

## *The Truth About Writing*

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In addition to the above, which have all been published or produced, Michael Allen is also the author of a considerable number of novels, short stories, stage plays, television dramas, film scripts, and the like, which, due to the general cluelessness of publishers, producers, and decision-makers everywhere, have yet to see the light of day.

# *The Truth About Writing*

An essential handbook for novelists,  
playwrights, and screenwriters

Michael Allen



Kingsfield

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‘If you want to be thought a liar, always tell the truth.’

Logan Pearsall Smith

## **INTRODUCTION**

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WRITING IS AN activity which can seriously damage your health. It can consume huge amounts of time and energy, and it can lead to frustration, rage, and bitterness. The overall purpose of this book is therefore to protect and preserve the sanity of anyone who is unfortunate enough to be afflicted with the ambition to write.

As the title implies, I shall tell you the truth about writing – the truth about your chances of success when you bang your head against the brick wall of publishers’ indifference. As is often the case, the truth does not make for comfortable reading, but the fact that this book does not pull any punches is what makes it valuable to you, the Reader, because most books about writing don’t tell you the truth at all. Instead, they lead you to believe that success – in the form of money, fame and literary prizes – lies just down the road, and that all you have to do is pay a tuppenny bus fare and you will arrive there almost at once.

Unfortunately, life is not like that, and I have no intention of painting a misleading picture. The authors of other books for writers may be encouraging, cheerful, and full of hope and optimism; I, on the other hand, will be

gloomy, pessimistic, and cynical. But I will, at least, be telling you the truth.

The book is aimed principally at those who intend to write novels, but there is much in it which will be useful to those working in the theatre, television, film, or radio.

With any luck, once you understand what an unrewarding and frustrating business writing is, you may abandon all thought of continuing, and take up something sensible, such as making quilts, or breeding budgerigars. But I doubt it, because most writers are, more or less by definition, completely crackers. They are people who are congenitally incapable of looking a fact in the face and recognising it for what it is. And I speak as someone who has been at it for nearly fifty years, so I should know.

## **The structure of the book**

The book is arranged in nine main chapters.

The first chapter considers the possible rewards of writing – money, fame, literary reputation, and the freedom to ‘express yourself’; and the second chapter explains how likely it is that you will obtain any of these rewards. (Not very likely at all, actually.) These first two chapters are, in short, a crash course in a skill which writers find hard to master: clear thinking.

If, after reading these introductory chapters, you are still suffused by the ill-advised ambition to write, Chapter 3 explains how to decide what it is that you personally hope to achieve through writing. It helps you to determine your own set of aims and ambitions; these, in turn, ought to determine what sort of books or scripts you write.

Chapter 4 describes how the modern publishing industry works, if ‘works’ is not too grandiose a term to

use. 'Staggers along' might be a more appropriate description of how the publishing industry actually operates. Of all the UK media, the book world is the one I know best, and hence I use publishing as an example of the way in which writers are generally regarded and treated. The situation in other media, such as television, the theatre, radio, and film, is not much different.

The fifth chapter is provided for those who are gluttons for punishment. If, in defiance of common sense, you are still determined to write a novel or a play, this chapter is designed to make sure that you have a clear concept of precisely what you are trying to do – or rather, what you *should* be trying to do. The thrust of the chapter is to argue that what writers are selling is emotion. To this end I provide a summary of what little scientific knowledge there is on the subject of emotion, and I explain how this information can be put to practical use.

Chapters 6 and 7 are thoroughly down to earth, and focus on the practical problems of finding sufficient time and energy to complete your project. You will often come across people who would definitely write a book if only they had the time and energy, and after reading these two chapters they will no longer have any excuses.

The penultimate chapter provides some valuable advice on how to sell your work, or at least on how to get it before the public. The problem of selling your work is normally glossed over by those who write about writing. They tend to imply that it is simply a matter of putting a typescript into an envelope and sending it off to a publisher or producer, who will open it, read it at once, and weep tears of gratitude that you should have chosen her as the recipient of your wonderful, fabulous, incomparable masterpiece. However, since the whole point of this book is

to get across to you that such is not likely to be the reaction to your work, this chapter attempts to suggest a few ways forward after you have, inevitably, exhausted all the orthodox avenues.

Finally, Chapter 9 provides what every purchaser of a book on writing is looking for: *the secret of success*. In this case the secret of success is expressed in *mathematical terms!* Wow! I give you a *scientific formula*, no less, one which explains exactly what it is that makes a writer a success overnight! Hot damn. If that isn't worth the price of the book, all on its own, then I don't know what would be. And I am assuming of course that you did buy the book with your own money, and not do something sneaky such as borrowing it from a library. In any event, even if you did borrow the book, you will certainly want to buy a copy after reading this chapter, so that you can refer to it from time to time.

Following the last proper chapter, there is a brief envoi, followed by a list of axioms which you would do well to bear in mind.

### **Conventions adopted**

I suppose an introduction would not be complete without a few boring words about the conventions adopted, sources of information, acknowledgements for help given, et cetera, et cetera.

One recent book on publishing, by a female literary agent, was marred – for me at least – by her desperate attempt to avoid using either a male or female pronoun. The lady didn't want to seem sexist, you see. This desire led her to write sentences such as 'An author should send their manuscript....' Oh dear.

In this book I have recognised that there are lots of women writers, and numerous women working in publishing and the other media, and so I normally use 'she' and 'her' quite freely, as appropriate.

Where I give examples of particularly villainous behaviour by publishers and their kin, I shall refer to the perpetrator as a man, on the well-known principle that all men are bastards. Exceptions may arise when relating specific incidents, from my personal experience, which involved a woman.

Speaking of personal experience, I have, when describing incidents from own career, avoided naming and shaming incompetent individuals and/or the ghastly firms they work for. Though I must say I was mightily tempted. My decision is based not so much on moral grounds as on the knowledge that publishing is such a fast-moving business that any individuals named would probably have been long gone from the company in question by the time you read this book. They may even have been long gone from publishing altogether.

My merciful decision not to be rude to any named individuals (or companies) does not mean that I intend to be mealy-mouthed. True, I am an Englishman, and was therefore brought up to be polite to everyone. I was educated in a culture in which to say 'I'm afraid I can't quite agree with you on that' meant 'I shall fight to the death to prevent you achieving your aims.' But, for the purposes of this book, I have forced myself to abandon that old-fashioned approach. In these pages, what I have to say will be set out in robust and forthright terms. This may offend some readers, but it will not, I promise, leave you in any doubt about what I am thinking. A book which presented a blurred picture of the realities of the writing

life would in any case not be worth reading.

Since this is not an academic book I have not littered the text with footnotes, giving the source of every statement. You may be assured, however, that all the facts, figures and anecdotes have appeared in print somewhere, if they are not obviously drawn from my own memory. Over the past forty years or so I have accumulated a considerable pile of press cuttings and quotations, many of which are incorporated in the text.

It is also customary to give a word of thanks to all those who have helped the author in completing his book. So, thanks to everyone concerned. But all the hard work, just in case you're in any doubt, was mine.

Michael Allen  
Bradford on Avon, 2002

## CHAPTER 1

### What do writers want?

---

THE FIRST THREE chapters of this book are designed to help you to decide whether you really want to be a writer at all. They are intended to enable you to identify the possible benefits of a writing career (Chapter 1); to give you a clear picture of how likely you are, in practice, to be able to enjoy any of those benefits (Chapter 2); and to provide you with a method for deciding, if you really want to set out into the unknown, which direction to head in (Chapter 3).

This first chapter deals with the question of exactly what it is that writers hope to get out of their work. If we cut through all the flimflam and waffle, all the mumbling and head-scratching and postmodernist twaddle, what can we say about what writers are aiming for? What, to paraphrase Freud, do writers want?

Broadly speaking, most writers will tell you that they want one of four things: money; fame; literary reputation; or simply the satisfaction of 'expressing themselves'. Some writers want all of these at once. So let us begin by looking at these four potential benefits.

Since I am an Englishman, many of the examples referred to in the text are drawn from a UK context; but the principles behind the examples will remain the same whether you are based in the USA, Japan, Australia, or South Africa.

## Money

### *The earnings of the few*

If you keep your eyes open you will regularly read press reports about writers who have been paid substantial sums of money for their latest books or scripts. For one thing, a big-money contract provides a form of free publicity, though such press stories can backfire.

Here are a few examples of big-money newspaper reports, drawn pretty much at random from the past twenty-five years or so.

Back in 1977, *The Sunday Times* reported that St Bartholomew's Hospital in London had lost a trainee nurse. The paperback rights to Colleen McCullough's second novel, *The Thorn Birds*, had just been sold for £1,117,000. The book had taken her eight weeks to write. Miss McCullough promptly resigned from her nursing post and became a full-time writer.

In 1996, the British book-trade magazine *The Bookseller* stated that the American thriller writer James Patterson had been 'snatched' from the publishing firm of Harper-Collins by another publisher, Headline. The attraction was a four-book contract worth a seven-figure sum, that is to say over £1,000,000.

Patterson is an interesting case because when he signed that particular contract he was still only a part-time writer; he spent most of his working day in New York as chairman of J. Walter Thompson, the advertising agency. He was said to write his books by getting up early and putting in a couple of hours before breakfast. It seems, therefore, that in some instances you can earn considerable sums of money in your spare time.

Twenty years or so after Colleen McCullough, we find that another young lady was doing something similar. Jenn Crowell was aged 17 when she wrote her debut novel, *Necessary Madness*. Hodder and Stoughton paid her £500,000, just for the British rights. The American rights were bought separately.

Incidentally, this book does not seem to have sold very well, at least in the UK. It does not appear on the relevant year's list of the 100 biggest-selling paperbacks, which must have been a disappointment to the publisher.

Next we come to the famous Mr Martin Amis. In 1995 HarperCollins paid Mr Amis £460,000 (some reports put it at a round half-million) for his novel *The Information*, plus a book of short stories.

This deal attracted enormous press comment at the time. Many publishing insiders regarded the sum as an unrealistic amount for a book by a writer who was much admired by the highbrow literary critics but who had not so far proved himself to be very commercial.

The doubters seem to have been right. Despite all the interviews and acres of free publicity in the press, not to mention the usual advertising campaign, *The Information* was another book which didn't sell very well – or at least, not well enough to earn back its massive advance. According to the *Financial Times*, 30,000 copies were sold in hardback, and *The Guardian's* list of big paperback sellers in 1996 had it at 94th place with 116,000 copies sold. These would be splendid figures for an unknown writer, but for a publisher who has paid half a million they are probably not good enough.

At the end of 1996, Amis parted company with HarperCollins and signed a new contract with his old publisher, Cape. Despite Amis's track record with HarperCollins, this

new contract was reportedly worth £1,000,000 for four novels which were yet to be written, plus the paperback rights to his existing books. So it seems that you can still find a publisher who is optimistic enough to offer you a big-money contract even if your previous books didn't sell as well as was hoped.

Not surprisingly, some of the novelists who write more obviously commercial fiction are also making huge sums of money. Take Danielle Steel, for example. For at least fifteen years she has produced two books a year, all of which have featured in the hardback and paperback bestseller lists in both the UK and the USA (and, I would guess, other countries as well).

In 1983 (to pick a random year) Danielle Steel had three books in the year's list of UK paperback bestsellers, placed 15th, 17th, and 21st respectively. In 1996 she had two, placed 15th and 22nd. At a conservative estimate, each of the 1996 books must have made her £150,000 in the UK market alone.

Other novelists who have received massive payments for novels in recent years include Douglas Adams, Michael Cordy, Robert Mawson, and Michael Hoeye. And, on the very day I was writing this section, *The Bookseller* carried a report that Lady Georgia Byng had secured a £1,000,000 deal for her children's book, *Molly Moon's Incredible Book of Hypnotism*. She will be the next J.K. Rowling, says *The Bookseller*. Well, we will see.

Writers in other fields, besides fiction, also produce work which proves to be very rewarding in financial terms.

In 1990 Brian Friel wrote a hit stage play called *Dancing at Lughnasa*. At one time there were 17 productions of it running in various parts of the world, including one on Broadway and another in the West End; if, in that particu-

larly successful year, Mr Friel's gross income came to less than £1,000,000, I would be very surprised.

Alan Ayckbourn is another writer who has had a constant stream of hits passing through the West End of London in the last thirty years. And although Noel Coward is long since dead, his estate must still receive substantial sums from the many revivals of his plays.

Hollywood, of course, has for decades been seen as a source of vast sums of money for writers. To give but one example, Olivia Goldsmith reported in a 2001 interview that she had not made much money out of the movie sale of her first novel, *The First Wives Club*, but she was paid £380,000 for writing the screenplay for *The Switch* in 1995.

Joe Esterhas was reportedly paid \$3m for writing *Basic Instinct* and another \$3m (or \$5m, depending who you believe) for *Showgirls*.

Finally in this review of success stories, let me tell you a story about a man who made a lot of money as a writer without ever becoming well known. Some twenty-plus years ago, a schoolteacher friend of mine decided to cooperate with two colleagues in writing a series of textbooks, designed for use in secondary schools. After putting forward some proposals, the three men were offered a contract by a major publisher, but they weren't quite convinced that there was any real money in the job.

To set their minds at rest, the publisher sent them to see his star author, a man who wrote books for foreign students who wanted to learn English.

One of the first questions which the three visitors asked this author was about the money he made.

'Oh yes,' said the unknown author, 'writing textbooks does pay quite well.'

To prove the point, he showed them his income-tax bill for the previous half-year (and remember that this was more than twenty years ago). He was paying, in a half-year, over £100,000 in tax. His pre-tax income was enormous.

My friend and his two colleagues went home and started work on their first textbook that very night.

### *The earnings of the majority*

Unfortunately, those writers who earn large sums of money from their work are definitely in the minority, and it is now time to come down to earth.

Irwin Shaw was a novelist, and several of his books were filmed with some very starry names in the casts (e.g. Marlon Brando in *The Young Lions*). Irwin was once talking to an insurance man, and he mentioned that he was a writer.

‘Yes,’ said the insurance man, ‘but what do you do for a living?’

This response was by no means unreasonable, because most writers earn very modest incomes from their work. It would be extremely unwise to assume that you yourself are going to be an exception to that rule. In your ordinary everyday life, you do not make assumptions which fly in the face of common sense. Every day, a few people are killed on the roads, but, when you get into your car to drive to the supermarket, you do not believe that you will be among them.

From time to time, various authors’ groups carry out surveys of their members’ earnings. Successive surveys by the Society of Authors show that there is always a big gap between the ‘golden nucleus of high earners’ and the majority of authors. Most authors receive ‘little more than

a token income from their work.'

The Society of Authors survey published in June 2000 showed that 75% of its 7,000 members earned less than the national average wage.

A similar enquiry into writers' incomes was carried out in the USA by the Authors Guild. The Guild's conclusion was that 'most book authors can't begin to make ends meet from their writing alone.'

A quarter of the writers who responded to the Guild survey reported that they earned sums which can only be described as small change. Not surprisingly, only 5% of the respondents were able to write full-time; the rest depended on other jobs, such as teaching or journalism.

Not even winning a prestigious literary prize does much for your income. The Authors Guild found that 40% of award winners still earned less than a living wage.

Other reports also confirm that a high literary reputation does not generate sales. For example, *The Prince* by Richard Koster was acclaimed by *Life* magazine as 'perhaps the most extraordinary first novel ever written by an American.' It sold only 3,000 copies, and 900 of those were bought by the author.

The Hollywood Writers Guild once asked for details of its members' income and found that two thirds of them were making less than \$1,000 a year. In fact, the top five executives in Hollywood earned more, in total, than the whole 9,000 members of the Writers Guild put together.

The California branch of the screenwriters' union discovered that, over a ten-year period, more millionaires had been created by winning the state lottery than from screenwriting! To be precise, 1,333 people had won lottery jackpots of \$1m or more, while only 393 people had made a million dollars from their film scripts.

As an aside, you may draw some comfort from the fact that those who are involved in the management side of the entertainment media aren't usually doing much better.

For instance, it has been estimated that, out of every five plays put on in the West End of London, three lose money, one breaks even, and one makes a profit. So, despite the obvious success of shows such as *Cats*, theatre producers have not yet found the route to easy money. One such producer told me, 'I made a quarter of a million quite quickly, and lost it quite slowly.' I certainly wouldn't advise you to invest in theatrical productions.

In publishing, the simple fact is that many of the books which are published with such high hopes end up by selling well under a thousand copies.

I was recently involved in helping a distinguished civil servant to get his autobiography published. It eventually sold 400 copies, and the publisher regarded this as a success. The book did not, of course, make any money for its author, but he had the satisfaction of being able to pass on the lessons that he had learnt in his long career.

For a number of years I was the head of an academic publishing operation, and our most successful publication sold only 800 copies. One of our books sold less than 100, but fortunately we had arranged in advance for a sponsor to cover the loss.

Finally, a couple of cautionary tales.

One writer who is exactly my own age (I won't name him because he evidently has enough problems already) had a big success with a novel in the late 1960s. It was given five-star reviews in all the right places, described as 'sensitive', a 'reflection of our troubled times' and all the rest of it. A successful film version was made; it was adapted into a play for the stage; and the book was adopted

as a text for teaching in schools. Unfortunately this author never seems to have written anything else, and recently, thirty years after his initial success, *The Times* reported that he was bankrupt.

Here is another story of a dead career. In the summer 1997 issue of *The Author*, Ursula Holden described how her time as a novelist began and ended. Her first book was published in 1975. She received an advance payment of £30. Nine more novels were published between 1975 and 1991. All were well received by the critics, but in 1991 her publishers told her that they could not carry on: her books were simply not making money.

Ursula has continued to write. She has produced four more books, and her agent continues to offer them. But now rave rejections ('we love it but it won't sell') have taken the place of rave reviews.

The novelist Alan Sillitoe tells the story of how his father, a tough old coal-miner, reacted when he saw his son's first novel. He hefted it in his hand for a moment, and then said: 'By God, lad, you'll never need to work again!'

Not true for most people, I'm afraid.

The conclusion to be drawn from the facts set out in this section could not be clearer or simpler. It is that, even if you do succeed in having your work presented to the public, you are statistically unlikely to make any significant money out of it – significant in the sense that it will have a dramatic impact on your way of life.

It's not like winning the lottery.

## **Fame**

This section examines the second possible benefit which can arise from a career as a writer: becoming famous.

I describe fame as a 'benefit' because it is undoubtedly true that many people yearn to achieve fame. They *imagine* that fame is a benefit. Why?

Well, presumably because they and their friends admire those whose photographs appear regularly in the press and who are often seen on television; they would like to be in that position themselves. Rightly or wrongly, people believe that the famous live better lives. Fame is associated in the public mind with wealth, comfort, glamour, and a release from the drudgery of life as it lived by most of us.

Well, perhaps, though personally I don't think so.

Another factor which, I suspect, fuels the desire to be famous is a deep-seated sense of inferiority; this makes people eager for praise and admiration.

So, given the fact that many writers, openly or otherwise, have an ambition to be famous, let us consider how effective writing is as a means of achieving that ambition.

We can all name a handful of 'famous' authors. In England: Jilly Cooper, Jeffrey Archer, Catherine Cookson, Len Deighton, Martin Amis. In the USA: Danielle Steel, Dean Koontz, Norman Mailer, John Grisham. But how many of these would we recognise in the street? I certainly wouldn't know Len Deighton or Danielle Steel, and I have kept a close eye on the book world for forty years.

Those writers who are *really* well known tend to be famous because they have appeared on television regularly, and not only on book programmes. In Jeffrey Archer's case, a large part of his fame probably derives from his various court cases.

The late Andy Warhol used to say that, in the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. As far as writing is concerned, the message seems to be that if you *do* want to be famous, you will do much better if you try

some other route. Why not become a TV quiz-show contestant? Or get a job as a TV news-reader or presenter. Or become, heaven help you, an actor.

But in any case, why bother? Is being famous what you really, really want? Surely, the truth is that being recognised wherever you go is a great inconvenience. You can't slip into Sainsbury's without people pestering you for autographs. (In my local Sainsbury's they threw bread rolls at Camilla Parker Bowles.) And of course if you want to do anything naughty, an informant will immediately be on the phone to the *News of the World*.

And is it not obvious that extreme fame carries a health risk? Fame attracts every kind and sort of weirdo, some of whom are dangerous; the more physically attractive you are, the more likely you are to have your own personal stalker.

Absolute fame tends towards absolute destruction. Worldwide fame brings with it almost obscene levels of wealth, a circumstance which inevitably seems to involve the employment of large numbers of yes-men and women. You lose touch with reality, as the examples of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe demonstrate.

Some years ago, when I was young and impressionable, I met a man who was about as famous as writers can get, at least in England. We sat at the same dinner table, and I noticed how everyone seem to take him awfully seriously, though in truth what he had to say was neither original nor interesting. It was extraordinary to see how impressed people were, just by being in this man's presence, because at the time he was a Really Big Name. Some of the women who were present would clearly have allowed him to take them into the nearest bedroom without a word of protest.

Thirty years later I met him again. He was still famous,

though less likely to appear on *Any Questions* than he had once been. He was divorced, had a string of unsuccessful books behind him, and had a drinking problem.

No, I really don't recommend fame. And surely the beauty of writing is that you can be very successful, in the sense of making money or winning literary prizes, without the inconvenience of having your face recognised. You don't even have to use your own name! In England, two of the most widely read women writers, known professionally as Jessica Stirling and Emma Blair, are actually men.

If you really must be famous, you would be well advised to find some simpler and quicker route to the front pages of the newspapers than is available to those who write. Making your name through the hard slog of writing books and scripts is a very long way round the houses.

## **Literary reputation**

Literary reputation is the third of the potential benefits (or alleged benefits) which can be obtained through a writing career. In my opinion, this is another perceived benefit which is actually more of a liability; still, it takes all sorts, so we must have a close look at literary reputation and all that it entails.

### *What is literary reputation?*

Having a literary reputation means that you are known for writing Good Books, i.e. novels which are among The Most Important Books of Our Time. Serious critics identify you as a Someone To Watch. I apologise for all the capital letters, but people who live and work and have their being in this field always tend to sound as if their words are in

UPPER CASE. We're talking meaningful, career-moulding stuff here. So, let's try to take all this nonsense as seriously as we possibly can.

Literary reputation turns upon the idea that there are two principal sorts of books: good books, and trash.

Back in your schooldays, when the English teacher found you reading a Jilly Cooper romance or one of Ian Fleming's James Bond books, what did she say to you?

She said, 'Why don't you read a *good* book, Mary (or George)? Instead of that worthless rubbish.'

Well, teacher must be right, mustn't she? If she says so, there surely must be a distinction between proper literature on the one hand and garbage on the other. Mustn't there?

Actually, no. For the most part, the idea that there are good books and bad books, in any absolute sense, is total nonsense, and later on (in Chapter 5, on emotion) I shall explain why.

For the present, let's just note that there are plenty of people around who think that there *is* such a thing as a 'good book' (or play), that a 'good judge' can identify such a piece of work. Furthermore, there is no denying that literary reputation is something, like fame, that many writers strive to achieve. They want their books (or plays) to be admired by highbrow reviewers and they *perceive* the achievement of literary reputation to be something worth aiming for.

### *How do you acquire literary reputation?*

You acquire a literary reputation when the critics on the staff of highbrow quality newspapers, such as *The Times* and *The Guardian*, review your work in glowing terms.

