

WRITING FICTION

by James Essinger

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to address a fascinating problem: how does one write fiction? What are the rules and how should one go about it?

This is designed to be a fairly informal document, and the ideas in it are not cast in stone. My aim is to update it every six months to incorporate new ideas I've had, feedback I get, and additional practical experience I gain with working with clients of Canterbury Literary Agency and with writers who approach the agency with a view to us representing their work.

I tend to think that for all human activity, there are a set of rules and that, if you know what the rules are, you can learn them, apply them, and be successful at the activity. You still need a certain amount of natural talent, but if you work hard and are willing to learn, you can improve your performance at the activity, and can indeed eventually perform at a level which may surprise you.

For example, chess, which is my favourite sport to play as a participant, is not as difficult as writing fiction by any means but there are certain practical strategic and tactical guidelines in chess which, by and large, you have to follow if you want to play well. I am a strong club chess-player, but I am sure I could get much better at chess if I spent many hours a day working at it. But I don't do this, because I find being a professional writer, and running Canterbury Literary Agency, more interesting.

There is a very good book called *How Not to Write a Novel* (Penguin Books 2009) by Sandra Newman and Howard Mittelmark. This is often very funny and full of lots of pithy advice about how not to write fiction.

The book basically says, ‘we can’t really tell you how to write fiction but we can tell you how *not* to do it’. The book’s pretty useful all the same as it gives lots of examples of typical mistakes would-be fiction writers make. I am going to be starting this paper by talking about some of the material in the book. Yet I also think that the authors have to some extent evaded the question by producing a book called *How Not to Write a Novel*. They do list in detail many mistakes people make and clearly you can to some extent extrapolate from the mistakes what one should be doing, but they provide no answer to the question: how should you write fiction? Also, the book rather seems as if it was written partly to mock unpublished writers.

In this paper, I’m going to try to make some progress with answering the question of how you *do* write a novel, and not just any novel but one that attracts a publication deal from a mainstream publisher.

The whole business of how to write fiction interests me a great deal, partly because, unlike most human activity, e.g. self-help, golf, tennis, running a business, playing chess, there is a shortage of good books about it. Indeed, if you think about it, there’s a *bizarre* shortage of good books about how to write fiction.

I’m not saying there are no books about writing fiction, there are. There’s quite a good one in the Teach Yourself series called *Writing a Novel* by Nigel Watts (Hodder Headline 1996) but there aren’t anything like as many good books on the subject as you’d imagine there would be.

The shortage of good books about writing fiction

I think there are three main reasons why there aren’t many good books about how to write fiction.

Firstly, the people whom you would want to teach you how to write fiction are successful published novelists, just as if you wanted to read a book that could

teach you how to play better chess, you'd want to learn from a well-known chess player.

But the reason why the people who could teach you how to play chess write lots of books about how you can play better chess is because playing chess is not a very well-paid job and if you're a chess grandmaster, earning a few thousand pounds from writing a chess book may be an important part of your income.

That's not true for successful writers. I'd love to read a book by Ken Follett about how to write fiction, and in fact on his website there is some very good guidance for fiction-writing - just as there is on the website of a science-fiction writer called Robert Sawyer. This is generous of these writers; most successful fictionwriters don't provide such information on their websites. But I don't imagine Ken Follett's ever going to write a book about writing fiction because such a book would only have a relatively limited readership and he's not going to make millions for it, which is what he gets for his novels. That's the first point.

The second point I think is that people who are very good at something are not always in fact the best teachers, so maybe many excellent writers of fiction might not be too good at teaching it.

Thirdly, I think many fiction writers don't want to encourage competition!

So yes, one of the problems of writing fiction is that there aren't many books about it and indeed there aren't many sources of information about writing good fiction at all. Because of this, it's too easy for would-be fiction writers to spend a huge amount of time that is mostly wasted, for example, on writing fiction which doesn't actually work. I think there is a need for a short, pithy book about how to write fiction successfully, a book which isn't too dogmatic but which proposes a certain number of rules which I think work in every case. Maybe one day in the future I might try to write such a book, but in the meantime I'm more interested in doing my own writing, including fiction. But I think this seminar might introduce some of the ideas that could be in that book.

Let's think about what fiction is to start with, and how it might have originated, so to speak, from first principles.

How fiction may have originated

Fiction is really the modern equivalent of the tale told around the camp-fire in the old days, when people probably had quite mundane lives and in the evenings people might be visited by a tale-teller who would travel from one village to the other, and was paid by the village, and would move on after a while and he or she, though I suppose it was more likely a man in those days, would tell them stories that would entertain them.

I think this is a good starting-point for thinking about what fiction should be, because thinking about the tale-teller round the camp-fire makes us realise that people who have done a hard day's work don't really want to hear an everyday, uninteresting story about people like them. They want to hear a story which makes them feel that life is exciting, wonderful, and glorious.

The hero

And that's where the notion of the heroic story came from. It's a story about a person – it could be a man or a woman – who was not so bothered by everyday concerns. That person was more concerned about doing heroic things, dealing with major problems, and he (or she) was someone who would inspire ordinary people because they wanted to be like that heroic person. Nor was that heroic person very much like them.

Now that kind of heroic character is still a feature of much written fiction and many movies. In this paper I include movie stories in the discussion, because after all, novels and movies are trying to do the same thing: they are both trying to tell a great story, and it seems to me fairly obvious that the story-telling tips that apply to novels also apply to movies, especially as of course many movies are based around novels.

To take one or two examples of the kind of hero I mentioned just now, the characters Arnold Schwarzenegger plays in many of his movies aren't too bothered by the concerns of earning a living or worrying about whether they can pay the mortgage next month. Similarly, the character Clint Eastwood plays in many of his movies is a person who is not usually very connected with everyday society. He's a sort of somewhat mythic traveller living outside the realm of everyday life. Films like *The Outlaw Josey Wales* or *Pale Rider* are very much about a person who moves from one community to the other and doesn't put

down much in the way of ties once he's carried out his mission to expunge evil from the community

Lee Child's stories about a character called Jack Reacher is really a pure heroic fantasy. Reacher is tall and very strong. He's a cop but he's very much a maverick; practically every woman he meets falls in love with him, he tends to hang around in late night diners in New York, sipping coffee from a foam cup rather than a crockery one, as that way if he needs to move on quickly he can. That's what a hero is like. I haven't, by the way, read a Lee Child book; they're not my cup of tea (so to speak); but you can easily see what kind of hero Jack Reacher is.

So I think the next thing we need to be saying about a novel is that it has a hero.

Now of course there are heroes and heroes. All that can really be said about heroes in the very sophisticated world of the dramatic narrative of today is that the hero is interesting. I have got a number of books here to talk about. One is David Lodge's excellent novel *Nice Work* which is set in the academic world. Its hero is a rather short, slightly overweight factory owner called Vic Wilcox and the book actually starts with him waking up in the morning, worrying about his factory which he runs.

Vic Wilcox is not a hero in the conventional sense. But nevertheless he is a hero. During the story, even though he is already married, he beds the beautiful academic who has been sent to shadow him., He runs a factory, then loses his job but at the end of the book he ends up with a new career as an entrepreneur. I won't say anything more about the story in case you want to read this excellent and highly entertaining novel. Certainly, . Vic is a hero for our times in some respects and he stands up surprisingly well against more traditional heroes.

Another example - this is in a movie - of an anti-hero is the film *The Terminator* where it's quite clear that the cyborg played by Arnold Schwarzenegger really becomes rather a hero of the piece. He does amazing things, he can stop lorries, he can survive fires. After a while we kind of sympathise with him, because ultimately he's only a machine that's been programmed. It isn't as if he has any personal animosity towards the woman he is trying to kill. So yes, to some extent we sympathise with him. And that's another point: we need a hero for whom we have some sympathy.

Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* offers another take on the hero, an extraordinary paradox of a hero who is not only an assassin and a murderer, but also who we know before the book starts does not succeed in his task because by the time the book was published, De Gaulle was actually dead, and had died peacefully in his bed. Everyone knew he wasn't assassinated. In fact, when Forsyth tried to get his novel published it was turned down by numerous publishers. They didn't understand what he was trying to do. They most likely thought 'why publish a book when we know from the start that the hero failed?' It was only when a publisher thought, 'wait a minute, this is an interesting idea. The author is going to try and convince us to show us how close the assassin got to completing his job.' Also, Forsyth tells this story very well *The Day of the Jackal* is a highly successful thriller and a huge bestseller. It's not a great work of literature but it's stimulating and exciting and very entertaining.

So I don't think we can be too dogmatic about what a hero should be like. The hero is a character who is at the centre of the piece, he could be a man or a woman, it could be an alien, it could be many things. The hero could be an animal, an invertebrate or even an inanimate object, like a chair or a table, it could be almost anything really, but at any rate the hero is an entity around whom the story focuses. In Roald Dahl's story *James and the Giant Peach*, the second hero of the story is, well, a giant peach. Every good story, and ultimately a good novel is simply a long good story, has a hero. The Bible has several heroes; the Old Testament has several heroes; the New Testament has just one main hero, Jesus Christ.

So the camp-fire tale-teller would tell a story about a hero, who ultimately we can identify with. We have to be interested in the hero. That's the point, and yes maybe that is the only real rule about a hero, that we find them interesting. I do think that we're more likely to be interested in someone who does indeed live outside the realm of normal life, but I don't think that's necessary. A hero can even be a fairly normal person who becomes special and heroic because of what they're doing in the story. For example, Harold Fry in *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce is a pretty ordinary bloke in most respects, but becomes heroic when he sets out to walk more than 600 miles, in yachting shoes, to help a friend.

Also, the entire story must be interesting. So what makes a good story?

Dan Harmon's formula for telling a story

The United States writer Dan Harmon has set down a general formula for what makes a good story. I think on the whole it's a pretty good formula, and at the very least it's a great starting-point for any discussion about how a good story should be constructed.

There are eight stages in Harmon's formula:

1. We start with the character (I would call this character the hero)
2. The character wants something (I agree: there absolutely *must* be something at stake for the hero in the story, or the story simply isn't a story.)
3. The character enters a new world (this doesn't need to be a world like in a fantasy novel; it can just be a new situation, such as a new job, a new relationship or a new house.)
4. The character adapts to the new world.
5. The character gets what they want.
6. The character suffers as a result.
7. The character returns to what Harmon calls the 'ordinary world', which basically means the world the character came from.
8. The character changes as a result.

Many, many stories, from Greek stories about travelling into the underworld, to most Shakespeare plays (*As You Like It* is a particularly good example), to most modern TV series and movies follow this formula and are very good stories. There are sometimes variants on the formula, but the formula really does work.

For example, consider the first *Back to the Future* movie. I'm giving an outline of the story in the first movie now, so please don't read the next paragraph if you haven't seen the movie yet! I'm deliberately choosing a movie made quite a long time ago (in fact, it's now 2015, the futuristic year to which Marty travels in the second *Back to the Future* movie.)

At the start of the first movie, the hero, Marty, who lives in 1985, wants a new life, though he doesn't consciously articulate that wanting. The crass bully Biff is his father's supervisor. Marty accidentally travels back to 1955; adapts to this new time with the help of the 1955 version of his friend Doc Brown who built the time machine that let Marty travel back in time from 1985. In 1955, Marty has a new thing he wants: to get back to the future. After lots of struggles and physical challenges (the suffering) Marty gets back to 1985, where he finds that his entire life has been changed, as due to the assertiveness in his father that he, Marty,

helped to prompt, his father is now richer, more successful and much more sorted than he was before, while Biff is now an abject and fawning weakling who runs a car servicing business. It's true that the story has a logical flaw: Marty's mum and dad would, in fact remember him from 1955, but anyway that problem isn't explored, and I would agree that it doesn't need to be.

So there's some help with structuring your story. Now, in order for your story to have a chance of being interesting, by and large it needs to be pretty economical, which means you have to stick to the story and not deviate too much from it. This is where many first-time fiction writers come unstuck. They put in too much unnecessary detail, and it strangles their story. *In a professional-quality novel, every detail needs to advance the core story somehow.* **So, stick to your story.** Please remember that if you want to write a novel that gets published by a mainstream publisher.

