



Mary Anna Evans

Your Novel:
Day by Day

a fiction writer's companion

YOUR NOVEL: Day by Day

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Joyeuse Press

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*For all those who share my love
of the art of storytelling...*

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CHAPTER 1—FIRST STEPS: THE ONLY WAY TO START IS TO START

DAY 1—Every single day

Perhaps you were expecting a preface or a foreword or some sort of introductory text, but no. We’re diving straight into our task of writing a book...your book.

I’m skipping the part where I clear my throat and talk to you about the process of writing a book. I’m skipping the part where I tell you how I will go about helping you through that process. You picked up this book because you were ready to get started. So let’s do that.

Very early in my career, when I had a drawer full of unsold short stories and a single unpublished novel manuscript, I had the pleasure and good fortune to meet two people who knew the publishing industry inside and out—Joe and Gay Haldeman. Joe has had a long and illustrious writing career that has been adorned with every award that science fiction has to offer, starting with the Hugo and Nebula and going on from there. His wife Gay has been at his side the whole time, managing his career and being an integral part of his creative process.

I had no intention of telling Joe and Gay that I was a writer, despite the fact that I had spent more than a decade writing stories and watching them fly back into my mailbox, rejected. What could they possibly say to my bold and presumptuous claim of authorhood other than, “That’s nice, dear...”?

The mutual friend who introduced us had no such compunctions. He announced that I had written a book and that he had read it and that it was just wonderful. Mortified, I watched as he produced the manuscript, which I guess he had hidden under his chair while we ate dinner. I snatched the manuscript out of his hand and hid it behind my back.

I was sitting beside Gay and she leaned over to speak to me, so I braced myself for the words “That’s nice, dear...”

Instead, she said, “Do you write every day?”

I’d never been asked this question, and it surprised me, but I did know the answer.

“I do. I have three children, and when they’re sick or they need me somehow, I don’t always get to my writing. But barring that kind of obstacle? Yes. I do write every day.”

That was the extent of our discussion of this issue, but it has stuck with me for more than a decade. It was the genesis of this book.

Writing a book is a monumental task. Many, many people would like to write a book, but not so many people can scrape together the guts to begin. Far fewer people can scrape together the fortitude to finish. Yet a writer who writes a page a day generates a book in a year.

Do you write every day?

DAY 2—The first step in a marathon

It has been nearly nine years since I sold my first novel. In that time, I have written and published the book, six novels, a short story collection, and a number of short stories, essays, and articles, and I have co-authored an educational text on mathematical literacy.

Wow. Just looking at that last sentence makes me tired. But if someone told a one-year-old, just learning to walk, how many steps she would take in her lifetime, she'd probably never have the nerve to stand up and go.

Let me repeat something I told you yesterday. If you write a page a day, you'll have a book in a year. If you're the kind of person who can just sit down and do that, then you have my permission to put this book down and start typing. If you can write three pages a day, or seven, or ten, so much the better.

For heaven's sake, though, don't throw the book away. I worked too hard on it, and I think it will help you reach your goals. I believe it will still be useful to you as a resource, because it is not intended as a purely motivational text. I'm going to share with you the things that I wish someone had told me a decade ago. I'm going to talk to you about giving your characters depth and reality. I'll be discussing the difficulties of editing your own work. I'll be helping you shape your plot. And, for those of you who *aren't* sure you can generate a towering pile of pages, I'm going to talk you through the process.

Is this process going to be as simple as writing a page a day until the book is finished? No. I know people who work that way, but I'm not one of them. I need to prepare before I work, and I believe in editing thoroughly afterward, so that's how I'm going to shape this book.

You'll work at your own pace. I've structured the text as a year-long day book, simply because that is the pace at which *I* work best. Still, I know that there are marathon runners, like me, and there are also sprinters, so I've made sure the book is useful for people who prefer either writing style.

If you're a sprinter, you can read all the introductory material in the first three chapters in one sitting, then launch into your book. If you can maintain a pace of three pages a day, instead of the single page being generated by the marathon-style writers, then you'll have a draft of your book in ninety days. (And if you write nine pages a day, you can do it in a month, but I know you can do the math.) At whatever pace you write, you'll find guidance here for editing your work and for preparing it for publication.