And this, I can assure you, does not usually happen without somebody making it happen. Publishers of literary fiction spend a lot of time and energy in softening up the opinion-formers on these leading journals. They send them news of forthcoming masterpieces months in advance, building up a sense of expectation. They take the leading critics out to dinner and introduce them to the author.

Perhaps even more important in establishing a literary reputation are the key weekly or monthly journals which are read by the literary élite.

At one time, a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* could make or break your reputation, and that weekly journal is still very influential today. There are also much less well-known publications which in any given year will be helpful in establishing your name – the *London Review of Books* and the *Literary Review* are two British examples.

If you happen to have written a novel which your publisher regards as ‘serious literary fiction’, and if she decides to make your book a lead title, then every effort will be made to have the book mentioned or featured on such television programmes as BBC2’s *Bookmark*, BBC1’s *Omnibus*, and ITV’s *South Bank Show* – or whatever programmes happen to have replaced these cultural monoliths by the time your book appears. If you are young, attempts will be made to get you listed as one of the ‘Best Young British Novelists’ or something similar.

The reviews of your book, when they appear, will be read by you and your publisher with great attention. Rave reviews in the right media provide instant literary reputation; respectful reviews provide a platform on which a reputation may gradually be built; and even negative reviews may be valuable if they are somehow ‘controver-

sial' and can be regarded as evidence of originality or daring on your part.

*But you can't have everything*

Sorry, darlings, but you cannot reasonably expect to have your literary reputation and the money as well. Implacable rule of the universe.

Yes I *know* there are exceptions, and let us deal with the exceptions first. Ernest Hemingway, for example, won the Nobel prize for literature (which is as classy as you can get in the literary world). He also made a huge fortune, and he was photographed so often that he was recognised and lionised wherever he went. He had money, fame, *and* literary reputation. So, at the moment, does Salman Rushdie. But you, dear Reader, are not going to achieve all that. Believe me.

Let me demonstrate the point about the incompatibility of literary reputation and money. Josephine Cox is a British lady who writes what is known in the book trade as 'women's fiction' or sagas. Her novels usually tell the story of a young girl making her way through life against all kinds of adversity. Ms Cox produces, on average, two books a year, and they almost invariably turn up in the list of the 100 bestselling paperbacks of the year. In 1996, for example, *Living a Lie* was placed 44th, and *The Devil You Know* came 48th. (Total sales 414,000 copies.)

These books obviously do very well financially, and Ms Cox's bank manager no doubt knows her name and smiles at her warmly whenever she enters his premises. But what do the reviewers in the 'serious' press think of her?

Not much. In fact, she has been publicly sneered at. *The Times* condescended to review *Living a Lie* by Josephine

Cox on 16 September 1995. I say condescended because they don't usually bother to review books of this kind at all. *Times* readers are not interested in popular fiction, you understand.

Anyway, the review of *Living a Lie* was not kind. The heading was 'Truth to tell, it stinks.' The reviewer began by saying 'I want to be nice. I want to say that it does not matter that the title is hammy, the characters mere ciphers and the writing laboured and superficial. I want to say that I quite enjoyed this book despite all that. But I cannot, because I did not.'

It gets worse.

'Cox's prose is simpering, wishy-washy and full of monstrous clichés.... All behaviour is motivated by simple emotions, like love and hate.' (The reviewer might have been better advised to write *such as* love and hate, but let us not quibble.) Ms Cox, says the reviewer, has produced a 'simplistic fairy-tale. That is fine if you like them, and thousands do; which makes it pretty irrelevant that I do not.'

Quite.

Let's take an American example. One of the biggest fiction sellers in recent years was *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller. American reviewers generally hated it. It was, one said, 'the worst book in living memory', and another referred to Waller's 'abysmal prose'.

The book's commercial success was due to word-of-mouth recommendation. People read it, enjoyed it, and told their friends about it.

'I know people who bought 30 copies,' says the author. 'By February 1993 it was at number one in the bestsellers chart and it stayed there for 56 weeks until my second book came out. The New York literati went absolutely ballistic.'

If there's one thing that the literary 'experts' cannot abide, it's people buying and enjoying a 'bad' book. The author of *The Bridges of Madison County* is quite bitter about 'the elitist, so-called intelligentsia who seem to think that they are the only intelligent people in the world.' But he has some consolation. Readers have written to him to say 'Thank you for changing my life.'

To summarise: we have established that commercially successful books get sneered at and frequently have no literary reputation whatever.

We should now note that the reverse is also normally the case: that is to say, books which are much admired by the intelligentsia do not usually achieve big sales figures. Even Salman Rushdie's first novel sold only 800 copies in hardback; all the unsold copies had to be pulped.

'Literature?' remarked the editor of one American journal, who had learnt the truth the hard way. 'The stuff just don't sell. Sometimes you can't even give it away.'

### *The origins of literary snobbery*

The contention that serious literary fiction is good, and that popular fiction is bad, is in my view a form of snobbery. Like all forms of snobbery it is both unpleasant and indefensible – indefensible in this case because it is founded on confused thinking. But it is, perhaps, just about worth our while to look back and see how this form of snobbery originated.

It largely began, I am sorry to say, in the university where I took my first degree, namely the University of Cambridge.

The study of English literature at university level is a relatively recent phenomenon, and Cambridge was one of

the first to give it house room. There, the first course in English was devised in 1917.

There was considerable opposition to the proposal for an English degree at the time, and this branch of academic study was viewed with suspicion for some years afterwards. Many Cambridge dons very sensibly held the view that English literature was the possession of all cultured men and women, and that it should at all costs be kept out of the hands of self-appointed 'experts'. In view of the hideous mess which has resulted from the academic study of literature over the years, one can only say that they were right.

One of the most influential academics at Cambridge was F.R. Leavis (1895-1978). He was, in my opinion, a small-minded petty little man (if you doubt that, read his attack on C.P. Snow), but he was highly influential. Leavis argued that there is a small 'canon' (i.e. list) of good books, which includes the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, some of Dickens, most of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, and all of D.H. Lawrence. Everything else is rubbish.

I have simplified Leavis's conclusions, of course, but not much.

Leavis taught several generations of impressionable undergraduates, and they went out and taught lots of others who ended up sharing the same half-baked opinions. Those who supported Leavis's views were always very bitter about the fact that Cambridge never made him a Professor. But in my opinion Cambridge's assessment of Leavis was dead right. The other dons could see perfectly well that he wasn't of professorial stature.

Leavis's wife Queenie was, if anything, an even bigger intellectual snob than he was. She wrote a book called *Fiction and the Reading Public*, which was an analysis of

the alleged decline in the quality of the books which people choose to read.

Consciously or unconsciously, Queenie Leavis's book conveys the impression that only intellectuals can possibly recognise which books are worth reading, and that anybody who enjoys a book which is 'not worth reading' is self-evidently a person of no morality, character or intelligence.

Anthony Burgess expressed the official line on this point when he wrote: 'Very occasionally the best book and the bestseller coincide, but generally the books that make most money are those which lack both style and subtlety and present a grossly over-simplified picture of life. Such books are poor art, and life is too short to bother with any art that is not the best of its kind.'

So there. Those of you who enjoy reading bestsellers can consider your wrist firmly slapped.

None of which would matter very much, except that the descendants of Leavis and his tribe are unfortunately still with us, and when it comes to literary reputation they can make you or break you.

### *The practical value of literary studies*

Before we go any further, I want to caution the embryo novelists among you against being too impressed by the highbrow literary critics. In particular I want to encourage you not to feel intimidated by the output of the ever-growing gang of academics who specialise in teaching Eng. Lit.

It is all too easy to be made to feel inferior by the fact that you simply don't understand what the Eng. Lit. brigade are talking about. Fear not. The fact is, they don't

know what they're talking about either. And, to be specific, the practical value of their voluminous output, for the would-be writer, is nil.

If you are interested in writing fiction, you will probably have cast your eye along those shelves in your local library where the academic studies of English literature are to be found. Before long you will have come across books with titles such as *Mythical Metaphors in the Modern Novel*. Or *Solitude and Sexuality in the Work of George Eliot*. I have invented these particular two titles, but in the library of any university which has an English department you will find dozens of similar works.

Consider the following statements:

1. Magical realism is the self-conscious departure from the conventions of narrative realism in order to enter and amplify other (diverted) currents of Western literature that flow from the marvellous Greek pastoral and epic traditions to medieval dream visions to the romance and Gothic fictions of the past century.
2. The main theme of the works of Rushdie is the role of the writer as reader. Habermas suggests the use of subcapitalist socialism to attack class divisions. Thus, if Saussurean semiotics holds, we have to choose between postcultural discourse and the capitalist paradigm of consensus. Lyotard uses the term 'neostructuralist objectivism' to denote the bridge between sexual identity and narrativity. However, Mark's model of Saussurean semiotics implies that art serves to exploit the Other.

3. The novel is the privileged arena where languages in conflict can meet, bringing together, in tension and dialogue, not only opposing characters, but also different historical ages, social levels, civilisation and other, dawning realities of human life. In the novel, realities that are normally separated can meet. This encounter reveals that, in dialogue, no one is absolutely right; neither speaker has an absolute hold over history. Myself and the other, as well as the history that both of us are making, still are not. Both are unfinished and so can only continue to be. By its very nature, the novel indicates that we are becoming. There is no final solution. There is no last word. Fiction is a harbinger of a multipolar and multicultural world, where no single philosophy, no single belief, no single solution, can shunt aside the extreme wealth of mankind's cultural heritage.

One could reproduce ten thousand such paragraphs, drawn at random from the shelves of academic libraries.

I think it's very unlikely that you will have understood the meaning of any of the three passages quoted above, and I would not recommend that you spend much time trying to work out what they do mean. But, in relation to the first sentence of the third quotation, for instance, we might reasonably ask the following questions.

In what sense can the novel possibly be a privileged arena?

How can languages be in conflict? If they are in conflict, how can they meet and bring together, in tension and dialogue, different historical ages – or social levels?

And what is a dawning reality of human life? How would we recognise one if we saw one?

And so on. And if we knew the answers to the questions that I have posed, would it help you and me to write better fiction?

I don't believe so. In my judgement, those who spend their days studying 'literature' have produced very little which is of practical value to those who wish to write fiction – even literary fiction. Most of the output of the Eng. Lit. academics is written not in plain English but in a language called postmodern deconstructed gobbledygook. It is litbabble – the literary equivalent of psychobabble; it is devoid of insight, and pernicious rather than helpful.

And by the way – did you notice anything particularly odd about quotation number 2? If so, give yourself a brownie point. The middle paragraph does not, in fact, come from a book on English literature; it was generated by a machine, the Dada Engine, which is programmed to generate random text from grammars. So, whatever you may think about the first and third quotations, the middle one, I can assure you, is *complete* gibberish.

Regrettably, the influence of the teachers of Eng. Lit. is far-reaching. It leads to the belief (which used to be common even in commercial publishing firms) that a 'true artist' must be alienated from society and must seek not to entertain but to deal with the 'great issues of our time'. According to this school of thought, the true artist should seek to transform society, effect moral improvements in his audience, and (quite often) demonstrate the futility of existence.

The idea that, to be any good, a book or play has to have highbrow content extends even into the movie business. William Goldman, the Oscar-winning Hollywood script-writer, reported a conversation that he had with the director of *Alien 3*.

‘Let me explain to you,’ said the director earnestly, ‘the philosophical implications I’m going to put in the movie.’

Goldman tells us: ‘As soon as I heard those words I knew the movie was in deep shit. If I had been the studio head I would have fired the director that day, because once you’re thinking philosophical implications for *Alien 3* you know the movie’s going to run over budget (which it did.)’

And the outcome of *Alien 3*? Well, let’s put it this way. One reviewer (in the *Los Angeles Reader*) wrote: ‘In space, no one can hear you snore.’

By now you will have gathered that I do not recommend that you aim to achieve literary reputation. To my mind, it is worthless in and of itself. Even if you succeed, all you end up with is the respect of a bunch of people whose opinions, in my view, are usually half-baked and invariably arrogant. Forget ‘em.

## **Expressing yourself**

The fourth item on our list of potential benefits to be gained from a writing career was, you will remember, self-expression. To be precise, the real benefit may be defined as the wonderful sense of joy which is experienced by those who lay bare their sensitive souls on paper.

And perhaps you will already sense, from the tone of that opening paragraph, that I am no more impressed by this potential reward for writers’ efforts than I was by the previous one.

At the risk of sounding even grumpier than in the previous section, I have to say that I do not support the idea that it is any business of a writer to express herself. The writer’s task, properly understood, is to create emotion in the reader, or the theatre audience. A writer may, in the

course of doing that primary job, succeed in expressing an idea or some feelings of her own, but that is not, ideally, the main purpose of what she is doing.

There are, however, plenty of people who hold a different view.

Some years ago I was involved in a public dispute, conducted in the pages of *The Guardian*, about the teaching of English.

On the one side there were those like myself (and we were in a minority, as it turned out) who believed that children ought to be taught to spell and punctuate properly; and on the other side there were those (many of them holding positions of authority in the world of education) who thought that spelling and punctuation didn't matter. What mattered, to this second group, was that children should *express themselves*. Not to worry if what these children wrote was pretty well incomprehensible. It apparently didn't matter if the work was badly spelt and lacked punctuation – it was enough, some said, that the children should put their feelings and ideas on to paper.

This belief in the value of expressing your emotions, however clumsily and crudely, is to be found in relation to the grown-up world too. Here it takes the form of an assertion that what matters, above all else, is that the 'artist' should in some mysterious way get things off her chest. The said 'artist' is of course considered to be far more sensitive and perceptive than ordinary people. And the audience is very much expected to adapt to whatever the creators of these 'works of art' choose to produce. The 'artist' does not have to bother about making things simple for the reader of her novel; she does not condescend to help the audience to understand what is going on in her play. Dear me no. The artist is much too grand for any of

that.

In the visual arts this attitude leads to such activities as filling a room with rubbish and describing the result as a work of art which comments upon the crisis of our time.

In the theatre it leads to plays which would run for eight hours, with speaking parts for 43 actors, and the demand that such plays be put on by the subsidised theatre at the taxpayers' expense.

And in fiction we get rambling, formless 'poetic and visionary' works which generated deep emotion in the author and therefore must – naturally – do the same for the reader. Unless, of course, the reader is too stupid to understand the meaning of it all. As is the case with me, as often as not.

Those who believe in the primacy of self-expression in the arts seem to me to have got it all the wrong way round. The point of 'works of art' is not – in my opinion – to make the creator feel good. The point is to create a powerful and deeply satisfying emotion in the *audience*. It is the audience that needs to be made to feel (and to be made to feel good, at that), particularly if they have paid for the privilege of seeing or reading your work.

This truth – and an eternal, unchanging truth I believe it to be – is well understood in what is normally referred to as show business. In other words, at the vulgar end of the entertainment industry.

'The show must go on' is a cry that you will be familiar with. And what does it mean? It means that the performer goes on stage and performs effectively, regardless of what catastrophes may be occurring in her personal and private life.

The comedian may have a temperature of 104, his wife may be having an affair, tomorrow morning he may have to

appear in the bankruptcy court – but for the moment, when the curtain goes up, he forgets all that. He goes out and does his duty by the audience. He makes them laugh, and he makes them forget, at least for an hour or two, their *own* pressing problems.

From time to time I meet people who, when learning that I am a writer, say something like, ‘Oh, I’m working on a book/play/autobiography too. But I’m not really interested in getting it published/produced. I’m just doing it for my own satisfaction.’ Or, to put it another way, they’re telling me that their only concern is to express themselves on paper.

At which point I smile politely and try to change the subject, because I don’t believe a word of what I have just been told.

There may be, somewhere, some eccentric souls who are *genuinely* working on something for their own satisfaction. If so, we shall never know, because they will never tell us about it. They will write the poem, book, or play, polish it until they are completely content with it, and then put it into a drawer, never to be shown to anyone.

Somewhere, someone may be doing that. But I think it unlikely. And I also think (based on long and weary experience) that I know what is going on in the heads of those who claim that they are only interested in expressing themselves for their own amusement. These people are secretly imagining that they will win the Nobel prize for literature (next year, probably), plus a Hollywood Oscar, and will have lucrative contracts for their next ten books pressed eagerly upon them.

And suppose – just suppose – someone comes up to you and asks you to read their precious book, the one in which they have expressed themselves. Do you jump at the

chance? Or would you rather read the latest volume by John Grisham or Rosamunde Pilcher? Would your milkman want to read the product of your self-expression? Would your dentist?

I think we know the answer. As a matter of fact, I don't even think your own mother would be interested.

The best advice I can give to you, dear Reader, since you have apparently read this far, is that you should forget about expressing yourself, at any rate in the early stages of your writing career.

You may choose to concentrate on self-expression, and then spend a year trying to sell the result, if you wish. That's your choice. But if, after putting in all that effort, you find that absolutely no one is willing to publish your book or produce your play, don't come running to me for any sympathy. I shan't be very interested. Or surprised.

There is one other small point which is worth mentioning. It is this: there is a great deal of satisfaction to be obtained from doing a professional job, and doing it well.

If you can put together a formula-driven romantic novel, say, or a detective story in the classic mould, and be sure in your own mind that it is a good, solid, professional piece of work, then that is a satisfying achievement in itself. And, given the difficulties which you will face in getting even an obviously commercial piece of work published, the satisfaction of creating it may be all the reward you have.

## **Summary**

This chapter has looked at the four principal benefits which may, in theory, be derived from a writing career.

In the case of money, we have seen that substantial sums are earned only by the very few – and even they

sometimes find that success is a one-off event. In terms of cash generated, most writers would be better off working behind the bar in their local pub.

Fame has more disadvantages than advantages, and expressing a desire for it ought to be sufficient, in and of itself, to get you sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

Literary reputation? A worthless bauble, admired only by those who can't tell Stork from butter.

And self-expression? Do me a favour. If you want to express your feelings, go out into the middle of a field and have a good scream. It's a lot easier than writing a book or a play.

However... it's a free world. It may be that you still harbour ambitions, despite having read what I have to say in this chapter. At least for the moment, you still want to be a writer.

Fine. As my first employer remarked when I told him that I was resigning, everyone is free to ruin their own life in their own way. You are an adult in full possession of your faculties – well, more or less – and you can pursue whatever aims you wish.

To assist you in making your decision, and possibly to cause you to revise your views, the next chapter will examine what chances you have of actually enjoying any of the potential benefits of writing. It will consider in some detail the question of how easy or difficult it is to get your work published, or performed before an audience.

## CHAPTER 2

### Are they likely to get it?

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THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER looked at the anticipated benefits of being a writer; it asked the question What do writers want? This chapter deals with the question which naturally follows: ...And are they likely to get it? In other words, what are your chances of actually obtaining any of the potential benefits of writing?

Perhaps, despite having read Chapter 1, you rather fancy your chances. You may have accepted that you're never going to make a big sale to Hollywood, but you have been thinking about writing a novel for some time. And it would be nice to earn a little extra to pay for next year's holiday. You're not greedy, and you're not absurdly optimistic, but you do think that you could produce something publishable. Surely, you say to yourself, it can't be all that difficult to get published – especially when you look at some of the rubbish that does appear in print.

Well, let's see. Let's take a look at the figures. (And in this chapter we benefit from the fact that we do have quite a lot of data to work with.)

We need to see how likely it is that you will be able to get your work accepted, whether for publication in print or for production on the stage or screen. This chapter therefore reviews the statistics relating to the numbers of books and scripts which are submitted to the decision-makers in

publishing, the theatre, television, and the other media. The examples are once again drawn from my collection of press cuttings covering some forty years.

The aim of this section is to enable you to come to an informed view about your own chances of achieving success – success, that is, as defined by yourself, however ambitiously or modestly.

## **Book publishing**

### *Acceptance rates for unsolicited manuscripts*

Writing in 1938, Thomas H. Uzzell estimated that American publishers at that time accepted about one book in every hundred submitted to them.

That 1% figure is one which occurs repeatedly in references to acceptance rates, whether in New York in 1938 or London in 1998, and perhaps it is best not to take it too literally. But what we can be certain of, whether we are talking about publishing or any other medium, is that the proportion of material which is accepted is small – often *very* small.

First, some specific examples. In 1989, *The Times* reported that the well-known British imprint Hutchinson was receiving about 1,000 manuscripts a year. One of these unsolicited manuscripts might be published every couple of years or so. Maybe.

A similar story was told at Jonathan Cape. ‘We get dozens of typescripts in an average week. More or less all of them are rejected.’

At Chatto and Windus the *Times* reporter was told that about 10 manuscripts arrived every day. Were they all read? Long pause. ‘Yes.’ Were any ever taken on? Long

pause. 'No.'

At Faber, no less than 15,000 manuscripts a year were being dumped on the doormat. But those fine fellows (and ladies) at Faber apparently sweated through the whole 15,000 in search of the unknown genius. It was reported by *The Times* that six people at Faber used to meet every Tuesday afternoon to discuss about 100 of the offerings. 'Most of it is just terrible,' said the fiction editor, 'but at the moment I have got an unknown writer doing the third rewrite of a novel. If it comes out right, I feel we just *might* publish it.'

(Note to potential novelists. In my humble opinion, no one in his right mind does even one rewrite at a publisher's request without a contract and some money.)

The largest publisher of romantic novels in the UK is Mills & Boon, or Harlequin Mills & Boon, to give the firm its full name. The Mills & Boon editorial director has stated that the firm receives 6,000 manuscripts a year from hopeful and so-far-unpublished writers. Out of these submissions, the company takes on, in a good year, about 10 new writers. Those who are taken on tend to do quite well financially (or that's the publisher's story, anyway); though they do not, of course, get short-listed for prestigious literary awards such as the Booker prize.

In 1995, the owner of two small publishing firms in the USA reported in *Publishers Weekly* that he had received nearly 7,000 offers of books in the previous twelve months, and had decided to accept 12 of these submissions.

A much larger and more prestigious American firm, Viking, agreed to publish only one unsolicited manuscript in 26 years; that was *Ordinary People*, by Judith Guest. The book went on to become a bestseller as well as the basis for a successful film.

Writers, of course, often do not help themselves. They regularly send earnest biographies of religious leaders to firms which publish only gay erotic fiction; and, of course, they send their gay erotic fiction to...

In 1983 the *Sunday Express* ran a competition to find a new romantic writer. Over 10 million words were submitted, but unfortunately only one entry conformed with the requirements of the competition.

Finally, heed the words of publisher Anthony Blond, writing in *The Spectator*. The acceptance rate of unsolicited manuscripts, he says, is 1 in 2,000, in both London and New York.

By now you can hardly fail to have got the message. If you go to all the trouble of writing a book, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, and send it off to a publisher, it is highly unlikely that you will get back anything other than a rejection slip; probably a printed slip at that.

To see why, let's take a look at what happens in a publisher's office. (Or, for that matter, in the office of any literary agent, or theatre producer, or TV company. Because they all get lots of submissions too.)

Each day the post office delivers a large pile of what everyone in the firm knows will mostly be unwanted, unpublishable and probably unreadable paper. This delivery of manuscripts is known throughout the publishing world as 'the slush pile'.

### *The slush pile*

It is the duty of some poor drudge, usually the newest and meekest member of staff, who is too terrified to say no, to log in every submission and to try to keep track of every last one of the parcels. Well, I say log in every submission;

sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. You might think that it was hard to lose a book manuscript, but publishers regularly manage it.

If you, the author, are very lucky, the product of your many hundreds of hours of labour is read by somebody with a little more experience and judgement than the aforesaid newest member of staff. (But don't rely on it.)

