

WRITING

A User Manual

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO THE CRAFT OF PLANNING,
STARTING AND FINISHING A NOVEL

David Hewson

BLOOMSBURY

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Foreword

I shouldn't be writing this foreword. I don't believe in how-to books. Not for writing. I'm not sure writing can be taught. I believe novels need to be instinctive. I think writers need to shut their eyes and write exactly what and how they want to. Because that way their books will be organic, living, breathing, vital, full of energy, full of integrity. I think that's the only route to success. You can't do it by committee. I think that to want to do something, but to hesitate because Lee Child or someone else does it differently, is the route to certain failure. My how-to book would be all of three words long: 'Ignore all advice.'

But.

But ... writing is also a job. It's a trade. It's a profession. Maybe it shouldn't have rules, but it does have manners. And conventions. And realities. And processes, and different stages within those processes. And tricks. Getting the words on the page isn't easy. You have to make them your words, and your words alone, but some ways will save you a little time and frustration, and some ways will cost you a lot of both.

And once the words are on the page, it's a whole new ballgame. There are blind alleys, and ways to avoid them. There are elephant traps, and ways to sidestep them. There's praise, and ways to parse it. There's criticism, and ways to respond to it. And ways not to. Once the words are on the page, you step out of the office and into the jungle. You need a guide.

You need David Hewson.

I know David pretty well. We've sat side by side through publication dinners, conference panels, at committee meetings, and with our elbows propped on bars. We've set the words to rights many times over. There are three things you need to know about old Hewson: his bullshit meter is second only to mine. He loves the business to death, but is the least starry-eyed writer you'll ever meet. And he was a working journalist, and (perhaps therefore) the most professional and down-to-earth guy you'll ever meet.

You should listen to him. I do, all the time. You should listen long and hard. You should absolutely be prepared to ignore what he says if you're not convinced, but I think you will be convinced. By most of it, anyway.

LEE CHILD
New York, 2011

Introduction

This is a guide to practical craft not cerebral art. It is aimed at the ambitious budding author more interested in finishing a book than allowing it to linger in the purgatory of a never-ending work in progress. Success and failure in any writing project frequently depend upon matters deemed too mundane to be worthy of discussion in authorial circles. Yet the real-world challenges – how to approach a manuscript, to manage research, to fix the right point of view – represent important and recurring obstacles every writer, novice or professional, must overcome.

All too often students and teachers alike focus almost exclusively on the intellectual question of ‘what to write’ and ignore the more immediate yet equally pressing one – ‘how?’ As my title suggests, this book is designed to be a manual offering some plain-language insights into the everyday mechanics of creating a book from hazy idea to finished manuscript. Sound working habits and a basic understanding of the technical structure of fiction are no substitute for creative talent. But the right tools and approaches can free the imagination to work on the most difficult task of all: telling a compelling story. Years of talking to students at writing schools around the world have shown me that writing projects frequently fail not because of some lack of inspiration but through the more humdrum issues of poor time management, faulty working habits and plain ignorance of some of the basic tenets of the writing craft. These are the principal issues I intend to approach here.

Art is fundamental in the development of characters and themes and the creation of a compelling story sufficiently gripping to hold the attention of the reader. I have doubts about how much these elusive talents can be taught beyond the obvious. The best tutors for the subtle skills of narrative have been around us since we were children, on bookshelves, in libraries, alive in our own minds. They’re the stories we’ve come to love ourselves and usually the reason we want to write in the first place. Every creative aspect of fiction is laid bare in the pages of the books we have absorbed as readers over the years. Better to study the work of the masters in their original form and work out for yourself what makes them great than to have someone else try to explain their achievements for you.

What can be learnt is the ability to think about writing, to understand how to control the various processes that go into the making of a book, from planning to story development, research to revision and, finally, delivery in a form which will catch the eye of an agent or publisher.

A first-time author may not be a professional in name, but there’s no reason why he or she cannot be proficient in execution. Nothing guarantees failure more than tardy delivery, shoddy presentation and badly proofed manuscripts betraying the most basic of structural and textual errors. Those who come to judge your work will be looking for motives to reject it more readily than reasons to support another hopeful on the long and expensive path to publication. They will receive no better justification than the obvious whiff of amateurism. Authors, new and old, make mistakes. It is the inexcusable and the avoidable that those judging your efforts will find hard to overlook.

Budding author or professional, you should endeavour to adopt the unsung virtues of the practical side of the craft and seek to maximise your time, energies and skills in order to get a fighting chance of reaching the goal: a finished book of publishable quality. An organised writer, in control of his or her fate as much as any author can be, will negotiate the rocks ahead more competently than one who simply sets sail on the first gust of wind. He or she is also far better prepared to rescue a project from the wreckage, a prospect few busy authors will manage to avoid at least once in their career.

A significant part of the battle to become a writer lies in discovering and adopting the combination of working methods that suits your own temperament, personal circumstances and ambitions. Books do not make harsh taskmasters. An author has few chances for success and many for failure. It’s important to

maximise the former and minimise the latter.

Producing a successful novel shares much in common with architecture. While the public may see nothing more than the glorious dome of St Peter's in the Vatican, Michelangelo, who designed it, needed also to be familiar with the hidden structural issues and foundations beneath his work in order to ensure that glorious vision did not – like the bell tower of his successor Bernini – come tumbling to the ground. You must pay the same attention to these unseen yet essential aspects of your book, adopting skills and strategies that may be invisible to the reader but shore up the story, giving it the confidence, depth and resonance that are the hallmarks of the polished narrator.

