

Chapter 1

Entering the Writer's World

In This Chapter

- ▶ Appraising yourself and your motivation
 - ▶ Getting to know your reader
 - ▶ Polishing your prose
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Writing a novel isn't like assembling a wardrobe. It would be much easier if it were. You'd be able to lay out all your words and ideas on the floor, check the instructions, and make sure that you had everything you needed. Then you'd just follow the steps, and at the end of it you'd have built a novel. Easy.

But writing a novel isn't like that. The process is different for every writer, although that isn't the same as saying that everyone's experience is completely different. Much of the process is common to many writers. But the most important part of your writing experience is unique to you.

The problem is that, unlike assembling a wardrobe, when you write a novel you don't have a blueprint. There's no set of instructions you can look at and say 'Ah, I see what it's going to look like when finished, here's a box of all the things I need, and I see clearly how I'm going to put them all together.' There are guide books, like this one, which can help by showing you how other people have met the same challenges you face. But the bottom line is that no one can write your novel for you.



The key concepts to keep in mind as you write your novel and get it published are

- ✓ Never give up, never stop writing.
- ✓ Never stop reading and finding out about your craft.
- ✓ Have faith in what you're trying to do, but always be prepared to consider the possibility that you may be on the wrong track.
- ✓ Trust the process.

Knowing Yourself

Knowing yourself means being honest about yourself and your situation. When you know yourself, you know what your avoidance strategies are likely to be, and so you can prepare for them.

You have to know yourself to know whether you're capable of doing the things you have to do in order to write your novel. Can you, for example, say to your friends 'I'm not coming out with you just now, I'll meet you later, when I've finished this chapter'? Can you leave phones unanswered, e-mail unchecked? Can you say to the people you live with 'I'm going to shut myself away for a couple of hours now'? Can you do that even though they are settling down to watch a film you want to see? And if they say that you're boring and no fun and they're going out without you, can you laugh that off?

Can you make writing part of the good things in your life, instead of a drudge that needs to be avoided except when you really feel like it, which is, let's face it, about once a week? Most important, can you arrange your life so that you have time for writing every day or almost every day? Can you treat writing like lunch: You sit down and eat lunch every day, and it wouldn't occur to you not to except in the most unusual circumstances. That's how you need to see your writing. Can you, honestly, see yourself doing that? And if you can't, can you train yourself to do it? Even when you're tired, when you've had a bad day, when you just don't feel like it? Because that's what the authors of the published novels you read and enjoy did. They didn't wait until the mood overtook them and then dashed off a few golden chapters. They sat down and slogged, just like you. That's what successful writing takes.

Knowing Your Reader

Your reader doesn't owe you a living, or even a second glance. The only way you can get your reader's interest is by giving them the best possible book you can. How do you do that? Read this book for a start.

Beyond that, you need to make sure that you know who your reader is. A book aimed at young women working in the media in London isn't going to be the same book as one aimed at retired men living in rural Sussex. At least, probably not. (If you can write a book that appeals to both, we know some publishers who want to talk to you!) Know who your reader is, and make sure that you address them.

Who is your reader? The easy answer is 'someone quite a lot like you', and that's not a bad start. If you like reading trashy science fiction, and you write trashy science fiction, your reader is someone like you who likes what you like.

However, presumably you want to attract people who like other things too: People who are going to read your novel and then say 'Well, I don't normally read this sort of thing, but this wasn't just a trashy science fiction novel, it had a wonderful romance story, all sorts of interesting points about politics, and it made me completely reconsider my attitude to the death penalty. Oh, and it had a great recipe for beetroot soup'. We exaggerate, but you take the point. Writing a book with this sort of wide appeal is called a *crossover novel* and is the publishers' Holy Grail. Write one of these books and everyone gets rich. (A good example of one of these is *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger (Vintage).

So, who is the crossover reader? Presumably someone open to different experiences. Beyond that, it's hard to say. Who is a Harry Potter reader? You may reply 'boys and girls aged 8 to 14 with a taste for adventure', but we all know that the appeal of these books goes way beyond that.

How do you target your reader? You don't, at least not at the writing stage. You write the book you want to write. Then, when you submit the manuscript, your agent and/or your publisher may well say something like 'I love it, really love it. Just a couple of suggestions: The romance is really nice, but can it be a bit more intense? And the battle is over a bit too quickly, I'd have liked it to go on a bit longer, with maybe a climactic single combat.' And so on. These people know the publishing market; they make a judgement as to where your book should be aimed, and try to push you in that direction as necessary. (Of course, you don't have to agree.)