Hear what one publishing professional, Andrew Taylor, had to say about the task, writing in *The Bookseller* in 1996: 'In an average day's work at a publisher's office, I aim to assess 7 to 10 submissions and write reports on each of them which vary in length from 2 to 500 words.'

So, if you are promising, you may get an hour of the reader's time. 'Won't the publisher read every word?' I hear you cry in anguish. No, of course he won't! Your own mother won't read every word.

Mr Taylor is more generous with his time than some publishers' readers. Giles Gordon once stated that when he was the slush-pile reader at Gollancz, he learnt how to tell whether a manuscript was any good within 15 seconds. 'It's just a matter of practice,' he said airily. Like writing, really.

Literary agent Pat Kavanagh takes much the same view. 'Two pages will tell you if a book from the slush pile is worth pursuing.' And when was the last time she found a book in the slush pile that was worth pursuing? 'Never. I don't believe it has ever happened to me at all.'

Barry Turner, in *The Writer's Handbook*, mentions an agent who fared a little better than that, but not much. In 14 years of reading 25-30 manuscripts a month, the agent found 5 good ones. Another agent, at Curtis Brown, personally received 1,200 manuscripts in one year, and took on two of the authors as clients.

No one works for nothing, not even in book publishing,

where salaries are relatively low, and firms which do make an attempt to read slush-pile submissions can easily find themselves employing three or four people to cope with the job. Not surprisingly, in view of the fact that so little publishable material is ever found in that way, many firms now refuse to consider unsolicited submissions at all.

Send your great masterpiece to HarperCollins, for example, and you will get back a printed note which says: 'We are sorry to say that, due to the number of manuscripts we have been receiving, we are unable, for the foreseeable future at least, to accept any further unsolicited proposals.'

What the note does not say explicitly is that the publishing house will, of course, consider books sent in by recognised literary agents. In effect, publishers have dumped on to literary agents the task of sorting out the more-or-less publishable from the oh-my-god. 'Let those other guys carry the cost' seems to be the motto.

'Oh,' you say. 'So that's what I have to do. Find myself an agent.'

Well, yes, more or less. It certainly wouldn't hurt, and see Chapter 8 for a discussion of what agents do and how to approach them. For the moment, however, we are talking about the *chances* of having your masterpiece (be it novel, biography, or whatever) accepted by a book publisher. And we have seen that your chances *seem* to be somewhere between slim and zero, with Slim having just left town.

Fortunately, that is not quite the case. You do have a slightly better chance than that, as I will now demonstrate.

### *The truth about your chances of acceptance*

Let's consider some arithmetic.

We know that a publisher accepts (at best) 1 unsolicited manuscript in every 100. Let's take a pessimistic view and say that it's 1 in 1000. But what happens to the other 999, after they have been wrapped up and returned to their anxious owner? Answer, they get sent on to another publisher. And then another.

And another.

And another.

And so each publisher is not rejecting a set of 999 manuscripts which is completely different from the 999 rejected by every other publisher. There is some overlap.

How much overlap, no one knows. We can only guess. What we do know is that some writers are very persistent. One publisher's reader found himself reading a manuscript which felt a bit familiar, and when he checked his records he found that he had rejected the book eight years earlier.

My own rough guess is that book writers get depressed and lose confidence, on average, after 15 or 20 rejections. After all, it takes time and effort (and money) to wrap up the parcel yet again, write yet another covering letter, and sit and wait for another three months. Or six. Or nine. Only to find that the firm has lost it. Sorry, don't remember that one. What was it called again?

Let's say that the unhappy soul submits her book to 20 firms and then gives up. This means that the actual odds of getting a book published are not 1000 to 1 but something more manageable. Perhaps about 50 to 1. We cannot know for sure, but in any case, the overlap factor means that the odds are not quite as appalling as they look at first sight.

Odds of 50 to 1 against are, of course, still pretty alarming, but since I have myself sold two books to publishers without using an agent (one fiction and one non-fiction), I know for certain that it can be done. Or,

more cautiously, I know that it could be done in the past.

## Periodicals

In view of the facts set out in the previous section, you may have concluded, not unreasonably, that the process of writing a full-length book and offering it to firms who are clearly uninterested is not one in which you wish to participate. 'Stuff that for a mug's game,' you say, or words to that effect. 'I will write for a newspaper or a magazine instead. It's bound to be easier to make some progress that way.'

Well, actually, no.

Those who aim at the periodical market almost invariably aim at the top, and there the competition is intense. *The New Yorker*, which is certainly the most prestigious magazine in the world for short stories, receives 2,000 manuscripts a week. I would be surprised if, in the course of a year, it published even one of those unsolicited offerings. At least 99% of *The New Yorker's* contents will be commissioned from established writers.

For years, the US magazine *Redbook* was another favourite target for short-story writers. In 1979 it was receiving 600 to 700 short-story manuscripts every week. It published, on average, one. It is a safe bet that much the same is true of every magazine which publishes short fiction these days. (And hardly any do.)

*Playboy*, for instance, once reported that, in an average week, its post included 5 or 6 novels and 20 short stories, which it had *asked* to see, and about 600 or 700 manuscripts which it had not asked to see.

Even in the good old days, when there were numerous markets for short fiction, it was not easy even for profes-

sionals to find their way into print.

Sax Rohmer, who later made a considerable name for himself as the author of the Fu Manchu books, managed to paper a whole wall of his house with rejection slips. To complete the colour scheme, he sent the same manuscript to the same magazine three times – but on the third occasion they lost it. He never did finish decorating that room.

## **Television**

OK, so there are very few markets for short stories any more, those markets which still exist are hopelessly flooded, and the book world is tough to break into. But, I hear you say, especially if you are young, that doesn't matter much because the day of the book is over. Television is the shape of the future. Surely real talent can find an outlet there?

Perhaps.

Let's take the British Broadcasting Corporation as an example. For the past few years the BBC has been a disaster area, and, by the time you read this, a whole new administrative set-up may well be in place. But in the days when the BBC had a central television script unit, it regularly received over 6,000 unsolicited scripts a year.

These were mostly original TV plays, since for decades that was regarded as the best means through which new talent could make itself known. The figure of 6,000 was in addition to scripts submitted directly to editors and producers with whom the writers already had working relationships.

Another BBC department, which may or may not exist when you come to read this page, is the Comedy Develop-

ment Unit. There, it was normal in the early 1990s for 45 or 50 situation-comedy scripts to be submitted each week. Similar numbers are received by any commercial television company which is in the sit-com business.

Interestingly enough, few of the comedy scripts are from women – only about 10%. Those in charge of comedy often speculate as to why this should be. One theory is that women find it harder to cope with rejection, which in television is almost continual. Men, it is argued (not by me, please notice) are altogether tougher.

In the USA, successful television shows are sent between 2,000 and 4,000 unsolicited scripts every year. Everybody you ever met in a bar seems to think that he can churn out an episode of *Friends*, but none of these scripts is ever accepted.

Writing an episode of an established series is not, however, a complete waste of time. Julian Friedmann, one of the leading authors' agents in the UK television business, suggests that speculatively written scripts of the old 'TV play' type are of little value to today's would-be television writer. Friedmann considers that it is more useful for new writers to produce one or more 'calling-card' scripts. These are episodes of well-known shows which are written by unknown writers.

No one imagines that a calling-card script will ever be broadcast, but it can demonstrate that the writer has a feel for the medium. Armed with such a script or two, and the assistance of a good agent, you might make a little progress with television script-editors and get a commission to write something else.

Writers, incidentally, are not the only ones who are rejected (and made dejected) by television companies. Linda Agran has an outstanding track record as a television

producer (e.g. *Minder*), but in January 2002 she wrote a newspaper article saying that she had abandoned her former profession. The final blow had been the BBC's decision (made by one man) not to proceed with a project on which she had worked for years.

Ms Agran was careful not to say anything too rude in print, but I imagine that in private her opinion of the individual who made this decision was less than complimentary.

What can one say, except that Ms Agran seems eminently sensible. Rational people do not put themselves in a position where the return on substantial investments of money, time and effort depends on the judgement of one far from infallible individual. Who knows, on the day when he judges your work, he might have a hangover.

## **The stage**

By now your mind may be leaping ahead of me. Books are out, you say to yourself, periodicals are hopeless, masses of competition in television.... So, it follows, does it not, that everyone has deserted the good old theatre. The bright young things, you go on to say, are so busy knocking down the doors of publishers and television producers that no one is writing for the theatre any more; this leaves the stage (ho ho) clear for the likes of me.

I'm afraid not.

No one knows how many stage plays are written in a given year, either in the UK or the USA, but it must be a large number.

Some years ago, David Raffelock contacted a selection of producers in New York, and discovered that between them they had been offered 3,517 plays in one year. They had

taken out an option on 23 of them, which is a 0.65% success rate. *And*, please note, taking out an option on a play simply means that the producer has purchased the right to *try* to produce it. He may or may not succeed, and if he does succeed the play may close after one performance.

The New York Shakespeare Festival announced in 1991 that it was going to stop considering unsolicited play scripts. About 5,000 a year were being received, and the theatre could not cope. (Despite its name, the Theatre was apparently producing a certain amount of new work at the time.) The decision caused a row, and a meeting had to be called to discuss the matter. Some 800 playwrights (mostly unproduced) were invited to attend, and 300 of them did so. Not surprisingly, no miraculous solution was found to the problem of how to enable all those ambitious writers to see their work presented on stage.

In the UK, there is a huge amount of talk about ‘new writing’ in the theatre, but little action. Anyone who has ever tried submitting a play to a so-called ‘producing theatre’ or a theatrical producer will tell you that despatching a script to such a location is often akin to dropping it into a black hole. Many scripts disappear for ever, presumably surfacing in some parallel universe, where, let us hope, they are produced to great acclaim.

Here are some specific examples of the amount of competition that you face in writing for the stage.

Assume that a theatre produces six new plays a year (which is a gross exaggeration in itself; many only manage one or two) and then work out your chances of success.

The Hampstead Theatre receives 1,200 scripts a year; the Man in the Moon Theatre, 100; the Royal Court, 2,000 (it has over 60 writers who are developing scripts *on*

*commission*, so not even a commission guarantees you a production); the Royal Shakespeare Company, 600; the Soho Theatre Company, 1,500; the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 250; the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 100; the Royal Exchange Theatre Company, Manchester, 2,000. And so on. These are all UK examples, but the position is just the same in every other country.

Yes, you're quite right. An identical argument applies here as in the case of book publishers: that is to say, the same rejected scripts circulate hopelessly round and round the system, and so the odds against success are not quite as bad as they appear.

And, it is true, some unsolicited new plays do occasionally get produced. I had one premiered myself, at the Brighton Festival in 1996, and in 1997 the same play toured the south of England and ran for three weeks in London. Another play was produced in Bristol in January 1999. I didn't make any money out of either of them, of course. But hey, come on, be reasonable – you can't have everything.

It is also true that much of the submitted material is, I'm afraid, unsatisfactory in some fairly basic ways.

Mary Luckhurst, who reads scripts on behalf of the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, reports that, in eight years, she received only two scripts which were suitable for production as they stood.

In my opinion there is only one foolproof way to get a stage play produced in these difficult days. First, you write something which is at least halfway presentable. Then you get a job in the theatre. Precisely what job doesn't matter. You can be an actor, stage-hand, box-office person, tea-maker. But you have to be in a position to know the key decision-maker personally. And then you press your sordid little script into his (or her) hand. And when he loses the

first one, as he will, you give him another copy. And you pester. And nudge. And stare at him meaningfully. Until eventually, when he is holding a little meeting with his buddies to discuss the autumn programme, he clutches his head in his hands, groans in anguish, and says, 'Oh God! I suppose we'd better do Fred's (or Freda's) play next – otherwise we shall never get any peace!' Make this true, and you may just have a production.

## **Radio**

Once upon a time, radio was a medium in which a new writer of plays could make a modest mark and then move on to higher things. This was true both in the UK and the USA.

In the 1950s, Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* began life in a version for BBC radio. The same material, suitably adapted and developed, later became a huge hit in the West End and on Broadway, and the film version won six Oscars, including Best Screenplay for Bolt.

Much of Caryl Churchill's early work was for radio, in the 1960s. Giles Cooper was a success in radio before he became a stage playwright. And so on. So here, we might imagine, is yet another way in which a writer may take the first step on that journey of a thousand miles.

As usual, we find that the competition is immense. In the 1970s, the then head of BBC radio drama estimated that the rate of acceptance among unsolicited plays was 'at most two to three per cent', with about 150 scripts a week being considered.

By 1994 the situation was considerably worse. The new head of radio drama told the Writers' Guild that, in the previous year, 16,000 unsolicited scripts had been re-

ceived. Of that total, only 7 had been broadcast.

Martin McDonagh, the author of *The Beauty Queen of Lenane*, which was another smash hit in the West End and on Broadway, began his career by writing for radio. Or trying to. He wrote 22 plays, all of which were rejected by the BBC.

If you are tempted to write for radio, whether for the BBC or for some other station, you will need to check the current position on submissions with great care before you even write a word. Otherwise you could waste an enormous amount of time.

## **Film**

If we are to cover all the media, I suppose we must mention film. But only briefly, because there isn't very much point in spending long on the subject.

A leading American agent told me recently that, if you want to write for the movies, you have to live in Los Angeles. I'm sure he is right, and even then you have to be a high-class optimist to imagine that you have any future.

In 1978, the Writers Guild of America registered 15,000 new and unsold screenplays. By 1990 the annual figure had risen to 45,000. Robert McKee, who has become famous for his courses on screen writing, estimates that the number of scripts written each year is actually nearer 150,000. Make your own guess as to how many of these are ultimately produced.

A good agent is essential for selling a film script. Hollywood studios gave up reading unsolicited scripts *decades* ago. They got fed up with fighting court cases in which people claimed that *Gone with the Wind* (or whatever) was actually based on a screenplay which they

had submitted in 1932. And so for at least fifty years the studios have not even bothered to open parcels which look like scripts. They send them back, marked in large letters 'Returned Unopened'.

As usual, film-script agents are extremely fussy about who and what they take on. Howard King estimated that 1 script in every 200 from unknown talent might be worth thinking about. John Alger was a bit more hopeful: 1 in every 100.

Even if you have an agent, the odds are steep. It is said that each studio will read 5,000 scripts (from agents) in order to find the 12 which they actually produce each year.

In the UK there are a few opportunities for original screenplays, but if they are ever filmed at all the result is likely to be shown on television rather than on the cinema screen. I know one UK agent who is quite glad to have an original screenplay from a writer, but only for use as a tool to show what the writer can do – not because she thinks there is any serious chance of making a sale.

### **Thinking clearly about rejection**

Many writers become extremely disgruntled and ratty when their novel/play/TV script is returned through their letter-box with a heavy thud. The manuscript will be accompanied, with luck, by a printed rejection slip, telling you who is returning it; but sometimes it is just sitting there, without a hint of which organisation has tired of it. If you are exceptionally lucky, or exceptionally talented, there might even be a letter with encouraging noises.

Letter or not, you will probably be steaming mad for few minutes. 'How can these people be so *blind?*' you cry. Usually, no one listens. No one answers. And no one cares.

Unless you have an endlessly patient partner. Or a dog.

After a while you will get your breath back. And, because you have been doing your homework, you will know that some of the world's most famous and commercially successful writers have suffered rejection in their time.

James Joyce's *Dubliners*, for example, was rejected by twenty-two publishers; Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* by seventeen; David Storey's *This Sporting Life* by fifteen; and Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* by twelve.

*MASH*, which became one of the most famous series in the history of television, was originally a novel. It was rejected by twenty-one publishers over a period of seven years before eventually finding a home. After publication, it was adapted as a successful cinema film before being developed for television.

A more modest example of perseverance paying off is that of the English writer Tim Parks. His novel *Tongues of Flame* was rejected by six agents and twenty publishers, but finally made it into print and won the Somerset Maugham Award for writers aged under thirty-five. It was later published in the USA.

Many similar examples of rejection followed by success can be found in the theatre. John Osborne's famous play *Look Back in Anger* was, it is said, turned down by every producer in London before a production was mounted at the Royal Court.

To some extent you can take heart from these examples. But you should not fall into a common error of thinking. The following is *not* a logical train of thought:

James Joyce's *Dubliners* was rejected by twenty-two publishers.

My book has been rejected by twenty-two publishers.

Therefore my book will become as famous as James

Joyce's *Dubliners*.

A book which has been sent to twenty-two *suitable* publishers, and has been declined by all of them, is unlikely to be a great literary or commercial success even if you finally persuade someone to print it.

You should not, however, assume that a book which has been rejected many times is worthless. And still less should you assume that rejection of a manuscript means that *you* are worthless. Rejection can seriously damage your health, if you let it.

Many a writer has become clinically depressed by failing to get a book into print, which is unfortunate to say the least. The most famous case is that of the American novelist, John Kennedy Toole. In the early 1960s he became deeply disturbed by the frequent rejection of his book *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and in 1969 he committed suicide as a result.

Toole's mother then took on the task of trying to find a publisher for the book on which her son had laboured so hard. She finally managed it, and in 1981 the novel was awarded the Pulitzer prize, which is the most prestigious of all literary awards in the USA. *A Confederacy of Dunces* was hailed by *The New York Times* as a 'masterwork of comedy'. A bit late in the day for its author.

### **Why do we do it?**

The world is not quite full of writers, but there are an awful lot of us about – and for the most part we are unpublished. For instance, without even trying hard, I can think of six friends and acquaintances who have each written a full-length novel; none of the six has succeeded in getting the book into print.

Writers tend to work individually, each in her own little room, typing away industriously; but collectively we do form a community. And while preparing this book I have been thinking about how best to characterise this community. Is it, in a sense, a bit like a football club, with a small team of professional players at the core, and a large mass of enthusiasts, part-time kick-the-ball-abouters, and simple spectators surrounding them? Well, possibly. That would be a nice, friendly, and inoffensive comparison to make. But it wouldn't be true.

No, unfortunately the truth is a bit more painful. And the truth is that the community of writers is best compared with the crew and passengers of *Das Narrenschiff* – a sailing vessel of which you have probably never heard.

In 1494, the German writer Sebastian Brant wrote a poem about the *Narrenschiff*. Brant's work was a satire on the vices and follies of his age. On board the *Narrenschiff*, the passengers and crew tell each other stories. Brant portrays these voyagers as a group of fuzzy thinkers, sailing out into an empty ocean in search of an unattainable paradise; and they all end up dead because of their misguided illusion. The *Narrenschiff*, in other words, is the Ship of Fools.

Brant's poem inspired a number of other artists and writers to use the same idea. Hieronymous Bosch painted a picture of the ship. In modern times, Katherine Anne Porter, Richard Paul Russo, and Gregory Norminton, have all written novels called *The Ship of Fools*. Sutton Vane used the concept as the basis for his stage play *Outward Bound*.

And this, I'm afraid, is the most apt description that I can give you of all those nice friendly people who make up the writing community. We all believe that we're really

talented people, and that we're going places fast, but in practice we're not. The unwelcome truth is that many of us are not all that talented, and that most of us, talented or otherwise, have writing careers which are going nowhere.

By all means climb on board this Ship of Fools if you wish: her name is the good ship *Nincompoop*. Among the passengers you will find lots of agreeable companions (including the author of this very tome). But you should not, I suggest, mislead yourself. You should not imagine that, by climbing the gangplank of this particular ship, you are doing anything sensible, clever, or wise.

## **Summary**

In this chapter we have looked at the question of how likely it is, statistically speaking, that a writer will be able to get her work presented before the public. And we have found that the chances are small – so small that one really has to question the judgement of those who persist in trying.

At this point, the most sensible thing you could do, I suspect, would be to abandon all ideas of becoming a published writer. But, for the benefit of those who are statistically challenged, and would like to consider the matter further, the next chapter provides a method through which you can clarify your thinking about what you hope to get out of writing, and decide which medium might suit you best.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **How to decide what you want and how to go about getting it**

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CHAPTER 1 OUTLINED the rewards which a career as a writer can bring; and Chapter 2 demonstrated that there is a high level of competition for those rewards. It follows therefore that, as a general rule, a writer will have to put in a considerable amount of effort to generate even small returns.

This simple truth does not constitute much of an encouragement to invest huge amounts of time and energy in a writing career. However, people do make such investments, all the time, and often they continue to write for many years despite the obstacles which they encounter. I speak from experience – I've been at it for five decades.

This third chapter is designed to give some practical help to those who wish to persevere. I shall suggest a way in which you can clarify your own thinking about what you hope to achieve. I shall also propose that you draw up an inventory of your skills and shortcomings, so that you can make an informed choice about which medium to write for.

#### **Analysing your daydreams**

We have seen that there are four principal benefits to be obtained from writing: money, fame, literary reputation,

and self-expression. By all means make a note of any others, if they occur to you. What you now have to do is to form a view about the relative importance of each of these rewards for you as an individual.

It may be, for instance, that you totally disagree with me about the value of literary reputation. Perhaps that is what interests you above all else. And incidentally, I can – just about – think of some sensible reasons why that might be so.

If you are an academic, say, or someone with a private income, it may be that what really interests you is earning the respect of the finest judges of literary fiction. Fine. That doesn't happen to be my ambition, but it could be yours.

On the other hand, you may still be uncertain about your objectives. You would quite like to acquire all four of the suggested benefits. Money would certainly be useful, and you wouldn't mind being famous. You don't really want to be sneered at in the highbrow press, so some literary admiration would not go amiss. And, yes, well, dammit, you also want to express yourself. You're an *artist*, when all is said and done. So how do you sort out your priorities then?

The solution, I suggest, is quite simple. It does not require three years of psychoanalysis. All you have to do is think about your fantasies.

Please don't pretend to me that you don't have any fantasies, because I shan't believe you. And it's the *respectable* fantasies that we're talking about now. Writing fantasies. So there's no need to look shifty.

All you have to do is think about the form that your writing fantasies take.

Perhaps, in your head, you have already written your acceptance speech for the night when you're presented

with a Tony award for the year's best play on Broadway. Or perhaps you see yourself signing a cheque for the Bentley Continental that you've always wanted. Or maybe you simply picture yourself receiving the plaudits of the distinguished professor who is head of your department of English literature. You have written an epic poem, based on a Greek myth which is unknown to all but a handful of scholars, and your masterpiece is available in a limited edition of 12 xeroxed copies, price 50 pence, available from Maureen, the departmental secretary. The professor tells you, his voice all chokey with emotion, that reading your poem has been one of the most extraordinary experiences of his life. He has never read anything like it.

Your ambition may not be precisely like any of those dreams that I have described, but somewhere, somewhere deep in the back of your devious little mind, dear Reader, there is a fantasy lurking. Perhaps a whole series of fantasies.

Perhaps you want to frame that page from *Publishers Weekly* which shows that your book crept on to the American bestseller list; or Madonna writes you a fan letter. Or whatever. However odd your dreams may be, drag 'em out and take a good look at them.

From then on it's relatively simple to plan what you want to do. You don't need a PhD to work it out.

You identify what you hope to achieve in your fantasy world, and then you ask yourself, how can this dream best be achieved? Will I be well advised to concentrate on earning money? Am I only interested in impressing the neighbours by appearing on television? Does the literary professor's opinion count for me more than anything? Or am I desperate to put all my paranoid fears down on paper, and to hell with whether anyone reads it or not?

After putting the potential rewards of writing into a personal order of priority, you will have a clearer idea of what you hope to achieve as a writer.