This book is divided into what I regard as the three principal phases involved in producing a book: planning, writing and finally the essential task of refining a raw manuscript for delivery to an agent or publisher, or as a self-published book. I have provided examples of how the techniques I outline here might be used to develop an imaginary story called *Charlie and the Mermaid*. From time to time I cite some of the techniques I use in some of my own work, in particular for the series of novels I write around four figures in a fictional police station in contemporary Rome. You don't need to know those books in order to make use of this one, but anyone hoping to start a series should be aware that this route does require some special consideration.

Finally I should emphasise that none of the advice that follows is intended to represent that dreary object, a 'rule of writing'. Fiction is too rich and flexible an art to be defined by rigid structures invented largely for the convenience of those who concoct them. The guidance I offer here is personal and partial, based on nothing more than my own experiences from thirty years of trying to write the best fiction I can. During that time I moved from being a reporter on a small newspaper in the north of England first to national newspapers in London, then to writing fiction in my spare hours, and finally to becoming a full-time author, with more than sixteen books in print in twenty or so languages, a movie of one and now the entire Costa series in development for TV in Rome. It's been a long and interesting ride, one I could never have achieved without focusing at times on unexciting matters other authors may think are irrelevant or beneath them.

They could be right. You should question every aspect of the advice I offer here, ask yourself whether these ideas ring true for you, then cherry-pick and reject each element as you see fit. And after that ... break your own standard practices from time to time, as I've done on many occasions. Which is another way of saying – if you read some of the million or more words I've written in my career you'll find I've contradicted some of the ideas I've outlined here time and time again.

Writing's like that: a hazy, insubstantial craft that you grasp at through a mist. Only you can define your own path to becoming a successful author, through your own creativity and a disciplined and imaginative approach to your work. I hope these suggestions help with the latter, and allow you, in turn, the freedom to devote more of your time and energy to writing a very good book.

Part 1

Plan

Books don't come into the world out of nowhere, even if it seems that way sometimes, to the author much as the reader. Something must happen that makes an individual think: I want to become a writer.

A sudden yearning for easy riches?

I hope not. You'll probably be disappointed.

Celebrity?

Think about it. How many bestselling authors would you recognise if you saw them in the street?

Books come from somewhere else. An odd, subterranean desire to invent stories, to play with your own imagination and share the results with the world at large. There's no point in trying to analyse the creative urge. You either have it or you don't. But it is worth trying to work out where it comes from and to set down a few basic strategies for how you intend to pursue the elusive goal of a publishable novel.

Charlie and the Mermaid

Your name is Charlie Harrison. You're a teenage boy walking in the shadows of a burnt-out pier on the seafront of a run-down English resort, watching shyly from the shore as a pretty girl stares back from the water, the still grey sea up to her waist. She's wearing a cheap, colourful cheesecloth shirt and her hair is soaking wet as if she's been swimming. The girl is crying uncontrollably and refuses to come out. She seems to want to say something but she can't quite bring herself to utter the words. A stray, bizarre thought occurs to you: she's actually a mermaid, someone stranded and in trouble, for reasons you can only guess at.

An idea, a seed is sown ...

All books start like this whether we realise it or not. A sight, a few casually spoken words, a line on a page, an encounter with a stranger. That trigger may lay dormant for years then one day, summoned usually by something you can't quite place, it emerges. Finally, you say to yourself, 'I *am* going to write a book.'

And so a long, strange journey begins, one that ends for so many in failure and frustration. We know intuitively there's a story inside us somewhere. We have to believe we have a tale worth telling and of sufficient interest to others to make the effort worthwhile.

Why, then, is it so difficult to bring this blurry narrative to light?

In part because we often approach the problem from one direction only, that of writing, of production, of hunting for words to fill the void of a blank page. In our ignorance we think that staring at a dead white monitor will, through some magical intervention, bring forth a solution. We bang our heads against the same hard wall repeatedly wondering why we can never break through. Or if we do get to the other side we wind up asking ourselves what cruel turn of fate made the way ahead just so foggy and impenetrable, as devoid of reason and progress as the grim place we came from.

Writing is never easy, but it can be made less difficult. Some of the answers lie in understanding the process that brought you to the point at which you said, 'I have a story to tell.' Starting work on a novel is usually the culmination of years of reading, thinking and dreaming, most of it muddled and unfocused. In other words a hotchpotch of ideas suddenly fighting to come together in the form of a long and convincing narrative.

Books don't enter the world from a vacuum. Nor can they be shapeless, without some kind of form, structure and direction. Bringing a full-length story to a satisfactory conclusion will require more than a single bright spark of inspiration. You will need to understand the nature of the obstacle course ahead, the skills required to negotiate it and the crucial decisions every writer will face along the way.

The seed is important too, of course.

Who *is* Charlie Harrison? What is his relationship with the girl in the water? What happens next? What kind of story could a starting point such as this one prompt?

