention away from the principal theme?
- Have we allowed suitable alternations between dramatic high points and quieter periods in which the characters 'catch up' with events and emotions and plan what they are going to do next?

Over familiarity with our material can cause us to take too much for granted and to skip asking these questions. But we must take as long as we need to examine these issues, along with the ones we raised in the section 'Writers read in order to write readably'. There can be no excuse for not doing so.

What we are primarily doing at this stage is checking the flow and tenor of our text rather than becoming bogged down in search of precise words or phrases. The key thoughts to bear in mind at this stage of editing are: 'What am I trying to say?' and 'Would someone reading this for the first time realise what my intentions were?'

Once these basic tenets are in place, we can progress to the second stage of text editing: 'Have we presented the material in the best order as well as in the most compelling words?' This is where, we must overcome our subconscious desire to avoid the hard labour involved in making sure that our sequencing works. That third paragraph might just flow better if it were placed earlier on . . . and that sentence that reads rather awkwardly where it is might read better if it were inserted in the midst of another paragraph. It can always be moved somewhere else if it doesn't fit there either. Several such rounds of 'shuffling' may be necessary before we finally reach that wonderful moment when we sense that the text says just what we want it to.

Since virtually none of us think so concisely that we do not need to sift, sort, polish and hone our material, it is better to view these multiple revisions as a godsend rather than a wasted chore. How on earth did Shakespeare and Dickens cope without word processors?

Another way to ensure a smooth flow is to practise reading your text aloud. Stories are meant to be read, and our writing will benefit from this exposure. The great advantage of listening to our material is that it permits us to hear the words in a way that highlights stylistic inconsistencies as well as actual mistakes. Inexpensive software can even save us from having to do the physical reading ourselves. This is not being 'hi-tech for the sake of it': it is using machines to help express what is really on our heart.

There is one drawback to this approach. A flamboyant 'live' reading can make a poor text sound better than it really is. By the same token, a perfectly acceptable piece of writing can sound dreary when we hear it relayed through an artificial computerized voice.

To vary the revision process, try printing out the whole text from time to time. We will see things on paper that escape us on the screen, especially when it comes to the best order to present ideas in. I normally edit with double-spaced lines, but there are also advantages in printing our material in varying page formats, for example, as a formatted page of a book. Anything that helps us to see our material from a fresh perspective is worth considering.

As we plough on with the rewriting process, we must let Samuel Johnson's incisive words be our guide: **'What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure'**. And when we have sifted and sorted the text to the best of our ability, we must know when to stop. Any more and the tinkering becomes counterproductive.

## **Scripting the Synopsis**

‘Plan, Write, then Fix’ (Anon.).

Most writers need to compose to a plan or synopsis has stood the test of time. It is not without its potential drawbacks, however. C.S. Lewis declared that he was ‘pregnant with book’. To pursue the metaphor, which of us know what sort of children we are going to bring into the world (let alone what they will be doing in ten or twenty years’ time). In much the same way, we will likewise often be taken by surprise by the changes of direction which occur in the course of writing a book. Once our characters begin to operate as ‘free agents’, they develop a life of their own.

But surely the argument runs, all that really matters is that readers can follow where the story leads them. So long as we end up with something worthwhile, it does not matter much how we got there. And yet we may never get there simply by writing.

The great advantage of writing to a synopsis is that it keeps us on course, and allows time for the story to come together. Tempted though we undoubtedly will be to plunge in and get on with the actual writing, we may need to take almost as long preparing the synopsis (the characterisations as well as the plot) as we do actually writing the book.

The second problem is restricting what we put into our synopsis. Because I am always so eager to write, my first attempts to prepare a synopsis for a children’s novel grew longer and longer, rather like Topsy’s house. When I became lost under the welter of events and descriptions, I had to compose a reduced synopsis to help me navigate my way around my synopsis.

Sol Stein adopts an approach that makes synopses work *for* rather than *against* our creative urges. He suggests we limit ourselves to describing scenes rather than chapters: the bare bones of what happens and where. If we write these down on small cards (or on computer outline programmes) we can then shuffle these scenes until we find the best sequence in which to present them.

Later we can add the merest hint of the information we are eager to communicate. Some of these details may be better off portioned out in more than one scene. If we get the basic scene-sequencing right, we will almost always be able to find a way to incorporate specific details and character development. Our banner sums up this section, **Plan, write, then rewrite. Check the sequencing and give every scene its own specific goal.**

**Tips to avoid Heartache**

In the context of preparing a synopsis, may we also recommend file-numbering. If we get into the habit of renaming our drafts on a daily basis (synopsis 1, synopsis 2, and so on) we will be much less likely to confuse versions. This simple strategy can save us great heartache. So too can asking a friend to store occasional copies of our material to guard against those twin authorial disasters: a hard disk crash or a burglary.

This is not a purely defensive gesture. We may find it useful later on, to dial up an earlier version of our text and compare it with our current one, not only to measure the improvements we have made but also to see if we have lost anything valuable during the redrafting process.

If we can face the thought, we will also benefit from rewriting particular scenes or chapters from the same starting point but without referring to our earlier draft. Our banner highlights the value of this radical approach. **Comparing two versions will often lead to a sharper finished result than merely tinkering about with the existing text.**

## Recurrent Themes

‘He who resolves never to ransack any mind but his own, will soon be reduced, from mere barrenness, to the poorest of all imitations; he will be obliged to imitate himself, and to repeat what he has before so often repeated’. (Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1774)

Many authors return again and again for inspiration to some comfortingly familiar theme drawn from the world of their childhood, when their sensory receptions were stronger and life was an adventure to be lived rather than an obstacle course to circumnavigate. Rosalind and I love Ellis Peters’ ‘*Cadfael*’ novels. We marvel at her ability to paint a pen picture in a few matchlessly chosen words that brings her world so vividly to life.

Some time after reading her fifth or sixth book, however, it begins to dawn on the reader that similar themes are recurring in almost every story. A young man is accused of some terrible crime, and the rest of the book consists of putting this injustice to rights. Given this writer’s amazing descriptive abilities, and her profound knowledge of human nature, could somebody not have helped her to come up with more varied plots?

Reading widely and receiving input from widely varying sources, inspires our creative spark and keeps us from becoming stuck in a rut. Like an endless loop we may end up repeating descriptions, settings and outcomes, and not even realise we are doing so. It is wise to ponder this particular banner from time to time as we

prepare our work: **Have I been down this road before?** Otherwise we may end up in that category of people whom Samuel Johnson dismissed so witheringly: 'Sir, you have but two topics, yourself and me. I am sick of both'.

## **Ragged Writing**

'Right or wrong, make it strong'.

There are so many alternatives in life to reading, many of which simply did not exist twenty or thirty years ago. It is up to us to write clearly and incisively, so that we give our readers no opportunity of getting either bored or confused. We should not be afraid of revealing who we are and what we believe. There are so many depersonalizing influences in our increasingly political correct society that it is a blessing to hear someone speaking out clearly.

We live in an age in which most people are working overtime to avoid having to take responsibility. Watch the politicians worming their way round giving answers to straightforward questions! But people do not buy books in order to hear authors covering themselves with disclaimers. It may sound humble, but a welter of 'mights,' 'maybes,' and qualifying phrases ('it appears that' merely makes our text less convincing.

Readers do not want to have to do any mental editing as they go along. They want to be assured that we are competent writers. Every time they come across words or phrases that sound hesitant, it raises a question mark in their mind.

Take this truly hopeless sentence as an extreme example. 'I am sort of embarrassed to admit that I am a bit of a timid person, but I am very much hoping that I will one day be lots (or at least somewhat) less fearful than I currently appear to be at this present moment in time'.

The material could perfectly well be summarized thus. 'I am embarrassed to admit that I am a timid person, but I hope that one day I will be less fearful'. (It would make for much more interesting reading if some explanation for the person's fear was also put forward, along with some positive suggestions for overcoming it).

There are many issues over which we cannot afford to be too dogmatic or definite of course. Proper caveats may be in order, but if we are in any way concerned with contemporary issues, we dare not wait too long before venturing to express our opinion lest people move on and lose interest in the subject to hand. We must relay the insights and the wisdom we have gleaned, even if final certitude and objectivity is beyond our grasp. Our banner is a powerful incentive not to sit on the fence: **'Be humble, but commit yourself!'**

## **Pause and Put into Practice**

You may never have realised just how hesitant much of your writing really is. Take a piece that you wrote some time ago and read it through with a view to weeding out anything that smacks of hesitant writing.

## **Stilted Stuff**

‘Give a civil servant a good case and he’ll wreck it with clichés, bad punctuation, double negatives and convoluted apology!’ (Alan Clarke, Diary)

‘One of our defects as a nation is a tendency to use ‘weasel words’. When a weasel sucks eggs the meat is sucked out of the egg. If you use one ‘weasel word’ after another, there is nothing left of the other’. (Theodore Roosevelt)

In these days when the disabled are deemed ‘physically challenged,’ and those with no aptitude for languages ‘linguistically challenged,’ the trend to find ever softer ways to express unpalatable realities can reach farcical proportions. One Town Council brazenly declared that someone who had died was ‘terminally challenged!’

Few things make a text more top-heavy than cluttering it with the jargon of Newspeak and Political Correctness. The media loves terms such as ‘collateral damage’ instead of admitting that ‘civilian casualties’ have taken place; companies are ‘downsized’ or ‘put into administration’ to avoid us having to ponder the fate of real people (with families and mortgages) losing their livelihood.

Newspeak is temptingly slick and glib, but all too often sinister developments lie concealed behind fine-sounding phraseology.

