

— I —

Getting started



Writing is hard enough yet there are many ways in which we add to our own difficulties. Perhaps most significant is our tendency to ask: ‘Am I good enough?’ Maureen Duffy speaks for many of us when she says that being a writer feels like ‘a terrible impertinence’, explaining that ‘the people I admire, my particular saints, are dead writers and being a writer is somehow daring to measure yourself against them’.¹ Our literary heroes can seem to loom over us, impossible to match, mocking our efforts. But it’s important to remember that all the writers you’ve ever admired had their own particular heroes – that this is just part of the condition of being a writer.

So for the moment, let your heroes recede into the background. Think of their work as part of the richness of your experience, not as a barrier to any achievement of your own. If everyone was daunted by what had gone before, there would be no record-breaking sprints, no life-saving vaccines, no new technology, no innovation of any kind. And anyway, you’re not setting out to write the way others write. You’re setting out to write the way *you* write.

So how do you find your own voice? You may already have hit on a style that works well and if so, that’s excellent. Or you may find that your voice – or the various voices you’re trying out – sounds inauthentic. Perhaps you think your voice lacks individuality – you don’t even think you have a style at all. Or perhaps your writing is perfectly fine; the problem is that it doesn’t excite you.

The only way you’re going to discover what you can do is by trying things out. If you’re going to make progress you’re going to have to be prepared to experiment. You might already not be liking the sound of this, as experiments can end in failure – indeed,

The Book You Need

they are often expected to. A scientist may carry out hundreds of experiments before she can discover the combination that works. All those failures are needful; none of them is absolute. Every success stands on the shoulders of multiple failures. So if you're going to progress you need to be prepared to experiment, and if you're prepared to experiment, you must expect, accept and even embrace failure – learning to put the term, conceptually, in inverted commas – as a necessary function of the writing process. Even the humblest writing implement implicitly defends the inevitability of making mistakes: you can write with one end and erase with the other precisely because a pencil is deliberately designed to accommodate your right to change your mind.

Think of it this way: a novel which wins a prestigious literary prize will have been through numerous drafts. Yet the writer would not, in retrospect, consider any of those drafts as failures; she will have seen them as necessary steps on the path to success. It might be that only a quarter of her first draft has survived into the final product, yet the book would not exist unless she had allowed herself to write that first unsatisfactory draft. And this holds true right down to the level of the sentence. You may decide to cross out a phrase you have written, but if you then discover a better one, you'll find this is often precisely because you have allowed yourself to write that not-quite-satisfactory phrase in the first place. If you won't allow yourself a mistake – a misstep – you'll be looking at a blank page for a very long time, and it will still be blank when you return to it the next day and the day after that. A page with writing on it, on the other hand, holds the potential to multiply into more pages.

So the willingness to experiment – and to fail – is absolutely key if you want to develop your writing skills. James Baldwin believed that writing was simply 'a polite term' for experimenting.² Experimentation can feel scary, but that's no reason to avoid it. When Margaret Atwood was writing *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) she had never attempted anything like it before – all her previous

Getting started

fiction had been realistic. She describes the unsettling nature of the experiment: it gave her ‘a strange feeling, like skating on river ice – exhilarating but unbalancing. How thin is this ice? How far can I go? How much trouble am I in? What’s down there if I fall?’³ In fact, most landmark fiction has done something which hasn’t been tried before. What you are attempting is comparatively modest: being prepared to try something *you* haven’t tried before. Actors rehearse, dancers and musicians practise, artists do preliminary sketches and so on – and writers, too, are allowed to take faltering first steps which may be only a pale foreshadowing of their mature work. It’s not just permissible; it’s essential.

Before we leave the f-word, it’s worth paying attention to the courageous sector of writers whose failures happen in full view of the audience. While a play will go through several drafts, it’s not until it’s performed that a playwright can see what might still be wrong with it. Yet they have to be prepared for that to happen. Samuel Beckett’s lines from his novella *Worstward Ho* (1983) are often quoted: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’⁴ He believed that ‘to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion.’⁵ More prosaically, Edward Albee said of fellow playwright, Pulitzer Prize-winning Sam Shepard: ‘Sam was always taking chances, always being original. ... Somebody who was willing to fail and fail interestingly. And if you’re willing to fail interestingly, you tend to succeed interestingly.’⁶ If these great playwrights were willing to fail in front of an audience, you can certainly afford to fail in private.

In order to write effectively we need to remember that our literary heroes, however talented, were or are mere mortals, who had to work through their mis-steps too. But who else might be sitting on your shoulder, emanating negative vibrations? Well, your nearest and dearest for a start, and perhaps your parents in particular. If you’re going to write to please your parents, it’s extremely optimistic to expect your writing to please anyone else. No writer was

The Book You Need

ever well served by the voice of an imagined other saying ‘You can’t write that.’ Such censorship stifles creativity, closing down avenues of exploration.