Only one of those questions has an answer at the moment. That's the last one and it's dauntingly vague: any kind. This could be the opening for a tale of young love, a thriller, a crime story, even some kind of fantasy or gothic horror. The seeds for books are the same as those in your garden. You can never know what might emerge from that small brown husk when all you see is a tiny green shoot just starting to poke its way out of the top. Rose or thistle? Precious flower or not-so-welcome weed?

The temptation, always, is to seek the answer by sitting down at the keyboard and hoping some revelation will flow from your fingers. You may be desperate to get that first page out of your head and on to the screen – and if you are, then do it. Perhaps you've written it already and started to wonder ... what next?

To finish a book, though, you need, at some stage, to walk away from the computer and try to think through some of the long and complex tasks ahead.

Don't worry. The words in your head won't disappear overnight. Why should they? If this is your first book they've been festering inside you for years, hidden away, murmuring in the dark, nagging you one day to try your hand at writing. They've been patient for a long time already. They can wait.

A Writing frame of Mind

I said in the Introduction that this book was divided into three sections representing the different phases of producing a book, its planning, its writing and finally, its delivery. The section titles you see here differ slightly, however, and say simply: 'Plan', 'Write', 'Deliver'.

Why? Because words matter. An appreciation of their subtle power is vital for anyone who seeks to use them. 'Writing', 'planning' and 'delivery' are all nouns, static, descriptive terms we use to denote things. This is fine for a description of how a book is organised. But a section title is an invitation to dive in and act. So instead I use verbs here, exhortative ones in this context that could just as easily be written as 'Let's Plan', 'Let's Write', 'Let's Deliver'.

Verbs are anything but stationary. They denote movement, vitality, effort and dynamism, all attributes that will be needed to see you through the difficult and testing task ahead. Self-doubt and negativity are not just threats to the completion of any writing project. They're an insidious poison that will seep into the text itself, instilling in it a dismal and pervasive mood visible to the reader.

Any book is a massive undertaking requiring commitment, skill, determination and an extraordinary amount of perspiration. Most people with half a feel for language and fiction can write a thousand words or so to kick off a story. Many can make it to some kind of mid-point. A few get to the end, and a small number of those few will manage to do so with sufficient dexterity to attract the attention of a publisher and see the fruits of their imagination reach, finally, the pages of a finished book. Of those only a handful will still be seeing their work published a decade or more after the debut and truly lay claim to the title 'professional author'.

Is it talent that separates the career writer from the amateur? Up to a point. But attitude, energy and resolve matter as well, which is why those section titles are active verbs not immobile, descriptive nouns. Creating a book may appear a solitary, cerebral activity from the outside. Beneath the surface it's a vibrant, exciting and immensely ambitious exercise, one that demands those traits of an author too. Successful writers don't sit down to start something. They set out intent on finishing it. You need to find the same enthusiastic doggedness in yourself.

Like the books they write, authors are a heterogeneous mix, some private, some extrovert, some deeply ingrained in academia, a few (this one, for example) with scarcely an educational qualification to their name. They do, however, tend to share some similar personal characteristics.

Here are a few. Some, you will note, are contradictory, but this is a profession of eternal paradoxes.

SELF-MOTIVATED. Most of us write our first book with little if any support or clear idea of what we're doing. Even established authors are, for the most part, lone operators, dependent on their own imagination for their ideas. You need to be able to analyse the problems you meet and find solutions without much in the way of outside help. Even when you have an agent and publisher you will find it not their job to fix your career beyond advice and guidance. No one can write that book but you. You're the kind of person who can't start work until you see the boss casting his beady eye in your direction something has to change.

FOCUSED. Writing requires intense concentration often to the exclusion of matters that, seen from the viewpoint of a non-writer, may appear more important. You could find yourself forced to write on planes and trains to keep up your work rate or locked in a room in your home with the sound of children in the next room and the noise of traffic outside. You will have to accustom yourself to devoting your leisure hours at the computer to work, not browsing the wastelands of Facebook and Twitter. This is a vocation for the single-minded and the obsessive.

INDUSTRIOUS. A novel may involve 150,000 words of raw text or more, research, editing, revision, liaison with editors, the occasionally fun but always time-consuming round of marketing and

events. If you want to write full time in mainstream popular fiction you will usually be expected to deliver at least a book a year and risk losing your foothold on the sales slots if you're late or turn out something unexpected or not up to standard. Anyone looking for a secure and comfy job with long holidays need not apply.

PATIENT. Finished manuscript to book on sale may take two years or more from the moment your work is bought by a publisher. Add another year to that for the mass-market paperback edition if you first come out in hardback. In translation we're talking many years more. Should your book be optioned for film or television it may be a decade before you know whether there is any chance of the project being green-lighted into production. Nothing you can do will shorten any of these processes. Accept all this and use the waiting time wisely. There is no better way than writing another book.

OPEN TO CRITICISM. First-time author or old pro, your work will be judged by others and is usually found wanting in some way. How do you react? Do you throw up your hands in horror and scream, 'But this is my book, not yours?' Or do you listen to the wisdom of people who have been in the business for years and have a very clear idea of what does and doesn't work? Writing involves constant learning. Even with sixteen or so books under my belt I discover something new with every fresh project. Successful authors pick up more from their mistakes than their successes. Smart ones ask a first-time editor, 'Tell me how to make this book better, please,' not, 'Tell me I'm clever and that you won't change a word.'