Also, the hero must be an *active participant* in the story. This may sound obvious, but many writers who set out to try to write fiction have too much *being done* to the hero, rather than the hero actually *doing things*. *The Day of the Jackal* has things being done to the hero; the police are, after all, trying to catch him, but he never stops being resourceful himself, and never stops initiating things.

While I admire J K Rowling's achievement very much, one of the problems I have with the *Harry Potter* stories is that Harry is often quite a passive hero, especially at crucial dramatic points in the stories, where when he facing apparent great peril, he gets rescued by a *deus ex machina* (this is a Latin expression that means 'the god from the scaffolding' and refers to the technique of solving the problems in a play by a god coming down and sorting everything out. Nowadays the expression is used to refer to a contrived solution to a character's difficulties that dissatisfies us because the contrivance is so blatant.

The trouble with writers using this technique, especially when they use it in a series of books about the same character, is that pretty soon we cease to believe that the character is ever likely to be in any real danger at all. Harry Potter himself is active enough in the stories for the stories to work, but I would say that the stories work more because of the wonderful imagination the author pours into them, and because of all the other characters, than because Harry is enormously interesting himself.

We are likely to be less interested in a hero who is passive and to whom things are purely done to. I know there are some erotic novels where that is the case! But

that's rather a special case. In most novels we need a hero who is relatively active. This is why detective novels or novels about people who fight crime are often very successful, because you've got a ready-made hero and you've got a ready-made scenario where the person is trying to investigate a murder. It's an inherently dramatic and engaging scenario.

Plotting

On page 1 of *How Not to Write a Novel* there is a very good paragraph which says the following:

Typically the plot of a good novel begins by introducing a sympathetic character to wrestle with a thorny problem. As the plot thickens the character strains every resource to solve the problem while shocking development and startling new information help or hinder her on the way.

Apart from the rather annoyingly politically correct use of 'her', preferring to make the pronoun female when 'him or her' is surely both more logical and better, that's a pretty good account of what a novel should actually be. A hero should be a sympathetic character who has a problem to deal with. But the hero can't be too perfect or too flawless. No-one's going to like a character who is totally without any flaws, totally invulnerable and who wins every situation. And then the plot must thicken. The hero strains every resource to solve the problem. Absolutely right, the character must struggle.

There are indeed many correlations between writing dramatic narrative fiction in novels and writing screenplays. Pretty much every rule that applies to making a good story in a novel also applies to what makes a good story in a movie.

There are many books about screenplay writing. There are two major pieces of advice about writing screenplays.

One is this: get into the scene as late as you can, and get out of it as soon as you can. That's very good advice. Only give the crucial dramatic elements of the scene.

The second piece of advice is: *under no circumstances make your hero's task easy*. After all, if you were writing a crime thriller and in the very first page the hero finds some information that lets you realise who the killer is, there isn't actually going to be a story. Of course, no writer's so stupid as to make a story that's one page long. All the same, many screenplays - both made and unmade - do make the hero's job too easy. That's lazy writing. Stories where that's not the case are more engaging and more interesting, basically because we get a vicarious thrill from experiencing the ebb and flow of the character's fortunes, which we also feel mirrors the ups and downs of life.

One reason why the *Back to the Future* trilogy was so successful is because in each film the characters confront a specific problem which is extremely hard to solve. I've already mentioned the challenge Marty faces in the first movie of getting back to 1985. Specifically, in the first film Marty has to find a way of getting enough energy into the car to get Marty back to the time where he belongs. The only way they can do this is to channel a bolt of lightning into the car. In the second film they have to reverse an unfortunate time paradox and in the third film they have a simpler task - although it's still very difficult in 1885 - of getting their car up to 78 mph, the speed it has to go to become a time machine. I've often wondered whether when - in the first movie - 78 mph was chosen as the speed the car would need to attain, the writers already planned that the third film would be set in the Wild West, where reaching 78 mph was a difficult task. If the speed had been lower, there might not have been a challenge and the entire plot of the third film would have had to be rethought.

The *Back to the Future* screenplays ingeniously make the characters' challenges about as difficult as we can imagine them being. Every possible opportunity for making the challenges difficult is brought into the service of the screenplay. For example, in the first film, just before the lightning bolt is to be channelled into the car, Doc Brown is using a rather complicated system of wires to do this and one of the hands on the town hall clock as a pivot. One of the wires comes off the clock hand and it's only in the nick of time that Doc Brown is able to attach the wires and set the lightning bolt into the car Marty's in.

That is exactly what writers need to be doing. We need to make our hero or heroine's job difficult, sometimes so difficult that you wonder how anyone could pull it off.

Yet we don't mind our heroes having a certain amount of luck. Almost standard in any movie and in any thriller is that the hero faces apparently insurmountable

odds but has certain strokes of luck which we're happy to believe, if we feel they're plausible.

For example, in the second *Lord of the Rings* movie, there's a scene where a few hundred warriors in Helms Deep are about to be attacked by an army of about ten thousand orcs. And it seems the defenders have absolutely no way of surviving this. However, at the last minute a small contingent of elves arrives, maybe a thousand, and then a bit later the Riders of Rohan arrive under Gandalf's leadership, and then a load of tree-characters, the Ents, decide they're going to help, and they become allies with the people of Helms Deep as well. Later, during the battles, there's a flood which washes many of the orcs away, and the remnant run into the forest where they are killed by the remaining trees. It feels satisfying. We don't feel cheated. I think the challenge must be very difficult and we must believe what's actually happening to resolve the situation. But yes, we don't mind the hero or heroine having some luck. After all, that may mirror life; you do need a certain amount of luck if you want to get on.

What's at stake?

My final, but perhaps most important point about how you make your story interesting - and this applies as much to writing prose fiction as it does to writing a screenplay - is to emphasise this point: *the hero or heroine need to have something significant at stake*. That is, your hero or heroine needs to be grappling with a problem that the reader (or audience) recognise as significant.

The nature of what is at stake will often depend to a large extent on the genre of the work in question. Literary novels often have things at stake that are actually very personal and emotional and not on the face of it especially big in the whole scheme of things; though if the story is sufficiently well told we will care about the issue all the same. I must admit that I tend to prefer stories with big things at stake, especially in a movie. So for example, the movie *Armageddon* has the future survival of the world at stake, *Jurassic Park* the whole question of whether dinosaurs can come back to life, *Gladiator* whether Rome should be ruled by a murderous tyrant or by a wise and benevolent Senate.

Just having a big thing at stake will not make your story interesting if you don't tell it in an interesting way through bringing to life the struggles the characters face that your readers find engaging. Conversely, if a story is very good indeed, we may overlook the fact that nothing too significant is really at stake.

Dickens's novels tend to have very little at stake really except the redemption in some way of some of the leading characters in the story, but the stories are good enough for us to feel that this is enough. Indeed, pretty well all nineteenth-century novels only had the personal fates of the hero or heroine and of some other characters at stake: the notion of the 'high-concept' story where big things that go beyond the hero's personality are at stake was very much a twentieth-century invention.

Some great stories have feeble things at stake. I won't say what is ultimately at stake in Martin Cruz Smith's superb novel *Gorky Park*, as I don't want to spoil the book or film for you if you don't know it, but it has always seemed to me a relatively absurd thing at stake at the core of an otherwise brilliant thriller. But in *Gorky Park*, as in all excellent stories, the fate of the hero and heroine (in this case Arkady Renko and Irina Asanova) is what we really end up caring about.

So although, yes, you can get away with having only feeble things at stake if you tell your story brilliantly, I recommend that you give very careful thought, before you start telling your story, to what is going to be at stake for your hero and/or heroine. Have something at stake that is inherently interesting and exciting, and you will begin the process of creating your story with a head start.

Generally, I think the advice given to screenplay writers is also very good for novel writers, and the advice is this: if you can't put a summary of your story on the back of a postcard then it's too complicated. I would say probably - as we don't use postcards much anymore - a better approach would be if you can't do a summary of your story that could be told to a studio executive during a ride in a lift you'd probably got a story that's either not sufficiently focused, or too complicated.

All the best stories can be summarised quite briefly. Essentially, your novel and indeed your screenplay should be a powerful, dramatic and compelling elaboration of the summary of your story.

The importance of a good outline

Now, most inexperienced fiction writers (and some experienced, published ones) waste time when they set out to write a novel because they don't bother to work out in advance what their story is before they start writing it. They often fall in

love with the writing process too much and are more interested in doing the writing than in deciding what their story really is. I have often made this mistake myself. All I can say is, adopting that lackadaisical attitude towards writing your novel is likely to involve you in much wasted time, and may indeed so sap your energies that your novel never gets finished at all, or if you do finish it, your book may not be much good. Much better to work out in advance the story you want to tell, and what will be at stake for your hero or heroine. But do leave some opportunities for story flexibility in the plan: you want to have things to discover as you write the book, and you'll want to give yourself the opportunity to include new plot developments that you think will work.

What, in summary, does the reader want in terms of a novel? I would say the reader wants something that is compelling, relatively concise, doesn't have irrelevant digression, has lots of ebbs and flows of fortune and a dramatic climax.

Remember: you're writing for strangers

By the way, you need to care about your readers and what they want and you need to give them what they want, inasmuch as they can ascertain it. Think of your readers as your customers, because that is what they are.

I wonder whether we can draw an analogy here about falling in love with writing and falling in love with another person. When we are falling in love with another person, we very quickly learn that if this person has got any interest in it at all, if this is going to get anywhere, we have to pay attention to their agenda. If, for example, the other person has got a job where they must go to bed at eleven o'clock at night, and they say to us, 'Look please don't phone me after ten o'clock because when we have our loving calls late at night I don't really sleep very well and it spoils my day the next day.' And we've got a choice, either we're going to go along with that and keep them happy, or not. If we then phone at half past ten and he or she says, 'I thought I asked you not to phone at half past ten.' And if we say, 'I know you said that to me but actually, my feelings for you are so strong that I want to phone you at half past ten,' they would be justified in thinking we didn't deserve to have a relationship with them, even though they might actually like us.

Well, yes, there is an analogy in caring about the reader's agenda. Basically, **if we're going to be professional writers, we have to care about the reader's**

agenda. End of discussion. No ifs, no buts. If we're just going to want to spend our weekends and evenings writing some very lengthy, digressive novel which alludes to our childhood, our sex life, people we want to get revenge on, people who have been a bit nasty to us, etc. etc, fine. I'm not saying we shouldn't use our time to do that, but we shouldn't expect to get it published.

Your novel is not a diary of your life, nor an autobiography (though it may use autobiographical elements), it's a story designed to entertain and engage other people, most of whom will be strangers to you. The vast majority of your readers don't know you and don't inherently care about you, though if you tell them a great story that thrills them and entertain them, they might end up loving you, even if they're most likely never going to meet you. They probably would care about you if you met them at a dinner party, but they're unlikely to meet you at a dinner party. They don't know you.

If a novelist is only being read by people who really likes him and personally, he's not going to get much of a readership. There's an instructive line in T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*, where a male character is talking about the poetry of a woman character, Celia. He says: 'Yes, I've seen her poetry. Interesting if one is interested in Celia.' And that really says it all about amateurish writing.

This is why publishers and agents are so wary, not just wary but irritated, if they are offered a novel along with a letter which says something along the lines, 'my friends/mother/father/girlfriend really like it.' The publishers don't care what those people think, and justifiably not because after all those people are not actually going to pay to publish it! The publisher suspects that their standards are lower than his own standards will be, and that's indeed likely to be the case. It might very rarely be the case that the author's friends and relatives are right, but in that case the book will most likely be so good that practically any firm will offer to buy it.

It's what people who don't know you think about your work that matters. Certainly, no-one who doesn't know you is likely to start with a preconceived dispensation to like your work, and that is essentially why the world of writing fiction can be a very tough world.

On the other hand, the rewards are enormous because writing something for strangers who don't care about you, and it's good enough for them to love it, is a

great, great thing to do and will give you a kick and a sense of satisfaction beyond almost anything else you can expect.