### **How to achieve what you want**

The next step is to plan a programme of writing which might, with much hard work and a soupçon of luck, bring you the particular rewards that you have selected.

I can't run through every scenario for you, and making a rational plan depends on having wide experience of the particular medium in which you choose to work. However, let's suppose that you are a novelist, and you decide that money is your main objective. It follows that you must write commercial fiction.

The most commercial fiction is obviously that which appears on the various bestseller lists. But if you look at those lists you will find that first- or second-time novelists seldom appear there. Most of those who do feature on the lists are writers who have served a long apprenticeship. It is not reasonable to assume, or even hope, that you will achieve high sales with your first book, however commercial and appealing you try to make it.

The best plan, in my opinion, would be to learn your trade, and make useful contacts, by writing genre fiction for a few years. Genre fiction means romances, mysteries, science fiction. Down-to-earth stuff.

After you have written a number of these genre books, and seen them appear in print, you will have improved your narrative skills and will have gained in confidence. You are then more likely to be able to write what is known as a 'break-through' book. Just as important, you are more likely to have met the right people to bring the book to the

public's attention.

If, while writing genre fiction, you want to keep your own name clean and pure for the great literary future which undoubtedly lies ahead of you, then you can always use a pen-name for this early work.

### **Matching skills to the medium**

Another important decision which needs to be made is which medium you're going to concentrate on. Despite the existence of a few famous people who have successfully written novels, plays, *and* film scripts (e.g. William Goldman), most writers find it quite hard to make an impression in one field, never mind two or three. Limitations on your time and energy will almost certainly mean that you will be obliged, by circumstance, to concentrate on one medium.

To help you to decide which field to work in, you need to make a realistic assessment of your skills – and with it a list of your shortcomings. You will then be in a better position to decide whether to write fiction, non-fiction, or drama for the stage, television or cinema.

At the risk of causing offence (which is the very last thing I would want to do) I have to say that if you want to write books you really ought to be able to write decent English prose. And the problem is, of course, that if you're under fifty years of age, you almost certainly haven't been taught how to do that. Not unless you went to a very old-fashioned independent school, and I'm not sure that I would trust even them nowadays.

About fifteen years ago, I decided that the English teaching in my daughter's school (the local comprehensive) really wasn't much good. (My daughter was writing

sentences such as ‘I would of liked...’.) I went to see the head of English, had some discussions with him, and sat in on some of his lessons.

This man – I’ll call him John – was an excellent teacher in the classroom. He had a good rapport with the kids, he could get them talking, get them interested in poetry, fire them with enthusiasm for drama, et cetera. Splendid stuff. Unfortunately he could not write a grammatical, properly punctuated sentence to save his life.

During the course of our discussions, John showed me some teaching notes which he had written for his colleagues: the subject was Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*. The *content* of the notes was fine. But the sentences were separated by commas, and Caesar was referred to throughout as Ceasar.

When I tactfully raised these matters with John, he admitted that teachers of his age (he was about thirty) were victims of the so-called progressive teaching which had been in vogue when he was of school age. (Such teaching probably still is in vogue.) The central precept of the progressive school of thought is that self-expression is everything. No one, according to this theory, needs to be taught any grammar; punctuation is irrelevant, and correct spelling is unnecessary. Just so long as the writer *feels*.

The result of this catastrophic policy is that several generations of schoolchildren have left the system without having acquired the means to communicate effectively in writing. It is not uncommon to find university graduates who can’t write a comprehensible sentence.

Some years ago I was involved in reviewing the academic progress of a student who had a II:1 degree in science from a former polytechnic. Let’s call him Peter.

After completing his first degree, Peter had applied to

take a PhD degree at another university. At the end of the first year of his PhD research he was required to write a report, outlining the work that he had completed. And it was at this point that it was discovered that he was, for all practical purposes, completely illiterate.

The Professor who was in charge of the student's department called him in for an interview. 'Now then, Peter,' he said kindly, 'it appears that you really can't write English for toffee, but when you applied here you wrote us a perfectly sensible letter. How did you manage it?'

'Oh, I got someone else to write that for me, sir.'

'I see,' said the Prof. 'And you also managed to get quite a decent degree at your other place – how did you achieve that, given that you can't string two words together?'

'Oh, I just did all the number questions, sir.'

Peter, I am sorry to say, was not allowed to continue his studies. Even today, most universities would be reluctant to give their highest academic award to someone who can barely sign his name.

If you, keen and enthusiastic writer though you may be, are also a victim of progressive teaching, then you need to be aware of your handicap. And there are ways to deal with the situation.

For example, you can teach yourself how to punctuate. You might start by reading Sir Ernest Gowers's fifty-year-old book *Plain Words* and go on from there. For spelling, use the spell-checker on your word processor. It's not perfect, but it's a start.

If you are really struggling to write halfway decent English, you may need to find someone to help you. I have seen it reported (and it was in a newspaper, so it must be true) that Lynda La Plante, writer of various television series, is dyslexic. In other words she's hopeless at spelling

and punctuation, and she has to have somebody to help her to translate her output into presentable form.

It is, of course, possible to be extremely articulate orally, while at the same time being quite unable to put anything down on paper. Muhammad Ali was one such. In my time I have also read a manuscript which was almost completely illiterate in the formal sense, but which made perfect sense when I ignored the commas which were spattered at random, and read the page as if I were listening to the author's voice.

The problem with such a manuscript, from a publisher's point of view, is that it would have to be heavily edited. In that specific case I calculated that it would take an editor about an hour to revise each 1,000 words, and the manuscript was 100,000 words long. The going rate for a good editor is somewhere between £15 and £20 an hour, so you can see that the extra cost would have made the book uneconomic. Or even more uneconomic than usual.

I mention the need to be able to write good prose, because those who work in the publishing business tend to be a bit sniffy about that sort of thing. Separate your sentences with commas and your manuscript will go into the reject pile in pretty short order. Well, there's no pleasing some people. But standards are, I believe, a bit lower in the dramatic media. Those who are punctuationally and grammatically challenged may well find it easier to write for the small or large screen.

My wife has a friend called Margaret, now in her sixties. Margaret's brother is a film producer, and a few months ago he sent her a script. He asked her to read it, as he thought it might need 'tidying up a bit.'

Margaret read the script and reported that the story was OK but that the spelling and punctuation were indeed less

than perfect. Bloody awful is the phrase which was used. Which is how Margaret got herself involved in the movie business. The last I heard of her she was on location in Spain.

Another question to consider is your own temperament. Writing a novel is pretty much a solo effort, but making a film, for example, is a team game. If you are a loner, perhaps you would be better off writing fiction; if you are an outgoing, gregarious type, then you might prefer to work as one of a group of soap-opera writers who bounce ideas off each other to produce three episodes a week.

In any case, the overall point is that if you are planning a writing career you need to take a long hard look at your skills and limitations, and plan a course of action accordingly.

Yes, it will take a long time to get anywhere.

And yes, it will be very hard work; it would be foolish to pretend otherwise.

And no, in spite of all I have said, I can't really tell you whether it will be worth it.

Only you can decide that.

## CHAPTER 4

### **How the publishing industry works or not, as the case may be**

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THE FIRST CHAPTER of this book described what benefits you might hope to derive from a writing career; the second chapter analysed the statistical likelihood of your actually obtaining any of those benefits. Chapter 3 provided you with a method of deciding what you yourself hope to achieve as a writer, and it also encouraged you to think hard about your available skills before deciding which medium to write for.

Whatever choices you have made so far (and the smartest choice of all might be to take up bowls), you will need to learn as much as possible about the industry you are going to be working in, be it publishing, the theatre, television, radio, or film. This fourth chapter therefore provides you with a no-holds-barred overview of the contemporary publishing scene.

I have elected to describe publishing, rather than television or the theatre, for a number of reasons. First, my best guess is that most readers of this book will, in fact, be embryo novelists. Second, I know more about publishing than about the other media. And third, much of what I have to say about publishing is, in essence, true of the other media as well.

I shall begin this chapter by taking a look at publishing

overall, chiefly using British publishing as the frame of reference, but also drawing on examples from other nations. Then we shall be examining one specific area of publishing, so-called trade publishing, which is the most visible part of the book industry.

### **Different kinds of publishing**

When lay people think about publishing, they are almost invariably thinking about the glossy, fashionable, buy-it-now books that are featured in the daily papers: the latest novel by Jilly Cooper, or Delia Smith's new cookbook. The layman imagines that publishing begins and ends with the books featured in the window displays at Waterstone's – works which are widely reviewed in the classier broadsheets, and whose authors are interviewed by Richard and Judy. Bestsellers.

The publishing firms which operate in this way, selling to the general public through the chains of high-street bookshops, are known collectively as trade publishers. But there are many other kinds of publishing, each of them important in its own way, and some of them more profitable than the firms which sell high-profile books.

For example, if we start at what might be termed the bottom, there are a substantial number of small local publishers, dotted all over the UK. In my own home town we have the Ex Libris Press, run by a local bookseller, Roger Jones. This firm has been quietly working away for years, publishing a wide range of books to serve local interests and producing them to a high standard: books on walks through Wiltshire; the memoirs of elderly residents; that sort of thing.

At the other extreme, we have publishers who specialise

in producing statistical reports which are of interest only to a small number of corporate purchasers who are prepared to pay very handsomely for them. One such firm is Euromonitor.

Do a search on Amazon and you will see that a typical Euromonitor book might be called *Pharmaceuticals – a World Survey*. This book ‘provides an in-depth analysis into the global market for prescription pharmaceuticals’, and its retail price is £3,950. And no, that is not a misprint. Almost four thousand pounds. Such books, obviously, are bought only by firms to whom the information which they contain is essential.

In fact, selling essential information to firms which have to have it is much the most profitable approach to publishing. Solicitors, for instance, absolutely have to have up-to-date information on changes in the law. It is a legal requirement that all solicitors should have a volume called *Legal Services Commission Manual*, published annually at a mere £125. This loose-leaf publication reportedly has to be updated during the course of the year, at a further cost.

Other low-profile but usually rewarding forms of publishing include churning out school textbooks, hymn books, dictionaries, and almost anything which most of us would consider dull but which proves to be of spellbinding interest to certain small groups.

My local paper recently reviewed a book about a short stretch of railway line in Wiltshire. The book is lavishly illustrated and deals with ‘everything associated with the railway network, buildings, sidings, and steam locomotives.’ What caught my eye is that the authors have written 120 similar books about other stretches of railway line! And I had never heard of the publisher.

I suspect that nearly all of these relatively unknown

forms of publishing are more profitable than the glamorous (well, faintly glamorous) variety which involves itself in advertising on the underground, launch parties in the West End, signing sessions for authors, and discussions on late-night television.

*The Bookseller* recently published an article listing typical profit margins in various fields of publishing. Now the term 'profit margin' can mean almost anything, but we will assume that on this occasion like was being compared with like. For business books, the average figure was 17.2%; for scientific publishing, 29.3%; and for consumer (trade) publishing 4.1%. Little wonder that a recent article in *Private Eye* stated that the general book trade is 'cutting its throat in an effort to provide big discounts and low, low prices.'

The fact that the serious money is more likely to be made in dull publishing than at the flashy end is often forgotten by those who ought to know better. Even I myself have sometimes overlooked the obvious. Yes, I know it's hard to believe, but it's true.

In 1986 I was a Fulbright Fellow at Northeastern University in Boston, USA. Northeastern is a typically huge university (huge in comparison to its UK counterparts, anyway) with more than 20,000 full-time students. And it has a bookshop.

Soon after my arrival I walked round this bookshop, which was similar in size and appearance to a small aircraft hangar. It was, I decided, quite the dullest bookshop I had ever been in. No attempt had been made to display the books attractively: they were simply piled on the floor, reaching almost to shoulder height, row after row of them, with narrow passages in between. This was, I decided, a badly managed business which would benefit from a

complete rethink.

A few weeks later I had a discussion with the bookshop manager, and I discovered that this boring and 'badly managed' bookshop was actually one of the most profitable in the whole of America.

Each of those big fat textbooks, literally tons of them, was priced at about \$40; the price would be substantially higher now. And in American universities, every student is required to have a copy of whichever textbook his lecturer has decided to use, for each and every course that the student is taking.

What this meant, in practice, was that at the start of every term, more than 20,000 students would come streaming into the shop, each of them needing copies of several textbooks at \$40 a shot. In the first week of term the bookshop would take in well over \$1m a day.

This chapter is not, however, about textbook publishing, or about local publishing, or about selling reports at £4,000 a time. What this chapter is about is trade publishing, because that, I suspect is where most of you are hoping to make your mark.

You will learn, during the course of the chapter, that publishers are not very good at selecting the best product to publish; but, as countless anecdotes demonstrate, the choices made by producers in the dramatic media – film, theatre, and television – are equally unreliable. Remember William Goldman's dictum about Hollywood: no one knows anything.

Publishing can therefore act, in many respects, as a surrogate for all the other media, and the conclusions drawn from studying trade publishing will prove highly relevant in other arenas.

## **I moan, you moan, he/she/it moans**

The one unchanging characteristic of the book world is that everyone in it moans ceaselessly about everyone else. Authors complain about publishers (with every good reason); publishers complain about authors and booksellers; and booksellers criticise all the other parties. Distributors, wholesalers, agents, literary critics and assorted hangers-on come in for their share of stick too.

The agent George Greenfield tells us in his book *A Smattering of Monsters* that Walter Harrap once actually remarked to him, 'Ours would be a wonderful job if it weren't for the authors.' And, I dare say, many another publisher has said the same thing. So, before we go any further, let me state, very firmly, that there ought to be a law.

There ought to be several laws, actually, but the one I have in mind would require every publisher to go down on his knees at 9.00 a.m. each morning, face in the direction of his warehouse, and recite the following mantra ten times over:

*Without writers there are no books.*

*Without books there is no publishing.*

*Without publishing there is no free lunch.*

If all publishers were required to follow this procedure, on penalty of losing a finger each time they forgot, then it is possible – not guaranteed, mind you, but possible – that writers might, just occasionally, and largely by accident, be given the credit they deserve.

As things are, the publishing world is so constructed that, to repeat the distressingly crude words of one anonymous complainant in *Publishing News*, writers are 'pissed on from start to finish.'

In case you think I exaggerate, let me offer just a few examples of other writers' opinions, to give you the general flavour of the warmth and affection in which publishers are held by those who create the basic product – the books.

Thomas Campbell definitely, and Byron maybe, remarked that Barabbas was a publisher. This was a comment which carried more force when people went to church and knew who Barrabas was – namely a thief who was crucified beside Jesus Christ.

Mark Twain was no less rude: 'Take an idiot man from a lunatic asylum and marry him to an idiot woman, and the fourth generation of this connection should be a good publisher.'

Warren Murphy, a well-known American writer who has written dozens of books and has won two Edgars (crime fiction's Oscars), recently wrote an article in which he described how he had yet to be paid for his latest book (which was then in the shops). 'In the old world of publishing,' said Murphy, 'writers always come last.' And he wasn't talking about sex. He was talking about getting paid.

Murphy went on to forecast the death of publishing, as currently constituted. 'Editors who can't edit... bookkeeping practices that would befuddle Stephen Hawking... an industry whose business practices were old a hundred years ago and dumb even earlier than that.' So he doesn't like publishers much.

And here is Stephen King: 'There are people in the publishing world – more than a few, actually – who would steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes.'

So... if, in the course of this chapter, you come to believe that it is being written by a peculiarly grumpy old man, kindly remember that it's not just me. OK?

## **Publishing in perspective**

Let us take a look at British publishing in perspective: we will try to see how important, or otherwise, it is in the general scheme of things.

One of the problems that we face in this exercise is that there are lies, damned lies, and statistics about the UK book business. However, here is a broad-brush picture, drawn from reasonably reliable sources. This book is being written in 2002, and where I quote figures they are for the latest year available, except where I say otherwise.

If we ignore academic/professional books and school textbooks, and just think about trade publishing, the consumer puts about £2 billion a year into the high-street tills.

That income from the consumer is, of course, divided. A largish chunk goes to the bookseller; he gets perhaps 35% of the retail price for a hardback, and more for a paperback. Another chunk, possibly 15%, may go to the wholesaler who supplied the bookseller. As a result, a publishing firm would be doing well if it managed to lay its hands on 50% of the money spent by the high-street book-buyer. In many companies they would be pleased to get 45%.

We may therefore assume that UK trade publishers are earning about £1 billion a year.

At first sight this looks to be a huge sum. But, if you compare this figure with the income of companies in other industries, you will immediately see that, in commercial and industrial terms, publishing is a small business.

For example: the income of all the firms of solicitors in the UK is £11 billion a year; the Shell oil company has an income of about £100 billion, i.e. one hundred times as large as all UK trade publishers put together; and, in its

latest published report, Barclays Bank recorded a *profit* of nearly £4 billion. And Barclays isn't even the biggest UK bank – it's the fourth biggest, actually.

In addition to being a relatively small earner, publishing is also a small employer. Faber, one of the most famous names in the book world, employs only 125 people. Even Hodder Headline, one of the top half-dozen firms, employs less than 800.

Compare these figures with almost any other industry and you will see that the numbers are tiny. I live about three miles away from the small town of Trowbridge in Wiltshire. The biggest employer in Trowbridge is a manufacturer of beds, called Airsprung. This firm employs 1,000 people, and you will certainly never have heard of it; in fact you probably haven't even heard of Trowbridge.

In financial terms, trade publishing is not a rewarding business to work in. A *Bookseller* survey in 2001 established that the average salary paid to those aged between 19 and 23, who had been in their publishing jobs for less than a year, was £14,416. (Nearly all these firms are based in London, remember.)

In one medium-sized trade publisher, the overall average salary was just under £20,000, with the highest-paid director taking home some £45,000. By way of comparison, a train driver on the London underground earns about £31,000 a year. There are some publishing bosses who earn over £100,000 a year, but not many

Because of its low earning power, publishing is of little interest to the City of London: generally speaking, the industry provides a poor return on capital. A report published in 1999 stated that only 32% of publishers made an 'acceptable' return of 10% on their investment, and that about one third of publishers were 'grossly inefficient' in

their use of capital.

In short, when we consider the financial data, coupled with employment statistics, we discover that publishing is a piddling little business of very little consequence to anyone. When compared with the oil industry, banking, or insurance, it is minuscule.

Publishing is, however, a business which plays an absolutely vital part in what might be called the nation's culture, and it has a central role in education.

### **Trade publishing in outline**

As far as fiction and general non-fiction are concerned, there are about seven or eight major publishers in the UK. Ranked roughly according to their share of the market, they are Random House, Transworld (which is now under the same ownership as Random House), Penguin, Harper-Collins, Hodder Headline, Macmillan, Orion, and Little Brown. Each of these firms can claim about 3% or more of the general retail market.

What this means, in practice, is that between them these few firms generate almost all the bestsellers, apart from the odd fluke. This is not because they are clever enough to pick really popular books – it is because they alone have enough financial muscle to give a book the sort of publicity and marketing that it needs if it is to sell enough copies to appear on the weekly bestseller lists.

Smaller companies, which occasionally have something of a literary or commercial success, include Harlequin Mills and Boon, Simon and Schuster, Faber and Faber, Fourth Estate, Judy Piatkus, and others.

Over the last twenty years, each of the big trade publishers has taken over and absorbed into itself quite a

number of smaller firms. These small firms survive only as imprints within the control and supervision of the main company. For example, Random House has swallowed the firms of Jonathan Cape, Secker and Warburg, Chatto and Windus, William Heinemann, and Hutchinson.

Most of the big names are themselves subsidiaries of bigger companies. HarperCollins belongs to NewsCorp, Rupert Murdoch's empire; Random House UK is part of a German company, Bertelsmann, and the majority shareholder in Orion is a French company, Hachette.

The big trade publishers work in close co-operation with the major bookselling chains, of which the biggest, by far, is W.H. Smith, followed by firms such as Waterstone's, Dillons, Hatchards and Ottakar's.

Both the big publishers and the big booksellers depend for their survival on a constant flow of high-volume sellers, both in fiction and non-fiction, with Christmas being the critical period for peak sales.

What is called the backlist (books published some time ago) is important, both to publishers and to booksellers, but at least half the big companies' income is generated by the frontlist (i.e. brand-new books which are currently being publicised).

It is useful to note that bestsellers come in two varieties.

First, there are those which are manufactured, so to speak, by choosing an obviously commercial project and then giving it huge publicity: the autobiography of a pop star would be an example.

Second, there are those bestsellers which arise through word-of-mouth recommendation, and which come as a complete surprise to everyone: examples of the latter include the first *Harry Potter*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, and *Trainspotting*.

## Manufacturing a bestseller

Let's take a closer look at the process of manufacturing a big seller. First, non-fiction.

It's usually a safe bet that the (ghost-written) autobiography of a so-called celebrity will do well. Bruce Forsyth was persuaded to 'write' his life story for an alleged £550,000, and Dale Winton is reported to have signed up for a slightly smaller sum. David Beckham can command £2m.

Given the good track record of this kind of book, a publisher who is seeking to create a big seller simply scans the newspapers for a likely celebrity, signs her up, commissions someone to write the book for her, and in due course arranges for the 'author' to appear on all the TV chat shows; serial rights might be sold to the *Daily Mail*.

If all goes well, everyone makes a reasonably honest penny. However, this celebrity-biography ploy does sometimes go wrong. For example, Anthea Turner is said to have been paid £400,000 for writing *Fools Rush In*; but for some reason no one wanted to read what she had to say about life, the universe, and everything, and the publisher lost money.

Publicity is the absolutely vital element in selling books, and so publishers are also on the lookout for well-known names who can write fiction – or, and excuse my mentioning it, well-known names who, in return for a large fee, are prepared to pretend that they can write fiction.

You will have noticed, I'm sure, that in the past few years a number of famous politicians, sportsmen, and television personalities have turned out to possess an unexpected willingness to scribble away in the midnight hours after doing a hard day's work in some other profes-

sion. Some of these people actually do write their own books, but some don't. Naomi Campbell definitely didn't write *Swan*, although her name is on the cover.

Once the manufactured big seller is written, the publisher then proceeds to publicise it.

President Nixon used to say that you can't solve problems by throwing money at them, but that was just because he didn't want to annoy the voters by raising taxes. In fact, throwing money at a problem is often the best way to deal with it, and allocating a large publicity budget is the standard solution to the problem of how to shift books out of the warehouse.

Publicity expenditure, for a single book, of the order of £50,000 and higher is far from rare; it might be £150,000 for a new novel by John Grisham. The money goes on advertising in newspapers, posters on the underground, parties for booksellers, and travel costs for sending authors from city to city, where they appear on local TV, get interviewed by the local paper, et cetera, et cetera. Result: usually a big seller.

The various communications and entertainment media co-operate in all this, of course. Newspapers are desperate for something interesting to fill up the space between the adverts, and TV chat shows are equally keen to find somebody articulate, amusing, and famous to interview.

If you want to be taken up by a powerful publisher, it will help your case enormously if you are already well known, witty, and personable. In the case of those who are not yet household names, it also helps if you're twenty-nine, write a column for the *Guardian*, and look utterly wonderful in a black miniskirt. (Personally I can do the miniskirt, at a pinch, but not the *Guardian* bit or the twenty-nine.)

One major item of expenditure in the publicity budget is the cost of preferential treatment in the high-street bookshops' display areas. In early 2002 there was a flurry of excitement about this, with some people claiming that buying display space and other bookshop privileges is immoral and misleading. But the practice is not new.