OBSERVANT. Books, ultimately, are about people and the universe they inhabit, about the creation of fictional characters who pass as real human beings and fictional worlds that are authentic enough to convince the reader they exist. You will never be able to achieve this small miracle unless you have the ability to listen to and try to understand the people around you, and to make notes constantly about what you hear and see and how that might affect your writing.

THICK-SKINNED. Few of us escape rejection at some stage. Those who go on to be published are often later happy to admit they should be grateful for their early rebuffs. Many books will be ignored by the critics and find little in the way of shelf space in a shop. Occasionally you will be subject to filthy reviews, particularly from the new army of so-called web critics, and rarely achieve much in the way of sales. If you crave instant public adulation or if disappointment dims your ardour, your writing career is likely to be brief and dispiriting.

REALISTIC. A sensible author understands that they are unlikely to be the next Lee Child or John Grisham, that Spielberg will not option their book, and that bestsellerdom normally takes many years and several books if it happens at all. He or she will be aware that it is an enormous achievement simply to be published, and that every book needs to be regarded as a stepping stone to a brighter future, not some desperate one-shot chance at stardom.

AMBITIOUS. You must aim high, craving a chance to sell more titles and write better books. If you don't believe in yourself why should your agent and publisher?

SELF-CRITICAL. It's no use trying to convince yourself that everything you write is wonderful. A serious author should be the first to find fault with their work and, whenever possible, correct the errors before passing a manuscript on to an editor. We all write rubbish sometimes. It's of absolutely no consequence provided we recognise it for the drivel it is and do our best to ensure it's never inflicted on others.

Is it reasonable to expect a novice to possess all these from the outset? No. You pick them up over the years. But you can prepare yourself for what lies ahead in some very simple ways. The first is the most obvious and pleasurable of all. Which brings us to the last universal quality to be found in all those who write for a living ...

Well-read.

In order to write Books You have to Read Books

The publishing business likes to focus more on the positive than the negative. So here's a truth you hear rather too rarely. Agents everywhere are drowning in unsolicited manuscripts from hopeful writers that are so bad they make the poor souls who receive them want to weep.

Not bad in the sense that they're sub-standard. Bad in the sense that they are pitiable, dreadful efforts that can only have come from the minds of people who simply don't read books at all.

Are there really individuals out there who think you can be a writer without also being a reader? You bet. Anyone who has taught at a writing school has met them. Here's a somewhat disguised conversation from recent memory.

AGENT (*to budding writer pushing an idea*): So who do you read?

BUDDING WRITER: Read?

AGENT: What other authors? Whom do you think you might be compared to?

Pinter pause.

BUDDING WRITER: I read a Stephen King book a while back.

AGENT: Which one?

BUDDING WRITER: The movie one with Jack Nicklaus.

AGENT (*sighing*): I think you mean Jack Nicholson. *The Shining*.

BUDDING WRITER: Yeah. *The Shining*.

AGENT: Book or movie?

BUDDING WRITER (*hesitantly*): Both, I think.

AGENT: That was, what, thirty years ago? Anything since?

BUDDING WRITER: To be honest I don't read fiction a lot. *Long Pinter pause.*

AGENT: Don't you think that would be a good idea? I mean if you want to write fiction ...

BUDDING WRITER: They're all the same really, aren't they? So to get back to my story. There's this secret research facility, see. and some aliens. And a vampire. A really hot vampire ...

I exaggerate. But only a little. If you're about to start a book do yourself a favour: go back to something you really like – an old classic, a title from a few years ago, one that's stuck in your memory for some reason. Read it again, from beginning to end, carefully, making notes. Try to put your finger on what it is you like and what, on a fresh reading, doesn't impress you so much. See if you can pinpoint the aspects of the story that made it memorable in the first place. The people? The concept? The location? It's more likely a combination of all three. But in what kind of order?

Think about the characters in particular. Why have they stayed with you over the years? What makes you like the ones you sympathise with and recoil from those you don't? Examine them again in the sections later in this book that describe technical issues such as point of view and tense. How do the writer handle these? What difference would it have made to the story if he'd written it differently from another point of view, say changing a first-person story to a third?

When your idea catches fire you will soon have to try to evaluate your own work. You'll find that a lot easier if you start trying to pick apart the books of others first.

Now, back to Charlie and his mermaid.

What kind of book could this be? Before we can begin to understand that we have to unravel a more pressing question.

What kind of writer are You?

Robert Louis Stevenson was a talented man. Not only did he write some wonderful books but he was allowed a degree of freedom few of us can enjoy today. Stevenson produced a children's adventure classic *Treasure Island* and the dark gothic horror of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. He penned the historical novel *Kidnapped* and *The Master of Ballantrae*, a kind of international revenge blockbuster with locations ranging from the Scotland of the Jacobite Rising to America and India. There was plenty of journalism and travel too, all in a mere forty-four years of a life blighted by sickness.

No one ever said to Stevenson, 'Stick to what you know, dear boy. You can be a kids' writer, teller of adventure tales, a master of horror, or the forerunner of the Clavells and Archers of the century to come. But you can't be them all.'