Ultimately, any good story, as Harmon's formula indicates, is about a character's *quest*. Here's what I hope will be a useful tip for what your story should approximately be like. Most good stories - indeed, maybe all good stories - are to some extent, indeed often to a large extent, a quest.

The quest

What kind of quest? Well, that depends on the story you are telling. But here are some examples:

- a quest for love
- a quest to help someone
- a quest to save someone
- a quest to solve a perplexing mystery (in a crime story, the mystery often concerns who committed a crime)
- a quest to understand life better
- a quest for happiness
- a quest for understanding
- a quest to make something wonderful happen
- a quest to stop something terrible happening
- a quest to save and protect something we love and cherish

These are just some examples of quests we read about. The great thing about having a quest as your story is that even if your novel has some boring parts, and all novels have parts that some readers will find less interesting than other parts, the momentum of the reader's interest in the quest will keep the reader interested and wanting to read on.

Of course, some stories have several quests in them; indeed some may have all these quests. But in any event, I think you need at least one quest in your novel, and if you only do have one quest in your novel, I recommend you make it an impressive and important quest.

Which writers should be your model?

Let's move on now to talk about a practical point that faces many would-be novelists when they start out: which writers should they use as an inspiration, as their model?

I think a big problem many writers have is that they take the wrong authors as models for their work. For example, when I began trying to write fiction back in the late-1970s, I think I unconsciously used Charles Dickens as my model.

I've studied Dickens at Oxford. I've not read all his novels and I probably won't read all his novels now, but the novels of his that I have read I know very well, and I think I can say I know Dickens well as a writer.

The first thing to say is that, if we're writing novels for the modern world then it makes more sense to take as one's model modern some writers who are successful today. Novels like *The Day of the Jackal*, *Nice Work* and Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle*, for example. I would regard *Nice Work* as a better novel than the other two, but all the same the *Eye of the Needle* and *The Day of the Jackal* were incredibly successful. They both sold more than ten million copies.

The Day of the Jackal and *Eye of the Needle* are both great thrillers, not that subtle but they have some subtle moments. They're good examples, I think, of models to use if you want to be writing fiction today.

I don't recommend you use Dickens as your model. Dickens was born in 1812 and died in 1870. Dickens was writing at a time which is about as different from our times as it is possible to imagine. The nineteenth century was full of long, dark evenings, where people had to amuse themselves by candlelight. I'm very glad indeed that I was born in 1957 not 1857. All of Dickens's novels - not some of them, all of them - were serialised, (though not his novellas such as *A Christmas Carol* - and it's a simple fact that even Dickens himself forgot some aspects of what was going on between the long process of writing the novels and issuing them in serial form. The longer novels amazingly actually took two years to be fully issued in serials. His longer novels are about 375,000 words long. Even Dickens forgot what was going on in his stories half the time. He kept records, but he didn't remember everything.

You can't possibly, over two years, doing a serial every month or every week, create a taut, concise thriller. Of course we call *The Day of the Jackal* a novel, and we call *David Copperfield* a novel, but they're almost like different art forms.

It's interesting that later in his career Dickens became influenced by Wilkie Collins and began to write tauter novels which were much more like modern thrillers. *Our Mutual Friend*, the last novel Dickens completed, is quite a long novel, but it's got a much less rambling structure than his earlier novels. *Our Mutual Friend* is my favourite Dickens novel, (though *A Christmas Carol* is my favourite Dickens story.) But please don't use Dickens as your model. If Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* today I very much doubt that it would get published without a lot of editing, and that's a simple fact.

Dickens's novels are often very poorly crafted. Many of the characters don't come off. Many of the events in the stories are completely tangential to the action. Dickens's novels are often admired by people who have not actually read them, but who have seen a TV or movie adaptation. Very likely most people who admire *David Copperfield* have never read it. They have just seen TV or movie versions of it. TV and film adaptations of Dickens tend to be crisp and focused, but the novels are highly digressive. For example, on the very first page of *David Copperfield* there's an extraordinary, almost 500-word digression, about David being born with something called a 'caul'. This is a harmless membrane inside which babies are sometimes born. For some reason, a dry caul was bought by sailors because they believed it would prevent them from being drowned. The 500 or so words that Dickens writes about the caul are completely irrelevant to the rest of the story. It's not as if the caul reappears anywhere else: it doesn't. Do that nowadays and your editor (if you get as far as having an editor) is going to ask you why mention the caul at all. You can't do that today.

Joseph Conrad, another great writer, is also, I think, a very bad model for an aspiring writer. I admire Conrad greatly, and indeed my decision to come and live in Canterbury back in 1986 was partly influenced by the fact that Conrad spent the last few years of his life near Canterbury and is buried here. Yes, Conrad is a great writer. But he has many serious weaknesses. His female characters tend to be poorly drawn. His novels are almost completely devoid of anything in the way of romantic feeling, and sexual feeling is in fact even more absent from Conrad's work than from Dickens's, though I would agree with George Orwell that Dickens's novels are less sexless than they are often seen as being.

Conrad's novels are often morbid and even rather depressing, but the best ones are masterpieces all the same, mainly due to his almost superhuman ability to conjure mood and setting with words. They are masterpieces but they are not good models for being a writer. Like, I think, many writers I went through a period of being influenced by Conrad. He is probably an even worse model than Dickens. Graham Greene recounts in his autobiography *A Sort of Life* going through a phase of having Conrad as his model. Greene describes Conrad as a 'dangerous' model. Certainly, I think that if you imitate Conrad, you risk producing little except a pastiche of his strange and rather roundabout style.

So don't use inappropriate models, otherwise you may never get your literary career started at all. Modern popular novelists really are a more reliable model for you. I don't think you need to worry about the danger of emulating them too closely; after all, if we don't have our own ideas for our story and characterisations and our own conception of what our own novel should be, we're never going to be novelists anyway.

The length of your novel

Moving on now, what *length* should your novel be?

You have to be very, very talented indeed to get away with writing a first novel that's much longer than about 90,000. For subsequent novels it is different. But your first novel, shouldn't be much more than 100,000 words, maybe closer to 75,000. You are unlikely to get away with writing a novel the length of a Dickens novel (his longer ones are about 375,000 words in length) unless you are writing in the fantasy genre, where great length is more acceptable, but don't imagine that editors of fantasy novels won't expect every word of your 250,000-word tome to count and have an impact, because editors will expect that. Indeed, unless you're incredibly talented or incredibly lucky you are unlikely to get away with a vast novel, and, even if you're both of those things your readers may, in the end, prefer a shorter novel.

Sometimes a very long novel (and I regard any novel of more than 200,000 words in length as very long) can be successfully divided into two separate novels, which together in effect form a duology. Over the past year I have taken on for representation two very long novels and have worked with the writers to divide

them into two approximately equal halves (I mean the books not the writers). We are currently in discussion with a publisher about one of the duologies.

The need to pursue everything

Another vital point: everything in your novel must be *pursued*.

What do I mean by pursued? It means this: **all the details to which you draw the reader's attention must be revealed as an essential part of the story or you shouldn't draw the reader's attention to them.**

A novel is not real life. Real life is full of events that are fundamentally meaningless and often random. Many things we need to do to keep our bodies alive are essential for us, but are not invested with mythic and/or spiritual significance, which is why bestselling novels don't generally contain scenes of characters going to the lavatory after breakfast (well, with the exception of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, anyway). But novels are a form of concentrated life that aspire to invest life with meaning and importance, and yes, with mythic and/or spiritual significance.

So all the things in your novel that seem slightly out of the ordinary - a character coming from Cornwall if your novel is set in England, or a character with an artificial hand, or a non-Finnish character who spent time in Finland, to take just a few examples - need to be part of the plot somehow. If they aren't, why put those details in at all?

In real life unusual details usually don't get pursued. We just see things and take them for granted, and we just hear things and hear about things and we take them for granted, too. But a novel is a story that needs to seem real and believable and has a power and energy and coherence about it that helps us to understand life and makes our lives more enjoyable.

Yes, in novels all the unusual details needs to have a meaning and purpose within the story.

If for example you have a character in your novel who's from Morocco and you never make any more of that, the reader might think: why is the character from Morocco? Why not from Manchester? Your character from Morocco should, in

effect, justify where he comes by his ‘Morocco-ness’ being a vital part of the story. Maybe he is an expert at some form of Moroccan cooking or happens to have a tame Moroccan cobra. In any event, his being from Morocco needs to be followed up somehow.

A novel is also, in effect, an especially long camp-fire tale. In any camp-fire tale, a tale-teller who came along and spent the first half hour talking about going to the field that morning and doing his usual daily work is probably not going to get very far as a tale-teller, as the village people would probably boo him out of the village. But it’s not only that people listening to the tale-teller around the campfire don’t want to hear about mundane things. They also don’t want to be expected to focus on elements in the story that don’t turn out to have any significance it.

If, for example, a tale-teller said, ‘I was setting out for the field that morning and I happened to see an enormous turnip as I was approaching the field I was working in, the biggest turnip I’ve ever seen.’ And if the tale-teller never again mentioned that turnip you might think, why did he mention it in the first place? No campfire roast sausages for him.

The rule is this: the details you’re bringing to the attention of the reader must be followed up and pursued (i.e. made significant in the story.) At one level, this is just basic common sense. It’s also an artistic courtesy to the reader.

Imagine that, at a dinner party, you start telling a story about your holiday in Spain last year, and you talk about a beautiful day you had in Toledo, and you recall that while driving to Toledo you saw a yellow Volkswagen overturned on the road; there had been a crash. Well, if you’re telling that at a dinner party it’s probably okay, because it’s an anecdote about life, but if you’re writing a novel we want and need to know about the Volkswagen and if there’s no point about, then don’t put it into the novel. The point is that the sentence you’re telling at that particular moment becomes the crucial focus for the reader. And the reader has no way of knowing that the sentence that you’re telling at the moment is irrelevant to the rest of the story. The reader trusts you. So if you’re talking about a yellow Volkswagen we want to know more about it and why it’s in the story. And if you don’t seem to be making it a real part of the story the reader will wonder why you put it in at all, and will trust you less.

The more interesting the detail, the more the reader is likely to expect it to be pursued. For example, imagine if you’re writing a love story about a rather

humdrum relationship a man has with a woman, named Maud (not a name that holds much promise anyway: I apologise if your name *is* Maud) and what happens is that the relationship gets better very gradually, the hero and Maud become close and eventually get married. In fact, I don't really advise you to write that story as it doesn't sound as if it would be a particularly interesting one. But leaving that aside, let's have the hero (who loves the poems of T.S. Eliot, by the way) travelling on the bus to the estate where Maud lives. It's a wet day. The bus stops for a moment at the bottom of a hill. Hurrying past the bus on the way to the railway station is another woman, the loveliest woman the hero's ever seen in his entire life. She's beautifully dressed, she doesn't look upset by the rain, she looks thoughtful, she looks interesting, especially as she's carrying under her arm a book he can see, even in the rain: a book of T.S. Eliot's poems.

Imagine that's what happens in the story. Are your readers going to prefer to want him to forget about this new woman and go to see Maud? No, because they'd want to know more about that particular woman because she's interesting and also because we feel that the hero could have a great life with her. I'm not saying a novel always has to be about positive things, but we want to feel excited and inspired by novels. Certainly, if I was reading an author's novel or the plan for the novel and I found the episode about his boring imminent life with Maud and his glimpse of the beautiful girl on the bus I'd say: 'abandon that plan for that storyline, my friend. Let's have another storyline where the bus goes off up the hill, the hero sits there and thinks about the woman and he rings the bell, and the bus stops at the next stop, or even better he persuades the driver to stop the bus right away, and he runs down the hill, he finds the woman, and she's reached the railway station, she's about to get on the train and he turns and says to her, and says, "I love T.S. Eliot." She says, "Oh really? I've never met anybody else who loves T.S. Eliot.'" And she's struck by him and they talk and she gets a later train instead. Now you've got a story, or at least a beginning of one. And that story's got a bit of a life of its own, because at that point you're interested in the characters and care about them.