In these days of faddish political correctness, it was perhaps inevitable that a dustbin man should become a sanitary officer, and that ‘humankind’ would eventually replace ‘mankind’. But does a manhole really need to be designated a person hole? It is better to make clarity and good taste our aim than to fear offending the new puritanical guardians of our words. It is only tactful, however, to avoid words such as ‘actors’ if we can find safer substitutes such as ‘performers’. Stereotypical phrases such as ‘Vicars have little time left for their wives’ can likewise be better rendered ‘. . . for their families’.

Why risk losing our reader's trust by cluttering our text with redundant words and phrases? If readers sense we are exaggerating, they may be inclined to take everything we say with a pinch of salt.

English-speaking people have long made fun of the German habit of stringing lengthy groups of nouns together in what is technically known as 'wortbildung'. Fashioning compound words together in ways that nobody has thought of before would make for an interesting and humorous challenge at a dinner party. The trouble is that such things are 'in our face' in more and more official communications. Zinsler quotes the following gem of a verbless sentence as a prime example: 'Communication facilitation skills development intervention'. He thinks it has something to do with teaching students to express themselves in plainer English!

The process becomes not merely stilted but even sinister when the real meaning is deliberately obfuscated (sorry, *hidden*) behind an impenetrable morass of jargonese. Such reports typically string together a collection of abstract concept nouns which combine to deprive it of any trace of warmth or humanness. In the woeful absence of any active working verbs, all we are left with are verbs such as 'is' and 'are' – or, more probably, 'isn't' or 'aren't'!

We hear *ad nauseam* of 'controlled learning environments' and 'bench marking benefits being made at the point of care'. Not only is it impossible to imagine anyone actually engaging in these complex sounding activities, they have about them all the attraction of those answer phone loops on which we waste so much of our working day. Oh for contact with real human beings, and for thoughtful verbs that guide us to the task in hand! That is the only way to rescue our rich and precious language from the quicksand of deadweight phraseology.

Most people have become accustomed to encountering phrases once confined to the world of social sciences that they barely notice how jargon-laden these communiqués have become. A simple statement such as, 'The Trust are delighted to announce that they have been able to appoint more nurses,' would gladden the long-suffering public's heart far more than interminable waffle about 'improved health benefits at the point of care'.

The following banner aims to steer us well clear of these reefs of jargonese. Because it contains an implicit reminder not to overdo the use of clichés, it will also help us to write much livelier reports. **'Whenever possible, use simple and personal expressions'**.

## Sharing with Others

'The function of an editor is to help a writer achieve the writer's intentions'.  
(Sol Stein)

'Approbation helps a writer, and lessens his labour, and the work as it grows glows in his mind'. (Ovid)

When the German armed forces identified the location of French or Norwegian Resistance radio transmissions during the Second World War, by taking bearings from several different directions and then comparing them. There comes a time when we must 'check our bearings' and share our work with others. Some of us

may prefer to do this we are still at the 'ideas' stage. Others may prefer to wait until we are satisfied that we have exhausted our initial burst of creativity, and have made some effort to edit the material ourselves. But who should we show it to?

Some people insist it is best *not* show it to friends (because they will tell us what we want to hear), and that only a (critical) teacher can help us. I would be wary of adopting such a hard and fast principle. My own experience is that alert and intelligent friends can do wonders to tell whether or not our draft is viable, as well as presenting perspectives we would not have thought of by ourselves.

That input and support does not mean that we should dispense with professional help however. All of us require wise and experienced outsiders to cast a stringent eye over what we have written, not only to pick up on our stylistic deficiencies, but also to point out things that we have omitted to include. True, the most experienced editor may not pick up on the full implications of what we are trying to convey, but that may be more through some deficiency in our technique than any lack of sensitivity on their part.

Rather than resenting editors, and removing them from our Christmas Card list if they puncture some of our cherished illusions, it is better to humble ourselves and welcome the challenge. If they succeed in bursting our bubble, it means that it was burstable – in which case it is surely better for all concerned that this should happen at a relatively early stage of proceedings, while there is still time to make course corrections.

The fact that we may have received our original idea with particular clarity, and that we have worked hard to research the subject and to find the best way to word it is no proof of ultimate inspiration. Pride will tell us to fight our corner, but humility will remind us there may be even better ways to express the same truths. Few of us will graduate as writer with our pride intact. It is the humble and the persistent who will find this sharper way.

As we hinted earlier, many of us are too possessive about our work; so jealous for its integrity that we will not allow anyone close enough to suggest any changes. Whilst we should not allow our main themes and emphasis to be whittled away, editors must be allowed their say about which material to change or omit.

If we find ourselves shying away from seeking this level of help and advice, it would be good to ask why this is. Do we subconsciously hear in even the most beneficial of criticism, echoes of the way our parents or teachers put us down in the past? It is important to identify and isolate these original memories, lest they harden into defensive and defeatist tendencies that imprison us. If the person who is trying to help is coming alongside us in an altogether more a constructive spirit, we will be forever grateful if we allow them fuller access.

But what if our would-be helpers really are hyper critical? Well, the fact that we do not like these critics, or the way they make their points, does not mean that they have nothing to teach us. We can still take on board whatever grains of truth are wrapped up in their criticisms, whilst at the same time strenuously siphoning off the prejudices that would do us harm.

There is another advantage of being on the receiving end of such criticism. Should we ourselves ever serve in an editorial capacity, may we never forget that the writer's greatest need is for encouragement. We shall have more to say about this in the section 'Carping Critics'.

The wording of this particular banner can hardly be said to be dynamic, but it bridges the gap between the role that editor plays and the special place that mentors can have in our lives. It may therefore be one of the most important issues for us to consider. 'Am I sharing my material with the right person?'

### **Pause and Ponder**

In all our writing endeavours, friends have a special part to play. Nothing encourages us more than their support and encouragement. Certain other 'friendships,' however, can seriously blunt and drain our creative energies. If the reason for this is that our paths and interests have diverged, or because an unhealthy degree of over co-dependency has set in, then it may be the best for all concerned to acknowledge the fact and to reduce the amount of contact we have with these people. There may be others, however, whose wisdom we would find it exceedingly helpful to cultivate.

What can you do to 'develop' these friendships from a literary point of view? Have you thought of asking them to read and comment on your material at various stages of its development?

### **Motivated Mentors**

'As iron sharpens iron so one man sharpens another'. (Proverbs 27:17)

In this profoundly insightful proverb, the Jewish Talmud envisages two students studying the Scriptures and offering each other constructive care and criticism, doubtless under the watchful eye of an older rabbi. We too will benefit from mentors who fulfil the role of this older rabbi. Such people are friends first and editors second, and, as such, they are uniquely placed to hone and sharpen our writing skills.

What is it that we are seeking in a ‘mentor?’ Someone whose vision is broad enough to embrace our own but mature enough not to stifle or control it. Someone who combines literary sensitivity with real-life skills. Who share the treasures of their experience with us, sharpen our existing gifts and draw out entirely new ones. Mentors can tell us honestly when something we have written falls below the mark – but they will do so in such a way as to encourage us that we will be able to produce something much more readable next draft round.

If persistence ranks at the very top of the qualities we need as writers, then doubly blessed are those who encourage creative people to keep going. Mentors are worth their weight in gold! Sometimes, sensing a better way of proceeding, they point us in directions we would never have thought of looking in for ourselves. We are wise if we take their advice seriously.

One word of warning is in order here. There is only so much that they can do for us. If we start looking to them to meet needs that are properly ours to fulfil, the relationship can become draining and demanding instead of creative and releasing. In all true mentoring there comes a time when the intensity of the relationship needs to slacken as we move away from our mentor, lest we remain forever locked in their orbit.

Do you remember those almost unbearably tense moments in the early Apollo space exploration missions, when the lunar module had to part company from the main rocket? It was a vulnerable but vital moment. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not for one moment suggesting any callous or abrupt parting of the ways – just a simple and mutual recognition that mentors are given to us for a season. The time will come when we (and they) will be called to branch out further afield.

All of us will reach our destination more fully and more quickly if we have such a person to guide and inspire us. Our banner is a deliberate piece of alliterative whimsy – but the point behind it is a real one. Motivated Mentors Mature Muddle-headed Writers. There is a great deal to be gained by seeking out such a mentor – or by making yourself available to serve others in this capacity.

## **Part Six ~ The Tools of the Trade**

In Part One we considered how we can access the springs of creativity. In Parts Two to Five, we examined the essentials of style and technique. Before turning to examine the psycho-emotional issues which play their own part in determining how successful we are as writers, it is time to turn our attention to more prosaic

matters. This is the most nitty-gritty section, because it aims to provide us with some brief instruction on the bare-bones of the writer's craft.

## **The Paras are Coming**

Ever felt deterred by the sight of a solid a block of text? If we keep paragraphs to a sensible length our texts (and with them our readers) will breathe more freely. Starting sections with a series of short sentences is another useful technique for keeping the pace moving and the reader alert. If we are presenting any strange facts or unusual angles, highlight them clearly and milk them for all they are worth.

Ideally, each paragraph should amplify the one that preceded it, or at least flow on from it in a logical sequence. It should make its point, reach its own mini conclusion, and then serve as a springboard for the next one. In much the same way that each scene should conclude with some sort of a hook to make the reader eager to press on to the next scene, it pays to put extra effort into the last sentence of every paragraph.

## **Verbalise your Longings**

What do verbs, dogs and authors have in common? If a dog is a man's best friend, then a well-chosen verb falls into the same category for the writer. Verbs bring incidents and episodes to life and enable us to get inside the hearts and minds of our characters. More than any other part of speech, verbs create the impression that we are part of the action. As our banner puts it, **Verbs enable us to see, hear, taste, touch and feel along with our viewpoint character.**

Verbs achieve their best results when they are carefully selected to produce certain effects. Their impact is usually blunted when we make too much use of the passive voice. Why? Because it makes it feel as though we are *reporting* an event rather than *participating* in it. Which sounds more dynamic?