He was lucky. Very few authors will find themselves so fortunate today. We live in the era of genre, of intense and rigid classification. In the 1960s, when I was a teenager browsing the shelves of the library in the small town where I grew up, already imagining where a book bearing my name would end up on the shelf, titles were divided into the most basic of categories. One part of the library was for fiction, one for non-fiction. The only sub-division in fiction might be an area where the sci-fi titles were kept, usually in the tell-tale yellow jackets of Gollancz. Everything else – from Marjorie Renault to Henry James, from Raymond Chandler to Somerset Maugham – was arranged alphabetically on the same shelves.

I grew up reading books of all kinds, not a set selection relegated to a genre, a pre-defined classification of the rich and sprawling world of literature that someone had kindly sifted and sorted beforehand. Like Stevenson, I was lucky too.

Today most popular fiction comes with a label attached. Crime, young adult, thriller, mystery, history, chick-lit, science fiction, fantasy, romance. These interbreed so we also have chick-lit mysteries and historical crime. Then there are the sub-genres such as noir, steampunk, gothic, hardboiled, legal, police-procedural, speculative and alternative history. Some of these terms have geographical limitations. American readers are always surprised to learn that the word 'mystery' means precious little to their counterparts in the UK. The US term 'cozy' – used for a crime novel that avoids nastiness such as overt violence, sex and bad language while still managing to kill people somewhere along the way – is equally foreign to most readers outside America, though the kind of book it describes is universally popular.

Rail against the rise of the genres as much as you like, but you would be foolish to ignore it. One way or another your book will probably be defined as belonging to one of these categories, even only tentatively. Accept that fact and start to understand how best to use it. You'll stand a much better chance selling your work as 'upmarket crime' than as 'general fiction that happens to involve murder'.

Not that everything about genre is necessarily negative ...

The Charlie Variations

Taking on some of the aspects of a popular classification will add an important aspect to your coming book: a direction. You need that badge on your lapel not just because an agent or publisher will want to see it. Developing a clearer idea of the kind of story you want to write will also shape the progression of that seed of an idea germinating in your head. A first-time author isn't simply trying to complete a book. He or she is unconsciously struggling to understand what kind of writer might live inside them.

An idea of the genre you're pitching for helps define the route ahead, and that's going to be important because this is a journey with many different crossroads and turnings. You need to ensure you take the right ones along the way.

Let's try to imagine some of the possibilities that could come out of the brief spark of a concept we've called *Charlie and the Mermaid* once we allow this germ of an idea to browse along a few different shelves in the bookshop.

Crime

Crime is a broad church, one of the most popular kinds of popular fiction around at the moment. Most stories in this field tend to be about revelation, about a search for truth, one that can often be costly for those involved. A crime writer could look at our starting point this way ...

Charlie wades into the water and discovers a drowned child at the young girl's feet. The police are called. The baby is hers. Immediately the police blame the girl and take her into custody. But she tells Charlie something before they arrive and he knows she's a victim too, not that the police will believe him, and for some reason she refuses to make this plain to them herself.

The girl is released into protective custody. Charlie manages to see her again and his conviction about her innocence grows. He takes it on himself to find the real culprit, even though he knows this is dangerous and will lead him into conflict with the police himself.

Note: there's no detail here. Nothing much to tell us what happens next or even where the story is headed. It's implicit in this kind of book, as it is in most fiction, that the central dilemma – how can Charlie prove the girl's innocence? – will be resolved at the end. But we've no idea how and that doesn't matter. We're not looking for specifics. We're trying to get a general, fuzzy idea of the kind of book this might turn out to be and then use that to take the story forward.

Thriller

Thrillers are so close in tone to crime stories the two frequently overlap. The key difference tends to lie in the thread that propels the story. In crime it is the hunt for the hidden perpetrator of some dark deed. In a thriller the narrative drive will come from something more immediate and pressing: an impending threat, a need to escape, a deadline that must be met. We'll sometimes know who the bad guy is, even if we don't know the full story about him or whether we should trust the information we have. None of this matters at the moment. Thrillers are there to thrill, to put the reader in the shoes of the protagonist as he or she tries to save their own skin, or that of someone else, and put the world to rights along the way. At this stage we simply need the starting point that propels our innocent into a new and threatening world.

Charlie wades into the water and discovers the body of a well-dressed man in a suit lying on the sand by the young girl's feet, held down by lead weights. She stands there weeping, terrified. A group of scary-looking men are walking towards them along the beach. One of them pulls out a gun. The girl starts to howl. A fast inflatable boat emerges from behind. There's a woman on it. She's armed to the teeth and looks even more scary than the guys on the beach.

She holds out her hand and makes it clear: this is their one chance to get away. They take it and as they speed off hear shots from behind. Has Charlie walked into the middle of some kind of gang war, a bloody feud over some issue his rescuer is reluctant to divulge? Is the girl he thinks of as the Mermaid a player or a victim in the endgame ahead? And how on earth is he going to get his geography homework to Mr Postlethwaite in Form 5c and avoid detention for the third week running?

There are lots of kinds of thrillers, just as there are many kinds of crime story. Some start with a bang on the first page and hope to hook you there. Others reel you in slowly with an air of mystery and menace. This would be one of the former I think, perhaps a juvenile James Bond-style romp about a spirited kid who finds himself trapped inside some nasty drama that's deadly and threatening, but one that brings out his own character so he wins through in the end.