Character in your novel

Fiction is a character-based art form. To make a story exciting and interesting you need to make it about people you care about. If you care about them, it's a fair bet that your readers might find themselves caring about your characters too.

In fiction writing, if you can make your character interesting enough the same thing will happen, the reader will care about the character. A novel is indeed a character-based art-form and my advice to anyone starting out writing a novel is, by and large, let your characters do the work.

Make your characters complex and human and vulnerable and your readers will not only like them but may become so absorbed in their adventures that they won't want to put the book down. Of course, it's easy to produce a novel your readers can't put down - you simply coat its covers in superglue - but a technique your readers will appreciate more is to give them a flawed, human, complicated but yet somehow admirable character and involve that character in a brisk, focused, irrelevancy-free and absorbing story.

Ken Follett's novel *Eye of the Needle* is about a German spy who is trying to get a crucial secret to the Nazis. Yet while the spy is certainly prepared to kill to achieve his ends - even kill people on his own side, he has many vulnerabilities. He vomits after killing people, he yearns for German sausages, he remembers his love affairs when he's lonely, he's quite a many-sided character. We read on because we want to know what happens to the guy.

How do you create characters whom your readers will care about? Well, I'd say create characters you yourself find interesting and put them in tough, taxing but believable situations. I'm not sure how you can guess what kind of characters your readers will find interesting, and even if you could guess then the characters still wouldn't be interesting if you didn't make them interesting yourself, so you do need to create characters that you personally find interesting, and who you strongly believe in.

Planning

What about planning your novel? Yes, it's important, but be willing to let your characters take over the story; indeed, they should be doing that anyway. The existence of this 'characters taking over the novel' phenomenon is one of many reasons why, though I advocate planning a novel, I don't advocate excessive planning. You need to be creative, and 'in the zone' when you write, and you need to give yourself things to discover at your desk. Certainly, your novel should not just be an elaboration of a rigid skeleton. Having too rigid a skeleton for your novel can constrain it.

Your novel's voice

Let's now move on to talking about the voice of your novel.

The question of the novel's voice is one of the big decisions you have to make at the beginning after the story and the character. By the voice of the novel I mean who is telling the story.

This is where you have a huge difference between the cinema and the novel. When you're writing a screenplay some things are fairly easy. For example, the viewpoint is actually the camera and the camera looks at different people more or less equally. You can still use someone's point of view quite effectively on the screen, though.

For example, consider the movie *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* with Steve Martin and John Candy. It's about two men who are thrown together, a middle-class guy (Martin) and a working-class guy (Candy) on a comically disastrous journey. At one point they come to a motel. There's only one room left in it so they have to share the room and they assume there will be two beds in it. When they get to the motel they find there's only one double bed and the director is very careful to show us Steve Martin's astonished face, then we see the camera panning over the double bed, so we see clearly Steve Martin's viewpoint and he's particularly horrified because the late John Candy was a big guy. The consequences are very comic.

Movies can do that a bit, but they can't do it very much, because as I say, the camera is the viewpoint. Movies are okay having the camera as the viewpoint because the actors do so much of the work for the writer. Novels, though, tend to have a specific viewpoint in order to be emotionally effective.

When your readers read a novel they make an investment of emotion, time and money in it. Our time here on earth is limited. We're all going to pop off one day, and spending an evening reading a great novel (or seeing a great movie) is an excellent way of spending an evening, while an evening spent reading a crummy novel or seeing a bad movie is a lousy evening, which is a big reason for making your novel as good as possible. We have, after all, only a finite supply of evenings in our lives. And before you can start writing your novel and having a

chance to make it live up to your readers' hopes and expectations, you need to choose a specific voice in which to tell your story.

What I know for certain is that the cinematic approach by and large does not work in novels. Dickens tries this in some parts of *Bleak House*. About half the book is written ostensibly in the first-person and in the past tense by a character called Esther Summerson, and the rest features an omniscient, present tense, third-party narrator, who however never writes about Esther herself. The omniscient narrator tends to look at everybody rather like a cinematic camera. By the time Dickens wrote *Bleak House* he was so famous that if he had written practically anything it would have been published. But I don't recommend the use of the first-person omniscient narrator to you. It can so easily seem pretentious and boring, and indeed I don't think Dickens is completely immune to these charges when he uses this kind of voice.

Basically there are really only, at least in my view, two voices worth considering for a novel. The first is the first-person, which is quite a safe and sensible way to write a novel, particularly when it's your first. In fact, in his book *Writing a Novel* the late John Braine, who wrote *Room at the Top* and did very well for himself with that first novel, which was written in the first-person, recommends the first-person for a first novel.

I don't think one should be that prescriptive, but certainly it's true that it's easier to write a novel in the first-person, as by and large I think if it's your first novel and you make it a first-person one it's more likely to get finished than if you were writing a third-person novel.

The first-person viewpoint seems very natural. After all, telling people a story about your life, your dinner party, you would talk about yourself: 'Emma and I etc.'

Generally, it's probably easier to write a novel in the first person than in the third person. First-person novels aren't an automatic doddle to write, though. The main problem is obvious: the character is limited to what he or she personally experiences. By and large the narrator has to be there in the scene. You wouldn't get very far with writing your first-person novel where all you're doing is recounting what people have told you. 'John said it was a very exciting dinner party and afterwards they all took their clothes off and had lots of fun.' We actually want to be there (so to speak) rather than John just telling the narrator about it!

You can use artificial devices to some extent when writing a first-person novel. Joseph Conrad, for example, often wrote narratives in the first-person within a third-person framework. Here, the narrator (often a chap called Marlow) is basically telling a first-person story though his narrative is effectively a first-person narrative inside the broader story. The way Conrad uses this technique, it does involve quite a lot of hearsay, but Marlow makes the other characters, who are telling him part of the story, interesting in their own right. Conrad uses this technique to good effect in his novel *Lord Jim* which in effect allows the reader to piece together a chronicle. But the technique is hard to get right, and Conrad himself was criticised in his own day for having a narrator (Marlow) whom the reader was expected to believe would be talking for more than six hours.

Conrad's famous novella *Heart of Darkness* features the technique being used in a more plausible way, if only because the book is much shorter and we can believe that Marlow could tell his story in the evening allocated to the telling. Also, *Heart of Darkness* is a more straightforward first-person narrative than *Lord Jim* and does not make such extensive use of other characters to tell the story.

By and large, if you're writing a first-person novel, I recommend that your narrator is limited to what he or she personally knows or to what they can be told by other characters. And your narrator should be in every scene in some active way, even if (say) he or she is overhearing something taking place or seeing some people but not being seen.

There are some particular opportunities for subtlety in first-person narration that are very much worth mentioning. One is where the narrator observes something whose significance we will understand at once, but where the narrator doesn't understand the significance, or at least not yet. This is normally possible where you have a narrator who is less knowledgeable than the reader themselves.

By the way, if you're doing a first-person novel, please don't imagine that the narrator must just be like you! That is a common mistake by inexperienced writers, and it often leads to them stuffing their novels with all sorts of personal stuff that may be of little or no interest to their readers. We want a story, not fragments of your autobiography. Don't let me stop you writing your autobiography if you really do want to write it, but don't expect to find a mainstream publisher for it unless you're already famous or have had a really

unusual and/or exciting life. After all, publishers want to make money, and who's going to buy an autobiography of you unless they know you? What you need to do, instead, is create an interesting character who will be the narrator, and accept that you need to reveal the character of the narrator as part of the process of unfolding your story.

Indeed, sometimes this revelation of the character of the narrator will be a major, if not the most important, element of the story. The narrator of a first-person novel does, on the whole, need to be fairly articulate. After all, he or she is telling a story. One of the problems, in my view, with John Braine's novel *Room at the Top*, is that while certainly it's a good read, it's told by the narrator Joe Lampton, who's supposed to be accountant for a local council, but he seems much more like a freelance writer than an accountant.

It's important to emphasise that your first-person narrator does not need to know or see everything that you know or see as the author. (I suppose it's not ever possible for your first-person narrator to know or see *more* than you know or see.) As readers we like to infer conclusions for ourselves, and we enjoy encountering a first-person narrator who has obvious gaps in their knowledge. We like to fill in the gaps. So a first-person narrator who doesn't spot everything can be very interesting. A first-person narrator who says, for example, 'I didn't really understand what was making her cry', when we do know that, emphasises the emotion of her crying and may give us sympathy for the narrator's emotional lack of insight. We will also feel more emotionally absorbed in the novel because we feel more of a participant in it.

A classic example of this kind of story is a novel that I've not actually read but which is regarded very highly. That is Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* which has a narrator who is deliberately made to be emotionally obtuse and who does not notice things which readers spot and who is emotionally cold and frigid as well. But that is rather a tour de force and for your first novel perhaps you shouldn't be that ambitious. *The Remains of the Day* was in fact Ishiguro's third published novel.

Another subtlety of using a first-person novel is where the narrator reports a clue to us which the narrator does not understand, partly because the narrator's not got that information. We ourselves probably do not understand what the clue means, although we might have a guess, but we quite enjoy having the clue reported to us by the narrator without understanding it ourselves because if we feel that the narrator's been honest, we have got all the information we need.

A first-person narrator, by the way, certainly cannot conceal things. I can't, for example, if I'm writing a novel about someone called Peter - who is the narrator and at the end of the story is in terrible peril and is thrown by the baddies onto a live rail on the London Underground but doesn't get killed because he's got an artificial plastic leg hidden under his trousers - well, I can't conceal the fact until that moment of him having that artificial leg which insulates him. If the reader doesn't know already that Peter's got an artificial leg, the reader is going to feel very, very cheated. The fact of his having an artificial leg needs to be mentioned earlier in the story, ideally in a fairly unobtrusive way, e.g. Peter might say, 'yes, I walk a bit stiffly because I lost my right leg when I was a kid in a road accident. I'm used to the leg now and I don't think about it very much.' The mention of the artificial leg earlier in the story so that it won't be a complete surprise is called a 'plant'. Sometimes a plant will be a clue that is picked up later.

At this point you might ask: can one fluctuate between the first and third-person? Let's come on to that in a second. It's a very good question. We'll have a word about third-person, then we'll talk about fluctuating.

Third-person narration involves telling the story in terms of 'he' or 'she' and what they did. It's also a fairly natural way of telling a story, though I do think the first-person voice is more natural. The third-person voice has the huge advantage over the first-person that you can take the reader into scenes that their hero is not present in. In Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle* (1978), for example, there are quite a few scenes where the 'Needle', the hero, is not actually present and in fact Ken Follett uses the cinematic device very well of featuring other people and we know that they're very soon going to be influenced, or involved, or in some cases killed by the hero. Similarly, in the case of *The Day of the Jackal*, the story would not be possible without the third-person narrative because a lot of the scenes do not feature the Jackal at all.

Third-person narration is more difficult than it seems. For one thing, it is hard to develop a third-person narrative voice where you can submerge your own personality enough to make the narration seem natural and neutral.

A vital point to make about third-person narrative is that you need a viewpoint character for every scene: that is, you need to view the action through the viewpoint of one particular character. You usually can't just use an omniscient narrator, that is, one who sees everything. It tends not to work. The omniscient third-person narrator can occasionally be used to comic effect e.g. 'And here this

afternoon we see John Smith strolling happily up the drive of his home, his front door-key in hand, little imagining that right now, in his marital bedroom and not in the least expecting her husband's early return from his business trip, his devoted wife Mary Smith is succumbing, for the fourth time that afternoon, to the loving attentions of Mr Prendergast from next door but one.'

But generally choosing the omniscient third-person narrator as a device for writing an entire novel seems to me a mistake. Why? Because the remote, magisterial style tends to make the writing not very engaging emotionally.

The second point to make is: where you have a scene in the third-person novel where your hero is in it, your hero or heroine must, by and large, be the viewpoint character. In *The Day of the Jackal* there are indeed lots of scenes where the Jackal doesn't actually appear but there's always a viewpoint character. In the scenes where he does appear, generally speaking he's a viewpoint character, though not always. Author Frederick Forsyth is quite adept at sometimes, for dramatic reasons, focusing on the viewpoint of someone else in the story with him.