‘Rosalind caught the baby’ sounds so much more dynamic than

‘The baby was caught by Rosalind’.

The second example conveys the same information, but it has a static flavour that makes us feel one stage further removed from the action.

Active verbs express the ‘who, how and when’ of an episode. Passive ones lose verve and momentum. Even an unexceptional phrase such as ‘Friday dawned fair and bright’ holds out more promise than,

‘The weather was fair and bright on Friday morning’.

Aptly chosen verbs energize a sentence and delight the heart. We are blessed that English is a language rich in verbs that conjure up specific nuances and sensations. To be on the lookout for unusual words that provide background colour without inhibiting the forward action. I can snarl, snap, grumble, grouch, gripe, swagger, strut, flaunt or leave the room in a huff as well as ‘find something hard to accept’.

An on-line thesaurus is a useful addition to our reading experience to help us. There is no need to go to absurd lengths though, unless we want to try our hand at describing an action by following the American habit of making verbs out of nouns. Once we overcome our trans-Atlantic prejudices, the effects can be surprisingly effective if used sparingly. There are no limits, except common sense. ‘I DTP’d this page to take a closer look at it, then I trained to Harpenden to see what Guy thought of it!’

### **Pause and Ponder**

Review your use of verbs. Are too many of them in the passive voice? How about their emotional impact? Do they convey a sufficient breadth of emotions? Have you made it easy for readers to *feel* rather than just *know* about the subject you are writing about?

### **Drop the Adjective**

‘As to the Adjective: when it doubt, strike it out’. (Mark Twain)

William Zinsser writes of the need to avoid ‘adjectives-by-habit’. We must resist the temptation to display our adjectival prowess to the full in order to prove that we are ‘proper’ authors. Whilst most people would be content to say that a performance was ‘enjoyable,’ we feel we have to add that it was ‘entrancing’, ‘tasteful’, ‘sterling’, ‘superlative’, ‘first-class’, ‘top-notch’ or even (heaven help us) ‘heaven-sent!’ Adjectives must earn their keep. Bland adjectives, like commonplace clichés, do little to surprise or excite and are usually best left out. Those that are included must serve to enhance the reader’s pleasure or awareness by injecting some fresh or surprising perspective. Does every old man really needs to have a *wrinkled* face or every cowboy a *trusty* steed?

We debase the language when we insert a host of adjectives that qualify everything but clarify nothing. To speak about someone wearing ‘black funeral clothes’ or ‘white wedding gowns’ is mere tautology.

If we choose the right noun in the first place, we will succeed in conveying most of the impressions and nuances we are seeking without having recourse to any adjective.

### **Pause and Ponder**

No prizes for guessing the homework here. Review a few pages of your text and see whether the adjectives you have used are paying their way. Remember Mark Twain’s advice!

### **Adverbs and Metaphors**

Few things can do more to evoke an impression than a well-chosen chosen adverb. Suppose we create a character called Miles, and find him ‘sniffing *propriatorially*, ogling the local women *leeringly* even as he stretches out his hands *expansively*’. In a minimum of words, we have succeeded in creating the base outline for a character sketch we can expand at leisure.

Since the thoughtful use of metaphors and similes is one of the principle characteristics things that distinguishes a good from an outstanding writer, there is often much to be said for reducing the amount of space a metaphor takes up by compressing it into an adverb or adjective. To say that ‘The women thought that Warren was as tough as nails’ sounds cliché-ridden. Why not try something like ‘*Steely strong*, but utterly fascinating for women, Warren (went on to do whatever he did)’.

Or, to create a rather different impression, the equally prosaic observation that ‘Women thought Warren was as tough as an ox’ could be revamped along some such lines as this: ‘*Ox-like*, Warren never wasted a moment’s thought wondering why women never bothered to pay him the time of day’.

Expressing a full-blown metaphor in one succinct verb, adverb or adjectival clause offers great scope for evoking the reader’s sympathy or imagination – or for conveying a sense of humour or irony. How about this for instance? ‘*Leathery-faced*, Priscilla glared at him *rowdily*’. It is hard to imagine less likely words to associate with the name Priscilla! If she had glared at him ‘*waspishly*’, or even

*'balefully'* we would have been on more familiar ground. But *rowdily*? And *leathery-faced*?

The more attentive we are to the world around us, the more we will find a ready supply of material from which to fashion striking statements or metaphors. The secret is to juxtapose and present them to their best effect. Succinct phrases can condense wisdom and help us to see the significance of things we might have been inclined to take for granted. 'The Youth of a Nation are the Trustees of Prosperity,' Disraeli declared, and, like it or not, he was right. 'Truth sits upon the lips of dying men' wrote Matthew Arnold in *Sohrab and Rustum*. Certain aphorisms can likewise point up the hopelessness of fulfilling impossible longings. 'There is no unhappier creature on earth,' Karl Kraus declared, 'than a fetishist who longs to embrace a woman's shoe and has to embrace the whole woman'.

Likewise, the very things that far too many people would give their eyeteeth to obtain often turn out to have a sting in their tail. 'Power?' declared Harold Macmillan dismissively (a former British Prime Minister). 'It's like a Dead Sea Fruit. When you achieve it, there is nothing there'.

### **Pause and put into practice**

If adjectives should only be used with discretion, unnecessary adverbs should be shown the back door. So many of them serve only to clutter sentences and hinder the flow of the text. Why tell people that prices are rocketing *fast*? Or that someone is *completely* exhausted? Surely it is self-evident that 'the water trickled *slowly* through his fingers?' And why labour the fact that someone is a *bit*, or *partly*, or *slightly* astonished?

If we find ourselves piling up adjectives and adverbs like a child playing with toy bricks, then it is time to set to work and dismantle the edifice.

### **The Dashing Colons**

There is a school of thought which tends to look down on the dash, as though it were vulgar – the sort of punctuation people might resort to if they are unable to handle the other parts of speech properly. I am no subscriber to this line of thought. For me, the dash fully deserves its place as a paid-up card-carrying member of the Punctuation Club. So long as we do not abuse it through overuse, it provides a thoroughly sensible and ready-made alternative to inserting a constant stream of brackets.

A dash also avoids us having to use a subordinate clause or start a separate sentence.

'Ronald went to Vancouver on Tuesday – he had been promising Rona he would do so for a fortnight – and then flew on to Nova Scotia'.

The other main use of the dash is to amplify something that was mentioned in the first part of the sentence.

'Ronald went to Vancouver on Tuesday – which Rona had been urging him to do for the past fortnight'.

As for those double dotted full stops, the colons: some people love them, and some despise them. I am rather too fond of using the semicolon myself, but it is largely out of fashion these days on account of its tendency to slow a sentence down. Its most useful function is to prepare us for the development of a thought that has already been expressed in the first half of the sentence. This a technique commonly used in the Psalms and Proverbs, where it is regularly used to expand or qualify an opening statement.

'Like the coolness of snow at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters'.  
(Proverbs 25:13)

'Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him'. (Psalm 34:8)  
'I sought the Lord, and he answered me; He delivered me from all my fears'. (Psalm 34:4)

If our aim is to keep the text moving briskly, however, we will probably do better to choose the full stop — or the dash -- rather than the semi colon. The colon, too is in danger of being considered somewhat old-fashioned nowadays, but it comes into its own when a collection of items need listing.

'He asked Jane to buy the following items: some toasted tea cakes, an origami stuffed teddy bear and an electric fence to keep the wallabies out'.

In some usages, the colon functions in much the same way as a pause sign does over a note in a piece of music. It is used to show readers that they have not yet reached the end of a line of music, but that the music is being brought to a temporary stop in order to achieve a desired effect.

## **Watch The Screamer!**

The Screamer! In one of my favourite cartoons, the lubberly Captain Pugwash is suddenly ambushed by his arch enemy, the pirate Black Jake. The surprise he feels is conveyed by a large exclamation mark that appears over our hero pirates' head.

With considerable astuteness Captain Pugwash reaches up and grabs hold of it. Using it as a belaying pin, he promptly hits his opponent on the head with it!

Not all exclamation marks are so felicitous. Too many of them make readers feel as though they too are being hit on the head. I find that I tend to insert far too many of them into my first drafts almost the moment anything strikes me as being in any way out of the ordinary. Later, when I revisit the text, I surreptitiously remove most of them.

If we shape and craft our sentences to convey our meaning properly, we will not need to resort excessively to the ‘Screamer’. Let’s face it: if people cannot see when we are trying to be funny, adding an exclamation mark by itself may not be enough to make them laugh(!)

### **Miscellaneous Muddles: Hang the Participle and Mind Your Butt**

‘You will have written exceptionally well if, by skilful arrangement of your words, you can make an ordinary one seem original’.  
(Horace)

Once again, authors are under no obligation to try too hard to be clever. Why use words such as ‘*donate*’ if ‘*give*’ will do just as well? A simple test is to ask what we would use in real life. There is no virtue in dredging up obscure words from the thesaurus if simple ones will do. Professional writers are perfectly content to use straightforward words, but to do so in appropriate and attractive ways. Relax. Be more intimate and less pompous.

There are several simple stylistic stumbling stones it is good to be aware of, however. Purists remind us that best English usage avoids beginning sentences with hanging participles. ‘Having picked up the cat’s mess, he turned his attention to trapping the python,’ could perfectly well be rendered ‘When he had picked up the cat’s mess he turned his attention to the python’ . . . Or ‘As soon as he had picked up the cat’s mess, he turned his attention to catching the python’. Either way, I hope he knew what he was doing!

There are occasions when it pays to disregard the blanket advice that sentences should never begin with a ‘but’. Who can deny that it can sometimes be the most effective way to begin a sentence? An apologetic ‘however’ somewhere further on in a phrase can feel limp and unconvincing. Each case must be weighed on its merits. But only use an ‘and’ to start a sentence if you are setting out to create a particular effect.