Fantasy

Fantasy covers a lot of fertile ground, stretching from gentle fairy tales to grim and visceral horror stories. But let's try an idea that's pretty low-key and 'ordinary' for this genre. No gates into other dimensions, no blood-sucking night creatures or howling werewolves. Just an unexpected rip in the fabric of the everyday world, one we can't even begin to understand at this stage.

Charlie walks into the water to try to talk the girl out on to the beach. When he suggests this she becomes even more distraught. Close up he sees that she is, indeed, a mermaid. Human – all too human – above the waterline. Something else beneath. He wants to help her but she's more intent on telling him something. She knows his name somehow and tells him she has a big secret. In order to hear it he has to come back to the beach that evening, in the dark, and bring three things: a silver ring, a candle and a set of Tarot cards.

Then suddenly, with the agility of a dolphin, not a human being, she turns and disappears back into the sea. He sees the flash of a silvery, scaly tail as she goes. He feels frightened but interested, almost elated too. She's done something to him. His life isn't ordinary any more and for some reason he knows exactly where he can find that ring, the candle and the set of cards.

Some fantasies take place in fantastic locations. Others, the most haunting occasionally, take place in the 'real world'. Once again there's no clue about where this idea goes next. Why does the mermaid want a silver ring, a candle and a set of Tarot cards? No idea. They're just objects to seek, to provide waypoints for the future story, places I could head towards. A note like this tells me some important basics about the story. The Mermaid knows Charlie somehow; there's a connection between the two of them. Does Charlie have an inkling what that might be? Is there a secret in his past too? Charlie has an interest in this girl, perhaps a romantic one. There's some kind of magic involved and, given his demand for some strange objects, a quest of some sort. Quests are popular devices for driving along narratives of all kind, especially fantasy.

The wonderful thing about ideas is that they often spawn others. It's tempting to replace one with what comes after. Resist. You're trying to build up a collection of possibilities at this stage, not narrow everything down to a single, concrete plan. That can come later. Perhaps your first option will be a mistake and it was something you rejected that will work better.

Here's a general rule you should apply to every scrap of information and inspiration you collect along the way. *Never throw these things away.*

There's another take on this story that last snapshot suggests. Charlie is a boy. He's met a pretty girl. There's attraction on his part, and a natural teenage curiosity about physical matters. Sexuality is an important human drive. Charlie sounds like a nice kid but hormones happen to everyone. If this were to go to the young adult market it would be rash to ignore the possibility of some budding relationship here, innocent, tragic or simply some kind of coming-of-age story. So let's go back to the real world and ditch silver, scaly tails ...

Charlie walks into the water. The girl stands there sobbing. When he gets up to her he sees her clothes are ragged and torn. She doesn't speak good English but they manage to converse. She's lost something: a ring. He puts his head beneath the water and retrieves it. He thinks she may be east European – there are a lot of immigrants in the town, and the atmosphere between them and the locals is more than a little difficult – even incendiary at times. And Charlie's dad is one of the biggest immigrant-haters of all. He's a fisherman and he thinks the foreigners have been stealing his catch.

Sure enough, a boat comes along and it's full of scary-looking men who speak a strange language and take the girl on board. She holds out her hand and for some reason he comes along too. They take him back to where they live, some shacks and huts beyond the harbour. They're wary of him but he found the girl's ring and that means a lot to her. Charlie eats with them, listens to them sing, sees the girl become a little more relaxed, content again. Then he goes home and he hopes he'll see her again, though he thinks there's more to her unhappiness than a lost ring. When he gets back to his house he realises his dad saw him in the foreigners' boat and now he's in big trouble.

There's enough there for a chapter or two to see if this project catches fire. Why is the girl sad? Are the foreigners really living off illicit fishing alone? What will Charlie do when his dad says he can't see her again? You can work out for yourself where a story like this could go. In several different directions, of course, but that's usually inevitable at this stage. We're not looking for an outline here, we're simply trying to establish what kind of book this might be.

If you've started your story already you may have decided that by now. But it's always worth standing back from your work from time to time and asking yourself frankly whether it's proceeding the way you want. If you're unsure, you may save yourself a lot of wasted time by pausing the writing for a while until the idea is clearer in your head. Problems in books are usually solved by thinking them through, not pounding out words at the keyboard, hoping salvation will miraculously appear out of nowhere.

Playing with these seeds of ideas should point the way. There are other key decisions that need to be made to stamp this narrative with a particular identity. We may have narrowed down the kind of book this could be. Now we need to know how, exactly, it will be related to the reader.

Point of View

Authors of popular fiction are primarily storytellers, building on the tradition established by early oral narrators back to Homer. This ancient Greek forebear worked before the invention of writing, and was a poet, a singer perhaps – blind according to legend. Homer memorised those fantastic tales of ancient heroism and derring-do and recounted them for anyone willing to pay his fee.

There are two conflicting theories about why human beings started to write things down. According to one, it was to enable the development of trade, so that individuals could produce lists of goods, invoices and sales receipts. Another claims we invented writing because we found the stories of poets such as Homer so entrancing we didn't want to lose them, to leave them to such a fragile and temporary thing as one man's memory. I know which theory I prefer.

One way we recognise our position as Homer's heirs is through something most readers never consciously notice: point of view – or POV, as it's commonly known.