I do encourage you to take the time to do the pre-writing exercises I will give you in the early chapters, even though I hear you saying that you want to *write*. Now.

Of course you do, and you *will* be writing—you'll be writing character sketches and developing a detailed outline and taking notes on your story's setting. Much of this text will probably find its way into your book, so writing it will in no way be a waste of your limited writing time. But if you don't know what kind of world you're creating and if you don't know who is going to live in it, then how can you even begin?

With this question in mind, it's time for you to begin imagining your fictional world and how it will be shaped, which means that you need to know what kind of book you're writing. Fictional genres can be frustrating for writers who feel that calling a book a mystery or a romance is an unfortunate pigeonholing of a work of art. And it is. There is no reason that your finished book must fit into an existing pigeonhole. Still, readers want to know something about your book when they are considering whether to read it or not. Genres—and I consider “literary fiction” to be a type of genre—give readers a bit of information with which to start.

So...are you writing a romance? A space opera? A literary novel? Realize that a story of two

lovers who are working for a radical resistance group during the War for Martian Independence could be any of these things. Your story is yours. You just need to know your goals.

What kind of book are you writing?

DAY 3—Deciding what kind of book you want to write

Your current assignment is to ruminate on a broad-brush description of the kind of book you'd like to write, thinking about its genre or lack thereof. I reject the notion that a writer must choose one genre and stay there. I have written science fiction, literary fiction, fantasy, essays, thrillers, and non-fiction. And I'm not dead yet. I fully intend to write in whatever style suits my fancy for the rest of my life.

Mystery, however, is the genre in which I can most reliably sell. It is the genre in which I have won awards and gotten good reviews and earned a reputation. The following essay was written in answer to the question, "Why do you do what you do?" Or rather, "Why do you write what you write?"

While you are musing over your own novel, consider a point I make in this essay, centered on the notion that mystery fiction could be considered the literature of justice. I've heard science fiction described as the literature of ideas. Romance is perhaps best described as the literature of romantic love. The best literary fiction examines all those things and more because, in the end, our stories and indeed, all our art, are the tools humans use to take a clear look at our existence...to explain the unexplainable.

As you read my thoughts on why I write what I write, consider your own aims. Fiction shines a light on the important parts of human existence, but a single book cannot illuminate every corner. Do you intend to explore life's big issues in your book, or do you only aim to entertain? (Let me stress here that entertainment in itself is a worthy goal, in my mind.)

Make a list of your goals in writing this story and think of how you can build a book that will reach them.

Meditations of a Mystery Writer

Any mystery author gets the occasional question from somebody who wants to know why you write about killing people. A slightly more discerning question comes when someone wants to know if it's possible to write a mystery that doesn't involve murder. The two questions are related, I think.

To me, murder works as a starting place for a story because it is inherently dramatic. It demands that the reader care. If I wrote a mystery about a jewel theft, I would need to presume that you cared whether the victim ever got her jewels back. How can a human being not care when another human being is deprived of life?

This doesn't mean that there's only one story to be told about a murder. The murder of a desperately evil person who has spent a lifetime torturing puppies and stealing from children wouldn't be the same story as the murder of an old lady who has devoted the last fifteen years of her life to raising a child who isn't even related to her. (This second scenario is the plot of my work-in-progress, [Plunder](#), in fact.) Still, though you may be glad that the evil person has died, you do care.

I think of crime fiction as the literature of justice. A crime, usually murder, sets the world askew, and the writer has about 300 pages to examine what that means. Sometimes, as a writer, I find that I'm far more interested in the repercussions for the people left behind than I am in the irredeemable piece of humanity who did the killing. Then I ask myself if anyone is ever truly irredeemable, and that question drives another plot twist or three. Sometimes being a mystery writer is philosophically interesting.