This isn’t a bridge you have to cross yet, anyway. Your parents, partner, children or friends won’t be reading what you’ve written until you’re ready to show it to them. By that time you will have a different relationship with what you have written and a more confident sense of who you are as a writer. And it is *fiction*, after all. You are entitled to make full use of any of your experiences – to record them or to reconfigure them in new forms: they belong to you. Don’t write to be liked and don’t write to impress – not every reader will like you and not every reader will be impressed, and you will end up with something dishonest anyway. Ernest Hemingway had the right idea when he wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald: ‘For Christ sake write and don’t worry about what the boys will say nor whether it will be a masterpiece ... I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit. I try to put the shit in the wastebasket.’⁷

Hemingway was famous for his practical views on writing, although there’s no evidence that one of the most widely quoted pieces of advice was actually his at all: ‘write drunk; edit sober’. The most likely source appears to be Peter De Vries who in his novel *Reuben, Reuben* (1964) has a character say: ‘Sometimes I write drunk and revise sober ... and sometimes I write sober and revise drunk. But you have to have both elements in creation – the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline.’⁸ Somewhat more elaborate than the advice to ‘write drunk; edit sober’, the insistence on the necessity for both ‘spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline’ in the creative process is extremely useful. While we wouldn’t recommend writing under the influence (no one mentions editing with a hang-over) the inexperienced writer will certainly benefit from taking a relaxed and uninhibited approach to the first draft. Indeed, a

Getting started

number of very experienced writers are perfectly comfortable with a distinctly underwhelming first draft. Frank O'Connor said: 'I don't give a hoot what the writing's like, I write any sort of rubbish which will cover the main outlines of the story, then I begin to see it',⁹ while James Thurber reported that his wife 'took a look at the first version of something I was doing not long ago and said, "Goddamn it, Thurber, that's high-school stuff." I have to tell her to wait until the seventh draft, it'll work out all right.'¹⁰

Ray Bradbury (who had a sign over his desk stating: DON'T THINK) had a different version of 'write drunk; edit sober', but it confirms the idea that a certain sense of abandon is appropriate at the first creative stage and that more careful consideration can come later:

The history of each story ... should read almost like a weather report: Hot today, cool tomorrow. This afternoon, burn down the house. Tomorrow, pour cold critical water upon the simmering coals. Time enough to think and cut and rewrite tomorrow. But *today* – *explode* – *fly apart* – *disintegrate!* The other six or seven drafts are going to be pure torture. So why not enjoy the first draft, in the hope that your joy will seek and find others in the world who, reading your story, will catch fire too?¹¹

(Subsequent drafts will not *necessarily* be 'pure torture' but it's fair to acknowledge there are usually some difficult moments.) So these writers, at least, lend their vote to the 'don't get it right; just get it down' school of first drafting. Only you will know just how well this will serve you, but you may well find that having started to write in a provisional and rough style, you hit your stride once you've warmed up and have a better sense of what you're writing. You can always go back and tidy up the early stuff later.

The early stages of this process often seem unsatisfactory and you may well feel dispirited at times, so it's important to remind yourself that you're not alone – far from it. Here's Virginia Woolf's account of her character Orlando's experience of writing

The Book You Need

his novel – an account that clearly in some measure reflects her own experience:

Anyone moderately familiar with the rigours of composition will not need to be told the story in detail; how he wrote and it seemed good; read and it seemed vile; corrected and tore up; cut out; put in; was in ecstasy; in despair; had his good nights and bad mornings; snatched at ideas and lost them; saw his book plain before him and it vanished; acted his people's parts as he ate; mouthed them as he walked; now cried; now laughed; vacillated between this style and that; now preferred the heroic and pompous; next the plain and simple; now the vales of Tempe; then the fields of Kent or Cornwall; and could not decide whether he was the divinest genius or the greatest fool in the world.¹²

So accept the difficulties, expect things to be initially unsatisfactory, and start putting the words on the page. And while we acknowledge the need for preparation, let's keep in mind E. L. Doctorow's wise observation on the subject: 'Planning to write is not writing. Outlining a book is not writing. Researching is not writing. Talking to people about what you're doing, none of that is writing. Writing is writing.'¹³

— 2 —

Memory and imagination



Aspiring writers are often told: ‘Write what you know.’ But what does this really mean? It doesn’t mean that if you’re a doctor in a paediatric unit you should write exclusively about a character who’s a doctor in a paediatric unit (although your specialised knowledge in this area would doubtless be an advantage if you chose to do so). It’s broader than that. But how do we know what we know? When Shakespeare created compelling characters such as Othello and Shylock, he didn’t know what it was to be an African or Jewish inhabitant of a European city – but he did know what it was to be an outsider, and he found in his own remembered experience the basis for an understanding of his characters’ imagined lives.