What happens is this. Publisher A has a book, by Celebrity B, which he wishes to have heavily plugged by Bookseller Chain C. So, A simply pays C a fee, in return for which C stacks a whole pile of B's book in the front window of every shop, and puts another big pile right beside the till. A striking placard is added to indicate that the book has the shop's warm endorsement: Book of the Month, it says.

Newspaper reports state that the going rate (2002) is £10,000 if a publisher wants his book to be identified as W.H. Smith's 'read of the week', £2,500 to be labelled Waterstone's 'book of the month', and so on. A publisher also has to give the bookseller an extra discount, usually 7.5%.

Some commentators maintain that these bookshop facilities can be purchased 'regardless of merit' – whatever that means in this context. And a writer in *The Spectator* argued that 'the reader is being manipulated and misled.'

By way of rebuttal, some booksellers have insisted that they really do select books 'on merit' – again, whatever that means in this context – and only then do they ask the publisher to stump up. It is argued that this makes the practice legitimate. The booksellers really do love books, you see, and they only choose the ones which are really, really well written. Honest.

I'm afraid I can't get very excited about this practice myself, even if the purchase of space is made in an absolutely cold-blooded manner, without anybody in the

bookshop bothering to read the book at all.

In effect, the paying of fees to powerful booksellers is just a particularly effective form of advertising. If a customer comes into a bookshop in search of a birthday present for Aunty Jane, but hasn't a clue what to buy her, what is the first thing he sees? Answer, a big pile of the latest bestseller by Felicity Fancypants, with a sign saying, 'All of us here at Liars & Co think this book is absolutely wonderful. It's just the thing for your Aunty Jane's birthday.'

As deceptions go, this is a very minor one. No one is going to get beaten up and have their wallet stolen. And who knows, Aunty Jane may decide that Felicity Fancypants really is terrific.

Anyway, for better or for worse, this is the way in which bestsellers are manufactured.

### **Word-of-mouth bestsellers**

Some books become bestsellers by virtue of the fact that they are excellent books of their kind.

What happens in these rare instances is that a few people read the book, decide for themselves that it's absolutely stunning, and then they tell all their friends about it. The friends then rave to other friends, and so on and so forth. (The publisher doesn't have to pay out a penny – amazing, isn't it?)

A few years ago I wanted to buy a birthday present for my ten-year-old nephew. I went into my local Waterstone's and approached the children's section, where I found two small boys browsing.

'Right, gentlemen,' I said. 'I want to buy a book for a boy of about your age – what do you recommend?'

Without hesitation both boys moved around the display until they found what they wanted. ‘This one,’ said one boy, and the other one nodded.

They had identified the first *Harry Potter*. And that is how that particular success story began – with satisfied customers rather than with a big advertising budget.

It does happen, but don’t depend on it happening to you.

### **How books are selected for publication**

Now you know how bestsellers come about. And you will have realised, I hope, that the last thing a publisher is looking for is a first novel by some ageing nonentity living in the provinces. Someone like me, or even you.

Nevertheless, writers are nothing if not certifiably optimistic, and despite being a provincial unknown you tell yourself that there must be some chance for new faces to get a look in. So let us now review the process by which publishers fill up their lists when they can’t persuade the footballer of the year to let his name be used on a thriller.

In non-fiction, it is common for a book to be commissioned: that is to say, someone puts forward an idea for a book – on how to grow fuchsias, perhaps – writes the first chapter or two, and is then given a contract to write the rest of it.

This sometimes happens in fiction, too, but rarely. One notable instance occurred about five years ago, and I watched the progress of the project with interest.

I can seldom read through a copy of *The Bookseller* without my jaw dropping open at least once, and this particular week I was staggered by the announcement of a novel which had been commissioned by one of the big

firms.

I've mentioned already that in the 1980s and 1990s it was common for firms to merge into ever bigger conglomerates. In one of these mergers, the managing director of the smaller firm had been made redundant. We'll call her Eva Brick. After some thought, Eva had decided that, rather than seek a new post in management, she would write a novel or two; and lo and behold, said *The Bookseller*, she had been awarded a six-figure contract on the strength of a couple of chapters.

What that means, in plain English, is that a publisher had agreed to pay Eva an advance of at least £100,000 in return for writing two books.

*The Bookseller* noted the lady's previous experience as the boss of a firm which published fiction, and asked rhetorically, 'Who is better equipped to write a successful commercial novel than Eva?' To which the only sensible answer is, 'Almost anyone who has already *written* half a dozen commercial novels.' (Such as the modest author of this present commentary.) Almost anyone, in fact, who had ever written a book of any kind, because managing a publishing company is by no means the same thing as creating the product; it's no substitute for practice.

If you look, for instance, at the American mass-market bestseller list, which I have just done, you find there the names of women like Nora Roberts, who has had 49 *New York Times* bestsellers; Catherine Coulter, who has written over 50 books; and Stephanie Laurens, who has 21 books to her credit.

It's no accident that these women appear in the bestseller list: it's because they know how to do the job of writing commercial fiction. They have learnt at the coal face, through years of application and hard work.

For a while – it must have been all of seven seconds – I did toy with the idea of writing to *The Bookseller* and pointing out all this. I could also have added that those of us who might justify a six-figure advance in terms of hard-won skills and experience lack one important ingredient when it comes to sealing such a deal: we are not on first-name, let's-do-lunch terms with the key decision-makers at the top of trade publishing.

In the end, however, I didn't write and make my views known. Waste of breath, Michael, I thought to myself. But from then on I did follow Eva Brick's career with some interest.

Understand that I feel no malice towards the lovely Eva. The only advice that I could give to someone in her position is Grab the money and run. But I did think that Eva was going to find that her new profession was a bit more complicated than she expected.

You see, I've written about two million words of fiction, and so I know that carving a novel out of your imagination is not an easy task. Even when you've done it a few times before. But publishers don't know that, because most of them have never done it.

It's easy for publishers to fall into the trap of thinking that writing is easy. Every post brings them another ten manuscripts to look at, so naturally they think that anyone can do it. But I had a shrewd idea that the end product of Eva's efforts was going to be less than amazing.

In due course Eva Brick's book (*The Broken Window*) was published.

Naturally, with an address book like hers, not to mention a big fat marketing budget, Eva was given pages of publicity and lots of attention on the TV shows.

Unfortunately the reviews were... well, mixed, as the

actors say. Eva's friends were polite, but not all the reviewers were her friends. The book 'never even resembles a nail-biter,' said one. 'Just too tame,' said another.

The paperback version did not get into the annual list of books selling more than 100,000 copies, which a publisher who had paid a big advance must have hoped for.

Heh heh heh, I said to myself. Could have told you, ladies and gentlemen, if only you'd asked. If you'd listened to me you could have avoided a lot of grief. But no, you knew best....

Eva's subsequent career as a writer has had its ups and downs, which I won't burden you with, and she has quietly admitted, in interviews, that it's all a bit more difficult than she had thought.

Quite.

In any event, the main point of telling you all this is to explain that, unless you are mighty well connected, no one is going to commission you to write a novel. You are going to have to write the whole thing, on spec, as they say, without anyone paying you a penny for your labour.

There is one another point which I can't forbear to make about Eva's contract.

Suppose you lived in a small town, and you heard that the council has awarded a contract for building a new library to a firm called Eva Brick Ltd. You were told that Eva Brick Ltd. had never actually put up a building before, though the directors had watched lots of other people putting up buildings. Furthermore, you were also told that there were numerous other firms in the town which *had* put up buildings, rather successful ones, and they had offered to build the library for about half the price demanded by Eva Brick Ltd. What would you think then?

You would smell, I think, a touch of corruption in the

air. You wouldn't have to go into many pubs before you found a bloke who told you, "Course, this is a brown-paper bag job, guv, you do realise that, don't you? I give you a big heap of money, you hand some of it back in a brown-paper bag, know what I mean, guv, eh? Nudge nudge, wink wink.'

So, do I think that Eva Brick's publisher was corrupt, and did a deal whereby he got a kickback from her?

No, I don't. Publishers are much more likely to be completely clueless than corrupt, and this is, I believe, a prime example of cluelessness.

And anyway, most publishers are far too timorous to commit a crime. Most of them blush crimson if they fiddle their expenses. The real villains of this world take a quick look at book publishing while they're at university, give a snort of derision, and then apply to join a merchant bank.

### **On the incompetence of editors**

When you have written your novel, what then?

Well, if you want to be rich and famous, you are going to have to try to find a trade publisher for it.

And here is an important point to register before you go any further:

*Trade publishers of fiction simply cannot distinguish between books which will find a big audience and books which won't.*

Sir John Harvey-Jones maintains that publishing makes its profits from just 8% of its product. Finding that vital 8% is the key to everything. But, as I've said before and will doubtless say again, the editors in the trade-publishing houses just don't know how to do it. Not consistently, ten times out of ten.

If you are a TV personality, or a writer with six big

sellers already behind you, or a publishing insider, then you are in the happy position of not being reliant upon a publisher's skills in distinguishing books which will sell from those which won't. Your stuff will find a home almost regardless of its quality. But if you are a single mother living in the provinces, then the only way in which you can conceivably get into print is if someone with decision-making power reads your manuscript and goes 'Wow!'

The problem which you face – as will be demonstrated below – is that publishers simply do not have the skills to do this job. If they do go 'Wow!' it is often about the wrong book. That is to say, they enthuse about a book which subsequently proves to be a dud at the sales till. Books which later prove to be smash hits often leave them unmoved.

A few examples will suffice to prove the point. But, in fact, we only need one. The case of *Harry Potter*.

If you do not know by now that the *Harry Potter* books have sold in vast quantities, and have generated fortunes, not only for the publisher and the author, but also for numerous companies involved in producing spin-off merchandise, then I hold out no hope for you as a writer. And speaking of spin-offs, my local department store can even sell you a fireside rug with young Harry's image upon it. The total revenue generated by the exploits of this lad must run into billions.

And how was the original *Harry Potter* book treated when it was first presented to publishers?

With disdain, that's how. Despite the fact that it was offered by an agent.

In a newspaper article published in 2000, Bryony Evens related how in 1996 she had been working as the office manager for the Christopher Little Literary Agency. One of

her jobs was to open the post, and one morning she came across a manuscript entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. At that time, the author was, of course, completely unknown and unpublished.

Ms Evens thought that the manuscript was intriguing, even though the firm did not usually handle children's books. She read it and drew it to the attention of her superiors.

Eventually Christopher Little & Co decided that they would represent J.K. Rowling, and the book was sent out to at least eight major publishers, including Penguin, Transworld, and HarperCollins. Who all rejected it.

Except one. The sole editor who was interested was Barry Cunningham of Bloomsbury. He paid the overwhelming sum of £2,500 by way of an advance against royalties.

An article in *Publishing News*, dated 29 September 2000, reported that Barry Cunningham was leaving Bloomsbury to start a new venture. J.K. Rowling was interviewed in connection with that article, and she chose to place on record her gratitude to the only man who saw any future for her book.

'If it hadn't been for Barry, *Harry Potter* might still be languishing in his cupboard under the stairs,' she said. (Actually it's not *might*, it's *would*.) 'A long succession of editors had said "too long", "too complex", and "too old-fashioned". Barry said, "This is great. I think it could sell well" – and bought it. Nobody who hasn't read my rejection letters can understand how bold a decision this was at the time.'

While I was preparing this book I did think about writing to J.K. Rowling and asking her to allow me to quote those rejection letters in full, together with the names of

the editors concerned. But I didn't. Said editors have probably now moved on to higher things, having proved themselves at editorial level, and there would be no point in reminding them of their past mistakes, now would there? Certainly not. We are not vindictive, you and I, are we? We are not in the business of humiliating individuals by reminding them of their errors of judgement, lack of foresight, and general paucity of nous. Are we? No. I'm glad we agree. So I won't be reproducing those letters after all.

It would have given us all a good laugh if I had though.

The single example of *Harry Potter* tells you all you need to know about the capacity of editors to identify those books which will eventually become big sellers – their capacity to recognise which books will give the readers what they want, and which will not. The poor bewildered souls simply can't do it: they simply haven't got what it takes.

Is this because the editors are ignorant, idle, and stupid? Well, in some cases, yes.

A year or two ago I read an interview in *Publishing News*; the interviewee was the crime-fiction editor of one of the top firms. In the course of the interview, the lady admitted, no doubt with a girlish giggle, that when she had been appointed to her present job she 'hadn't actually known very much about crime fiction.'

Now the thought that occurred to me was this: Do you think hospitals appoint brain surgeons on the same basis?

I tell you, there are days when you just couldn't invent anything sillier than the stuff you read in the book-trade press.

Let us allow, however, that most editors are well informed, hard-working, and quite bright. And yet, when

they look at manuscripts, they still can't distinguish books which will prove wildly popular from stinkers which won't.

One of the reasons for this is that few editors seem to have any knowledge of narrative technique. For about fifteen years my principal literary agent was Al Zuckerman of Writers House in New York. Al is one of the few people in publishing who have taken the trouble to think hard about, and do some research into, what constitutes a commercial novel, and how to bolt one together. And as Al once remarked to me, editors can tell you whether they like a book or not, but if they don't like it they can't tell you what's wrong with it, technically, or how to fix it. (If you yourself wish to take advantage of Al's hard-won experience, read his book *Writing the Blockbuster Novel*. Ignore the catchpenny title; it's a sound piece of work.)

Over the past forty years I have made a point of reading any book which I thought could teach me something useful about literary technique – literally hundreds of them – and damn few have been written by editors, or for that matter by publishing staff of any variety.

In crime fiction, I can think of only a couple: *Mystery Fiction, Theory and Technique*, by Marie F. Rodell, first published in 1943; and *Writing the Modern Mystery* by Barbara Norville, from 1986. Both of these authors are American, and both were distinguished crime-fiction editors in major houses.

Less specialised books on the novel have been written in the UK by Michael Legat, who was once a top editor, and Christopher Derrick, who had many years' experience as a publisher's reader. There are, of course, numerous publishing memoirs, most of them unintentionally shocking or hilarious, but few of them vouchsafe any practical information on how to do the job of writing

fiction.

Well, let's be generous to all these experienced editors in the UK book trade and say that they regard what they have learnt as commercially valuable material – far too sensitive to be made available to the *hoi polloi*. No doubt the knowledge is passed on to a select few during arcane ceremonies which involve the rolling-up of trouser legs and the baring of bosoms.

The best books on how to write a novel are often written, not surprisingly, by agents, for agents live or die by their capacity to identify potential bestsellers even more directly than do editors. Agents who have written books on fictional technique which are worth reading include (in addition to Al Zuckerman), Paul R. Reynolds, Malcolm MacCampbell, Scott Meredith, and Carole Blake.

Before I forget, let me reiterate that editors not only overlook potentially successful books, but they also pay more than good money – huge sums of money in fact – for books which prove to be duds.

In the 2002 edition of the *Writer's Handbook*, Barry Turner gave a couple of examples. I will omit the authors' names here, because they have suffered enough already. One minute they were told, by publishers, that they were geniuses whose books were going to be big hits, and the next they were told, by the public, that actually they weren't very interesting at all.

Author A was paid £300,000 by Faber for two novels. The first came out in 2001 and sold less than 4,000 copies. Author B was paid £250,000 for one book, by a different publisher, and this one generated sales of 1,500 copies.

On a lesser scale, I myself (in publisher mode) was once involved in the sale of a book to Faber for £15,000. When Faber finally allowed the rights to revert to the author

there was still an unearned advance of over £11,000 on the royalty statement. I subsequently sold the same book to another publisher, who had a hit with it.

### **More about the slush pile**

The existence of the so-called 'slush pile' was mentioned in Chapter 2. The term is one which publishers throughout the English-speaking world apply to unsolicited manuscripts which are sent to them by authors who are not yet represented by an agent.

Perhaps I ought to come clean at the outset and say that, if I were the chief editor in a major trade publishing house, I would not operate a slush pile at all. I would confine my reading, and that of my junior editors, to material which was submitted by recognised literary agents.

Why? Several reasons.

First, running any sort of a business involves a degree of ruthlessness; an element of triage, so to speak, which means that you have to concentrate your mind on matters which are likely to produce profits.

From time to time books which are capable of generating word-of-mouth recommendation (and thus sales) do turn up in the slush pile. But many years of experience suggest that the likelihood of finding such a book in the slush pile is so small that it renders the whole operation pointless. Most of the slush pile consists of illiterate rubbish. (If I am going to tell the truth about publishers then I have to tell the truth about writers too; and the truth is, most of them can't write.)

A typical slush pile will contain a number of thrillers which somehow fail to hold one's attention ('He opened his raincoat and showed me his sawn-off shotgun.'). Also

romances which lack, perhaps, a degree of sophistication ('Alas,' cried Camilla, clutching her bodice about her. 'I am undone!'). And then there are leather-bound tomes with titles like *Buttercup's and Butterfly's*. Even I will forgive a publisher for not reading any further than the title page of those.

A second reason for not running a slush pile is that it is expensive and time-consuming to do the job properly. Even a medium-sized publisher is likely to receive several thousand unsolicited manuscripts a year. Let's say it's fifty a week, which is ten every working day.

Just to open these packages, log them in, get them looked at for, say, half an hour each, and then to ship 99.99% of them back again, is a job which would occupy at least the equivalent of one full-time member of staff. I have read of firms which have three staff in this section. Realistically, the cost of such an operation is unlikely to be recouped. True, I have read statements by publishers which contest this view, but so far I have always found their arithmetic unconvincing.

In any case, whether the slush pile is theoretically cost-effective or not, the evidence shows that most firms which do operate one do the job, in practice, in an appallingly slapdash and sloppy manner; their system, if we may dignify the operation by that term, is most unlikely to yield benefits for anyone.

Slush-pile managers regularly lose stuff which is sent to them, infuriating the authors concerned, and they delegate the task of reading to underpaid, untrained, and over-worked staff.

Michael Underwood once recalled that a publisher's reader had remarked of his first book that it had obviously been written by a woman who was miles out of her depth

when it came to describing court procedure. At the time, Michael Underwood was working in the Public Prosecutor's department in London.

In an article in *The Author*, Jane Dorner wrote of her own experience as a reader and concluded: 'Unfortunately, dear Author, your reader is too dear!' In other words, publishers simply will not pay their readers enough to ensure that slush-pile searching is done properly.

Such badly run operations succeed in doing nothing more than – every so often – making the firms in question look as if they are run by complete fools. As the following data will demonstrate.

From time to time, some embryo author in a dark provincial backwater receives one rejection slip too many, and a snarling, blood-pounding rage ensues.

After smashing the furniture, the offended party calms down a bit and mutters, 'I will show the world what half-wits these book editors are.' And the enraged one proceeds to concoct a cunning plan.

The plan usually consists of preparing a typescript which looks like any other no-hoper's dog-eared manuscript but which is actually the text of a famous and well-respected book. This is then submitted to distinguished and learned publishers who, surprise surprise, fail to recognise its merits.

In 1979, Chuck Ross typed out Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Steps*, which had won the National Book Award, and sent it under a pseudonym to 14 publishers. Of these, 2 lost the typescript (we're sure it's here *somewhere*, Chuck); 1 returned it unread; 8 sent it back with the standard rejection slip; and 3 'recognised its quality' but still didn't want to publish it.

A similar scheme was carried out in 1996 by one Kevin

Banks, of Colchester, who was actually a journalist on the *Sunday Mirror*. He sent a chapter of a novel to 10 publishers and asked if they were interested in seeing the rest with a view to publishing it. None were.

'Kevin Banks' then revealed that the chapter in question was a 'lightly amended' version of Chapter 1 of *Popcorn*, which was a current bestseller by the comedian Ben Elton.

Yet another similar exercise was undertaken in France, in the summer of 2000. A famous French television presenter had written a novel which was published by a leading firm called Plon; the book was a great 'success', in that the author was interviewed widely, made lots of personal appearances, and the public was persuaded to buy a large number of copies.

The magazine *Voici* decided, however, that this novel was less than interesting, and that it would never have been published at all had it come from an unknown author. (Now where have I heard that before?) *Voici* typed out the first chapter of the book and offered it, under a pseudonym, to every leading publisher in France. None of them accepted it, naturally, and none even recognised it as the season's hit – including Plon, which had published the book in the first place.

*Voici* claimed to have proved what everybody knew already, namely that poor novels are happily published if they happen to have been written by a celebrity.

Ho hum, ho hum. It's a hard life being a writer, and it's not made any easier when you contemplate the pathetic, pitiful, mind-wrenching bricks which are regularly dropped by those who manage the slush pile.

George Greenfield had a story about Enid Blyton, who was published by Macmillan, and whose books paid the salaries of most of the staff. On one occasion Enid had

heard that her usual editor had left the firm, but naturally no one had bothered to tell her the name of her new editor. So, when she had completed her next book, she simply addressed it to 'Macmillan & Co'. The manuscript went into the slush pile, and in due course was rejected.

Good ole Enid is still selling, by the way. In 2001 the sales of her many titles totalled 363,000 copies, with a retail value of £1.4m. Not bad for a lady who liked to play tennis in the nude. Or so they say. Never actually witnessed it myself. Dammit.

A similar instance of the rejection of a work by a famous author occurred early in the career of Giles Gordon; he relates the story in one of his books.

Giles was then working for Hutchinson, which was run by Robert Lusty. At the time, Hutchinson's most profitable author was Dennis Wheatley, who is now largely forgotten but was then a sort of English Stephen King. At his death, Wheatley had 50 books in print, and total sales were 41 million copies. As with Enid Blyton, the income from his novels was paying the salaries of most of his publisher's staff.

Giles Gordon, of course, being a clever young fellow, felt nothing but contempt for Wheatley, in the way that all clever young men despise those who put bread on their table. 'I resented having to soil my brain cells with the likes of Wheatley,' says Giles; and so, when Wheatley's new novel arrived, Giles had it sent out for a slush-pile report as if it was from an unknown.

The report which came back was not favourable. 'The book is terribly hackneyed,' declared the reader. 'Decline.'

Giles showed this report to his boss, Robert Lusty, who was not amused. Giles was told to publish the book in short order.

‘In spite of my best efforts,’ Giles relates, ‘Dennis Wheatley’s career continued to prosper.’ And Giles Gordon went on being paid a salary out of the proceeds. He may have resented soiling his brain cells with Wheatley’s fiction, but he doesn’t seem to have resented being paid.

I have a friend called George, who has ambitions to write. Well, actually he does write, but he just doesn’t get published. Every so often we have a drink in the Faggot and Dyke, and exchange horror stories.

‘Publishers!’ said George one night, after sinking more than a single pint. ‘Publishers are too stupid to recognise a good book if you hit them over the head with it.’ (And I understand, from a previous conversation, that George has demonstrated the truth of this statement by experiment.)

For once in my life I felt obliged to defend those noble souls who protect and enhance our glorious literary heritage.

‘Now George,’ I said, ‘that isn’t quite fair. Most publishers can recognise a bestseller, but only when it was published two years earlier and they have the sales figures in front of them.’

### **Internal approval procedures**

Once upon a time, in another world far, far, away, it was possible for an editor to make up her own mind about whether to publish a particular book. ‘Right,’ she could say when she had finished reading a manuscript. ‘That’s excellent. I’ll have it.’

Not any more. Nowadays everything is *so much more* professional and Amanda the editor has to jump through a number of hoops before she can offer a contract.