It is also worth checking every occasion we allow an *and* or a *but* to remain in the middle of a sentence. Might our text not flow more convincingly if we took a break and started a new sentence? Short sentences impart vitality.

Deleting redundant *'that's'* in the middle of sentences can likewise help our text to zip along with more pace and sparkle. As to the convention that it is wrong to split infinitives, the principle still stands – but as the waiter said to his manager, 'breakages are increasing'. Raymond Chandler is quite belligerent on the point. 'When I split an infinitive . . . I split it so it will stay split'. It reminds me of an intriguing comment David Wray once made: 'When I write a man, he stays written(!)'

## **A Which Hunt**

Which hunts were horrible things in medieval days, but they have their uses today. As a general rule, hunt down the *'which's'* and replace them with the more versatile *'that'*. The guidelines for determining when to choose between the two are quite involved, but at their simplest, if you need to use a comma to clarify a sentence, then the chances are that *'which'* is preferable. At all other times, *'that'* is the safer option. If that still feels opaque, let's try putting it another way. *'Which'* is generally the right word to use if you are looking to *expand* the piece of information that precedes the comma. 'I went to visit the school, which had just passed its OFSTED'. Compare these examples.

'The school, which had such a bad reputation, deserved to lose its best teachers'

has a rather different meaning from

'The school that has a bad reputation deserves to lose its best teachers to its rivals'.

The first example is specific whereas the second is more generalised.

In other instances, *'which'* locates or identifies something for us. 'Naples, which is in Italy, is much loved by the Mafia'. 'Hurricanes, which hardly ever happen in Hertfordshire, hardly merit a mention here in Shetland'.

## **Neither Male not Female**

Suppose we are writing a text book on how to care for a new born baby, and are faced with the perennial problem of knowing whether to refer to it as a male or a female. I find it clumsy to write 'he or she', or the equally widely used convention 's/he'. It slows the text down. Some publications compromise by using 'him' in one chapter and 'her' in the next. Though immaculately even-handed in today's politically correct world, I find this alternating viewpoint somewhat restless.

The simplest way round the problem is to convert the sentence into the plural. This has the enormous advantage of encompassing both genders. I would much rather read that 'Babies need their nappies changing regularly,' than 'he/she needs his or her nappy changing regularly'.

Plurals do have one disadvantage, however, and that is that they take the reader one step further away from personal involvement – and anything which fosters the cult of the impersonal is a potential weakness.

## **Red your Roofs (and Read your Proofs!)**

Glance at the well-known phrase below.

Paris in the  
the Spring

Write the phrase out on a card, preferably framed in a triangle, and show it to some unsuspecting friends. I can almost guarantee that more eight year olds will read it correctly than adults, who tend to see what they expect to see.

Proofreading is essential. An unchecked hastily written article can reflect on us poorly, or even misrepresent our intentions altogether. People may well feel inclined to assume that mistake-laden text is substandard in more ways than just the spelling. Since we rapidly reach the stage where we can no longer see the wood for the trees, it is good to ask people who are seeing the text for the first time to proofread for us. A crafted e mail, card or letter can be a friendly and powerful means of brightening someone's day,

Proofreading is particularly important for people who do most of their writing by Dictaphone or on computerised software packages. We need to be specially watchful for spellings that the dictionary would pass, but common sense will not. My spell checker would happily accept, 'Whey duds her tape the poke in thee shudder Luke hats?' but most people would have difficulty deciphering the fact that I was, for reasons best known to myself, trying to ask, 'Why did he tap the moke on the shoulder like that?' As Winston Churchill once famously said, 'This is the sort of English up with which I will not put'.

More emotively, a Bible was printed in the seventeenth century that enjoined readers on the highest authority to commit adultery! Not only were the Bibles recalled, but the unfortunate printer was fined heavily for the proof-reader's failure to spot the missing 'not'.

Bearing in mind that our aim is to do nothing that will cause our reader's attention to drift, it pays to run at least one final check through Grammatik, that excellent aid which highlights various stylistic faults as well as inconsistent punctuation and unintentional spaces.

Artificial aids can never be a hundred percent context-accurate, but even when we cannot accept the recommendation grammar checkers suggest, the mere fact that they have highlighted a sentence may lead us to go in search of better ways to express it. Grammar checkers are valuable tools, but they by no means do away with the need to read our text through for ourselves.

To take the paragraph above as a typical illustration. I originally wrote, 'It is impossible for artificial aids to be 100% context accurate'. In the interests of brevity, I decided that the phrase 'It is impossible for,' made the sentence long-winded and pedantic, so I shortened it accordingly. 100% is best written out in full, as numbers usually are. 'Context-accurate' is just about acceptable as a deliberate piece of jargonese, although very little would have been lost by omitting the word 'context'. As for the phrase beginning 'but we should not allow' – why not have a go at reworking it to find a less clumsy way of conveying the same meaning. By the way, did you notice that I deliberately wrote, 'we should not allow the duff ones to deter you?' It is so easy to confuse which pronoun form we are using, and to toggle inadvertently between 'we' and 'you' via 'him,' 'his' and 'their'. It may sound dull, but let's fly high this utterly necessary banner: 'Check, check and check again'!

## SUMMARY OF PARTS TWO TO SIX

'Trust Your Material' (William Zinsser)

'It is no kindness to do for others what they ought to be doing for themselves' (Abraham Lincoln)

Wouldn't it be simple if adding bundles of qualifying words automatically succeeded in describing something more successfully? The reality is that to *over* explain things actually deprives readers of the opportunity to discover things for themselves. Much that we have shared so far can be summed up in William Zinsser's exhortation to 'trust our material'.

If we find ourselves using too many words like, 'inevitably,' 'of course,' 'surprisingly,' and 'predictably,' we are effectively imposing our own value judgement on something before readers have had the chance to draw their own conclusions – and that is the precise opposite of Zinsser's counsel. Learning to trust our material is the product of hard-won experience, and a growing confidence in our literary skills.

Just as it is wise to double check our pronoun-sequencing for consistency, so there are many other aspects of our work that merit a review. We have touched on most of the following points before, but, most of us will benefit from considering them again.

- Draw readers into the heart of your subject material at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Make every word count.
- Check the length of your sentences. Shorter ones impart vitality.
- Limit the amount spoken by any one person at a time to just a few sentences. Remember that a degree of confrontation in the dialogue increases

tension and holds the reader's attention. Develop obstacles (preferably human ones) that threaten the path of your leading characters. Nothing can beat the suspense of human conflict.

- Check that the right viewpoint dominates in each scene. If you have switched within it, does the effect work?
- Give each scene and character its own distinctive features. Don't let too much of the action take place 'off-stage,' or be described in some remote past tense.
- Know your characters inside out – especially those who are least like you. If you have introduced minor characters (or specific objects) have they been given a proper part to play in proceedings, or could their role be incorporated by someone or something else?
- If you are writing animal stories, have you adhered to the rules of the game? At the very least, the animal's level of understanding (and speech) ought to remain consistent throughout the book.
- Double check your data to make sure that it is as accurate as possible. I have come unstuck on more than one occasion by trusting information from supposedly 'reliable' sources who turned out, on these particular issues, to be entirely unreliable. We lose a portion of our reader's confidence every time we assert something to be true when we have not taken the trouble to check the facts for ourselves. P.G. Woodhouse repeatedly used to research train timetables to make sure that his characters could legitimately return from London to Blandings Castle (his wonderful creation in Shropshire) at certain times of the day. Do our time sequences and geography work?
- If you are writing of past times, scour the text for historical anachronisms. Michael Legat speaks of the "'Gee!' said Leonardo da Vinci" syndrome. It is rarely wise to attempt to write entirely in archaic language. Not only is it difficult to do consistently, it is also hard for readers to understand. The same applies to dialect too. A small amount evokes a strong impression and adds local colour, but pagefuls of the stuff make the reader work too hard.
- Make liberal use of surprise elements – they breathe life into a text.
- Find alternatives for the 'twee' words: good, nice, bad, pretty, big or little. 'Said' can become monotonous, but replacing it with fancy words can be over elaborate. If you write 'he added' do make sure that the character really does add something worthwhile.

Candidates for the chop include ‘certain,’ ‘clearly’ and ‘obvious(ly)’ Aim to be sparing, too, in the use of the word ‘very’. Check each time that it earns its keep. ‘Upon’ is likewise usually best rendered ‘on’.

## **Part Seven ~ The Still Small Voice**

Time and circumstantial pressures are by no means the only obstacles that we face. It is time to face the fact now that many of our greatest hindrances do not relate to any technical deficiencies at all. It is in this final part that we will explore a whole raft of psycho-emotional hurdles. More perhaps than anything else, it is overcoming these foes that will equip us to pursue the Art of Creative Writing.

Many of these sections are concerned with unblocking various aspects of what may generically be termed ‘Writer’s Block’. I am adopting a twin-themed approach: cultivating the still small voice of inspiration on the one hand, and facing down particular bugbears on the other. Like John Bunyan’s pilgrim Christian, most of us will have repeated brushes with Giant Despair and other dread adversaries. How we fare in facing these emotional blockages will, to a large extent, determine how successful we are in fulfilling our potential.

It is not only writers who experience extended periods during which they are assailed by the thought that theirs is the most excruciating profession on earth (and that they are its most useless practitioners). This sense of revulsion afflicts a high percentage of gifted people. This is a salutary reminder that extreme creativity is hard to handle. Many highly talented musicians find themselves beset by strong and seemingly inexplicable urges never to pick up their instrument again. By contrast, other pastimes suddenly appear overwhelmingly desirable.