And it also gives me a chance to dream up interesting ways to kill people. (Metaphorically.) I have thrown them off cell towers, beaten them, shot them, knifed them, and I'm waiting for

chance to kill someone with candy, because I know how.

~~Now you're afraid to eat in my presence, aren't you? And maybe you should be...~~

DAY 4—My own response to this assignment

On this, your last day of meditating on the kind of book you want to write, I'd like to share with you the story of how I came to the genre of mystery. As I've said, I have written in many styles. I am an absolutely omnivorous reader. (I compulsively read the shampoo label in the shower, which was a great help to me when I took organic chemistry and I already knew the commercial uses of sodium lauryl sulfate.) Thus, I obviously read in all genres. So why did I choose to write mysteries?

The simple answer is that the story that came to me was a mystery.

I had written a thriller that got me an agent but didn't sell. This meant that I had the advice of an industry professional, my agent, as I decided what I would write next...or even whether to keep writing, after so much rejection. She urged me to write another book because we had gotten so close with the first one. As a writer with no contract and with no track record driving her to write another book like her last one, I could do any book I wanted. What did I want?

As I drove down an interstate highway, the image of a dilapidated Southern plantation house came into my head—no story, just the picture of a crumbling house in the woods. I usually develop my plots by asking myself questions, which is something we'll talk about later in the chapter on plotting. The question that this house brought into my mind was, "Who would live there?"

I was pretty sure it wouldn't be a debutante who had inherited the family mansion and a bunch of money. I was also pretty sure it wouldn't be a Scarlett O'Hara clone, because *Gone with the Wind* had already been done. I thought it would probably be someone who inherited the house and nothing more, which meant that she wouldn't have the money to keep it from crumbling to the ground.

This was great, because it answered my second question for me: "What is my character's problem?" The answer was simple. This person had inherited a money pit in the form of a historical home, but it was a treasured family relic and she had a deep personal need to save it.

I love the beauty and romance of plantation architecture, but it comes with moral ambiguity. The beautiful house in my head was built by slaves. A book set there could not (or, in my opinion, should not) be written for 21st century audiences without acknowledging that fact. It occurred to me that it would be exceedingly interesting if my main character descended from the slaves who built the money pit of a house. Soon enough, it occurred to me that it would be even more interesting if she also descended from the masters who lived there. Out of this collision of cultures, my series character Faye Longchamp was born, and she carries within her enough conflict and ambiguity to support several books, so far, with more to come.

But look closely at that last paragraph. Notice that I still had not chosen a genre. I could have been plotting a romance or a historical novel. If I added some time travelers and a ray gun or two, the story could morph into science fiction. This story could be chick lit or literary or...well...anything. I needed to do some more thinking.

I asked myself what Faye would do to get the money to save her home. I realized that the only thing of value that she owned, other than the house, would be the artifacts her ancestors left behind, buried on the island where the house stands. I decided that Faye would feel perfectly ethically okay about digging up those artifacts, for which [Artifacts](#) was named, and selling them on the black market because they emphatically belong to her. Then I pictured her digging for those scraps of history, day in and day out.

When I realized that the island where she was digging had been inhabited for the ten thousand years since it rose out of the water, I knew that she would, sooner or later, dig up a dead body. But even that corpse didn't make my story a mystery. She could have stumbled onto the plantation cemetery. Or maybe she has uncovered the body of a Creek warrior, killed in battle. Or maybe she has

found a dead conquistador.

~~I pictured the moment she discovered the dead girl's skull, and in that image I saw an earring nestled nearby. Its design said that it wasn't ancient. It had probably been made when Jackie Kennedy was the nation's style icon. And that forty-year-old earring told me that Faye had found someone who had been brought to this island and buried at a time when she should have been placed in a cemetery grave. This was a body that wasn't old enough to be an archaeological find. This was a murder victim.~~

And it was only then that I knew I was writing a mystery.

I hope that you've been spending the past few days digging deep into the story that you're developing, making sure that you know the kind of tale that you want to write. It's the only way I know to tell a story well.

CHAPTER 2—WHO WILL LIVE IN YOUR WORLD?

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