For example, when the Jackal meets a beautiful French aristocratic lady in a hotel and after she's met the Jackal and he's basically asked her to spend the night with him, we switch to her viewpoint and see her downstairs wondering what to do, about whether to go to his room or not. And Forsyth talks about how she feels lonely and wants to be told she's beautiful. Forsyth tells us, through her viewpoint, that her husband's just a philanderer and always running off with young women, so we have enough reason to believe she's going to go there and spend the night with the Jackal.

Towards the end of *The Day of the Jackal* there is a very interesting scene where the detective Claude Lebel and the Jackal meet face-to-face at the end of the story. They're about to shoot each other and the viewpoint changed very dramatically. One moment it's the detective's viewpoint, then it's the viewpoint of a young policeman who is with the detective. I won't say any more about this scene in case you haven't read the book yet. So, yes, you can sometimes switch the viewpoint briefly, but that's not the same as constantly oscillating between too many characters' viewpoints. If you do that, your reader will have no idea which character to care about. As *How Not to Write a Novel* puts it, if you have too many viewpoints, you don't end up with a novel, but with a focus group.

A safe way of writing a third-person narrative is make the main character the viewpoint character in every scene. This, of course, requires you to have your hero or heroine in every scene, much as in a first-person narrative. The fashion today is much more for that kind of approach. Those rather cinematic thrillers where in one scene it is, for example, Monday, 9 am, Rio de Janeiro, then in the next scene it is Monday 10 am, London, nowadays seem rather dated, perhaps because movies do that sort of thing much better than novels do and novelists are perhaps expected nowadays to create tension in their stories by more subtle methods.

Just as movies over the past twenty years or so have tended to become more character-focused and more emotionally tense (partly because screenwriters make more money nowadays and you get better writers writing for the screen), novels have become more emotionally subtle and story-telling in novels has become more sophisticated in many respects.

It's actually much easier to write a third-person narrative from a particular character's viewpoint. Also, even more to the point, it tends to make the scene more emotionally coherent and engaging.

So now you might ask: would it feel disjointed if you started moving from one viewpoint to another viewpoint, to another viewpoint?

Well, in the 1960s and 1970s a lot of thrillers did precisely that. They rapidly switched from one viewpoint to the other, but by the eighties the fashion had rather changed. Novels often did lots of viewpoint switching because it made them more cinematic, but it does to some extent limit the emotional immersion in the experience.

Why does it do that?

Maybe because we aren't prepared to spend time caring about too many people. More and more by the 1980s - a classic 1980s novel is a book I've already mentioned Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park*, which is also a marvellous film with a great screenplay by the late Dennis Potter - you will find that many novels focuses intensely on just a few characters, or just one. In fact, *Gorky Park* is a third-person story but it's told very much with Arkady Renko, the investigator as the prime viewpoint character. You could probably convert *Gorky Park* into a first-person novel quite easily, because it's very much happening in Arkady

Renko's head. Indeed, I'm not sure if there are any scenes in the novel in which he doesn't take part.

I myself feel that *Gorky Park* is a more emotionally compelling novel than, say, *The Day of the Jackal* or *Eye of the Needle*, partly because we spend more of it inhabiting the head of the main character, in this case Renko. And I'd again emphasise that I think using this focused approach makes it easier to tell the story. I think when there's a lot of different viewpoints it does make the story more disjointed and, as I say, it's slightly out of fashion now. I think the craft of novel writing, like all crafts, evolves. I don't really follow Ken Follett's work, but I know that his novels are nowadays more emotional than they were in the past. *Eye of the Needle* is an excellent thriller, but it's not emotionally that engrossing. It's very much worth reading, though.

In a writers' club, and indeed some published writers do this too, writers often produce more complex types of narration. They do things I personally don't like. A very common technique is that alternate chapters are narrated by different characters in the first-person.

I personally feel that is a device that doesn't really work. It always seems slightly insincere, rather like these newscasts from America where we get a cute male and a cute female sharing the newscasting assignment together. I think having multiple first-person narrators in a novel, while an intellectually respectable technique (Nobel Prize winning novelist William Faulkner used it, for example, in his novel *The Sound and the Fury*) but I still don't like it. First-person and third-person narrative is, after all, a natural way of telling a story, and multiple first-person narratives basically isn't.

By the way, occasionally people try to write books in the *second person*: Jay McInerney's successful *Bright Lights, Big City* is written in this way, but it seems to me an unsatisfactory technique, though I rather enjoyed that book, and also the movie, which I saw in New York. After all, if the reader reads a sentence such as e.g. 'you flew to New York that morning and caught a yellow cab to the Bronx Zoo', the reader could always say, 'no I didn't'!

When you've got your first novel published you can then be more ambitious and experimental. It's all very well Picasso doing his cubism and people with eyes dangling around their cheeks, fair enough for him to do that when he's established, but before he did that he had painted many masterpieces in a more conventional manner.

And if you don't think you can write in the first-person? Well, if that's how you feel then fair enough. Many writers feel that some narrative voices are beyond them. Norman Mailer once said that he could only write in the first person after reading E M Forster in the third person. I myself like creating a character and inhabiting that character and writing a first-person narrative instead of writing a third-person narrative.

Part of me, by the way, feels that a third-person narrative is inherently flawed when you are writing a children's book. Why? Because children's books are written by adults, not by children. It's very hard for an adult to avoid any condescension towards the children at all. True, J K Rowling avoids that in *Harry Potter*. She avoids talking about the characters in a condescending or a patronising way. That's something I really admire about her writing.

Something you must especially strive to avoid, by the way, if you're doing a third-person narration about children, is what is sometimes called 'chubby fistery', where you're being condescending to the children. You can't say, for example, 'little Mark held the rattle in his chubby fist.' You can't say that. You can't also do what one of my agency's writer did – that was a blip really, the book is pretty good – where, in his third-person narrative, he used the phrase 'like all eleven year olds...' You can't write like that! After all, when we were children we did not think of ourselves as inferior adults and indeed we weren't. We were possibly superior to adults. We thought of ourselves as entities, deserving respect in our own right, and we were.

Anybody who wants to write for children with an aim of talking down to them, or who believes that their views and their feelings are not as important as those of adults, or not more so, is most likely never going to write successfully for children. Yes, we can look back at when we were children and when we believed or thought things which we may not believe or think now, and perhaps some of that enthusiasm seems rather naïve in retrospect. But why should we be more ashamed of feeling like that as children, any more than feel ashamed of some of the jaded attitudes to life we may have as adults? I think we should be proud of having been children and accept that their perspective is as good as anybody else's and in fact may be better, because they're often more emotionally honest than adults. And frequently better people, too. For example, as far as I'm aware, no child has ever begun any world wars.

The need to love writing fiction

I think you need to love writing fiction if you want to write a really good novel. In fact, you need to love every aspect of the process of writing fiction, including your characters, the book's setting, the milieu, and of course the story.

Ultimately, our job as writers of fiction is to entertain people by keeping them gripped by our story, moved by its emotions and excited by our ideas, and if we don't love what we're writing, how will they?

All right, so we've talked about the story, the voice, the narrator, and we've also talked about character, and I want to move on now to talking about the following things. Now let's talk about the scenes that you decide should be in your novel.

How many scenes should you have and how do you choose which scenes you want in your novel?

A famous literary agent once said to me, and it was good advice, that a novel should consist of about fifty scenes. Of course, as it's a novel you're writing rather than a play, you should, in effect stick all the scenes together so they form the story.

So if we have the fifty-scene rule in mind, how do we decide what scenes you use to tell it? The answer is the *significant* scenes, the ones that you decide matter. Those are the scenes the reader needs to know about. Deciding this is never easy, but if you care about your story and are professional, which means sticking to your story, and avoiding irrelevant digressions, and especially avoiding sorties into feelings and experiences personal to you, you should before long be able to work out which scenes to use.

If you look at most recent DVDs of major Hollywood movies they often have, in the Special Features section, a short film about making the movie. It's useful to watch these little films: you realise how much work goes into the screenplay and into the actual process of story-telling and also just how many scenes are filmed and then cut out of the film during the edit.

I think it's unrealistic to expect, say, you're using the fifty scenes rule, that after you've got your first draft you won't see scenes that need taking out. I remember a producer saying in the short film about making the blockbuster *Gladiator*, 'you often think something's essential and it's not.' Indeed, in *Gladiator*, they spent a lot of money, more than a million pounds, because they wanted to have a rhinoceros in the amphitheatre. With the greatest respect to rhinoceroses, they are rather unintelligent animals and you can't train them. So the producers of the movie decided to make a completely digital rhinoceros and it cost them about a million pounds to do this and they got obsessed by it and in the end they thought, we don't want the thing in the film anyway. And that's true of novels as well.

The first scene in your novel should be the first vital one. I can't tell you how to start a novel. It depends what your novel needs, but I do know that if you don't think of a scene that figuratively arrests your reader from the word go, your reader may not be around to read the rest of your scenes.

The Day of the Jackal has a masterly start. It begins with the following sentence:

It is cold at six forty in the morning of a March day in Paris, and seems even colder when a man is about to be executed by firing squad.

It's about the execution of a chap called Bastien-Thiry who was a chief plotter in an assassination attempt on De Gaulle. Bastien-Thiry's execution in the novel leads to the organisation that wanted to kill De Gaulle giving up trying to do the job itself and instead hiring a professional killer, the Jackal, to do the job. That's of course where Forsyth mixes facts and fiction.

But that's just one way of beginning of a book. David Lodge begins his novel *Nice Work*, which is about an industrialist and an academic falling in love:

Monday, January 13 1986. Victor Wilcox lies awake, in the dark bedroom, waiting for his quartz alarm clock to beep.

I can't tell you how to start your novel, but yes, a professional starts with something dramatic in the context of the story. A big part of the story of *Nice Work* focuses on Vic's angst about his life and career, so to have him waking up in the dark and feeling anxious is a pretty good way for the book to start. *The Day*

of the Jackal, on the other hand, is a political thriller and crime thriller combined and starting with an execution on a steely cold day in Paris and it makes sense.

There's a lot of material in this book *How Not to Write a Novel* about amateurs not loading the novel with irrelevant detail or off-the-point digressions. To emphasise this point again, we don't need to know things unless they are relevant to the story. If they are not relevant to the story we don't need them. Think of the camp-fire tale-teller. If his story is full of irrelevant detail, if he bores the reader, he probably won't get any supper. Nor will you because you won't get paid for your work.

Yes, every scene should advance the story significantly or it shouldn't be in the book. You don't need to tell the reader everything of course. Readers enjoy having things to work out for themselves, and enjoy finding things out without having everything spelled out to them.

Backstory

Which raises the interesting question of how you handle *backstory*. Backstory is what the character has done, or what characters have done, before you met them. Backstory is very important to us in our lives. After all, our CVs are our backstories. Our backstories are, in a very real sense, who we are up to that moment. When we meet new people, a big part of our conversation with them will focus on their backstory. The presence of backstory is something we expect and its absence makes us uncomfortable. You are hardly likely to offer a job to someone, who is say, forty-five, and who tells you they have never had a job in their life. Nor, if you go on a date and meet someone in their thirties or forties and who says, 'I've never had a relationship. This is my first date in my whole life,' you might not be confident that this is a very normal person. On the one hand you don't want her or him to say, 'I still love Jeremy/Jemima. No-one could match him/her.' That's not very auspicious either.

So backstory is important to us. Using backstory in a novel is a challenge. Here's what you can't do. You can't do an info-dump, where you just splurge all the backstory out. That would be like going to a party, meeting a new person, and they spend half an hour telling you all about their life to date. Unless they're *very* attractive, and you're very single, it's unlikely you'd be impressed.

OK, how do you present his backstory information? Well, one way of doing it is through a scene which shows the character engaged in doing whatever his or her backstory chronicles.