Such feelings assail our heart with mind-numbing plausibility during these ‘blocked’ periods. If I had devoted the whole of this publication to exploring nothing more than the gamut of fears and emotions the writer must overcome, it would scarcely have made the work unbalanced. Fear stunts our willingness to risk and experiment – but overcoming these these energy-depleting emotions increases our output and broadens our effectiveness as writers.

Do you remember how Elijah, concerned for the extreme drought that was ravaging the nation, took heart when he gazed out across the sea and declared, ‘I see a cloud no bigger than a man's hand’. (1 Kings 18.44) The longed-for rains were on their way and the land would soon be restored

Several of the topics in this section overlap and run into each other. I make no apology for that: it is an intentional strategy. Many of the problems that we face are too deep to be solved at one fell swoop, and it is right that we should chip away at them piece by piece, and insist repeatedly on adopting certain courses of action. Moreover, readers will quite possibly want to approach these intense issues in manageable quantities, working them through section by section rather than attempting to read them all at one go.

More than ever, these are the times to remember the four-step solutions:

- 1) Cultivate the Still Small Voice
- 2) Maintain Friends and Activities away from the Word-Bank
- 3) Hold up Banners of Truth
- 4) Resolve to Pursue your Vocation

### **The Still Small Voice**

‘After the fire, a sound of gentle stillness and a still small voice’. (1 Kings 19:12)

At an exceedingly vulnerable point in his life, the prophet Elijah found himself in an exposed cave high on a mountainside, surrounded by the tumult of raw elements raging wild. For hours the howling wind had been battering his senses to the point where he could hardly think straight anymore. There was worse to come. Jagged lightning set fire to the trees and triggered a great blaze: not the gentle domestic kind that belongs in the hearth, but a dreadful forest fire. The most agnostic of us discover a renewed interest in prayer when we see such terrors sweeping down towards us. As if all that wasn't enough, the ground suddenly began to tremble. What can be more frightening than when the earth, the symbol of our stability, begins to quake?

Elijah had but lately survived the most intense experience of his life, a contest to the death with the bloodthirsty prophets of Baal. Victorious in the conflict, his nerve that had held so well in the hour of trial collapsed in the aftermath. When the vengeful queen sent Elijah a message to tell him that his days were numbered, she achieved what the prophets of Baal had been unable to do. Elijah ‘lost the plot’ and ran for his life.

For days he fled, until he found himself in the most remote part of the southern desert. From being the centre of the nation's attention he was suddenly again a nobody, an inconsequential nomad. Desperate to know if there was still a role for him to play in the nation's life, he strained to discern any sign or message in these manifestations of Nature's might. But when the storm had passed, the fire had died down and the earth had finally stopped shaking, Elijah had learned nothing that he

did not know before. It was all too reminiscent of the storms and shakings he had been through in his own life.

Something profound had happened, however: his own strength had been reduced to the point where he was ready to listen when the still small voice did come. This was the moment he had been waiting for, when peace again touched his soul. At the same time, he was given a fresh set of instructions. He was to return to the fray he had so abruptly departed and appoint a successor for his ministry. His name was Elisha, and he was destined to fulfil a yet more astonishing ministry than he himself had done. The real fruit of Elijah's life lay not only in what he had accomplished, but in the legacy he bequeathed to the nation.

I have written at greater length about this in 'Ravens and the Prophet,' an extended meditation on the life of Elijah. The relevance for us as writers is that we too need to learn to heed this 'sound of silence' as one translation puts it, deep within our heart.

When the still small voice speaks, we find fresh and original ways to impart insights and information. If Elizabeth Browning had merely told her readers that they ought to spend more time in prayer, the chances are that her less spiritually receptive readers would have switched off immediately. But what honest soul can fail to re-evaluate their life priorities when she writes,

'Here's God down on us! What are you about?  
How all those workers start amid their work,  
Look round, look up, and feel, a moment's space,  
That carpet-dusting, though a pretty trade,  
Is not the imperative labour after all'.  
(Aurora Leigh, by Elizabeth Browning p.34)

Can any of us pretend that attending to 'carpet-dusting' domestic chores has never been a more pressing concern than seeking creative or eternal insights?

The still small voice enables us not only to acquire invaluable moments of inspiration but also to rise above the surging tides of life's conflicting moods and experiences. After all, many of us usually find the external pressures of deadlines and demands less difficult to handle than the fears and longings that so wrack our inmost being. We may choose to suppress and ignore these things, but to do so reveals a lack of emotional honesty which is likely to manifest itself in flat uninteresting prose. The more willing we face our turbulent emotions – our impatience, frustration, resentment, guilt and so on – the better we will be able to understand and write about them.

Cultivating the still small voice means involves developing the time to reflect on the topics we are writing about. Effectively, we have come full circle, back to our

starting point of needing to go in search of that vital one percent of inspiration. Except that this time we are more aware of the turbulence we will encounter along the way. Our banner encourages us to go through all it takes to bring us to this place of enhanced creativity. **‘One genuine insight is worth pages of uninspired writing.’**

## **Affirming and Protecting our Calling**

‘A good work talked about is a good work spoiled’. (Vincent de Paul)

Inspiration and morale are closely linked. The more we know what it is that we are called to be, and to do, the more likely we are to succeed as writers. It is so much easier – and safer – to say that we are a *‘this’* or a *‘that,’* who happens to do a spot of writing than to acknowledge just how important the Craft of Writing has now become to us. With the best will in the world, people want proof of the statement. They want to know which books we have published, and when our next one will be ready. They are not being rude, they are simply expressing their interest and curiosity by the most obvious route open to them. What they do not know is how easily jarred and jangled we can be by such questions!

Our pride wants to leap to our defence and to parade details of our latest project. But wisdom may lie in not attempting to provide much by way of an answer. In the episode I referred to earlier, when my friend asked me in the hospital cafeteria the other day what I was working on, I simply handed him the Contents Page of this book and left it at that. I knew from experience that any attempt to do more than that would reduce my motivation to get on with the hard work when I got back home.

Another reason for keeping at least some of our cards close to our chest is that we are often in no position to be able to give any satisfactory answers. How on earth do we know when the thing’s going to be finished, let alone whether anyone will ever want to publish it?

I liken the emotions these questions engender in us to the ignominy many pregnant women experience when they go overdue. As well-meaning friends ply them with gently chiding questions as to ‘why they are still at home,’ it can make them feel as though it is somehow their fault that the baby has not yet been born. But women only have to endure such comments for a few weeks at the most. For a writer, it can stretch into what feels like near-infinity, as the months go by and certain projects remain unfinished.

Perhaps we ought rather to praise ourselves that these publications are still under wraps and under construction. We should not be ashamed of that. It means we have the courage and the wisdom not to attempt to release them until they are ready.

Other problems we may encounter when we first set out our stall as a writer stem from the fact that our friends and acquaintances know us so well in our former capacity that they are

finding it hard to conceive of us in a new role. To them we are still the same old son or daughter, friend, adviser, boss, skivvy or what-have-you. Unless we are very sure of our calling (which is most unlikely if we are only just starting out) we may find their liberally laced-with-doubt perceptions hooking into our own uncertainties and seriously undermining our confidence.

The banner phrase I suggest to help us cope with this testing ordeal is a rather truculent one: **‘This isn’t just a phase that I am going through!’** If our calling is a genuine one, it deserves recognition – from ourselves if from no one else at this stage. If Elijah had not known deep down that he had been chosen as a prophet of the Lord, he would never have endured those desperate days in the desert. As it was, the time came when he recovered both his stability and his sense of purpose. A time may come for us too when others will see us in our true light. We may have left them with no alternative!

## Carping Critics

‘A man must serve his time to every trade  
Save censure –  
Critics all are ready made . .

With just enough of learning to misquote . . .  
Seek roses in December –  
Ice in June,  
Hope constancy in wind,  
Or corn in chaff . . .

Or any other thing that’s false  
Before you trust in critics,  
Who themselves are sore’. (Lord Byron)

Elijah’s adversary, Queen Jezebel, must surely rank as the most carping critics of all time. To all who dared oppose her tyranny she had but one solution: the oft-repeated cry of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* – ‘Off with his head’. Her track record proves that this was no idle boast. As we have seen, even Elijah, who had stayed ahead of the game for so long, finally buckled under the pressure and fled for his life. We should never underestimate the effects that abuse and criticism can have on us, not least in terms of causing our confidence to flounder.

Zeuxis was right. ‘Criticism comes easier than craftsmanship’. There are few callings that leave one more vulnerable than being a writer – but there are equally few that can lead to such rich self-awareness. When I drafted my first full-length book, I was eager to show my work to several people whom I assumed would

serve as my mentors. It turned out to be a profoundly discouraging experience. Their approach was far more objective than mine; they favoured ‘all teaching and no anecdote,’ and more or less forced me to edit out all personal references from my writing. To me, the stories I had wanted to include provided welcome relief from the intensity of the teaching, whilst at the same time illustrating and grounding the material real people’s experience.

The dilemma was excruciating. I was insufficiently convinced of my literary abilities in those days, and nowhere near courageous enough to reject the advice my friends were pressing on me. Because I had *sought* their advice, I felt impelled to *accept* it.

Considering the painful outcome this caused, it is hardly surprising that writers think twice before sharing their work with others. The very act of expressing ourselves so intimately on paper makes us acutely vulnerable. What if people’s kind remarks are just a patronising attempt to pat us on the head and gee us up? And how will we cope if they make snide remarks or, worse, rubbish the whole project? (Most preachers would sympathise with this too. They know from painful experience what it is like to have over-conscientious people leaping to fulfil their self-appointed duty to correct the one thing they got wrong in their sermon).

People say that writers need to develop a strong hide to cope with the criticism that will inevitably come our way. There is truth in that statement. We do. Even more than that, however, we need to develop discernment. By all means we should listen to every piece of advice and criticism. There is bound to be a measure of truth in almost all of it – but is there a sufficient amount of it to justify making any serious change?