First, she probably has to get some sort of green light

from the editor in chief. Next, there is an editorial office meeting, at which Amanda has to persuade her colleagues that the book she favours is a winner. And third, there will be some sort of approval procedure which involves several groups: the people in sales and marketing; the overall chief executive; production people; and, almost certainly, a bean-counter. ('Why does this book have to be so long? Don't you people know the price of paper?')

Come to think of it, the office cleaner probably has to put her stamp on Amanda's favoured manuscript as well. ('Don't reckon much to this one, Amanda. The 'eroine's got red 'air. I couldn't never take to an 'eroine wot 'as got red 'air.') Books have been rejected on far less cogent reasoning than this, believe me.

Oddly enough, Amanda doesn't object to these encroachments on her personal liberty as much as she might, because it's sometimes jolly useful to make sure that everyone is in agreement. A girl can make mistakes, you know. Amanda, you see, has days when she understands, in the depth of her soul, that she and her mates are like a bunch of blind girls, stumbling around on a dark and foggy night as they look for the bridge across the river.

'Follow me, girls!' cries Amanda. 'I know the shape of every cobble underfoot, and if all else fails I can navigate by smell.'

And then Splosh.

Of course, Amanda doesn't make mistakes very often, but when she does it's nice to know that everyone else was wrong too. It's known as covering your lower back, a procedure which will be familiar to anyone who has ever worked in a corporate body for more than about five minutes.

The everyone-has-to-agree policy may be OK by editors,

but it does have certain drawbacks, at least as far as writers are concerned. It means that the last thing that Amanda wants to take into any of these meetings is a book from the slush pile – to be precise, this is going to be the very last thing she wants by about four miles.

Amanda's first preference for a book to take to the acquisitions committee is one by an established seller who has been with the firm for some time. 'Jeremy's new one – really excellent, all about a cabinet minister who has penis-enlargement surgery and it all goes *terribly* wrong. And as we managed to get him and his agent to sign the contract when they were drunk it's costing us absolutely nothing at all.' ('Well *done*, Amanda!')

Amanda's second choice would be a book by an author new to the firm but whose work was ardently desired by every other publisher in town. 'This was auctioned by Curtis Brown, and there were seventeen bids, and we were the runner-up by a hundred thousand. But I managed to persuade the author to come to us because she's an old school chum. We used to run dorm feasts together. Cordelia over at Bigg Greene was absolutely *livid* when she found out.' ('Jolly *good*, Amanda!')

What Amanda does *not* want to do is defend her choice of a slush-pile special. She does not look forward to persuading her colleagues to accept some manuscript by a total unknown which has been shuffling around the circuit for years (the author being dumb enough to submit it to only one publisher at a time, as publishers recommend – well they would, wouldn't they?).

Amanda especially doesn't want to have to defend such a book if it's a frightfully moving novel about a deeply sensitive subject – a spinster in her sixties who is torn apart by the need to put Mummy into a home.

If Amanda puts this one up to the acquisitions committee, she is not only shooting herself in the foot but also amputating her left leg; and she will get black looks from everyone. Particularly Nigel from Sales, who will roll his eyes heavenwards, groan loudly, and begin to bang his forehead on the table. ('We had one of those last year....' Thump. 'Four hundred and thirty-nine copies sold.' Thump. 'And all but seventeen of them were returned.' Thump.)

No no no. Definitely no.

So now you begin to understand what you are up against. You, the unknown, unagented author from the sticks.

Of course, publishers could help themselves to improve the quality of the material which is submitted through the slush-pile system, but they seem incapable of taking the few elementary steps which are necessary to do so.

About five years ago, in the absurd hope that they might have something sensible to say, I wrote to twelve fiction publishers and asked them if they had any guidelines to offer to authors who were hoping to write for them. (You see what a trusting soul I am.)

What I had in mind was the sort of thing that I have seen issued by a few publishers: documents which set out in some detail precisely what they do want and what they don't. These blueprints are mostly offered by houses which publish fairly specialised genre books, such as erotica and romance, but it would be possible to produce something equally useful, if more broad-brush, in general trade publishing.

The responses to my request for guidelines was predictably pathetic – but then, you were more or less expecting that by now, weren't you?

Eleven firms replied, though if I hadn't enclosed an sae I doubt whether the score would have risen above six.

"Thank you for your letter of your book proposal (*sic*)", said one, despite the fact that I hadn't sent a book proposal.

Four people wrote brief handwritten notes on the bottom of my enquiry letter, outlining the need to submit a synopsis plus couple of chapters.

One sent me a xerox copy of a page from the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, which, oddly enough, I have more or less known by heart since I was fourteen.

And one sent me an article on submitting manuscripts which had been published some years earlier in *Writing Magazine*.

The rest advised me that they were not accepting unsolicited material.

In short, there was nothing there (apart from the refusal to consider any submissions other than through an agent) which might significantly reduce the burden on the publishers' slush-pile readers, or lead them to receive manuscripts which were more in tune with what they might be looking for. In only two cases was there even the broadest indication of the genres which were then favoured by the house in question, and a statement of the length required.

There is absolutely no doubt that publishers need writers – without writers there are no books, remember? – and equally there is no doubt that, at present, they are doing nothing to help or encourage those who might one day produce a suitable product for them. But then, they don't even train their own full-time employees, so why should we be surprised?

Recently I was talking to an executive in a large local

printing firm, one which has been heavily involved in the book trade for decades. He told me that he has found that there is a considerable market for short training courses for publishing staff – courses which give them a sort of child's guide as to how books are produced.

'I have to choose my words carefully,' he told me. 'But I have found that there are a lot of people in publishing who have been, shall I say, thrown in at the deep end. When they find out that there is someone who is prepared to give them an overview of what they are supposed to be doing, they are deeply grateful.'

Which says it all really.

### **The limited market for fiction**

The *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* provides a list of firms which publish fiction. Some of those named are minute companies which hardly merit consideration, but if we stretch a point we might admit that there are some forty imprints which might be thought to carry some prestige, imprints which are run by firms which can actually punch with enough weight to get books into the bookshops.

It is unlikely that any of these firms allow an editor to offer a contract without the approval of at least the head of editorial, and so what this means is that, at most, forty people control the kind of fiction that UK citizens are allowed to read. The true number is probably smaller than that, and it is shrinking annually as the apparently endless succession of mergers goes on.

Should you ever be offered a contract by any of these forty people, don't get too excited. You will be expected to be grateful for the 'advance', which is actually a retrospective, because it will be a payment for work which you

completed months, if not years, earlier. In terms of payment per hour of labour on the book in question it will almost certainly be inadequate, and it will in no way recompense you for the years spent learning how to do the job.

Oh, and by the way.... Make sure you read the small print.

### **The monstrous inefficiency of publishers**

You may feel that I have already banged away quite long enough about the inefficiency of publishing companies, but I'm afraid there is more. Oh dear me, yes, there is still more that you need to know.

First of all, you need to be aware that, from time to time, publishing companies go bust. Of course, companies fail in every field of commercial endeavour, but in publishing they seem to do so for unusually bizarre reasons.

Take the year 2000, for instance. In 2000, Dorling Kindersley found itself in severe financial trouble because in the previous year it had overestimated the likely demand for its series of publications related to the film *Star Wars*. DK was left with 10 million unsold books, and in the six-month period to 31 December 1999 the firm ran up a loss of £25m.

Now it is not uncommon for publishers to be too optimistic about the likely sales of a given book. But to print 10 million copies too many? Seems a bit excessive, wouldn't you say? The Chairman of company later complained that no one had told him about this large print order.

The outcome was that DK had to be sold to Penguin. Job losses: 350. Also affected were 14,000 people in the UK,

and 40,000 worldwide, who were employed as part-time agents for DK products.

Next, Element, a publisher in the field of mind, body, and spirit, as it's called in the trade. MBS books are about reflexology, star signs, curing arthritis by diet, using crystals to change your life, et cetera.

According to some press reports, Element's problem was that it was selling books for less than the cost of printing them. The firm's directors apparently had the idea that, once they got a foot in the bookshop door, so to speak, they would then be able to raise the prices of their books to a sensible level. Their accounting practices were also peculiar; the managers reportedly thought they were making a profit, but more experienced judges saw the business as 'a large cash hole.' Whatever the precise causes, Element went bust too. The grisly remains of the company were sold to HarperCollins.

Third company, Citron. This was a firm which was set up with the idea of publishing new fiction, which most of us would think was a good idea. Citron's particular variation on the usual practice was to charge their authors some £400 each for the privilege of being published. But even then the business couldn't be made to pay, and the receivers were called in.

Other publishing firms which have gone into receivership in the last few years include Studio Editions, Dragon's World, Pavilion, Batsford, Brassey, and Quadrillion.

None of these companies represents as big a disaster as Enron (the American energy company which foundered in early 2002), but in all these failures employees lost their jobs, and authors were deprived of royalties; suppliers – printers and the like – were left with unpaid bills. Not a happy situation.

So, if you ever do sign a contract with a publisher, just remember, before you start spending your projected royalties, that the firm may not be around long enough to pay any.

Apart from going out of business, which is a fairly major event, publishing companies are also prone to all the occasional little errors which crop up in any organisation. Things that could happen to anybody.

For example, *The Times* recently reported on a gathering of authors at Hatchards bookshop. The article's author, Joseph Connolly, related that Deborah Moggach had supplied 'the inevitable publisher horror story.' The word inevitable was used by Mr Connolly, not me.

The tale told by Deborah was about a fan who had confided in her that she had quite enjoyed Deborah's last book, but suggested that it did rather leave you up in the air at the end.

Up in the air? Deborah didn't like the sound of that, so she had a look at the book in question and found that every copy was lacking its last two chapters.

'Forty thousand paperbacks were pulped, and no more was said,' Mr Connolly tells us. Adding: 'When publishers blunder, little is ever said.' Is it indeed. Well I'll soon put a stop to *that*.

Publishers themselves could help to eliminate some of their mistakes if they were willing to hold post-mortems. But they're not.

I was told of one firm which had at one time been in the habit of holding an enquiry whenever a book failed to earn back its substantial advance, but they were obliged to abandon the practice because the staff found it too upsetting.

The ladies from editorial, in particular, tended to burst

into tears and run off to the ladies' lav, where they would have to be comforted by their friends. ('Don't pay any attention to that nasty Nigel from Sales, Amanda. He's a brute!')

### **Personal affronts**

Let me now relate to you three incidents from my own recent experience. Each of these little sagas of inefficiency is minor in itself, and you may ask yourself why I'm bothering to tell you about them. The answer to that question is: Because, if you are what might loosely be called a professional writer, or otherwise engaged in the book trade on a regular basis, then something like this will happen to you every week.

This is the way things are, you see. If you are a writer you are one of the unclean; an untouchable. You are the industry equivalent of the office cleaner – someone who is seldom seen and whose work is taken for granted. In telling you these tales I'm just warning you what to expect.

Example one. At least once a year, and sometimes twice a year if I'm feeling strong, I send for the catalogues of every major trade-publishing firm. I like to see what they're up to. It's a weird habit, I know, but it could be worse; I could be collecting match-box labels, and at least I'm not doing that.

In the case of the smaller publishers, the procedure for getting hold of a catalogue is quite simple. You ring up the main number, and the young lady (it usually is a young lady) takes your name and address; she writes it on an envelope there and then, stuffs a catalogue into the envelope, and tosses it into the post tray. Done.

The bigger companies, of course, are much more efficient than that. Oh yes. They have Systems, and the trouble with Systems is that they can sometimes be hell to deal with.

Every year I invariably have trouble with one big company. It's not always the same company – they take it in turns to annoy – but every year there is at least one firm which really screws things up. This year it was the turn of Clapham and Irons.

You ring up C&I, tell them that you want a fiction catalogue, and the operator informs you that catalogues are dealt with by their distributor. OK....

So, you ring the distributor, and after the usual recorded lunacy ('If you want lunch, press 1; if you want political asylum, press 2') you eventually manage to speak to a human being. Called Doreen. You explain that you want a C&I fiction catalogue.

'Are you a customer of ours?'

'No, I'm a member of the public. I just want a fiction catalogue to see what C&I are publishing next year.'

Can't have one. Sorry. Catalogues are only sent to booksellers.

No amount of argument will shift our Doreen. She has her instructions, and it's more than her jobsworth to disobey them. Supervisor won't budge either. God forbid, apparently, that a catalogue should ever fall into the hands of anyone who might actually buy a book.

Eventually, I give up and go back to C&I head office. I ask to speak to the sales manager's secretary.

This is a dodge that I have tried before when sorely tested. You usually find that the secretary to the head salesperson has a few catalogues lying around on her desk and she can sometimes be persuaded to send you one. But

this time the secretary isn't answering. I get voice-mail, which I avoid using if at all possible.

I go back to the main switchboard, explain once more what I want, and ask to speak to somebody, please – really, really please – who might be able to inject a little common sense into the situation.

'Ah yes,' says the operator firmly, 'catalogues are dealt with by Peter. I'll put you through.'

But Peter isn't there, of course. Voice-mail again.

For two or three days I try, in vain, to get through to Peter in person. In the end I give up and leave a message on his voice-mail. I ask, very specifically and clearly, for a copy of their current fiction catalogue.

Three weeks later (yes, it can be as quick as that), I receive a parcel through the post. It is a big, heavy parcel. So big and heavy, in fact, and so badly packed, that it has fallen apart in transit, and the post-office people have had to patch it all together again. It is delivered with multiple apologies for the Post Office's carelessness, though for once the fault is not theirs.

This parcel contains twelve catalogues, all different. Each catalogue describes the C&I range of books which is offered in various school subjects, such French, Chemistry, German, and so forth. The average printing cost of such a catalogue, according to figures in a recent *Bookseller*, is about £1.50 each; so, if you include postage I have had about £20 of C&I's money spent on me. But these catalogues are of no use to me and they all go into the bin.

And I still don't have a fiction catalogue.

At which point I give up. I decide to live without news of C&I's fiction.

Next year, C&I will behave impeccably, and it will be some other firm which proves itself to be hopeless in

carrying out a simple task. But I have no doubt that I shall have big trouble with one of them.

The next two tales of disaster concern the submissions process, a subject which is of maximum interest to us writers because we have all made submissions of one sort or another, on a fairly regular basis.

In 1999 I decided to dispense with the services of a literary agent and I began to undertake the marketing of my work myself. (In case you're wondering, and you probably are, it was I who terminated the arrangement with the agent, and not the other way about.)

Prior to 1999 I had been using agents for a couple of decades, and I had quite forgotten how appalling is the treatment which is handed out to writers who either can't get an agent or prefer to operate without one.

I had assumed, you see, that it would be possible – nay, automatic – for a writer with a list of previous publications to be treated like a professional. I had thought that if I mentioned my track record – a history of published novels going back to 1963, together with the odd prize – I could expect to be taken seriously. Yes, I know it was silly, but my struggle against congenital naïvety has been lifelong.

I was soon to be reminded of the truth. By and large, unsolicited submissions from writers who are not represented by an agent are accorded the same degree of respect as would be given to something left on the publisher's doorstep by a dog with diarrhoea.

The Society of Authors, noting the 'shambolic way in which many publishers now deal with unsolicited manuscripts', advises authors to ignore publishers' preference for being approached on an exclusive basis. 'It is reasonable,' says the Society, 'for multiple submissions to be made without authors necessarily mentioning that copies

are being sent to other publishers.’

This is a piece of advice which I heartily endorse. Early in 2000 I submitted an outline of a book, plus the first three chapters, to nineteen publishers simultaneously.

The guidelines issued by the Publishers Association say that all unsolicited submissions should be acknowledged as soon as received. Furthermore, ‘at least a progress report should be sent by the publisher to the author within six weeks of receipt.’

My, how I laughed when I read that. I came over all peculiar and had to take one of me tablets. Needless to say, these PA guidelines are systematically ignored.

No single publisher, out of the nineteen that I approached, sent me an acknowledgement of the arrival of my submission.

In due course, and it took several months, I did get a response from most of the nineteen firms concerned. In a couple of cases I got what might be called, if you were feeling generous, a sensible letter, but usually I was simply sent the standard printed postcard.

Two firms never replied at all. Though it’s never too late, gentlemen, and I appreciate that it sometimes takes a while to move these things through the decision-making process. It’s been a couple of years now, but I know how it is – people leave, staff go off to have babies and then come back nine months later and the pile is still there and they just can’t face it. I understand. It’s a hormone thing. But I will still listen if you decide that you have anything to say....

The one submission among those nineteen which sticks in my memory is the one that I made to a firm which we’ll call Smudgit and Fudge.

After eight weeks I rang up Smudgit and Fudge and asked, in the sweetest and most reasonable of tones,

whether I could expect to receive a response to my submission in the near future.

I found that I was addressing the office boy. At least I assume it was the office boy. It might have been the managing director.

‘Did you enclose a stamped addressed envelope?’ he demanded.

No, I explained, I had not enclosed return postage. I had stated quite plainly that I did not require the return of any of the material. But I had given a telephone number, a fax number, and an email address, not to mention a good old-fashioned snail-mail address.

‘Well we never reply to anyone unless they enclose return postage,’ snarled the gentleman on the other end of the line.

I remonstrated, again in the most reasonable of tones. (In all seriousness, I try not to lose my temper with underlings. Usually it’s not their fault.) Surely, I said, surely someone in Smudgit and Fudge could at least take the trouble to send a brief reply to every submission. I myself was, I added (as a piece of special pleading), the author of several other books, some of them quite well reviewed.

‘But we get three thousand of these things every year!’ protested the idiot boy. ‘Do you realise how much time it would take? Do you realise how much it would all cost?’

I ended the call with as much patience as I could muster.

The answers to the idiot boy’s rhetorical questions are, of course, Yes, I do realise how much time it would take to respond to three thousand submissions a year; and Yes, I do know how much it would cost. Because I am capable of simple arithmetic.

Three thousand submissions a year is roughly sixty a week, or twelve every working day. By way of response, you could send a simple duplicated letter to each of these three thousand people, perhaps with a modest personalised note at the bottom, for a maximum cost (excluding staff time) of £800 a year. Emails or faxes would cost far less.

If Smudgit and Fudge had any brains at all, they would understand that sending a brief reply would be good public relations, at the very least. They could thank warmly those authors who had bothered to write to them; they could explain succinctly the kind of books they are currently looking for; and they could express the hope that said authors might send them anything suitable in the future. This, at the very least, might make a favourable impression and might actually lead to something valuable being sent in at a later date.

But no. This is plainly asking too much of this firm's feeble intelligence. Smudgit and Fudge, you see, have forgotten their mantra: *Without writers there are no books; without books there is no publishing; without publishing there is no free lunch.*

After I had put the phone down on the idiot boy I sat back and asked myself a question. Did I really want to do business with a firm as brain-dead as this one? A firm which was, apparently, so strapped for cash that it couldn't even afford an email? I decided that I didn't.

A few months later, I read about a writer who had decided to buy himself out of his contract with Smudgit and Fudge. To do this he had had to repay the first instalment of his advance, and guess how much that was. A whole £400! Wow! Publishing sometimes takes your breath away, doesn't it?

Of course, I am not the only one who has had to wait a

long time for a response from publishers. And it is not only those who make submissions who are kept waiting.

Suppose you were commissioned by a UK publisher to put together an anthology of poetry, and you wanted permission to reproduce (for a fee) a number of poems from books published by other publishers. If, in the year 1999, you had telephoned Penguin's permissions department, you would have heard a recorded message telling you that there was a five-month backlog in dealing with such requests.

One such anthology editor reported to *The Author* that Random House had taken five months just to say that they didn't control the rights to the material he was enquiring about, while HarperCollins in New York needed seven months before they could tell him the same thing. I think you will agree that delays of this order are unacceptable in any business context.

Example 3, in this series of personal affronts, reveals that it is not just the idiot office boys of this world who treat authors with contempt; those at the top do too.

Last year, with my publisher's hat on, I sent a copy of a trade paperback to the head of the mass-market division of a major publisher. I will refer to her as Ms Commission. I asked Ms Commission, appropriately, if she was interested in buying the mass-market rights in the book, and I advised her that the submission was being made on an exclusive basis (which was true).

After eight weeks, having heard nothing, I sent a tactful fax asking for a response. After twelve weeks, still without a reply, I rang up and was put through to Ms Commission's secretary. (The lady herself was in Australia.) I explained who I was, gave the title of the book, and asked for news of progress.

It turned out, after discussion, that Ms Commission's office has no system for keeping track of the submissions it receives, whether they come from other publishers, agents, or individual writers.

'So you can't tell me for sure whether the book arrived, or, if it did arrive, whether it's been passed on to somebody else?'

'No. Sorry.' Pause. 'It doesn't look very promising, does it?'

Once again, I used guarded and polite language with an underling. But what I felt like saying to her was this:

No, darling, it doesn't look very promising. What it looks like is arrogance, idleness, and stupidity writ large.

What we have here is a woman who is head of a major division of what passes, in publishing, for a major company, and yet she just can't be bothered to keep a proper record of the material that is sent to her. All she has to do is give a simple instruction to her secretary. It's elementary office management. But she hasn't done it. (And incidentally, Ms Commission also has a secretary who is too dim, or too inexperienced, to see that the job needs doing and to initiate it herself.)

Not good enough. Sorry. This is plain, old-fashioned incompetence and bad management.

When I relate incidents of this kind to people who are familiar with publishing practice, and occasionally to people who aren't, it is sometimes suggested that I am, perhaps, getting things a little out of perspective, and that I should try to see things from the other person's point of view.

Fine. OK. Let's do that.

Ms Commission occupies a position of power, and she knows it. She is a gatekeeper – someone who guards the

doors to the temple. She lets some beggars in and gives them alms; some she turns away. Agents take her to lunch. Writers (God forgive them, the toadying little creeps) remember her birthday and send her presents.

A couple of years of this, and the woman starts to think that she's someone important. Whereas in reality she is merely someone who facilitates the publication of that which is important.

This is a woman who can't walk down the street without fourteen writers stepping out of doorways and pressing samples of their work upon her. Poor, pathetic, bewildered creatures, they live in a world of fantasy, imagining that if she will only recognise their talent they will overnight become rich and famous. They pluck piteously at her sleeve as she passes. 'Please Miss, will you read this, please Miss? And if you think it's really good, can I have a gold star, please Miss?'

The extent to which some writers will humiliate and demean themselves in their desperate search for publication is frankly rather disgusting.

But if you look at all this from Ms Commission's point of view, as I have been urged to do, you begin to understand why she doesn't keep records. Writers, this woman says to herself, who gives a whatsit about writers? There's one born every minute!

The head of this woman's company, by the way, was recently reported in the trade press as having failed to recognise one of his biggest-selling authors at a company gathering. So he obviously feels much the same way as Ms Commission. After all, why should the boss know who this stranger is? He's just one of those weirdo writer-chappies. They turn up once a year with a pile of paper under their arm, hang about the office for an hour or two, looking

thoroughly shifty, and then they push off home again. Thank God.

### **A personal response to this nonsense**

I don't know about you, but I have been dealing with publishers for over forty years (my first novel was published in 1963). For several decades, whenever things went badly awry, I gritted my teeth and tried to smile (jolly hard to do at one and the same time). We all make mistakes, I said. Could happen to anyone. These chaps, and ladies, are all underpaid and overworked. They're doing their best. Mustn't complain. Keep a sense of perspective.

But somewhere along the line my attitude changed. If, as the Chinese say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, then there is also a step on that journey beyond which you cannot go.

After about thirty-eight years of banging my head on this particular brick wall, I realised that what I was left with was not a warm glow of affection for a hard-working and likeable bunch of people. What I was feeling was a weary sense of contempt for the whole pitiful enterprise.