Otherwise, backstory needs ‘trickling’ into the story at crucial moments. This trickling in of the backstory is an absolute hallmark of the novel writer who knows what he or she is doing. After all, don’t we trickle in our backstories when we meet someone new? Anyone who, when they meet a stranger, just blurted out their back story to them, would seem a bit weird.

Back in the early part of the twentieth century, the novelists Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, who were friends and who collaborated on some novels together, earnestly discussed the nature of fiction. According to Ford, in his 1924 book *Joseph Conrad we agreed that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes upon mankind.*

I think this a momentous and major remark, and very much worth ingraining into the fibre of your writing brain. It explains why so much of the craft of fiction involves in effect learning techniques that will help you, when you write your novel, to imitate the effect that life has on people. That is what you should be doing in your fiction. So, to take just on example, as we don’t do info-dumps in life, why should we do them in the novels we write?

After all, the novel is not some sort of rarefied art form, it is part of life. It comes out of life and it’s ultimately a camp-fire story and the same rules apply to someone telling you an anecdote at a dinner party or someone telling you a story in any situation that would apply to writing a novel. We can say that, when you meet someone at a dinner party, and they spend their first half hour telling you all about their life so far you won’t be very interested. We have to really care about someone to learn about their life so far. Similarly, we need to really care about a character in a novel to want to know more about that. So leave the major revelations until we do indeed know them better.

In *The Day of the Jackal*, Frederick Forsyth dishes out small, tasty dollops of backstory very well to convey the menace of the Jackal, who is a ruthless professional killer. Here is the first time we encounter the Jackal in the novel.

As he [Marc Rodin] boarded his train a Comet 4B of BOAC drifted down the flight path towards Runway Zero-Four at London Airport. It was inbound from

Beirut. Among the passengers as they filed through the arrivals lounge was a tall, blond Englishman. His face was healthily tanned by the Middle Eastern sun. He felt relaxed and fit after two months enjoying the undeniable pleasures of the Lebanon and the, for him, even greater pleasure of supervising the transfer of a handsome sum of money from a bank in Beirut to another in Switzerland. Far behind him on the sandy soil of Egypt, long since buried by the baffled and furious Egyptian police, each with a neat bullet hole through the spine, were the bodies of two German missile engineers. Their departure from life had set back the development of Nasser's Al Zafira rocket by several years and a Zionist millionaire in New York felt his money well spent. After passing easily through Customs the Englishman took a hire car to his flat in Mayfair.

I don't think anyone could reasonably claim that *The Day of the Jackal* is a literary masterpiece, because literary masterpieces make you feel wondrously moved by the human condition, and ultimately *The Day of the Jackal* does not, I think, have that effect on us. All the same, it's a book written with great literary skill in the art of holding the reader's interest, and we get a very good view in the passage I've just quoted of how Frederick Forsyth does this. He has the clearest idea of what his character is like, and there is a sense of urgency about how Forsyth communicates to his reader the world of the hired assassin. In just one paragraph, one that tells us what the 'tall, blond Englishman' has been doing in Beirut, we learn what the Englishman does for a living, and that the assassin does not have the least sympathy for his victims, or is likely to spend even an instant in feeling guilty about what he's done. Indeed we are invited to sympathise with the Jackal, rather than with the two missile engineers, who are portrayed as having basically been up to no good, anyway.

The calmness, efficiency, and deadliness of the Jackal are all emphasised, and during the book Forsyth regularly mentions the Jackal's enjoyment of the luxurious lifestyle his success brings him. There are several quite detailed accounts of meals the Jackal enjoys, and the lavish accommodation he occupies in the hotels rooms he favours is also frequently emphasised. We only see him with one woman in the book, but she is a beautiful French aristocrat and she enjoys her liaison with this calm, handsome and potent man until, inevitably, she is herself murdered by him for having learnt the truth of what his mission is. The efficiency and economy of the Jackal's backstory is handled beautifully.

So he's a handsome man who kills for a living. Is that all we get to know about the Jackal's backstory? No, not quite. We get another little glimpse, too, in a crucial scene where the Jackal learns that his cover has been blown, that he is now be hunted by the police, and that he faces a stark choice: continue with his

mission and try to complete it in the face of significant odds, or return the first part of his fee and abandon the mission.

Of course as readers we want the Jackal to continue with his plan, but we need to feel convinced of the reasons why he makes his choice. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it's money that makes him want to proceed. Yet the matter is more subtle than that; the Jackal sees that giving up now means risking all his quality of life. Faced with the knowledge that the police are now looking for an assassin they know has been hired to kill De Gaulle, even if they don't know about the Jackal's precise false identities, the Jackal, weighing up in his mind what to do, is finally decisively influenced by getting the bill for the luxurious café where he has been having a pot of coffee on a terrace of an ultra-smart hotel on the French Riviera. The passage in which he makes his decision is worth setting down in full.

The bill came; he glanced at it and winced. God, the prices these people charged! To live this kind of life a man needed to be rich, to have dollars, and dollars and even more dollars. He looked out at the jewelled sea and the lithe brown girls walking along the beach, the hissing Cadillacs and snarling Jaguars that crept along the Croisette, their bronzed young drivers keeping half an eye on the road and the other flicking along the pavements for a likely pick-up. This was what he had wanted for a long time, from the days when he had pressed his nose to the travel agent's window and gazed at the posters showing another life, another world, far from the drudgery of the commuter train and the forms in triplicate, the paper clips and tepid tea. Over the past three years he had almost made it; a glimpse here, a touch there. He had got used to good clothes, expensive meals, a smart flat, a sports car, elegant women. To go back meant to give it all up.

The Jackal is on his way to his rendezvous with destiny.

How does one write as well as this? Certainly, you need some facility for expressing a character's thoughts in words, but after all, none of us are (probably) born with an innate literary ability; it's something we need to learn. Also, to use backstory well you need to be assured in your use of the skill of letting the backstory trickle in, and ideally to make the trickling in happen when the insertion of the nugget of backstory has maximum dramatic impact and/or relevance to the plot. After all, Forsyth could have already told us about the Jackal's days of poverty and obscurity, when the Jackal wanted a life more glamorous than he'd had then. Yes, Forsyth could have told us about that earlier, but how much more effective to tell us about it now, at this absolutely decisive moment in the story!

To use backstory well you need to know your characters and care about them. And that means choosing characters to start with that you like. They don't need to be goodies, of course. Many of the greatest characters in literature, from Richard III in Shakespeare's play of the same name, to Satan in *Paradise Lost* onwards, are baddies rather than goodies, but we like them all the same, maybe because they allow us to indulge our fantasies of being amoral without anyone getting hurt. Certainly, we like the Jackal, surely, because he lets us enjoy the vicarious pleasure of being ruthless, murderous, sexually irresistible etc. etc. without needing to handle the consequences if we actually were all those things.

How do you choose your characters?

It certainly makes sense to write about characters you want to write about. After all, you're going to be spending a year on your novel, and maybe much longer. You may as well spend it with characters you like and care about. Don't, by the way, make your characters too perfect. After all, again to refer you to life, no-one is too perfect in life. You have to have some basic liking for the character. Also, the character, even if real baddies, has got to be to some extent attractive. Who is going to read a novel about a beautiful female detective who's got terrible bad breath? We just don't want to know about that.

I think these things are important. Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* likes eating people, but he is attractive because he's cultured, fair, polite, (he doesn't kill you if he finds the world more interesting with you in it, so we'd better all make sure we're interesting), and he is not actually physically unattractive.

So make your characters interesting by giving them certain strong characteristics. If you write about a character you find interesting, you are likely to be able to convey that interest to your reader. But don't make the character too much like you; after all, it's a novel you're writing, not an autobiography. Yes, write about characters you like.

Next, write about people, and situations and settings, you know about emotionally. If you only write about what you know about that's going to limit your imagination quite a lot, because writers tend to be relatively sedentary people who are quite happy at their desk writing. They don't spend their lives

travelling around the world. Some do, but they'd rather be writing with their friends or with someone attractive from whatever sex they prefer; writers often don't really want to have very hectic lives.

So if writers only wrote about what they knew about literally, their books would all take place in offices, but what you know about emotionally is vitally important. For example, *Cantia*, my novel for young people, is set in an underground world underneath Canterbury. Clearly, I can't know anything literally about that, but I do think I know about it emotionally. I used to live in Finland and I often felt pretty alienated there, even though I learnt to speak the language. But I'm quite sure I used those feelings of alienation when I wrote about *Cantia*. I personally only tend to write about settings that I've actually been to or know about, or feel I can imagine. A good writer doesn't need that much experience to base a whole novel on, or chapters on. Joseph Conrad's great novel *Nostramo*, for all its sometimes slightly tedious way of being written, is unquestionably a masterpiece. Conrad only visited Venezuela for about four days before he wrote *Nostramo* (he wrote it some years after his visit), but he created a very convincing South American country and town in the novel. I think he knew South America well emotionally, and that this enabled him to write the book.

Writing about things you know about emotionally is essential. I would not write about drug dealers. I think I could imagine them but I don't know them emotionally and also I wouldn't want to write about drug dealers. When in *Cantia* I wrote about two cockney villains, they were slightly comic although they are quite bad as well, I based them on some of the people I knew in Leicester and that I think worked reasonably well. I don't really know any cockneys. But they are cockneys, I didn't just study cockney rhyming slang and they had slightly farcical behaviour.

Villains

I think good villains tend to exult in their villainy. You get this in movies a lot, but the technique works in fiction too. Hannibal Lecter exults in his villainy in a rather subtle way in Thomas Harris's brilliant thriller *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Villains should ideally be larger than life and fun, which they are in the sense that they enjoy being villains. In the movie *Cliffhanger*, a thriller starring Sylvester Stallone, the actor John Lithgow, who normally plays quite serious characters,

plays the villain and he really hams it up, yet never so much that you cease to find him believable. At one point, for example, he says, 'You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you Walker? Well take a ticket and get in line.' And it's wonderful because he's aware that he's evil and he enjoys being evil. That's not John Lithgow's prerogative. You get it in *Paradise Lost* too. Satan very much enjoys being evil. He doesn't need to be but he enjoys it. Half the best lines of *Paradise Lost* are spoken by the baddies.

How do you choose where to set your novel?

I tend to believe that writers should follow the rule that if they haven't actually been to a place they shouldn't write about it, because you can't. I've lived in Finland, I've lived in Germany, I've spent quite a lot of time in France and on the East Coast and West Coast of the United States, I can probably set novels in those places with a reasonable amount of accuracy. I'm not going to set a novel in Borneo or Thailand as I've never been to those places. If I really had to do it I would actually try and keep the scene very short and I would try and convey, use the unfamiliarity of being there in the viewpoint. I have never been to India either.

The novel is not an opportunity for someone to just experiment, it's an opportunity to tell a convincing story and so you need to know about your settings both physically and emotionally. So how do we convey a sense of place, or location, in fiction? Well, yes, my advice is, by and large, to again to relatively impressionistic in how we do it. We don't want an encyclopaedic description of a setting.

After all, if people want to know, for example, what it's like to wander along the banks of the River Seine in Paris in springtime they can find movies that can show them that. If they really want to know what it's like to visit an orang-utan forest in Borneo they don't really want to do that in your novel. They don't necessarily want to visit an orang-utan forest in your novel, not at least unless one of the orang-utans is really a good guy dressed as an orang-utan who is hiding from the Bornean Mafia. Many Victorian novels start with extensive descriptions of the setting. It's almost part of the deal of writing a Victorian novel that you have to do that. But nowadays we haven't got so much time for that, and in any case if you want the kind of description of a place that you get in a travel guide why not buy that rather than the novel?

Dialogue

Let's talk about dialogue now.

Dialogue is a challenge for all writers. Dialogue makes or spoils a novel. When I was beginning to try and write fiction, about forty years ago, my dialogue was truly bad. I think I've got it moderately good now, but there are always new things to learn about dialogue.

A novel is not a snapshot of real life, it's a story where everything in it should be significant. The same is true of dialogue. If someone said, 'What dialogue needs to go in a novel?' I'd say only the dialogue that's significant for the story.