This where the still small voice comes into its own as it processes the comments and examines the criticisms. The most important thing is not to allow the extensive criticism to crush this voice and make us doubt our judgement.

As we saw in the section on ‘Sharing with Others’, it is important not to flare up in our self-defence, upset because somebody has dared to challenge our grandiose work. If we can humble ourselves sufficiently, and accept the challenge, this may actually prove an excellent test of whether our work is up to scratch, and whether we are prepared to stand up and fight for things we know need to be included in our text.

These are the times when we must set our faces like flint and shun all contact with negative voices that would snap the fragile thread of our creativity. Experience teaches us not to share our first outline ideas at too early a stage with highly critical people. Their inability to see beyond our preliminary sketches is likely to discourage us to the point where we lose heart and never complete the project at all.

Think of two people walking round a building plot. One picks his way delicately around, seeing only mud and half-completed foundations. The other dons his wellington boots and sees the beautiful house that will one day stand in that place.

Likewise, to quote Byron's memorable words, we must beware critics who are sore: the flattering and the bitter, the show offs and the know-it-all's. Although such people may have some viable observations to make, there is no reason why we should follow their advice implicitly.

This is the banner we must raise to keep us from running to carping critics for help: **'Only share your work with people who will inject positive feedback and fresh perspectives'**.

### **The Mind Field Maze**

You think that you are Ann's suitor; that you are the pursuer and she the pursued. Fool: it is you who are the pursued . . . Marry Ann, and at the end of a week you'll find no more inspiration in her than in plate of muffins. (George Bernard Shaw)

When we have taken the all-important step of publicly declaring that we are a writer, and are resolutely setting time aside to pursue our calling, our battles are far from over. The confidence-sapping emotions we mentioned earlier still have plenty of life in them. The battle is joined, and it is primarily in the mind that it will be played out.

Just as insecurities lessen our creativity by causing us to wage unnecessary battles with ourselves, so distractions in one form or another are a constant plague. Although not all distractions take the form of quite such explicit temptations as the one indicated in the quote above, most writers experience strong inclinations to divert their emotional energies into pursuing secondary objectives that will lead them almost anywhere except to producing much finished work.

That same sensitivity which enables us to feel so passionately and to write so eloquently also renders us vulnerable to extremes of hope and discouragement. One day we are convinced that we are writing a masterpiece; the next that we are a hopelessly deluded basket case. Whatever gave us the mad idea that we could ever write a book?

From there, the inner process goes something like this: 'This piece of writing is no good' – a supposedly objective though entirely self-destructive comment. 'Nobody would want to read it – an overt expectation of rejection. 'Therefore I'm no use at all!' – a final devastating curse upon ourselves.

If we settle the matter in our mind beforehand, we will suffer less and be deflected less often from our central purpose. We should pay no attention whatsoever to these faith-deadening messages our subconscious plagues us with. They are mournful fear-inducing refrains and should be given as wide a berth as we would give to an unexplored bomb.

When these almost overwhelmingly strong emotions assail us (grand delusions one day and pits of despair the next) be assured that both extremes are quite normal – but that both represent a faulty perspective. Being convinced we are an inspired genius will only give us a serious bout of ‘Writer’s Swollen Head’. As for the negaholic tendencies, the less said about them the better – they can be devastating! How right Kipling was when he taught us to treat both success and failure as impostors.

When we are in the creative writing stage, we may legitimately dally with a few delusions; they spur us on, and keep us on our toes. But we need to declare war on all tendencies towards negative expectations. Ruthlessly. Grasp this banner during seasons of discouragement and declare out loud, ‘I am not useless – I am simply under construction!’ This is such an important battle that we will make it the subject of the next section too.

## **Pause and Consider**

To return to our starting quotation: is there an ‘Ann’ in your life that is distracting you from your call to write? Are you secretly flirting with other possibilities, enticed by the buzz that they give, and all but insensible to the fact that they are drawing you away from your true direction?

## **Faith and Humility to escape the Condemnation Trap**

‘The most self-sufficient form of spanking ever devised by humankind’. (Rachel Simon)

When unspecified fears and a great sense of worthlessness come over us, we have two main defences to raise against these energy-depleting emotions. Firstly, as we have been insisting throughout, we must raise our declaratory banners to offset the flow of falsities that we are continually being depth-charged with.

Typically these thoughts weigh in just when we ought to be reaching for our pen, reminding us that we didn’t achieve much last time we tried doing it, so why not go and do something useful like mowing the lawn, or something kind like visiting a friend in need? These distracting thoughts come in a seemingly endless sequence of plausible variations. It is only the determined and the passionate who will have

the strength and resolution to shrug them aside. It is not that these other things do not need attending to: it is just that they should not be done now. Writing is a serious priority and it requires the best of our time and energies.

Our second line of defence is equally as vigorous. At its simplest, it consists of assuming that vices are virtues that have taken a wrong direction, and that there must therefore be a way of ‘catching’ these strong emotions and turning them into something positive. Think of a jujitsu fighter who uses the force of his opponent’s charge to flip him over on his back and the idea begins to make sense.

For example, the more our feelings of fear or inferiority tell us that we will never be able to do this or that, the more we need to humble ourselves and respond in the opposite spirit – not ‘I can’t,’ but ‘I can’. This is not pride and neither is it a blind presumptive faith; it is a faith that is tempered by realism, and a humility that has nothing whatsoever to do with perpetual self-denigration.

Each difficulty that we face, and every setback that we experience thus becomes an opportunity in disguise: a challenge to negotiate rather than the death knell to our desire to write. Why allow past disappointments to make us give up? Provided that we have properly mourned hurts given and received, and sought to learn necessary lessons from them, then they too can play their part in maturing our character.

If we can accept in advance that we are bound to make mistakes, and that not everyone will find our contributions of much help or interest, then we can be free to find both peace and enjoyment in our calling. We will escape the pitfalls of perfectionism on the one hand, and the pusillanimity of the unadventurous on the other.

We are afraid of making mistakes? Then let’s step out and attempt the very thing we are afraid of. When we hear ourselves wondering, ‘Who on earth would want to read this load of codswallop?’ pause and remember how helpful people have found other things that we have written. After that, declare out loud: **‘Why should it be any different this time round?’**

What happens if we fail to respond in faith and take some such affirmative action? The chances are that we will remain forever at the mercy of these destructive feelings. They are, after all, more than strong enough to cause us to retreat into ourselves and to lose all sense of purpose. From there it is but a short step before anger and paranoia set in and we end up lashing out blindly at anything and anyone who, as we perceive it, is daring to add to our burden of rejection.

Such reactions are the very opposite of faith and humility in action. Nobody wants to hear embittered people whingeing endlessly that nobody understands them – but there are plenty of people who will respond to someone who has pushed through

the mind field and kept their faith and vision alive until they finally succeed in creating something of real value.

The best of us are a mass of internal contradictions, but it is the single-minded who ultimately prosper. They are the ones who are prepared to take whatever steps are needed to keep their hearts free from distractions, and who are quickest to make the most of the opportunities that come their way.

In the face of life's many distractions, take courage! We do not need to allow them to squash our creativity. It is as we yield ourselves and embrace the particular yoke that our calling has placed on us that we can write or paint or play our musical instruments or sing or pray or do whatever it is that we are called to do, as it were to order. In such ways, we not only stay close to our calling, but keep ourselves one step removed from the tyranny of our moods.

That is why this particular banner is one of the most important put into practise because it is calling Condemnation's Bluff. **'Believe the opposite whenever your heart tells you it is all a waste of time'**.

## **A Far From Passive Perseverance**

'Le genie n'est qu'une grande aptitude à la patience'. (Genius is nothing but a great aptitude for patience -- De Buffon)

'La patience est amère, mais le fruit en est doux'. (Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet -- Rousseau)

'Recall your courage and lay aside this gloomy fearfulness'' (Virgil, *The Aeneid*)

There are seasons in the writer's life: times when inspiration flows freely, and other occasions when we need to crank-start our reluctant motors. A break to go for a walk, or to take a day right away from the computer and to learn afresh to play – that is all it may take to release our blockage and to get us writing again.

If the *desire* to write is still there, then no matter what difficulties or distractions may be preventing us from exercising it, all that has happened is that, like certain types of streams, the waters of inspiration have briefly gone underground. We can be confident that the waters will return, and that we will once again experience the joy that comes from being in a writing flow.

This is where the second of our step principles is especially important. Spending time with friends and in recreational activities rescues us from too much mental preoccupation. We need these non writing projects to compensate against the

colossal amount of thought power we expend every day. We will live longer and write better if we husband our mental and physical energies.

In the meantime there is a cardinal principle to reiterate. If we are serious about our calling, then sooner, rather than later, we must come to the point where we can function as writers no matter what is going on in our lives. This is where we make the altogether delightful discovery that we can still operate with some considerable degree of fluency, even during these times when inspiration appears to have all but deserted us.

Discipline and dedication (supported as they must always be by a strong desire) to a large extent supersede our need to 'feel' inspired. Without in any way being unsympathetic to those who are caught in the vice of Writer's Block, we must insist on this banner: **'We can write to order any time and any place, if we will but set ourselves to do so'**. But if we turn right away and find fulfilment in other pursuits, then perhaps our call to write never meant that much to us.

When an almost frenzied impatience takes hold of us, and we berate ourselves for taking so long to produce a finished copy, this is the time to raise another banner: **'Good Writing takes longer than we would like it to'**. It will certainly take a great deal longer than other people think it should do!

Repeating and affirming this particular slogan will help to calm our restlessness as the days and months of hard toil pass by. It will comfort us, too, during those occasions when, for whatever reason, we cannot 'get' to our work at all.