Every scene of every book is defined and in some ways shaped by the position of the voice narrating it. Sometimes this is obvious. In a first-person book the voice of the tale comes directly from the character relating what happens. But sometimes POV is far more subtle. Popular fiction is usually divided between first-person and third-person stories, and third-person fiction sub-divided into three distinct sub-categories. Before embarking on any book you need to think about the POV you intend to use.

This decision is far from irrevocable. Sometimes it's worth rewriting an opening scene from different points of view in order to work out which is best. What matters is that you're aware of the POV as a writer, even if this technical concept goes over the reader's head entirely. Without a defined POV your narrative is likely to flounder around the place, meandering into byways where the story will become confused and lost.

The best way to envisage POV is to think of it as something Homer could never have imagined: a camera. In every chapter there's a lens through which the reader experiences the narrative. It's a very clever camera too, one that doesn't simply pass on an image of what's happening but also the words of those speaking and even at times what's going on in their minds.

This distinction between speech and thought gives you a clue to one of the trickiest aspects of POV. In order to function, that camera must understand its limitations and never range beyond them without good reason.

Let's look at some of the principal POV options open to you, how they might be used in a story like *Charlie and the Mermaid*, and some of their strong points and their failings.

First Person

She wasn't around at first. At least I don't think so. It was as if she just appeared out of nowhere, like a ghost. Or a mermaid. One minute the beach was empty. The next she stood there, waist deep in the lazy waves of an ebbing tide, a little unsteady as if sinking into the soft sand beneath. Her long black hair was soaking wet. She wore a T-shirt that clung to her skinny body. I looked at her and shivered. For some reason I thought I recognised her, but that was impossible and soon I'd know it. Didn't matter either. Sally looked as miserable as anyone I'd ever seen.

From the outset we're inside Charlie's head, seeing what he sees, hearing his thoughts as they happen. This is a very direct and personal way to engage our audience. Readers hear the voice of the protagonist and are immediately introduced into both the plot and its key character.

Many novice writers begin their first attempt at a book writing in the first person. You only have to scan the bookshelves to see that first-person tales are very popular with readers too. For someone starting out it's an approach with many attractions. It's usually much the easiest voice when it comes to getting words on the page. You can imagine yourself into your character and describe what he or she sees through the progress of the narrative. If you're desperate to see whether you have the stamina to finish a full-length book, first person will probably help get you there more quickly than any other voice. But it's not without some serious drawbacks.

First, there's the question of character. There's another clue to the limitations of first person in the opening paragraph. We hear Charlie's thoughts as he looks at the girl in the water. We don't – and shouldn't – hear hers. Novices very often make key mistakes when it comes to point of view, errors that can get you marked down badly by any agent or publisher who reads your manuscript. One of them in the first person is the questionable use of interior thoughts. It's fine for Charlie to think he recognised her. It's perfectly reasonable for him to think she looks miserable too, since this is his observation. But what about this?

I'd seen her before somewhere. Her name was Sally. She looked back and thought to herself: he's a funny-looking kid.

No. At least not within the accepted conventions of popular fiction (though there are always writers who will – and should – break these from time to time). We're in Charlie's head. He can't know what Sally is thinking, and you mustn't, in general popular fiction, pretend that he can. It's fine to say 'I watched her. She seemed to be thinking about what to do next.' That's his observation. But in 'I watched her. She was thinking about what to do next,' the omission of 'seemed' drags us out of Charlie's first-person narrative and puts us into Sally's head. And that's plain wrong. No reader will scream, 'Inconsistent point of view!' Or at least not many. But you're diluting the tightly fixed dimensions of the narrative – shifting the camera, albeit briefly, from Charlie's head to Sally's. Editors may shriek and for good reason. This is bad practice and, unless you're doing it deliberately for a reason, it will reveal you as someone who doesn't understand such a basic tenet of writing craft.

This example points to a broader problem with first-person narratives. They are, by their very nature, restricted in what they can describe. Unless you use some sly techniques the reader can only see what happens within the immediate experience of your narrator. In third-person stories you can fly from character to character, location to location. You can see inside the heads of different people, on all sides in the tale. You have a much broader field of possibilities to play with. With standard first person you're locked inside one character.

Most popular fiction is based on a conventional linear narrative, going forward from one point in time to another. In the simplest kind of first-person story your protagonist can usually only witness what is happening in scenes where he's physically present.

This is tricky. Is some bad guy sneaking up on Sally when she leaves Charlie and goes home? In the pure first person, Charlie can be scared about that possibility. But if it happens when he's not present, he – and by implication the reader – can only learn about it afterwards, through some reported event. In the third person you can be there, with the bad guy, with Sally, with someone else altogether. First person denies you that flexibility and immediacy. It's a narrow, restricted, two-dimensional canvas, one that needs to be worked with special skill. In short ... it may be the easiest way to achieve a finished story, but it can be the hardest POV through which to produce something compelling and original.

Unless you get sneaky. Here are a couple of common tricks.

The diary

First-person stories don't have to be linear narratives moving forward from a starting point to conclusion, hour by hour, week by week, year by year depending on the timescale you've chosen. They can be more free-ranging if you play with the first-person system a little. The most common way through a diary or letter-writing – epistolary to be precise – format.