It is not that I think that writers are God's gift to the world. I don't, and they aren't. If, at any point in this chapter, I have given the impression that all publishers are sinners whilst all writers are saints, I withdraw the imputation unreservedly. It ain't so.

Many writers are undeniably their own worst enemies. They make themselves miserable with their foolish, unattainable ambitions, and even at best they bore their friends and families. At worst, indulgence in the vice of writing leads to isolation, loneliness, broken friendships, divorce, and the demon drink.

There are lots of writers around who, metaphorically speaking, are four-foot tall, fourteen-stone wannabe athletes who delude themselves that they are Olympic high-jumpers. And they're not. Never could be. No amount of training or practice will ever give them the foggiest chance of success at that level.

These wannabes could, perhaps, be something else. They could be a second-row forward in the village rugby club's fourth XV, maybe – if the number-one choice is injured. But an Olympic high-jumper? Hardly.

So I don't expect writers to be treated like gods. What I do expect is that publishers should exhibit some sense of awareness that, as our mantra has it, without writers there is no publishing. Whereas at present, even successful writers are not even given credit for knowing their trade.

Consider the case of Dean Koontz. In 1986, after he had published fifty-four novels and four non-fiction books, Koontz hit the US hardcover bestseller list with *Strangers*. He then wrote *Lightning*, which involved him in a bitter struggle with his editor, Phyllis Grann at Putnam.

Grann wanted Koontz to put *Lightning* on the shelf for seven years. The lead character in the book was a child at the beginning of the story, and Grann argued that *Lightning* was consequently a young-adult book; she prophesied the end of Koontz's career if he insisted on publishing it.

In other words, Koontz was being told that he didn't know how to do his job. He was being told this after writing some sixty books and he was being told it by a woman who had herself written, er... How many novels was it, Phyllis? Can't quite remember.

Well, Koontz had his way. He insisted that *Lightning* should be published, and in due course it became a hardcover bestseller.

Soon afterwards, to no one's surprise, Koontz left Putnam and signed with Knopf. Meanwhile Phyllis Grann went onwards and upwards. She became Chief Executive Officer and President of Penguin Putnam. She was the first woman CEO in US publishing, and was described by one columnist as 'the undisputed queen of New York's book business.' Which is only right and proper. Because she's obviously a very smart lady.

Yes, we writers do understand that other skilled professionals are needed to put our books before the public (and we wish there were more such skilled professionals around). No, we do not expect to get 100% of the credit, or the money.

What writers would like, just once in a while, is formal recognition that we are the onlie begetters of the entire operation. Just the briefest of acknowledgements that books do not grow on trees.

Without writers, everything is a non-starter. There are no editors, no ladies in reception, no trips to Australia, no critics, no van-drivers, no booksellers, no librarians.

We do not expect all these people to kiss both cheeks of our posteriors – though a publisher may, if he wishes, go down on his knee and kiss the toe of my left boot, and I shan't take offence.

What we would like, just once in a while, is to meet a publisher who has got his act together.

### **Publishers' achievements (a short section)**

'Proportion, proportion, proportion,' cry my friends and former colleagues in publishing. 'You must develop a sense of proportion! And you must be fair to people! Give credit where credit is due.'

Hmm, well, this goes against all my instincts, you know. Why should I be fair to publishers when they are demonstrably unfair not only to me but to most other writers as well? Was Phyllis Grann fair to Dean Koontz?

Sadly, however, I am easily swayed. I am a notoriously soft-hearted fellow, and I am putty in the hands of others, so let's have a look at what there is to say about publishers' achievements.

According to the afore-mentioned friends and colleagues, there are at least two areas in which publishers perform well and for which they deserve credit. These are (i) selling an ever-rising number of books, and (ii) the smooth and successful completion of what are claimed to be complex tasks.

First we will look at the facts relating to the selling of substantial numbers of books.

Take, for instance, the figures which are drawn up annually by Alex Hamilton, relating to the sales of paperbacks. From 1979 to the early 1990s, there were always between 100 and 125 UK-published titles with sales in excess of 100,000 copies (each). In 2000 there were 154 such books. The aggregate figure for sales of these 154 titles was 30.5 million copies, a total which was higher than the previous year; the notional turnover from these sales (ignoring discounts) was £194.7m.

These figures show that sales of paperbacks, which are mostly fiction, are rising, with some individual books recording substantial unit sales. *Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason* sold 820,000 copies in six months. Probably 25% of those copies were exported, but even so the total is high, given the size of the home market.

Such figures are impressive, I will grant you that. But the question we have to ask ourselves is this: to what extent

do publishers deserve our praise and admiration for achieving them? Have they really done something out of the ordinary?

To answer this question, I think we should begin by acknowledging that 90% of the value which is encapsulated in any given copy of a novel was put there by the author. And while I accept that a publisher can probably shift 50,000 copies of more or less anything by giving it a hefty shove and a large publicity budget, I am firmly convinced that sales of 820,000 are achieved only by word of mouth. In effect, the publisher's contribution is limited to printing, distribution, and initial publicity.

Another factor which enters the equation, when we are considering the generation of sales, is the book-reading public's overwhelming hunger for new material. This hunger borders upon desperation. How come?

My own theory is that Marx was right, at least about one thing. (I am talking here about Karl Marx, the founder of communism, rather than about one of the Marx Brothers.) Marx maintained that, in industrial society, people live in a state of alienation.

We need go no further back than 1750 to find that lives were then lived quite differently. Most people then lived in the country, and worked in agriculture. They were, literally, close to nature – ever conscious of the weather, the changing seasons, the progress of the crops. And the novel, please notice, had barely been invented. Cinema, radio, television, recorded music, all of these were not even science fiction.

Move on to 1900, and you find that most people now live in cities. They frequently work in factories, undertaking ceaseless repetitive work, often being unable even to stop and draw breath. They may very well go to work

before dawn, spend all day with barely a glimpse of daylight, and stagger home in the dark. Office workers and those in the service industries don't fare much better.

If that isn't a state of alienation I don't know what is.

Today, many of us no longer work in factories which concentrate on mass production. But we travel long distances to work; once there, we rush from meeting to meeting, grabbing a sandwich at lunch, answering the mobile phone as we go. We develop headaches, ulcers, and back problems, and we have what used to be called nervous breakdowns.

In my judgement, it is no coincidence that the process of industrialisation and associated alienation led, simultaneously, to a tremendous growth in the entertainment media.

Over the 250 years since 1750 we have seen the development of radio, various formats for recorded music which can be played at will, cinema, and television. We have hundreds of satellite channels, computer games, video-recorders, DVDs. The average person spends over 20 hours a week watching television alone.

The output of the entertainment media is hungrily consumed because such consumption helps to combat our sense of alienation.

I shall say more about this in the next chapter, but for the moment I think we have to accept that most of us simply cannot do without the constant doses of emotion which the media provide. Judging by our behaviour, most of us can no more survive without such intake of entertainment than we can survive without water.

The novel, of course, is still a mighty convenient medium for conveying emotion, despite its relative antiquity. A paperback book fits conveniently into a pocket or a handbag. It can be pulled out at odd moments, read in

bed, read while standing up in a train. For portability, perhaps only the smaller CD players, with headphones, can compare.

Given these facts, and I believe they are facts, I am not inclined to give very much credit to even the most efficient trade-publishing firms. The public is simply *dying* to get hold of the stuff which they produce. And, despite the fact that publishers frequently sell them a duff product, the buyers keep coming back for more. Publishers have not so much created this market as struggled, with limited success, to supply it adequately with what it wants.

Let us turn then to the second great achievement which the publishers' apologists lay claim to: the smooth-running machine which delivers the right book to the right place at the right time. And at a modest cost.

A leading example of this smooth-running system supposedly occurred in 2000, when Bloomsbury had to arrange the delivery of some one million copies of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to bookshops and wholesalers in one day. This logistical exercise was apparently completed successfully.

In passing, let us note that there were the inevitable rows about the pricing of this *Harry Potter* book. In most trades, you keep the price high when demand is strong, and offer cheaper prices when demand fades: hence, diaries become cheaper in March. But in the book trade, when you have customers queuing up outside the shop door, waiting for you to open for business at one minute past midnight, you give them a discount. Go figure, as the Americans say.

OK, just for once I will stop being churlish, and agree that in arranging the delivery of adequate supplies of *Goblet of Fire* Bloomsbury did a good job. That seems to have been the general view of the trade.

But the question which then occurs to me is this: how complex a business is book publishing anyway? Is it so difficult and demanding a task that we should stand in awe of those who accomplish it successfully?

Suppose we construct a scale of business complexity, running from 1 (simple) to 10 (extraordinarily difficult). On this scale, the task of managing a corner shop, which sells newspapers, sweets, and cigarettes, will be rated as 1; designing and building a supersonic airliner, to replace Concorde, would rate as 10. Where on this scale do we place book publishing?

My answer, based on my own past and present experience, and long acquaintance with the trade, is at about 1.5. Or maybe 1.7, if it's a big firm.

I really cannot bring myself to believe that running a publishing operation is a particularly difficult management task. There are lots of perfectly viable publishing firms which are run by one man and a couple of part-time women, or vice versa. Of course these firms are often under-capitalised, but then so are most small businesses across the whole industrial spectrum.

Despite having limited resources, and despite the atmosphere getting a bit fraught at times, most of these small firms contrive to carry out the basic functions of a publisher without any great problems. As a matter of fact, I am now doing the job myself, without any part-timers to help me, and in the calendar year in which I am writing this paragraph I shall publish four books.

Publishing can be, literally, conducted as a cottage industry; and I believe that there are quite a few subject areas in which publishing is best carried out in that mode, rather than through the convoluted mechanisms of a conglomerate which is itself a subsidiary of some vast

multinational monster. Fiction, oddly enough, may well be one of those subject areas.

The tasks involved in publishing are frequently fiddly and time-consuming. They require concentration and attention to detail. But the tasks are essentially those of middle management or a lower level; and the salaries offered in the industry reflect that fact.

Most publishing staff operate on the basis of minimal training and a large dollop of common sense; fortunately, such a combination is often sufficient, because carrying out the overall mission of a publishing company is by no means as difficult as putting a man on the moon.

This being the case, I'm afraid I can't even pretend to be particularly overwhelmed, or even grateful, when a publisher does something efficiently. I am sometimes surprised, yes. But impressed? No.

Has Great Britain become feeble Britain to such an extent that we now have to heap praise upon, and express our eternal gratitude to, those who are simply doing their job? I don't think so myself, but I accept the possibility that I might be wrong. I was once.

The party line, you will not be surprised to hear, differs from mine. I read in *The Author* recently that it is not uncommon these days for an agent to suggest to a writer than when her editor (the lovely Amanda) does something frightfully difficult, such as guiding the writer's new book through the acquisitions committee, said writer should express her thanks, not to mention her undying allegiance to Amanda's cause, by sending her flowers. ('Oh darling, two dozen red roses! You shouldn't have.')

For once in her life, Amanda is right. You shouldn't have.

I am happy to say that I myself have never been on the

receiving end of a suggestion that I should send my editor a bunch of anything. But if I were, I'm afraid that my reply would be something to the effect that, if Amanda the editor wants flowers, then she can perfectly well buy them herself. Or something along those lines.

So much for publisher's achievements. I said it wouldn't take long.

### **Some conclusions**

The main conclusion of this chapter should be, I think, that you mess with these people at your peril. For my taste, this is a business in which too many deals are done under the terms of the Old Pals Act of 1898, and too many smug people labour under the delusion that they are on top of the job when, demonstrably, they are not.

A recent editorial in *The Bookseller* made the point that authors have to wait a long time to get paid. They deliver manuscripts which may have required a year's work or more before anyone will give them a moment's attention. *The Bookseller* rightly noted that this constitutes a credit period which not many suppliers would endure.

And, please note, it's only the authors who succeed in getting published who receive any income at all. In other words, publishing depends for its continuance upon a ceaseless flow of mugs, suckers, and associated halfwits who are prepared to work for a year or more without any serious prospect of remuneration.

If you are a writer, then dealing with publishers will undoubtedly raise your blood-pressure and it will put at risk your emotional equilibrium, if not your very sanity itself. And it's not just me that thinks so. Really it isn't.

Recently I met a friend who is a professor of manage-

ment. He asked me what I was doing these days, and I told him that I was running a small publishing company.

He laughed. ‘Oh, publishers,’ he said. ‘We professors of management are always talking about publishers. We all write books, of course, so when we hear that one of our number is bringing out a new one, we ask him who’s publishing it. He tells us, and then we say, Are they any good?’ He laughed again. ‘The answer’s always No.’

Second conclusion: as far as publishers are concerned, unpublished and unagented writers are simply a nuisance. That, at any rate, is how it feels if you’re a writer.

Some publishers would contest this, but if they want to find out whether it’s true or not they should carry out the classic management experiment: pose as a customer, and see how you get treated. In this case, try submitting a book in the role of a would-be author. Type out the first chapter of a novel by a Nobel prizewinner and submit it, under an assumed name, to the slush pile operated by your own company. Want to bet any money on the outcome?

Final point. You may recall that, in describing the collective body of writers, I likened them to the crew and passengers of the Ship of Fools; and I have been casting around in my mind for some similarly appropriate comparator for the community of publishers.

Individually, publishers can be good company. Even charming. Especially Amanda. Though I do have occasional doubts about that Nigel from Sales – I don’t think he went to a very good school. This characteristic niceness of publishers made me think of comparing publishing with the insurance industry.

Some thirty years ago, I used to live in a town which was the headquarters of several insurance companies, and many of my friends and neighbours were employed in that

business. Insurance people, I discovered, are universally pleasant, softly spoken, well educated, and friendly. They do not hold noisy parties late at night, and if you go away for the weekend they will look after the cat for you.

But what happens to all these delightful insurance people when they go to work?

Unless you are very young, you already know the answer. They become members of organisations which are big soggy puddings. Such organisations never reply to your letters; if you ring up you can never find anyone who can answer a simple question; and they systematically steal your money.

So, the insurance analogy has much to commend it. But there is, I think, an even better way to describe succinctly the character of trade publishing.

Suppose you were to attend a Saturday-night talent contest at a local pub, or perhaps even a small theatre – what sort of people would you find there?

Answer: friendly, enthusiastic, cheerful, warm-hearted people. Splendid souls. Backbone of the nation.

But what happens when the contestants get up on stage and perform?

Well, sad though I am to report it, what happens is that the comedians tell jokes which you first read on cornflakes packets when you were very small; the dancers exhibit all the grace and delicacy of a herd of hippopotami; and when the soprano comes on to sing the barman pulls his shutters down because her voice can shatter glass.

And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen: as neat a descriptor of the book-publishing business as you could ever hope to find.

Amateur night.

## CHAPTER 5

### The role of emotion in writing

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THIS CHAPTER IS intended, like the rest of the book, to be of practical assistance to anyone who wants to be a writer – either a full-time professional writer or a part-timer.

If you have been reading the book from the beginning, and if you are still determined to write something, then you will have decided by now what it is that you hope to achieve through writing; you will also have noted how unlikely it is that you will actually achieve your aims; and you will have chosen a medium to work in – say, the novel. Preferably, you will also have identified a genre within that medium in which you intend to specialise – it might be science fiction, perhaps, or romantic fiction.

I am now going to try to provide you with some further information which will increase your chances of success as you write in your chosen medium and your chosen genre. So pay attention. This is pretty good stuff.

In the course of this book I am not often going to ask you to do anything. That's one of the great beauties of books about writing: you can sit and read one without actually having to do any work. And I am really not going to ask you to do anything very difficult. Honest. But I do believe that thirty seconds of thinking, at this stage, and another thirty seconds later in the chapter, might possibly prove beneficial.

I suggest that you now write down on a piece of paper an answer to the following question:

When I write a novel (or a script), what exactly am I trying to do? What is my main purpose?

And it's perfectly all right, at this stage, to write down 'Haven't a clue.' Lots of writers go through an entire lifetime without having a clue about they're really trying to do, and some of them are quite successful.

If you want to take this little assignment seriously, devote some thought to what I said in the last chapter about the growth of the entertainment media in the last 150 years, and the underlying reasons for that growth.

### **Why is this man talking about emotion anyway?**

My own interest in emotion began, I am surprised to remember, when I was still a teenager. No doubt, like most teenagers, I was a seething mass of emotions anyway, but when I think back I believe that my interest in researching this subject was aroused by two things.

First, I was at that time being taught about Aristotle's theory of tragedy as part of my English 'A' level studies; and, second, I was very interested in jazz.

Aristotle, you may recall, had a theory that tragedy in the drama brings about the purification (catharsis) of such emotions as pity and fear. However, I probably did a lot more reading about jazz than about Aristotle. One of the ideas about jazz which was current when I was a teenager was that, since jazz is a musical form which can accommodate almost unlimited improvisation by a solo musician, it

is possible for such a musician to express his emotions instantaneously.

At that time (and I was very young, remember) I took the view that the expression of emotions as felt by the artist was an important matter. I was, in short, a pompous twit. ('And you still are,' I hear a chorus of voices cry.)

Well, when we're young we all do and believe silly things, and if it's any help I can say that I now hold the precise opposite of my teenage view. In other words, I now think that it doesn't matter a damn what the 'artist', or writer, or performer, or actor, is feeling when she writes or performs; what matters, above all, is what the *audience* feels.

But more of that later. For the moment, please note that what I am trying to do in this chapter is explain to you what I believe constitutes a sound and sensible principle on which to base your writing career – seeing as how you seem hell-bent on having one. I am trying to give you an idea of what you should – in my opinion – be trying to do. If you choose to carry out some of the suggestions that I am going to make, you will, in my view, substantially improve your chances of achieving whatever it is you want to achieve through your writing career.

Of course, you are entirely free to ignore what I say. If so, good luck to you. But don't blame me if you end up wasting several years of your life.

### **Sources of ideas on emotion**

I cannot claim that there is much in this chapter which I can describe as original thought. I have relied heavily upon the research and ideas of other writers, scientists, and thinkers. Furthermore, it may be that everything I have to

say on this subject strikes you as being perfectly obvious. If so, I can only say that the truths expounded here were once far from obvious to me.

The one virtue which I can perhaps claim is that, so far as I am aware, there have been very few previous attempts to relate the scientific findings about emotion to the craft of writing; and none of them have been recent.

The main previous attempt was that undertaken by an American, Thomas H. Uzzell. In my twenties I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Uzzell's book *Narrative Technique*, which was first published in 1923 and revised in 1934. It was at one time quite a well-known work but is now forgotten. Uzzell also wrote *Writing as a Career* (1938) and *The Technique of the Novel* (1947, revised 1959). Uzzell himself was heavily influenced by Professor Walter B. Pitkin of Columbia University, and Pitkin in turn drew on the critical writings of Edgar Allan Poe.

Given my long-standing interest in emotion, I have made it my business, every ten years or so, to do a brief survey of what science has learnt about emotion in the period since I last researched the subject. As we shall see, this has usually been precious little, because emotions do not readily lend themselves to scientific analysis; as a consequence, few academic researchers have bothered to go down what was obviously a dead end in career terms. However, from time to time I have found the occasional useful book on the subject, and I shall refer to these below.

### **What does the punter want?**

The word 'punter' is, perhaps, a rather vulgar term, but then I'm a vulgar fellow, and I prefer plain words to fancy

ones on the whole. The primary meanings of punter (I have just looked it up) are: one who gambles or places a bet; and a customer or client (often of a prostitute). Earlier dictionary definitions used to include a member of an audience.

For our purposes the word 'punter' will serve very well, because it covers both readers of novels and the audiences for dramatic productions. And, since all readers and audience members are gamblers, in the sense that they are laying down money in the hope that the book or play will deliver what they want, the word is doubly appropriate.

So, what does the punter want? When she buys a novel, or a ticket to the opera, what does she hope to get for her money?

What she wants, in my opinion, is a dose of emotion. To be precise, a satisfying emotion.

I commented earlier in the book on the massive growth of the entertainment media in parallel with the industrialisation of society and the alienation of the individual members of society. Oh dear, that sentence is, I fear, excessively sesquipedalian. What I am trying to say, in plain English, is that lots of people who live and work in the modern world are thoroughly browned off, and they are desperate for a bit of entertainment. They turn to novels, plays, films, TV programmes, music, and various other media and art forms, in the hope that one or more of these things will help them to feel a little better.

There is nothing new or original about this idea that art is used to overcome alienation. For example, I have on my bookshelf a collection of essays first published in America in 1928 and entitled *The Art of Playwriting*. One of the contributors to this book had an acquaintance called Jennie, who worked long hours in a beauty parlour. In the 1920s Jennie had this to say:

‘When I go home at night I’m too tired for *anything*. I can’t sleep, I can’t read, I can’t speak, and I don’t want *nobody* to speak to me. But for five cents I can go to the movies and sit and rest and see things I never could see any other way – grand people, wild animals, foreign cities, wonderful houses and strange beautiful things. And I forget about myself and go home all made over. And the things I have to stand from *him* [her husband] don’t seem half so hard.’

Not exactly difficult to understand, is it?

The punter wants to be made to feel emotion. She wants to come out of the cinema, or the theatre, feeling in some sense stronger than when she went in; uplifted, if you will; moved.

This desire is reflected in our everyday conversations. A colleague at work tells us that last night she saw the latest movie that everyone is talking about. ‘Oh,’ we say, ‘and was it good?’ What we mean by that question is, Did the movie deliver a satisfying emotion? Did you come out feeling better than when you went in, or did you think it was all a waste of time?

This emotional effect is, perhaps, more obvious in the communal arts, such as the theatre, cinema, and the concert hall, than it is in the case of the novel; but the novel, of course, is capable of doing exactly the same job.

Given what we now know about what the punter wants, what can we say about the definition of a sensible purpose – a sensible set of intentions – for the working writer?

Once again, we find that other thinkers are well ahead of us. Here is Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) writing about the art of the short story:

‘A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If he is

wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. As by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art *a sense of the fullest satisfaction.*' (Poe's italics.)

You will discover, as we proceed, that in this one paragraph Poe has condensed almost every important truth about the writer's task and the role of emotion in art generally.

To paraphrase Poe in more modern English: The writer's job is to decide what emotion to create in the punter, and to write a novel (or short story, or play) which generates that emotion.

You might now have a look back at what you wrote on that piece of paper, about what you thought you personally were trying to do as a writer.

The odds are that you will have written down something like this: I feel the urge to express myself. Or, There is a story inside me and I want to put it on paper. Or, I want to satisfy a longing.

If what you wrote comes anywhere near to matching what I have stated in my paraphrase of Poe, then you have my congratulations.

If you have written down something else entirely, that's fair enough. But let's have a look at some of the possible statements that I listed above.

*I feel the urge to express myself.* What this usually means is something like, I want to pose as an author and appear on TV and have everyone admire me. Oh, and I want to earn lots of money. Thanks.

Unfortunately, as I may have remarked before, no one cares about what you want. When our sample punter comes out of the movie she doesn't give a damn about whether the scriptwriter has expressed herself or not. All she cares about is whether the movie made her laugh or cry.

*There is a story inside me and I want to put it on paper.* Fair enough, but remember that the whole point of putting the story on paper is to produce an emotional affect in the reader. How you feel when you're writing the story is irrelevant.

*I want to satisfy a longing.* Yup, but it's the reader's longing you need to concentrate on, and not your own. Again, nobody cares very much what you want. If the book-buyer or theatre-goer is going to pay full whack for your book or play, they expect you to pay close attention to *their* needs, not your own. It's the customer who is supposed to feel better after a steam bath, not the man who stokes the boiler.