Keep the picture of your reader general while writing. 'A 14-year-old boy who goes to grammar school and lives in Edinburgh' is too specific. 'Anyone who likes an exciting adventure story and who's interested in boats, but isn't too bothered about romance' is the kind of picture to paint at this stage.



You aren't writing for yourself. Of course, you have to like your book, but never forget about your reader. If you ever think 'Oh, that's not really as good as I can get it but I'm not going to worry about making it right', or 'I'm tired, the heck with that bit, it's a muddle but I can't be bothered to fix it', your reader's going to notice and won't forgive you. Your book must always be as good as you can make it. No compromises.

Remembering that Writing Is Editing

Creative writing isn't actually what novelists do. What this book encourages you to do is creative *re*-writing.

Writing a novel – putting about 90,000 words on paper – takes you about three months if you write three pages – about 1,000 words – a day. Writing a *finished* novel can take you anything from three months to thirty years. Fortunately, it doesn't take that long for most people, but can still take a year or so.

The extra nine months is spent re-writing: shaping, changing, re-ordering, re-phrasing, honing, and polishing. Over and over again, until your novel is as good as it can possibly be.

The process is no different to creating a sculpture: You can make the vague shape of a javelin-thrower relatively quickly – a lump about six feet tall, a long thin bit at the top, maybe standing on two smaller lumps for feet. Then you start the real work: the editing and polishing.



Writing is all about getting the details right.

Entering the Market

We aren't going to pretend that getting a book published is easy. Some people think that the world owes it to them to publish (and read) their book. Maybe it does, but the world isn't about to pay up. If you're one of those people, don't read the rest of this section: You're not going to like it.

In this corner in the blue trunks, 225,000 books published this year: In the other corner, in rather fetching green shorts, you. Lousy odds, no? So, what can be done to better the odds? Read this book for a start.

Beyond that, always, always be professional. This section contains a few initial pointers. Part V has loads more information about getting published.

Steeling yourself

Getting your novel published calls for clear-eyed realism and absolute honesty with yourself. If you think that getting a novel published is easy, you are just plain wrong. You have to deal with the publishing market as it really is, not how you want it to be. This reality means never being too proud to learn. It means doing research and whatever needs to be done in order to maximise your chances. Above all, getting published means long hard work. If this sounds too much like trouble, or if it feels like commercialism and selling out, you have a choice. As a Script Editor at the BBC once said to one of us when we were much younger, a little pompous, and very naïve, 'Suck it up or move aside'. He was right (if not particularly sensitive or polite).

Doing the maths

You only have to do the maths to realise that publishing a book is not for the faint of heart. According to Nielsen BookData, over 225,000 new books are published in Britain each year. *Two hundred and twenty-five thousand every year.* Nearly 40,000 are adult fiction novels, so unless you're writing for the young adult or children's market, you have 40,000 competitors every year. And don't forget every author who's ever been published and is still in print – your DH Lawrences, Graham Greenes, Jane Austens, and so on are taking up a lot of shelf space already, and only so much shelving is available.

That's your competition, and that's what a publisher is thinking about when they look at your novel. They ask themselves 'We've got Greene and Lawrence and Austen already, and the Booker winners and the rest, which have most of the shelves sewn up before we start. Then there are maybe forty thousand other new novels coming out this year alone. We can only publish a few more this year. *Is this book good enough to elbow them aside?*' That's why only the best books get through.

And that's the aim of this book: To help you make your novel as good as it can be, and to make sure that it stands the best possible chance of getting noticed and getting through against the competition.

Being polite

Always deal politely and sensibly with fellow writers, agents, publishers, readers, and anyone you come into contact with. Don't whine, complain, or insult people. (The old proverb 'Never kick people out of the way as you climb the ladder, you'll be meeting them again on your way back down' is very relevant here.) You never know who you may need help from in the future, so don't make enemies.



In particular, always be polite to secretaries, receptionists, and so on. Not only is this the right thing to do – these people often do a difficult job for not much money – but they are also the gatekeepers. They can help you, make useful suggestions, and offer to go the extra yard for you. Or they can just put you on hold and leave you there.

Of course you must look after yourself and not be a doormat, but the best way to deal with someone who doesn't treat you with respect is to walk away with dignity.

Honouring deadlines

Always keep deadlines when you're committed to them.



The trick with deadlines is to make them realistic at the start. Most people underestimate the time it takes to do something and don't give themselves enough time. Let's face it, most people also don't start straight away, and then try and rush it at the end. Start early and take your holiday when you're finished.

As well as keeping deadlines, find out people's requirements, and fulfil them. If a publisher wants your script on pink paper printed in Italic Gothic, don't argue, do it. After all, they get to make the rules of the game. Complaining about this sort of thing is a waste of time and something that amateurs do. Be a professional.