Yes, we do need to have occasional social chit-chat dialogue, because the dialogue has to be realistic as well. But basically you need to get down to action quite soon. Remember the rule about how screenplay writers should get into the scene as late as they can and leave it as soon as they can? It's good advice. So only put dialogue in that you actually need.

The dialogue should obey the following rules. First of all, it should be capable of being spoken aloud. A very good test of dialogue is whether you can read it aloud. Point two, you don't need whole sentences in the dialogue. After all, we don't usually speak in whole sentences. We don't tend to do long speeches, either.

In real-life dialogue we also tend to talk in fairly short bursts. In novels, too, dialogue is better when it's shorter. A lot of Victorian dialogue is terribly wordy, partly because most Victorian novelists had not really mastered dialogue, novel writing was still only fifty or sixty years old. Dickens's dialogue is normally pretty good, but even he is too wordy sometimes, or uses words that the character wouldn't use.

By the way, make sure you use elision in your dialogue. We do not usually say, for example, 'I will be there tomorrow,' but 'I'll be there tomorrow.' If you don't use elision your dialogue can seem terribly stilted. Remember that dialogue seeks to set down on the page how people speak, while leaving out (most of) the ums and ers and general repetitions that people generate when they really speak. Any spoken language is very different from written language. You can one-word

sentences in dialogue, and any other technique that makes your dialogue seem natural and realistic.

By the way, so many inexperienced prose fiction writers put internal dialogue – what characters are thinking - in speech marks. Only use speech marks, please, if something is actually said aloud. Otherwise, use italics, although with practice, you'll discover that you can often dispense with italics for all your characters' thoughts and just use italics for the put the emphasised parts. For example:

John watched Helen gyrate on the dance floor. I wonder what it'd be like to have a date with her? he thought. *Even better, what would a night with her be like?*

What kind of prose should you be writing?

Let's now move on to thinking about the kind of prose one you should be aiming for?

There's often a feeling among inexperienced fiction writers that leads to them thinking along these lines; 'this is a literary endeavour, therefore I should be literary in my style.' Please don't let yourself think like that: it's a big mistake to think in that way.

In fact the kind of prose you need to write is whatever will tell your story in the clearest, most concise fashion, using words that are neither especially 'literary' or 'non-literary' but simply most fit for the purpose of telling the story. The idea of a novel being a story told around a camp-fire is, I think, again useful here because in fact the test of good prose can be read out. I think the best kind of prose fiction writing is the writing you don't notice because you're so absorbed in the story.

Ultimately, I think the only way one can learn to write clear, concise prose and natural-sounding dialogue is through lots of practice that is constantly complemented by a desire to give the reader a good time. After all, as I've said earlier, the reader is your customer. So your novel is essentially your shop, and if you were running a shop, wouldn't you want your customers to enjoy being there and to find things there they like?

Caring about your readers

One reason why many novels by inexperienced fiction writers never get published is because the writer doesn't care about readers and what they want.

Too many first novels show that the writer is far more interested in telling a chunk (or the entirety) of their own life story, or getting back at people who they imagined have wronged them, or in effect telling a former lover who dumped him or her shouldn't have done so, or - which is even worse, in my opinion - preaching some political/religious/ethical or moral creed.

If writers want to spend their time writing that kind of book, I mean if they really want to spend time doing that, there's no reason why they shouldn't, other than the biggest reason of all: it won't get published, and very likely no-one but the writer will read it. And at some point in the future the writer will himself or herself most likely lose interest in the book, and - as the writers of *How Not to Write a Novel* put it at the end of their first chapter, which exhorts the reader to cut to the chase and stick to the story - the novel will be only a brief detour in a ream of paper's journey to mulch.

I'll say it again: your readers are your customers, and if you want them to queue outside Waterstone's to meet you and to get you to sign your book, you need to give them what they want.

After all, they're paying for the book, aren't they?

Plants

Let's now talk about plants. Because a plant is very important in fiction, just as in gardens!

Plants are apparently insignificant observations that become significant in the plot later on. They require careful judgement to devise and to insert into your story in a subtle way that plays fair with the reader and gives him or her a chance to notice the plant but avoids drawing excessive attention to it and require careful judgement to not be clumsy about it. For example, imagine if in your novel there's a fish tank in the villain's living room, in which he keeps a number of

goldfish and also a cone shell - some cone shells happen to have an extremely virulent poison - which the baddie is going to use to kill a victim at some point.

You could introduce this plot idea by writing something like: 'John took a step towards the aquarium: 'I'm sorry, I've got to feed the fish. Excuse me for a moment.' And he drops a bit of fish food in the tank, and maybe one of his guests asks him what fish he has in there, and he mentions a few names of fish, and then says there are some interesting and unusual shellfish too.

If we find later on that he uses one of these shellfish to kill his victim, we will accept that. We won't feel cheated. What you can't do is, near the end of your novel, is have the police say to John when John is being interrogated, 'Our lab people say that Mr Brown was killed by some sort of fish poison,' and then John says: 'Since you know so much I am going to tell you everything. He deserved it. A cone shellfish I brought three years ago and keep in my aquarium has got one of the most virulent poisons of any shellfish in the world.'

You can't do that. The reader thinks, *I didn't know about the aquarium. It's not fair. It's cheating.* And the reader would be right. It's a very unnecessary form of cheating, because you could have just put the plant in earlier on.

But don't make a plant too obvious. In the Columbo series of programmes, the stories usually have a plant but it is sometimes very clumsily done. In one episode a young playboy explains (I forget to whom) that his parents were killed some years ago 'in a freak explosion'. This young playboy (acted well by the late Roddy McDowall) is fairly creepy anyway and once he mentions how his parents died, we don't have the slightest doubt that he's the murderer!

Your novel needs, in a sense, to seem more real even than reality.

Making your novel more real than reality

I remember years ago reading some book about advice to writers. One of the points it made, an illuminating point, is that some children had put on a play at school and the play had been evaluated by a dramatic adviser, who said it was a good play, but that the brother and sister in the play didn't look like brother and sister. And the children thought this comment was hilarious. 'But they're brother

and sister in real life!’ they said. But the adviser said, ‘that may be the case but my comment is still valid.’ And that is very revealing about what art is.

It’s a bit like saying, ‘that really happened’. But saying that something really happened is no defence; it still needs to work and seem plausible as art. Even though they were brother and sister in real life, the adviser’s comment that, in the context of the play they did not look like a brother and sister is still a valid one, because you are creating art, and art is not real life. ‘It really happened,’ is a defence in real life, but not in art.

Think of the things in real life that are amazing. You would hardly put them in a novel, because people wouldn’t believe you. An English-speaking enclave in Spain? An American air base in Cuba? A Spanish enclave in Morocco? You can hardly believe it. Do you know that in 1864 they laid a cable from New York to Cornwall underneath the Atlantic Ocean, by putting a 3,000 mile cable onto a boat and then just unfurling it, in 1864? Can you actually believe that? It’s almost unbelievable, but it happened. But in the context of a novel that would have to be made believable. Indeed it isn’t enough for the writer to say, ‘but it really happened.’ The writer has to make the event seem believable in the story. On pages 28 and 29 of the paperback of *How Not to Write a Novel*, there is an excellent passage: too long to quote in full here, entitled ‘Why Your Job is Harder than God’s’. It’s very much worth reading.

We need to feel that something in a novel really works and is believable. How do you do that? Well, you do that partly by putting plants in. If you have got a fifteen-year-old boy who is going to save the day by getting us all out of some room we’ve been entombed in by cracking a combination using his genius, we had better establish earlier on in the story that he’s actually got that genius to start with. We can’t just spring it on the reader.

Language

Let’s now look at the mechanics of language, which after all is a tool. The first thing to say, I’ve thought about this a great deal over the past few years.

Talking of God and what he can do and we can’t do, we are limited as writers by the fact that we can’t create life. This is true of all artists. Sculptors use inanimate and durable materials to create life. Michelangelo’s *La Pieta* is a great masterpiece but, ultimately, it’s not the same as a living, breathing woman and

her baby. Only a deity (if you believe in one) or the life force, can create actual life. As writers we are doubly handicapped if you think about it. We can't create life from the tools we use, as the tools we use are words, which by definition are just words. They are just linguistic tools for evoking something, just as an artist uses oil paints or sculptor uses plaster of Paris or marble.

Language is a prehistoric invention which probably evolved in tandem with the evolution of our species. Very likely early forms of humans had some sort of language and as human beings developed, language got more sophisticated. Homo sapiens has been around for 100,000 years or maybe more than that. The languages that were spoken 50,000 years ago were no less sophisticated than they are today. We may have more technical terms, but people still had highly sophisticated languages. Very possibly earlier forms of language spoken by earlier forms of mankind were less sophisticated than the languages spoken by homo sapiens, but there is no evidence at all that there are any 'primitive' languages spoken by homo sapiens.

Writing is a fantastically more recent development and invention than language. Writing was invented seven or eight thousand years BC, so it is about 10,000 years old maximum. There is evidence that writing first came about as you might expect, as a way of people remembering who owned what in more complex societies. It's no coincidence that writing evolved about the same time as woven fabrics evolved, as people tended to move away from very rural, Neolithic settings, and live in more sophisticated urban settings. I think it's interesting that writing and fabrics evolved at about the same time.

Written words are the only tools we have as writers. Writing is a form of setting down language, not thought. You can't set down human experience directly, you have to set things down in language. One reason the hieroglyphics in Ancient Egypt were very difficult to decipher was because people initially thought they just meant the pictures of birds and humans only meant the things they were pictures of. As it happens, some were, but most were phonetic symbols of the Ancient Egyptian language, which by the time people in the eighteenth century tried to decipher it, was a dead language. However, some people who tried to decipher the hieroglyphs fortunately knew that the still surviving church language Coptic was related to the Ancient Egyptian language. This made things a lot easier for them.

So words are limited tools. They're not inherently all that potent. The word beautiful is nowhere near as potent as seeing beauty.

So what's the upside of words? Why are words potentially so powerful for a writer? One upside is that words give us access to experience that we wouldn't necessarily want to take part in ourselves. We might read a thriller such as *The Day of the Jackal* about people getting killed. We don't really want to be in a situation in our lives where we might be killed at any moment, so words give us the opportunity to experience vicarious excitement, in the same way that the cinema and screen-based entertainment does the same visually.

Also, words are durable. Once words are set down they will transcend the end of our lives. If you and I write a novel that is good enough it will be read by people after we are dead.

But words are only immortal if we use them well, and this brings us on to the particular way that words should be used in pictures.

Show and tell

As we've already discussed, words can be used in fiction in one of two ways. They can be used to tell the story and they can be used to evoke the story. An alternative word for the evoke is the word 'show', so in most writers' courses on books you'll get the advice, show not tell. What does that really mean? Let's start by saying what 'tell' means, because that's the easiest one to define.

'Tell' means giving the reader a summarised account of events in the story. It's as simple as that. '*And then the French executed the chief plotter in that failed attempt to kill De Gaulle.*' That's tell. '*Rhonda spent the afternoon in Tenterden doing shopping and went to the shop called Cook, where you can get marvellous home-made food, and went to Cook to get something for the evening.*' That's also tell.

But by and large a story composed purely of tell would not be readable. It wouldn't be interesting. Events themselves are not that interesting. After all, we're not disembodied spirits or brains living in goldfish tanks! We're physical creatures living in a physical world. If you stick a pin in us we'd bleed. We need food, we need sex, and we have other bodily functions that are less interesting but

which we need to carry out or we die. We are physical creatures living in a physical world, and so the stories we want to hear about also need to be like that. They need to be about physical entities living in a physical world, even if that physical world is a small planet in the Crab Nebula.

Generally speaking, in good fiction ‘tell’ is used for relatively occasional bridges between show scenes.

What does ‘show’ mean? **Show means that you report to the reader the sense data of what is going on.** And that is what makes the story come alive.