Two of my favourite classics are *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* by Robert Graves. They manage to tell complex, panoramic stories of life in the Imperial Rome of two thousand years ago through the first-person voice of a single narrator, Claudius, a crippled member of the ruling family who goes on to become emperor himself. Graves achieves this through a very simple trick. The books are 'false documents' pretending to be the diaries of Claudius himself, written in old age, looking back on his life and the history of the empire, ranging from era to era, location to location.

This epistolary approach circumvents many of the problems of linear first-person narrative. Since Claudius is an amateur historian he can relate events in the furthest parts of the Roman empire with a distanced yet individual voice. It doesn't matter that he wasn't there and didn't witness what went on. Claudius knows these facts because he's now an old man telling the story of his life and times. The diary format allows him to tell stories, comment on characters, make observations of a series of historical occurrences and famous people even when he isn't personally acquainted with them.

Books written as letters or diaries bring much more flexibility and range to the first-person viewpoint. They allow the writer a considerable degree of perspective and the chance to take a panoramic view of an unfolding story. The catch can be easily seen in the nature of *I, Claudius*. Books of this nature are, of necessity, reflective, more leisurely in pace than a simple story hooked to the linear passage of time. *Claudius* is looking back at his life. If it's thriller-style speed you're after then this is going to be a tough place to find it. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

Here's another take on the first-person voice:

The unreliable narrator

One of the great epistolary novels is Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, often acclaimed as an early precursor to the modern detective tale. Written in 1868 and first published as a serial story in a magazine edited by Charles Dickens, this is an adventurous and highly gripping mystery about the theft of a precious Indian gem from an English country house. Collins performs an extraordinary feat in telling his tale in the first person through the recollections of several different characters, many of whom contradict each other, gradually revealing the truth behind the crime. In most first-person books we assume we can believe the voice of the person whose personality we have almost come to share as the story progresses. In works such as *The Moonstone* we've no idea whether they're telling the truth or not.

The storyteller in works such as these is known as an 'unreliable narrator', someone whose words we simply cannot trust. Children often make unreliable narrators, and may not even know it. Teenagers, such as J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, know full well what they're up to, and don't mind letting on to the reader either. If you want to experience an unreliable narrator so unexpected that his revelation provoked outrage in some readers at the time, try another detective classic, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. These are all works told in the first person, but with much more surprise and richness than one might expect. An unreliable narrator may be simply economical with the truth, a villain, someone who hides something for a good reason, or plain mad. Even a combination of all three. There's a lot of room to play with and, unlike in the epistolary approach, the unreliable narrator is quite happy to play a part in a conventional, linear narrative.

One caveat though: the narrator here is unreliable only in terms of what he or she shares with the reader. Internally the character needs to be working to a strict and accurate set of values which will usually only be shared with the world at the end. In order for this to work you will need to know very clearly what those values are as you go along. If in doubt read *Roger Ackroyd* and ask yourself: how did Agatha Christie handle that as a writer? At what stage do you think she managed to come up with that unexpected twist at the end? Certainly a long time before it reaches the reader.

Second Person

It's the middle of July, a hot afternoon, and you're bunking off school again, kicking pebbles on the beach near the old, fire-blasted pier, wondering when you dare go home and face the music. You look into the cool dark space below the walkway. Next to a rusting iron pylon that looks like some severed stork's leg you see her standing waist-deep in the water by a concrete stanchion green with seaweed. She's a little older than you, but she's crying uncontrollably, tears running down her shiny pale cheeks, and she's holding something in her arms, cradling it like a baby. But it isn't. You can see it's a doll, an old and battered one, with a pale face that's cracked, skull open to the sea air as if someone's smashed it. You think: she looks like a lost mermaid. You tell yourself: walk away. There's trouble down here sometimes. Gangs and louts and all the people your father says to steer clear of.

But there's a girl too. She's pretty and she's in trouble. You can't walk away. You can't.

Very few full-length books are written entirely in the second person. The voice is usually employed in short stories or to add some variety to a work in another voice by introducing short passages, perhaps prefacing a chapter, told in a semi-interior second-person mode. This is, I imagine, how one would proceed with the passage here. One could move from this dreamlike image into a first-person account told by Charlie himself, indicating that this was a memory perhaps or a dream. Or segue into a third person version that leaves the reader wondering who the 'you' referred to in the first few paragraphs actually represents.

Brief changes of voice – and as we shall discuss later, of tense – can add a slightly surreal and creepy nature to your story, beguiling the reader who knows he's being drawn into something unknown and perhaps a little unreal. Note that this opening is set in the present tense, not the customary past. That adds to the idea that this is some kind of vision or dream. Placing the second person in the past tense changes the effect substantially.

It was the middle of July, a hot afternoon, and you'd bunked off school again, kicking pebbles on the beach near the old, fire-blasted pier, wondering when you'd dare go home and face the music. You looked into the cool dark space below the walkway ...

We can imagine the first would lead to a narrator thinking inwardly, wondering about the reality of the memory. In the past tense all this *has* happened. So perhaps you'd use that to lead into something a little less loose and strange. The narrator is distanced from this event. He might even be recalling decades later in his old age.

The possibilities are there, but the second-person past can all too easily sound a touch flat and prosaic, the report of some event, not the tantalising glimpse of the coming story that we're looking for.

Only the very brave and experimental should attempt to write a complete novel in the second person, especially if you hope it will fit into some category of popular fiction. As a voice it has all the

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