Both Othello’s and Shylock’s stories are set in a city Shakespeare never visited, and writers are often in the position of writing not only of a physical location they don’t know, but of somewhere they can’t even hope to visit: the past. As we shall see later, Henry James thought that attempting to write historical fiction was pointless, because although we might get the ‘facts’ right it’s impossible to reconstruct the way people thought – and hence the way the world seemed – in the past.¹⁴ Geraldine Brooks grappled with this problem when writing *Year of Wonders* (2001), a novel set in a real historical situation, when the small village of Eyam in Derbyshire became infected with plague and sealed itself off to avoid spreading the disease to neighbouring communities. She realised, however, that although the events she was trying to reconstruct occurred over three centuries earlier, there were many parallels between Eyam then and the small rural community in which she now lived; just as people are in many ways the same the world over, so people in the past are very like people

The Book You Need

now – their hopes, fears, griefs and joys are similar to ours. She reasoned that the bedrock of human experience is essentially the same in any age, and this is part of what, as writers and human beings, we know. ‘It is human nature to imagine, to put yourself in another’s shoes’, she writes. ‘The past may be another country. But the only passport required is empathy.’¹⁵ Empathy is an act both of memory and of imagination, and our writing is enriched when we harness the two.

All writing has to be ‘what you know’; it can reasonably be argued that you can’t write what you don’t know. Whatever we invent is based on something known to us – our own experience, to which we apply our imagination. And in those cases where we have to increase the stock of what we know – through research – our writing reflects our newly acquired knowledge.

We are already applying imagination to memory when we recall an event from the past. If you were to set yourself the ten-minute task of writing down a memory from your childhood and were then asked whether, in order to fill in any gaps in your memory, you had made anything up (why you were there, who else was there, what the occasion was, when it happened), you would be very likely to say that you had – in fact, that you had been obliged to, because otherwise the narrative would have had distracting gaps or uncertainties in it. However, you would probably maintain that the account was essentially true.

The truth of an event may not, in any case, be easy to establish. You will probably recognise this experience: you are among old friends or family members when one of them starts to recall an event at which others were present. Members of the group will disagree on the detail – perhaps even on bigger issues – because the fact is that each individual has their own version of what happened. This is partly because they were experiencing it from their own unique perspective (and we shall have more to say later about the individual point of view) and partly because memory doesn’t unfold as a continuous spool of events and experiences. We don’t

Memory and imagination

preserve a frame-by-frame record of the past; what we retain is more like snapshots in an album, and we have not all taken the same snapshots; we have remembered what seemed to affect us as individuals most deeply at the time. We can't recall every incident which happened between the snapshots so we imaginatively reconstruct what *must* have happened between them. It is natural for humans to make connections in this way, to create narratives that suggest causes and effects. This is why dreams are at once so fascinating and so frustrating – they seem to be no respecters of cause and effect or of seamless narrative: we can step out of a restaurant and be on a ship, or turn out of a corridor and be in a forest. It's not a frame-by-frame narrative; connections seem to be missing. And our desire for connections – our desire to make sense – drives our automatic habit of filling in the gaps. When we remember, we are to a large extent reconstructing the past.

Everything you have lived through is material for your writing. (Hemingway maintained that the best early training for a writer is an unhappy childhood,¹⁶ and while this can be taken as part joke, his point has substance.) However, we don't simply report our own lives. As Maureen Duffy puts it: 'the experience has to be worked on, wrought up and transformed, not simply regurgitated'.¹⁷ The experiences may be whole episodes of our lives or the briefest moments: a look, a phrase, a smell. Terry Pratchett described writing as 'a process of breaking yourself and everything you've done into little bits and pasting them onto something else'.¹⁸ The fact that fiction draws on the writer's own lived experience gives readers their most intimate connection with the writing; as Carol Shields observes: 'We love fiction because it possesses the texture of the real'.¹⁹ But what makes a novel or a short story something both less and more than autobiography or memoir is its implicit acknowledgement of deviation from the facts in the service of a wider and deeper truth.

Professional writers are often exasperated by how often they are asked: 'Where do you get your ideas from?' The frequency

The Book You Need

with which the question is posed suggests that most people don't realise how close the writer's way of thinking is to the generality of the population. We all have ideas, we all exercise our imaginations. We all consider 'what if ...'. We all project and plan and guess and improvise. Writers are not the only ones who lie in the bath composing the perfect thing they *should* have said in response to a colleague's criticism earlier in the day, or rehearsing their response to an event which might never happen. Anyone can read something in the newspaper, or overhear a snippet of conversation and think: 'I wonder what story lies behind that', or 'I wonder what that was like.' With writers these speculations are peculiarly significant: they have a potential value, a possible purpose. We might be able to recycle, repurpose or repair and somehow re-use the stuff that surrounds us. Writers are not necessarily more observant than other people, but we pay attention to the value of what we observe, because that is the stock we draw on when we write.

William Faulkner had this to say on the subject:

A writer needs three things, experience, observation, and imagination, any two of which, at times any one of which, can supply the lack of the others. With me a story usually begins with a single idea or memory or mental picture. The writing of the story is simply a matter of working up to that moment, to explain why it happened or what it caused to follow.²⁰

What Faulkner appears to be describing in that 'single idea or memory or mental picture' is what others might call 'inspiration': a catalyst, a creative spur, an idea that stimulates further ideas. Inspiration comes both from outside and from within: often we observe an event, or are struck by an image, that illuminates and enables us to recognise something we already know deep down. As Ray Bradbury sees it: 'You are, in effect, dropping stones down a well. Every time you hear an echo from your Subconscious, you know yourself a little better. A small echo may start an idea. A big echo may result in a story.'²¹