Spoken dialogue, by the way, is always ‘show’: it’s what the characters in the novel hear, which is of course one of the senses, and in fact spoken dialogue exactly mirrors the life event you are describing, whereas all other use of words in a novel can never quite mirror the life event so precisely. But yes, report to the reader the **sights, sounds, smells, tastes** of your fictional world, and also (sometimes) the feel of something to the **touch**, and do all that through whoever is your viewpoint character at the moment, and you can be pretty sure that you are giving your readers ‘show’.

I think the influence of movies has made readers more demanding (though possibly unconsciously) of the ‘show’ in a novel. After all, movies are all show, except those occasional parts at the start of movies set in classical times (including *Gladiator*), where you get a bit of prose on the screen at the start which sets the scene, and then you go into then movie. The bit of prose at the start itself shows that movies are an art-form whose narrative form developed from prose fiction and prose histories.

When you recall a novel you have enjoyed it’s the show passages you mainly remember. They’re often the ones that stick in your mind. And yes, the reason is because we are physical beings in a physical world, and we’re engaged by physical events. Which of us would rather read a letter from the person we love rather than spend an evening with them?

Ultimately a novelist needs to wield tell and show like a composer wields his baton. Yes, you really do need some tell, as show rarely moves the momentum of the story along faster than tell does. But tell is always less readable and less interesting than show, because we don’t feel the story when we were are just being told it.

There are ‘tell-words’, too. These are usually abstract words whose meaning is imprecise. Certainly you have to understand as a novelist that using a word like beautiful, for example, is an inadequate way of describing the character. Why?

Let’s look at why philosophically.

Let’s think of a beautiful female character. If let the reader see her beauty (e.g. her glossy, very straight shoulder-length black hair; her pale, fine-grained, creamy skin, her bright blue eyes, the even white teeth and her rather full lips emphasised with just a touch of light, orange-red lipstick) that’s fine. But if you just say she’s ‘beautiful’ and leave it at that (or, even worse, say she was ‘attractive’) it doesn’t work at all. Why not? Because you’re a communicator and your reader does not have the same terms of reference as you do.

If, say, your reader is in China, he will think of beauty in a woman in a different way than you would.

Or if you’re writing a science fiction novel and you say ‘Zyx was beautiful’ and Zyx is actually a female pterodactyl-type dragon, on her planet being beautiful might mean having very shiny green horns. That’s fine, as long as we know what the cultural references. If we have established that that’s the rule in Zyx’s culture, ‘Zyx flapped her wings and stood up to her greatest extent. Her green horns glistened. They shone like the star that ruled her galaxy. Myz was transfixed. He’d never seen such beauty.’ You need to particularise what you mean by beauty. **And that, that particularisation, is the essence of what literary art is.**

So if you just say ‘shewas beautiful’ there is no cultural reference. I’m not gay, but if I was, I would see beauty in a different way than a heterosexual man would see beauty. If I only find black women attractive I would admire a different kind of physical female beauty than if I only find Scandinavian women attractive. If you haven’t established the terms of reference people will, by default, use the terms of reference that they’re familiar with. That’s the reason why you can’t just use the word ‘beautiful’ and expect your reader to know what you mean. Besides, you want the story to live, so why not give the reader the sense data? And that is in some ways why novels tend to be comprised of nouns and fairly concrete adjectives.

You can say, for example, ‘golden hair’. That makes sense. ‘She blushed a fine crimson.’ We know what that looks like. But you tend to avoid abstract words like beautiful, like wonderful in the narrative voice. It’s different, though, if a character uses them. Maybe you have a character, Teresa, in a novel you’re writing, and in that character’s world everybody is wonderful. That character, Teresa, might think someone wonderful just because they live in Tunbridge Wells. Or Teresa might think someone wonderful for having two cars, and soon we realise that Teresa describing someone as wonderful says more about Teresa than about anyone else.

Suddenly, you have done what a novelist must do and set a particular use of a word in a character context. You have used the very fact that Teresa uses the abstract noun so willingly. You’ve used that as a way of finding her as a character. It works very well. That’s the point you see. And this is why mastering the tools of writing fiction is so important: you can use them as a way of making your story work better.

Suspense

No novel will be interesting unless it contains suspense. Suspense basically means delaying revelation. A good novel does this, I think, at two levels: firstly, in the major elements of the plot and the delayed revelations that draw you to want to read to the end: secondly, in the incidents that populate the story and which reach individual conclusions at the end of a particular chapter or section or even at the end of a couple of pages.

In making your novel full of suspense, you are mirroring life, which is itself rich with suspense. Do you know every detail of what is going to be happening in your life tomorrow? No, you don’t. You don’t even know whether you’re going to be alive in twenty-four hours’ time.

Will John propose to Betty? Is the tumour benign or malevolent? Will the solo free climber stay on the side of the mountain or fall off? Is Debbie pregnant? Can the asteroid be prevented from hitting the planet Earth? Will the bomb defuser manage to make the bomb safe without being blown to pieces?

These are just some of many examples of suspenseful situations. Your novel needs plenty of such situation, both within individual chapters and as part of the main story of your book.

Ken Follett, interviewed in the Christmas 1993 edition of the US journal *Writing Magazine* by Judith Spelman, said something I thought particularly interesting when she asked him what the secret was of writing page-turning material. He replied:

‘It is a pattern, you see, composed of small dramas within a large drama. You must make sure that before one small drama is resolved, another has begun. When you are reading you think *I’ll just find out what happens at the end of this scene*. But before you get to the end of the scene, your curiosity is caught by a development that is going to create the drama in the following scene. Then you think you will read the next scene...’

The need for your story to be logical

A fundamental requirement is that your story needs to be logical, which means that the motivations and behaviour of characters need to make sense.

This is not always easy to be sure about when you are writing. There is often a grey area in what will seem logical and plausible in terms of motivation and behaviour.

After all, we respond in events in different ways. One man might respond to being dumped by the same lady to shrugging it off and dating another the following night; another man might respond by devoting the next five years of his life to stalking her. I myself tend to respond to being dumped by writing a novel about the woman which casts her in a positive light.

What matters, of course, is how logical the motivation and behaviour seems in terms of the character, but that is not always easy to be sure about. A good mentor, adviser and editor can be crucially important to you here as in all other areas of your novel-writing.

Editing and improving your novel

Which brings me to this vital point: no novel worth reading is ever ready for shipping to the printer the moment it is finished. **Your book will ALWAYS need more work, and that means that you need to edit your novel mercilessly.**

Above all, let at least some time elapse between finishing it and revising it. In fact, I also advise you to use the services of a professional editor BEFORE you let a literary agent or publisher see it. Most literary agents are not editors; if the book is not almost already as good as it can be (which most likely the book won't be) they most likely won't take it on. I'm an exception; as a writer myself I do give editorial advice, but only if I like the book, or the part I've seen.

There will very likely be a limit to how polished you can make your book without some professional help. In today's publishing world, few publishers can afford to help a writer polish a promising novel into a publishable novel unless you already have a name and are making them money, and that still doesn't solve the problem of how you got your first book good enough to sell. So, seek professional editorial advice, and above all be prepared to be listen to advice about making cuts, and to converting tell to show. You may also need to be willing to pay something for the advice you get, especially if the editor actually does some work on your material. After all, editors need to eat too.

In conclusion...

Let's now move towards a summing-up.

Think of your camp-fire narrator and it's all clear. We want a hero. We want a beginning which is interesting. We want a story which is full of significant events without unnecessary digressions. If your hero crosses the sea, fine. But if you say there's a dragon there on the land on the other side, the dragon's either got to be fought, or it's best not to mention the dragon in the first place.

We want the story to be told in spare, compelling, concise language where every word is there for a purpose and does its work well. In the past, language was no less potentially powerful and evocative than it is today. It's a fair bet that ten thousand or maybe even fifty thousand years ago there was once a time when a camp-fire tale-teller said, 'She was beautiful,' and a member of the audience said, 'What the hell is that supposed to mean?' The camp-fire narrator was not given his sausage until he'd explained what he meant by saying she was beautiful,

otherwise he hadn't done his job properly. And no writer is going to get his or her sausage, so to speak, until he or she has done his or her job well, too.

If I make you a chair with only three legs, you'd think, 'This chair's rubbishy' and you'll ask me to put a fourth leg on it, at least unless it's a three-legged stool. But if I make you a chair with five or six or seven legs on it, you ask me to chop off all the extra legs above four. You don't need them. So all we're doing as novelists is doing exactly what the camp-fire narrator does, or what a chair-maker needs to do.

How Not to Write a Novel is a useful and entertaining book. But it makes the whole job of writing a novel more daunting than it needs to be. The book tells you what not to do, it makes you feel there's lots of pitfalls, which indeed there are, but if you have a great story and great characters, you will have a lot of fun writing your story, and lots of the work will be done by your characters, as after a while your characters will tell the story for you.

Remember: the author is the authority.

Ernest Hemingway said that as a writer he tried to produce what he called the 'one true sentence'. He meant a very straightforward sentence the reader would accept.

Ken Follett, on his website, says less interestingly perhaps, that he wants to write the sentence that the reader thinks they could write for themselves. As a writer myself, I'd like to think that I could produce sentences the reader *wouldn't* have thought of. But all the same, funnily enough, and this is something I learned fairly recently in writing fiction, is that a lot of the stuff in good novels is fairly everyday stuff. That's a fair point to make, actually. A character in a novel can't have absolutely amazing things happening, or be doing amazing things, all the time or he or she would lose credibility. The scenes should be interesting but you are going to have to have some straightforward scenes too, because if you're too outlandish you lose your reader. Even movie stuntmen need time off in their trailers to have a snooze and a coffee.

Ultimately, *The Day of the Jackal* is a very good novel. But ultimately, it's an ordinary novel in a way. It's about a professional assassin who tries to kill General De Gaulle and all the problems he had in trying to do it. But it doesn't take you into some imaginative world you can't believe existed. It's not like that.

Even *Lord of the Rings*, if you look at the way it's written, it's just about people in Middle Earth going about their business. Okay, they've got funny names and it's a different kind of world with different races, but ultimately the *Lord of the Rings*, - I'm not saying it's ordinary, it's obviously a very fine piece of work - is set in a recognisable real world. It's not bonkers, you know. And crucially, the motivation of Sauron and Sauraman and the bad guys, they're recognisable motivations. Sauron is trying to take over the world. The good guys are trying to protect what's valuable, like the shire with its hobbits and the strawberries and cream and the grass and the love-making and the smoking, and the holidays and the meals. They are trying to protect something that they regard as valuable. And that's very recognisable in terms of the world that we're part of.

Sauron is not trying to do something bizarre and mad, like trying to make everyone wear their underpants outside their trousers. His motivations are emotionally easily recognisable. I think we have to tread delicate balances as novelists between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Yes, we have to make things exciting, we have to use words that make our books exciting and interesting book, but we have to write a story in a recognisable real world. I think that's a very important point to make.

The world is in a way fairly neutral, and things happening in it can seem pretty random. Things happen in the world that can hurt us no matter how nice and kind we are. The agenda of other people are often very different from ours. So, yes, the world is full of potential disappointments and upsets, and the fact that those disappointments and upsets are usually fairly random doesn't make them any less disappointing or upsetting. But as writers, we write stories that can make the world make sense to us, which is why, when you are writing, ultimately the words you produce are very dear to your heart, and if you make them work then you will find yourself being rewarded for that with status and money, and - above all - you will respect yourself.

I think writing fiction - or, more to the point, writing fiction that is going well - is the most exhilarating job one can do. When it goes well, even without great recognition from the outside world, it is a compensating force for all the things in life that disappoint: people, relationships, the practical difficulties of life, one's health, one's non-writing career, and one's writing career, those things can be very disappointing, even for people who on the face of things seem quite successful.

Ken Follett describes the profession of novelist as ‘organising daydreams’ which of course it is to some extent, but I think it’s much more than that. The truth is that writing a novel can put you in touch with the truth of the human condition in a way that is more exciting, in a very real sense, than almost anything else in life. I think the only thing that is more exciting is truly passionate love.

Writing fiction provides a shield against all of life’s disappointments, not least the biggest disappointment of all: that at some point we grow old and frail and die. But our written words, if forked with flame and power and passion, will outdistance death.

So let’s get to work.

THE END