Samuel Johnson would have approved of this banner. He once famously declared, 'I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please have sunk into the grave!'

Remember Brahms? He was forty before he wrote his first symphony. As for Flaubert, he had already discarded two previous novels before he even began to write *Madame Bovary*. Obsessed with finding 'le mot juste,' it is no surprise that it took Flaubert five full years to complete a book which, perhaps above all others charts the rise and fall of impossible delusions. There is still hope for us!

### **Escaping the Clutches of Green-Eyes the Envious**

'Envy and wrath shorten life'. (The Book of Sirach 30:24)

Ever stood before a rack of publications racked by doubts whether your puny efforts will ever match up to the inspired penmanship of those who have made it

into print? The feelings are entirely understandable, but they become crippling when envy rides in on the back of them.

Long ago, wise king Solomon showed how alert he was to the green-eyed monster when he declared, 'Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming – but who can stand before envy?' (Proverbs 27:4)

There is no more damaging emotion than envy. It resents the success of others, eats us up from the inside and eventually makes us twisted and bitter. Jealousy is bad enough; but envy is worse. What is the difference between the two? I am jealous when I want what you have. But I am envious when I resent anyone having that thing which I cannot have. If it is allowed to run unchecked in our hearts it spreads like untreated cancer.

In '*The Artist's Way*,' Julia Cameron likens bouts of jealousy to snake bites that need an immediate antidote. In '*The Writer's Survival Guide*' Rachel Simon is equally as insistent about our need to take action the moment we discern its onset. Rachel suggests an eminently sensible solution. For her, the best way to combat envy is to focus less on the source of our envy and get on with our own work. Closer contact with our own calling will spare us many pangs of jealous longing and pointless animosity towards those who appear to have 'made it'.

It is worth reminding ourselves how important it is that we win this particular battle. Envy has strength enough to tighten our chest and eventually, to consume us from deep within.

Envy is like a deep-frozen grudge. It freezes our trust, dents our courage, stifles our creativity and impairs our ability to judge accurately and to act efficiently. Envy makes us mean-minded rather than generous-spirited. How did we reach this sorry state?

Perhaps, like a horse wearing blinkers, we allowed jealousy to focus our gaze too narrowly. Our mistake was to assume that our ultimate happiness depended on one person, incident or aspiration and when that failed to materialise according to our aspirations, we allowed a foothold to bitterness, and spite called to envy. Life has more to offer us – wider perspectives, fresh contacts and new experiences.

Rather than resenting someone else's success (which is often a reflection of our hidden fear of being left on the shelf) the best way to overcome these feelings is to refuse to look on writing as a contest. There is room for everyone, and that includes us. So far from permitting the success or indifference of others to paralyse us into inactivity, we must use these feelings as a goad to pursue our own calling ever more diligently. Only then will we succeed in fulfilling our potential.

## **Pause and Put into Practice**

Do you really want to escape the jealousy trap? Then here are some practical steps to take. Julia Cameron recommends drawing three columns on a page. In the first column, write down the names of the people we feel jealous of.

In the second column, list the reasons why we are jealous of them. This will take a great deal of honesty because most of us are highly skilled at disguising these hidden jealousies from ourselves, let alone from other people.

In the third column, begin to sketch antidotes: specific actions we can take that will direct our heart away from the jealousy that is harming both us and them.

Try this exercise. Be imaginative, kind and creative – and gradually the green-eyed monster who used to trample the paths of our hearts with such storming regularity will find the ground being taken from under its feet. Our banner antidote is both a prophetic declaration and a call to action: ‘When love and charity are flowing in our hearts, Green-Eyes will find himself squeezed out’.

## **Dealing with Disappointments and Repelling Rejection**

‘I am in that temper that if I were under water, I would scarcely kick to come to the top’. (John Keats)

‘Hope deferred makes the heart sick’. (Proverbs 13.12)

‘He who has never hoped can never despair’. (George Bernard Shaw)

When Winston Churchill returned to Harrow School after the war to give a speech, he, the school’s most famous scion, astonished the audience by uttering but two sentences, – words of advice he had proved in the sternest arena possible: ‘Young men, never give up. Never never give up’.

This is a message we will often need to return to. Hope springs eternal, but the writer’s path is full of moments that cut to the quick. Our spirits can reach a perilously low ebb when a clutch of rejection notes land through our letter box. Not only do they sting in themselves, they, can so easily hook into our low self-esteem, especially if no explanation is provided for them. I remember how gutted I felt when one of my books was accepted by a major American publishing company, only to have them withdraw the offer at the last moment because "I was not well enough known on the American lecture circuit". It took many months to overcome the disappointment of being outmanoeuvred by blatantly commercial rather than literary considerations.

When it comes to handling the inevitable matter of rejection slips the first and most important thing is to avoid taking the rejection personally. It is our work that does not fit somebody's commercial needs, not our life and character that are being rejected.

There may, however, be hints in the way the rejection slip is couched that will inspire us to rewrite the rejected piece review some aspect of our style or technique. The most important thing is not to stop writing. Anything is better than wringing our hands and bemoaning how unfair it all is. The very act of putting pen to paper reassures us that we are back on track, no matter what may (or may not) be happening outwardly to our material. As we have been stressing all along, real writers cannot find true fulfilment unless they *do* write.

Writing is, after all, a labour of love which we undertake ultimately not only for ourselves but for the benefit of others. For that reason it will eventually bring us into contact with Love itself. When I am in a writing flow, treating a subject that is dear to my heart, I feel clean inside. Friends, associates and situations stand before me as I am working. I can love them, pray for them, and even remember their circumstances without in any way losing focus on the work in hand. I am where I really belong.

Keats was right when he looked beyond his immediate turmoil and declared, 'There is a budding morrow in midnight'. For all the setbacks and the pain, there is also unparalleled joy. There is nowhere else I would rather be, and nothing I would rather be doing. This alone goes a long way to compensate for the hurts and rejections, and which spurs me on to go on making the immense personal sacrifice to closet myself away and continue my work at the word-face. This is the determination we need to help us overcome the temptation to self-pity and which will develop in us a broader sympathy and charity for others. That is why this particular banner is so dear to my heart: it is full of promise and adventure as well as doggedness. **'We never know what can happen until we try again'.**

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

Following some disappointment, try using the following starter phrases as a framework. Doing this exercise can help us to regroup our hopes and emotions and write our way out of our emotional turmoil.

Why can't I . . .

I remember when . . .

I dream of the day when I can . . .  
I am grateful for . . .  
I am confident that . . .

How did you get on? I wonder if you realised that you have just sketched the outline of a modern day Psalm! King David, who experienced such colossal highs and lows in his chequered life, began many of his psalms by pouring out his hurting heart before stirring his faith remembering what his God had done for him. This in turn brought him to a point where he could thank and praise his Lord for what He was going to do next to resolve the crisis that he faced. His memorable songs and poems have inspired millions through the ages to achieve a sense of perspective. Our present disappointment is not going to last for ever. It can even open up into gloriously creative and liberating appointments.

It is courage that helps us to move on beyond our discouragements and faith which helps us to believe that our disappointments will one day be turned into worthwhile appointments.

### **Unblocking Writer's Block**

He who wants to enjoy the glory of the sunrise must live through the night.  
(Anon)

Writing is not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness. (Georges Simenon)

I love my calling – but I can sympathise entirely with Simenon's sentiments! 'Writer's Block' takes many different forms, but in essence it is much the same: a series of pressures (internal usually rather than external) that make us disinclined to pursue our calling.

There are some, perhaps, who have never experienced Writers' Block, but I am not sure I would want to spend too much time in their company. Those who have never experienced a day's illness in their life rarely make the most compassionate sick visitors. Neither do the unrealistically triumphant have much in common with the majority of us who are obliged to try many routes before we finally find the path we are meant to travel down.

My own struggle has never been to find something worthwhile to write about – the 'blank page in the morning' syndrome – but rather with finding a suitable angle from which to present material that constantly threatens to run to seed.

No matter what guise it may come in, Writers' Block can lead to an almost overwhelming sense of alienation. A great pall of grey settles over us and we cry out, 'What have I got to say that's worth reading?' The sheer amount of time we are obliged to spend on our own – such a blessing when inspiration is flowing – feels now like all-imprisoning loneliness. Solitude is precious, but when the well of inspiration – or the morale to drip the bucket into the well – has all but dried up, is it any wonder that authors actually end up welcoming excuses and distractions?

Much of the writer's time is spent thinking. ('Brooding' may sometimes be a more accurate description). Writers need to dream. The mind – like a bicyclist – benefits from periods of free-wheeling. Wisdom lies in knowing how to avoid such reverie becoming dead-end introspection and to convert it into creative writing. Like wind turbines that convert the forces of nature into productive electricity, we must learn to sense when the moment has come to move beyond thinking and to get on with the task in hand.

During times of Writer's Block we will not feel like doing this. Almost every minute we may find ourselves assailed by dark thoughts, moodiness and temptations to give up. We are afraid we will never make it into print, or, if we have experienced some measure of success, we fear that our latest work will fail to come up to the mark. There is nothing unusual about such feelings. From our frequently jaundiced position, every other writer appears infinitely more accomplished and better established than we could possibly be.

It is at these testing junctures that we can make some serious mistakes. Fear can make us change too much, or too little in our text. Better to stick with the theme we were working on, and only make any serious changes if we are convinced that they are demonstrably better. It can also lead to an inner withdrawing (and to sulks and tantrums) and to a seething resentment against our perceived critics. Another route it can take is to torment us with a desperate desire to please people who, in all probability, we can never hope to satisfy. #Fly Fishing.

The one thing we must not do is to give up trying. All that happens then is that fear wins the contest unopposed. The prophets of Baal triumph and Elijah runs away distraught at the thought that it has all been in vain. We can no more afford to allow Fortress Fear to win in our own lives than we would in the lives of our central characters. Courage has nothing to do with the absence of fear, but everything to do with keeping going despite it. If we will allow it to, the still small voice will always tell us that there is still a way forward! Better to grit our teeth, acknowledge our fears and at all costs refuse to give in. There will be a way forward!

The vast majority of our fears prove to be delusions when confronted head on. This is why faith is the perfect antidote to fear. We had faith in our inspiration when we embarked on the project, and now, in the doldrums, it is being put to the test. We

may have to endure months, or even years at a time, when ideas dry up and other commitments make a nonsense of our professed desire to write. But the flame simply will not go out. Like one of those magic birthday candles, it will always spring up again. Let us therefore return for our banner to the quote we referred to earlier from the gloriously dogged Winston Churchill: 'Never give up. Never, never give up'.

### **Pause and Ponder**

Faith and fear lie at opposite ends of the bridge. Where would you place yourself along that bridge? The answer probably lies in whether you are feeding your faith or your fears more.

### **A Book of Gratitudes**

New every morning is the love  
Our wakening and uprising prove.  
If on our daily course our mind  
Be set to hallow all we find,  
New treasures still, of countless price,  
God will provide for sacrifice. (John Keble)

Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything beautiful. Welcome beauty in every fair face, every fair sky, every fair flower, and thank Him for it is He who is the fountain of all loveliness

(Charles Kingsley).

There is another antidote to envy, fear or frustration that costs us nothing yet which contains within it almost limitless power. What is this wonderful quality? Gratitude. It is virtually impossible to be grateful and resentful at the same time. We can turn these thoughts into a declaratory banner: **'I cannot be anxious, impatient or fretful if I am truly grateful'**.

This is no light matter. To a large extent, our happiness depends on the extent to which we are grateful. Gratitude and celebration keep the well of happiness flowing within us, and help us to appreciate the fact that our glass is half full rather than half empty.

Opportunities to express our gratitude are almost endless, but our willingness to do so may have been seriously stunted by past woundings. We cannot alter the past, but we can waste a perfectly good present by worrying too much about the future. Cultivating a grateful spirit can do us nothing but good. Because the writer's calling is a long-distance haul rather than a short sprint, it will hurt rather than help us live in perpetual anticipation of that mythical moment 'when it all happens'. Better to take each day as it comes and to make time to celebrate the minor successes, that come our way, and to reward ourselves in little ways. Social trips, a meal out – simple things that we can eagerly anticipate, savour to the full, and then look back on with gratitude.

There is currently no regular cinema where we live on Shetland, so when we hear that a particular film is coming to the island, we look forward to it eagerly. The anticipation is rarely misplaced and its memory is treasured. Back on the mainland we would have taken such events for granted, and no doubt have sandwiched them in between numerous other activities and engagements. Their comparative rarity up here helps us to appreciate them more, and to reflect more profoundly on what we have watched – and that is surely honouring to the spirit in which they were created. We are blessed on these islands too, with an extraordinary wealth of talented singers and musicians. To participate in such 'live' entertainment is not only immensely pleasurable; it also fosters a strong community spirit.

### **Pause and Put into Practice**

The stanza of the hymn I quoted at the start of this section reminds us that gratitude is sacrificial as well as joyful. Most of us find it infinitely easier to moan and to grumble than to express our thanks and gratitude. But these two paths lead to entirely opposite outcomes. They are as far apart as faith and fear. This is not just a matter of temperament. Instinctively optimistic people have an easier ride than dour doomsters, but there is much all of us can do to improve our mental outlook. Since every day brings its own share of precious insights and recollections, try writing a list each night of things that have happened in the course of the day for which we can be grateful. We will be pleasantly surprised by how much there is to be grateful for. A baby smiles, we are surrounded by beautiful views, people share kind words with us, we gain a fresh insight through something we have read . . . As you can see, we are not talking about major events such as a new job or promotion, but the visit we had from a friend; the fact that the car started faithfully again this morning, the fact that there was food on the table; that we found a particular programme enjoyable; a letter or e mail that reminded us that someone loves us – yes, even the criticisms that have come our way show that people care enough to make their point. I call this 'A Book of Gratitudes'.

Try to record a dozen or more good points every day. Little by little, we will come to look for the good things, and to see value in everyday occurrences we might once have passed by without noticing. This is the fruit of reflection – and it will prove a promising well for inspiration. Since the Americans have so much to teach the rest of us about maintaining a positive outlook on life, we will go transatlantic for this banner: ‘It’s time to cultivate the Gratitude-Attitude!’

## **Preparing for Tomorrow**

When once the itch of literature comes over a man, nothing can cure it but the scratching of a pen. (Samuel Lover, 1842)

‘A losing trade, I assure you, sir; literature is a drug’. (George Borrow)

‘He never leaves off . . . he always has two packages of manuscript in his desk, besides the one he’s working on’. (Rose Trollope)

Most writers are familiar with the emotional slump which often accompanies the completion of a project. There is a simple way to guard against this emotional downer - start planning immediately for the next piece of writing. Many authors like to have more than one project on the go, awaiting assessment and submission. Perhaps we should make this our final banner: **As soon as we finish one project, get on with a new one straight away.** This maintains our impetus and is a useful shield against rejection slips. But if we feel in urgent need of a break from the word processor, then we should not hesitate to take one. As we considered earlier, the fallow times often prove pivotal for refreshing our inspiration, and for helping us cope with the inevitable peaks and troughs.

The high points come when we hear that our material has been of real value and service to others. The low points include making the disheartening discovery that Calvin Trillin poignantly described in the Sunday Times a decade or so ago: ‘The shelf life of the modern hardback writer is somewhere between the milk and the yogurt’.

This rather sobering appraisal ought, of itself, to be enough to deter the ‘wannabees’. It won’t, of course, because hope dawns eternal and we are optimistic (or foolish) enough to believe that we will be the ones who buck the trend. And we know from much experience that we will never be fulfilled unless we write down the ideas that are bubbling up within. Like the prophet Jeremiah, there is a fire burning in our hearts; a burden that simply has to be discharged.

As to who it is that we are writing for (our target audience) it is only common sense to research the potential market, but even here we should not limit ourselves unduly. Editors themselves are not always aware of what they are looking for. We write because we know that something vital would be left unfulfilled in our lives if we did not set the whole thing down on paper. And who knows who knows? Our interest and knowledge may just be enough to open up make a new market.

Only a small percentage of those who take up the pen will ever derive more than a small portion of their income from their creative writing, but there are a multitude of opportunities and professions which service and run parallel to it, in much the same way that eight or nine people have to be employed behind the scenes in order to keep one modern soldier in the front line. Where would writers be without editors, proof-readers and teachers of literature?

There is much we have not touched on in this book. Poetry, science–fiction, the arts of crime writing and journalism are just some of the more obvious omissions, along with any practical suggestions on how to explore areas of research. These are all specific genres that must be studied separately. Our aim has been to share principles that can be applied to any form of creative writing.

It was Ovid who wrote, ‘Love has bidden me write’. That is why I want to urge you to press on with all your heart. You have talent enough to turn your ideas and experiences into something worth reading. There are doors waiting for you to walk through, and an audience that is waiting to benefit from your particular contribution.

But don’t be unrealistic. It will all take a great deal longer than you would like, and you cannot hope to avoid at least some of all the highs and the lows of the emotional roller coaster. Faith and courage will always give you the strength to overcome the disappointments and to pursue your calling.

The most important thing is to remain attentive to the Still Small Voice. For me, this is intricately bound up with my relationship with the God of Love, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the World so that we can know Him intimately in this life and the next.

Not everyone who reads these words will have experienced this level of friendship – nor indeed have the slightest interest in doing so, though the offer remains open to everyone. But just as the sun shines on people of all faiths and none, so the principles of creativity we have shared in this publication hold true for all who will humble themselves and apply themselves to something that will bring both you and your readers great joy and insight: namely, The Art of Creative Writing.

## **To end where we started . . .**

Everyone must start somewhere. Set yourself the goal of ‘free writing’ for at least a few minutes every day for the next ten days. Gradually increase this period as time and opportunities permit – half an hour, an hour and so on. As a first fruit, this will more than double your output – and there can be no better way for discovering where your real heart interests lie – and this will be reflected in the conviction with which you write. Then you will be ready to benefit from all the advice and suggestions we have made in the course of this book. To quote another Latin author, Martial, ‘Scribe aliquid magnum’ – ‘Write something great!’

## **Books that will take you further**

### **Part One: Writing as a Lifestyle**

Dorothea Brand, ‘Becoming a Writer’ (Papermac)

Rachel Simon, ‘The Writer’s Survival Guide’ (Story Press, Cincinnati)

### **Part Two: The Art that Conceals Art**

John Brain, ‘Writing a Novel’ (Eyre)

Michael Legat, ‘How to Write Historical Novels’ (Allison and Busby)

Josip Novakovich, ‘Fiction Writer’s Workshop’ (Story Press, Cincinnati)

Sol Stein, ‘Solutions for Novelists. Secrets of A Master Editor’ (Souvenir Press)

### **Parts Three to Seven: More General Books**

Jack Bickham, ‘The 38 most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (and how to avoid them)’  
Writer’s Digest Books

William Zinsser, ‘On Writing Well’ (Harper Perennial).

Carole Blake, ‘From Pitch to Publication’ (Everything you need to know to get your novel published) (Macmillan)

Ruth Sawyer, 'The Way of the Storyteller' (Bodley Head)

Christopher Stevens, 'Get into Print' – A Guide to Self-publishing (New Caxton Press)

Ellin Greene, Storytelling: Art and Technique (Bowker)

'The Writer's Handbook' 2002 (MacMillan)