## **Turning principle into practice**

In principle, as we have seen, the matter is simple. A writer's job is to create emotion in the reader, or the audience for a play. But, in practice, this is pretty darned tricky.

One of the factors which makes it tricky will be revealed if we contemplate that final phrase of Poe's: *a sense of the fullest satisfaction*.

That sense, or feeling, is what us punters want to be left with at the end of a book, or when we come out of the theatre. But just a minute – does that mean that all books and plays must have a happy ending?

Obviously not. There is a well-known phenomenon in the cinema known as the weepie, or the three-handkerchief movie. This is a sad film which the audiences (usually female in this case) somehow think is absolutely wonderful. And then, of course, there are all those tragedies by William Shakespeare, which seem to have lasted pretty well despite the fact that the leading characters often end up dead.

You will also have noticed that it is not always necessary to have nice guys as your heroes. It is possible, if you get the alchemy right, to write about people who are thoroughly unpleasant characters. They may even be out and out criminals, as Donald Westlake's famous books about Parker demonstrated forty years ago; some of those books are still in print.

Another circumstance which must be faced, of course, is that there is no such thing as a book, or a play, that everyone enjoys. Some people come out of a cinema raving about a movie, and others just can't wait to get to bed and forget it. What some people find deeply moving, others find boring, or worse.

A good many years ago there was a famous cartoon of a couple coming out of a theatre which was showing *Death of a Salesman*. The man says to the woman, I'll get you for this.

In other words, the man obviously thought that he was

going out for a bit of harmless entertainment, a few laughs, and maybe the odd dancing girl with nice legs. And what did he get? He got Willy Loman committing suicide.

Or so I understand. I've never seen *Death of a Salesman* myself, and I'm not about to. I've *read* about it, of course. Endlessly. It's one of the most significant pieces of serious theatre in the entire twentieth century. Or some such.

I am not very keen on serious stuff myself. My daughter the doctor asks me, Dad why do you read trash all the time? And the answer is, because I *like* trash, that's why. I find it more fun, and most of the time I find it better written too.

Which reminds of me seeing a play called *Tolstoy*, by James Goldman. This was a serious play – a deadly serious play – about one of the Most Important Writers in History. Or so they tell me. Anyway, this play featured about two and a half hours of Tolstoy being anguished; apparently the poor fellow had a really miserable time being a rich man in feudal Russia. He felt so *guilty*, do you see.

Towards the end of the play the author brought on a beautiful dancing girl who hopped about the stage for a few minutes, swinging her skirt and showing us her legs. Very nice legs too. The point of this, apparently, was that Tolstoy had been tortured by sexual thoughts and dreams all his life, and this girl symbolised his lifelong struggle, OK?

Now, the thought that occurred to me was this. If only the playwright had brought on this lovely dancing girl about 90 minutes earlier, and had her accompanied by about eleven others, and then brought them back on periodically throughout the play, wearing different costumes, or, preferably, no costumes at all, then we might all have had an enjoyable evening.

As it was, what we did have was a bone-achingly boring

couple of hours about an extremely self-centred man. The play went to London, where, not surprisingly, it died a horrible death.

See, there're a lot of people out there who just don't like serious, and no amount of telling them that they should will make any difference.

Even a moment's reflection, then, will demonstrate that the writer's task, simple in principle, is mighty complicated in practice. Walt Disney was known to remark that making movies is a little bit less scientific than Russian roulette.

So, if we, as writers, are going to have any chance of completing our task successfully, we are going to need to know rather more about emotion than we have learnt so far.

### **What can science tell us about emotion?**

Not a lot, as I suggested above.

In 2001 Dylan Evans published a short survey of scientific research in this area; its title was *Emotion – the Science of Sentiment*. Evans tells us that scientific interest in the emotions is currently growing, but the growth starts from a very low base.

In 1997, Candace Pert wrote a book called *The Molecules of Emotion*. In it, she says that emotion is 'one of those words mainstream science likes to spit out at the very first taste.... Unless we can measure something, science won't concede it exists, which is why science refuses to deal with such "non-things" as the emotions.'

Emotions are rather like a bar of soap in the bath: they're difficult to get hold of, and most scientists don't even bother to try. Evans comments that 'a really good theory of emotion may remain forever beyond our grasp.' A

recent book review in *The Times* says that an average psychology textbook gives about twenty competing theories of emotion. And as a matter of fact we don't even have an accepted theory of what consciousness is.

We do, however, know a few facts which can help us to understand human emotions.

Recent research suggests that the present six billion human beings are all descended from a few thousand ancestors who lived in a small region of East Africa, a hundred thousand years ago. The current theory, based on analysis of genetic material, is that the last migration out of Africa, a mere 50,000 years ago, wiped out all previous human inhabitants in Europe and Asia.

Not surprisingly, given the common origin of human beings, there are half a dozen facial expressions which can be recognised and understood by members of all races and all cultures. These expressions are related to the emotions fear, surprise, anger, happiness, disgust, and sadness.

If you show a member of a remote jungle tribe a picture of a Frenchman crying over the death of a child, the tribesman will know that the Frenchman is feeling grief. The experiments have been done by Paul Ekman.

Can we even define the term emotion? Er, no, not really.

In his book on emotion, Dylan Evans doesn't try to define the term until the last chapter. Then he tells us: 'Most contemporary philosophers and psychologists who write about emotion reject any simple definitions of emotion in terms of a single criterion.' (Evans's book is, however, a useful starting point if you want to learn more about scientific research into emotion.)

For the moment, then, it looks as if us writer guys are just going to have to struggle along as best we can without the benefit of hard science to help us on the question of

emotions. But that is by no means the disaster which it might at first appear.

To begin with, while we may not be able to define an emotion very well (or at all) most of us can recognise one when we feel one, or when we see someone else experiencing one. And, fortunately for us, some of the disputed points in emotion theory don't actually *matter* very much as far as writers are concerned. Bill Shakespeare didn't know anything about peptides and receptors and other biochemical mysteries, but he did understand the need for comic relief in a tragedy.

### **An unscientific theory of emotion for writers**

In this section, and the two following, I give you the benefit of my own ideas about emotion, as it affects the craft of writing. This theory is based on my readings of various authorities over the last forty years or so; it is essentially unscientific, but I believe it has useful applications despite that. Newtonian physics is not, I understand, sufficiently precise to send a man to the moon, but it will serve very well for building a bridge. The same principle holds good for the theory of emotion which is presented here; it will not meet the rigid criteria laid down by scientific method, but it will help you to write a better novel or play.

Let us begin.

An emotion starts with a stimulus. Something happens to somebody.

As a result of this stimulus, there may or may not be conscious thought on the part of the individual concerned. If there is no *conscious* thought, there will certainly be *unconscious* thought.

There is then a physical response to the thought, such as trembling, or blushing.

And there may subsequently be conscious thought which leads to further action.

This process will be easier to understand if we consider a few examples.

Suppose a gun goes off, unexpectedly. You jump! Your heart starts to beat faster, your eyes open wide, and you stare around, wondering what the hell is going on. You feel an emotion called alarm, possibly fear. You may tremble and shake, even weep.

In this case, there is no conscious thought until after you feel the emotion, and there may not be much conscious thought even then; you may rush around in a panic.

Among scientists and philosophers, there is an unresolved debate about what the emotion actually is, and where it is located.

Is the emotion which we call fear contained in the physical symptoms – in the gasp, the trembling, the dry mouth, the staring eyes – or does it exist in the mind, as a thought? And which comes first? Does the mind experience emotion, which then brings about physical responses which may help to preserve and protect the organism (as when a frightened person prepares to run away)? Or do the automatic physical reflexes somehow cause an emotion in the mind?

This debate about what emotion is and its link with physical responses in the body has been going on for at least a hundred years.

In the early twentieth century, William James suggested that emotions are a feedback to the brain from an increased heart-rate, sweaty palms, and other physical phenomena. Carl Georg Lange developed a similar theory.

These ideas were opposed by Walter Cannon, who argued that emotions originated in the brain and trickled down to the body.

These are, as I say, unresolved issues; nevertheless, it is possible to put together a hypothetical theory of emotion which provides writers with a working basis for doing their job.

Here is another example of how emotions are created.

The simplest form of narrative is the anecdote, or joke, and these stories frequently generate emotion, usually amusement. Curiously enough, there has been some serious research done on jokes; a study was set up by the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 2001.

Here is a joke which is widely thought to be funny:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are going camping. They pitch their tent under the stars and go to sleep. Sometime in the night, Holmes wakes Watson up.

‘Watson, look up at the stars and tell me what you deduce.’

Watson says: ‘I see millions of stars, and even if a few of those have planets, it’s quite likely that there are some planets like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life.’

Holmes replies: ‘Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!’

Ho ho ho.

Well now, let’s see what we can learn from this.

First, if you did indeed find this joke funny, then you will have experienced an emotion called amusement. Usually, this emotion is accompanied by a physical response called laughter (which itself is a very odd phenomenon, but we won’t go into that now). When a

theatre audience really roars with laughter, it rocks backwards and forwards.

Second point: there is not much conscious thought involved in laughing at a joke. Usually, you either 'get' the joke more or less instantaneously or you don't.

Third: please note that, in order to 'get' the joke, the audience needs to be able to understand the language in which it is written – in this case, English. If you couldn't speak English, you wouldn't be able to read the four paragraphs above which contain the joke, and you couldn't possibly find them funny.

You may think this is too obvious to need stating, but lots of books and plays depend for their appreciation on being able to speak the language – so to speak. More on that later.

Fourth point: even if you do speak English, you really need to have the right frame of reference in order to appreciate the humour.

What that means is that you need to know a few pieces of background information; you need to have a particular kind of general knowledge, to enable you to assess the joke. In this case, you need to know something about Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in order to appreciate this particular piece of humour in full.

You might, possibly, find the story funny even if you had never heard of Holmes, the brilliant detective, and even if you had never seen one of those films in which Watson, the bumbling idiot, trails pathetically in Holmes's wake. But you are much more likely to get the joke, and you are much more likely to laugh, if you know, already, that Watson is usually a clown.

(Incidentally, I once wrote some scripts for a television series of Holmes stories, and the producer specifically

instructed me to make Watson a good deal smarter than usual. The actor was most grateful.)

Fifth, please note that a given stimulus does not generate the same emotional response over and over again; and few examples demonstrate this point better than a joke.

The Holmes story was apparently one of Michael Portillo's favourites for beginning an after-dinner speech; and it was reportedly very successful for him. But suppose Mr Portillo, having told the joke to an audience once, proceeded to tell it again. This time there might be nervous, puzzled laughter. He tells it again. And then again, and again, and again. Faced with such peculiar behaviour, an audience would eventually creep away in embarrassment, leaving the speaker alone in the dining-room.

This rapid fall-off in the capacity of a given stimulus to evoke a given emotional response is the reason why we have to write new novels and plays. If the old ones went on working, time after time, we wouldn't have needed any new writers for at least the last hundred years. But this, fortunately for us writers, does not happen. Yes, there are some plays which can bear repeated viewing; but you really can't attend a performance of *Hamlet* on every night of your whole life.

We should not end this brief description of how emotion is created, both in life and in writing, without going a little further into the interaction which occurs between mind and body.

Candace Pert is a distinguished American scientist who has done research on the biochemistry of emotion. Modern technological developments have enabled us to examine the molecular basis of emotions, and Pert's conclusion is

that the molecules of emotion run every system in our body.

Pert was once asked where she stood on the James/Cannon controversy. In other words (as you will doubtless remember), she was asked whether emotions begin in the body or in the mind. Pert replied that James and Cannon were both right – and yet neither of them was quite right.

In Pert's view, there is a constant *two-way* traffic between the realms of mind and body; emotions exist as peptides and receptors in the body, i.e. as molecules, cells, and real pieces of flesh and blood, and they also exist as feelings which we experience in our minds.

If this seems a little complicated, don't worry. It is simply common sense given the dignity of scientific backing. We all *know* perfectly well that there is an interaction between body and mind. When we feel ill we feel miserable; and when we feel miserable we can easily fall ill. There is clear evidence that stress suppresses the immune function.

If you're feeling depressed, it would a smart move to go for a walk in the fresh air. Your Grandma told you this, and Grandma was right. Even better than a walk is a run.

Humour is particularly valuable in releasing endorphins and enkephalins into the body – and these substances are natural painkillers. Laughter results in biological changes which are the reverse of those occurring during an episode of stress.

Since this interaction between body and mind is taking place all the time, Pert believes that the biochemicals of emotion are stored in the body, thereafter affecting us quite extensively; emotions may, for instance, affect our ability to move a part of our body, or even feel it. Memories

and the record of our experiences are located not only in the brain, but also throughout our physical selves.

These ideas have important implications for writers, as I shall continue to explain. Emotions can and do transform the body; they work for better or for worse, creating disease or healing it. Given that this is true, and given that writers have the means to create emotions in their readers and audiences, then it follows that the writer has at least a potential role as a healer.

### **The range of emotions**

If it is true, as I believe, that writers need to understand how emotions are created, and that writers need to develop the skills which will enable them to create emotions in others, then it follows that writers need to be aware of the possible range of emotions.

How many emotions are there?

And are they all equally useful to the writer?

Those were the kind of questions which I began to ask myself some forty years ago, and gradually, over the succeeding years, I have put together some answers.

What I needed, I eventually decided, was a sort of emotional equivalent of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. (A taxonomy is simply a classified list or catalogue. However, no self-respecting social scientist will ever use a short and familiar word when a longer one can be used instead.)

About fifteen years ago, I picked the brains of my friendly neighbourhood psychologists, searched the databases in a good library, and found that there was only a modest amount of scientific literature to help me.

The best book that I could then find on emotion was *The*

*Language of Emotion* by Joel R. Davitz, and, with the aid of one or two other sources, I put together a list of all possible emotions. That list is reproduced below.

I say 'all possible emotions' with some trepidation, because naturally anyone who looks at my list is going to say, But what about so-and-so?

Well, what about so-and-so? You should understand that the list which follows was originally drawn up for my benefit alone. As far as I am concerned the list is complete, but if you wish to add to it, or delete from it, for your own purposes, then feel free to do so.

I appreciate that some people will argue that there are omissions from the list, and that some 'emotions' are included which should not be there. For example: cowardice and bravery are not listed.

Personally I don't think that cowardice is an emotion; it's a character trait. Cowardice is what you display, or reveal, when you are placed in a situation which creates fear, and then you run away, rather than deciding to face up to the danger.

The same can be said about courage, or bravery. If, in the face of danger, you make a conscious and deliberate decision that you will stand firm and fight the enemy, then you display bravery.

On the other hand, one 'emotion' which is listed is gaiety; and some might argue that it should not be. It could be argued that gaiety is a mood, or a manner of behaviour, rather than an emotion. There are many more questions and quibbles which we could discuss, and you are welcome to debate these matters in your own mind or with your friends if you wish.

You will also note that I have placed the named emotions in a particular order. I decided, correctly or other-

wise, that emotions can conveniently be divided into two kinds: positive and negative, which broadly means pleasant and unpleasant. Within those two categories, emotions can again be ranged from mildly unpleasant to absolutely horrible and intolerable; and ditto on the other side of the divide. Whether I am right to place elation above enjoyment, for instance, is a nicety which we could debate all night. But it would not, I suggest, be particularly profitable.

Here then is my list of emotions, beginning with the pleasant ones:

*Positive emotions* (ranged from the most powerful and pleasant to the mildest in strength)

Ecstasy  
Rapture  
Happiness  
Hope  
Exultation  
Delight  
Gaiety  
Elation  
Contentment  
Serenity  
Enjoyment  
Amusement  
Confidence  
Relief  
Love  
Lust  
Passion  
Affection  
Excitement

Cheerfulness  
Friendliness  
Gratitude  
Determination  
Admiration  
Inspiration  
Pride  
Amazement  
Astonishment  
Curiosity  
Awe  
Reverence  
Solemnity  
Satisfaction

*Negative emotions* (ranged from the least powerful  
and unpleasant to the most intolerable and unwelcome)

Apathy  
Boredom  
Reflection  
Puzzlement  
Surprise  
Resignation  
Disappointment  
Indignation  
Concern  
Dejection  
Impatience  
Irritation  
Frustration  
Dislike  
Embarrassment

Resentment  
Discontentment  
Pity  
Exasperation  
Scorn  
Jealousy  
Contempt  
Sadness  
Nervousness  
Dismay  
Disgust  
Shame  
Guilt  
Repentance  
Humiliation  
Alarm  
Distress  
Remorse  
Melancholy  
Sorrow  
Grief  
Anxiety  
Loathing  
Depression  
Anger (rage, fury)  
Dread  
Hate  
Fear  
Panic  
Horror  
Terror  
Despair

## The creative writer's task

I don't much care for the term 'creative writer'. However, rather than follow in the social-science tradition and invent a new term (and thus give my work an entirely spurious air of originality and profundity) I will use it on this occasion.

A creative writer (I assume) is someone who invents or creates fictional material, as opposed to someone who relates the facts, such as a historian or a news reporter. The term 'creative writer' therefore covers all those who write fiction or drama.

I suggested above that the creative writer's purpose, properly understood, is to produce a piece of work which will fulfil the punter's desire to experience a satisfying emotion.

Again, please note that I am talking here about the purpose of fiction, not non-fiction. In non-fiction the purpose is to explain, or convince, or describe. These processes may well involve or generate some emotion, but the creation of emotion is not their prime purpose.

The punter's desire is not just a desire for *any* emotion. It is a desire to be made to feel what Poe called 'a sense of the fullest satisfaction.' In my own mind, I define this process as entertaining the reader, though I appreciate that 'entertainment' has a rather superficial ring to it, and the effect that is being sought is often far from trivial or superficial. In any event, the writer's task is to leave the reader with a strongly positive emotion, even if the subject matter is dark and tragic.

As an aside, perhaps I should mention that I have never yet met, or heard of, a publisher's editor who understood that this is the proper and most sensible intention for a writer to have. But I have, happily, met a film producer

(Sheldon Reynolds) who understood it perfectly.

The short story, which was Poe's speciality, is so constituted that there is only time and space to convey one major emotion to the reader: which is why Poe spoke of 'a single effect to be wrought out.' In the course of a novel, or a 90-minute film, however, it is possible to create in the punter a whole variety of emotions: anxiety, surprise, amusement, sadness.

If you are at all serious about improving your writing skills, it would be a smart move, at this stage, to find a copy of your favourite novel (or movie) and study it in some detail.

Read, or skim through, the book again. It will be divided, probably, into chapters or divisions of some sort. Consider each of these. If the book held your attention (and if it's your favourite it must have done), what was it in each section that fascinated you? What emotion did you feel? Name the emotion and write it down. And then, when you had completed the book, what was the major, *overall* emotional effect on you? Did you end the book laughing? Or did it leave you sad and reflective?

What you will realise, if you do this exercise, is that, deliberately or otherwise, the author created in you a series of emotions which kept you reading. You did not, in this case, chuck the book aside with a cry of Boring! or Revolting! You were held.

Once you have identified your emotions, you might then care to look back and try to decide *how* these emotions were created. What was it in the story which caused you to feel anxiety about whether the heroine would survive? Why did you feel so angry about the way she was treated? Why were your hopes raised when she met that nice man in the dark suit?

Reading a novel, or studying a movie, in this way will give you a new insight into what you are trying to do when you yourself write fiction. Or what you *should* be trying to do, in my opinion.

On the assumption that you are prepared to agree with me, at least for the present, about what constitutes a sound purpose, you now have a plan of action; of sorts.

You have decided, perhaps, to write a novel. Let's say a piece of romantic fiction.

You will have read, presumably, dozens if not thousands of romantic novels before you start. (If you haven't read widely in your chosen field then I would suggest that you rethink what you are doing from stage one.)

Following my suggestions, you will have analysed at least one or two novels, to identify, with the aid of my list, the typical emotions which popular and successful romantic novels generate. You have written down those emotions and you have the list in front of you.

First, choose the key emotion – the overall effect which you are trying to achieve, at the end of the book.

Personally I have never written a truly romantic novel, and I don't read many, but I guess that the intended emotion of most of them could be expressed more or less as follows:

A sense of great satisfaction and happiness, tinged with relief, that Jane (your heroine) has at last found a man with whom she can look forward to a lifelong love relationship.

Then, having determined your overall aim, you need to look at the list of emotions which (you have decided) the body of your book needs to contain, and then you proceed to invent or devise incidents which will produce these emotions. In the words of Poe, 'such incidents... as may best aid... in establishing this preconceived effect....'

This is not a book about the technique of fiction, so I am not going to say very much more about plotting here. However, the vital point for you to understand is that all plotting must be conducted with the creation of emotion in mind. That is what must colour and control your selection of plot events.

There is room here, however, for me give you one or two tips on technique.

Don't be too concerned about originality. This is, in my opinion, a much over-rated virtue in fiction and the arts generally. Most punters don't like originality. It upsets them. They don't know what the hell is going on. A hoary old plot device is often perfectly acceptable if you dress it up in new clothes.

For example, when I saw the film *Titanic* it seemed to me that some of the plot twists were so old and grey that they had probably been used in stories which the crew of Noah's ark told to each other. But there were, as a newspaper report which I have just read remarked, 'crowds of teenagers queuing up to see the film again, excitedly telling each other how much they were going to cry.' For these teenagers, the tried and tested plot devices were new, fresh, and profoundly effective.

Another important point, for novelists particularly, is that it does no good at all to name an emotion in the text. If, for instance, your heroine is all alone at home on a dark night when a murderer has escaped from jail, and the lights go out, it is no use telling the reader that 'fear gripped Jane's heart.' That will achieve nothing.

What you have to do, with your heroine in such a perilous circumstance, is describe to the reader the *physical response* to the emotion which Jane and the reader (you hope) are experiencing. 'Jane's heart began to

pound so hard that it threatened to burst out of her chest. Her hands went cold and she found it hard to breathe.'

Yes, I *know* that's terribly hackneyed, and I'm *sure* you can do so much better. And that's what a writer has to do, you see; she has to find new, fresh ways to inject life into what is often very familiar and hackneyed material.

Fortunately for all of us, new punters are coming along all the time. The orchestra may be playing that Beethoven symphony for the four-hundredth time – but somebody in the audience is hearing it for the *first* time, and they are absolutely entranced.

Another useful piece of technique, which was emphasised by Thomas Uzzell, is that the only interesting response to a stimulus is the considered response.

Suppose you are writing a thriller, and you have followed Raymond Chandler's useful advice: when in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.

In real life, a bank clerk faced with this problem might freeze. She might stand there, paralysed, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. This reaction is not really interesting; neither does it reveal character. It might, of course, be acceptable for a minor character to behave in this way, but not one of your major players.

Another uninteresting and uninvolved reaction to danger is the panic response. The gunman comes in and the bank clerk starts to scream; she falls on the floor, and has a hysterical fit. Sorry, the punter isn't interested. In real life we would all, I hope, be sympathetic, but in a book, forget it.

The only response which will interest the reader is the considered response. The gunman appears, and our heroine the bank clerk is horrified and frightened. But we

don't just say that she is horrified and frightened. What we do is describe her shortness of breath, the sudden lack of blood supply to her cheeks, the trembling of her knees. And then we describe how she starts to think. Can she reach that alarm button? If the gunman sees her will he shoot? She feels fear, which we describe through her physical reactions, and she thinks about what is the right thing to do – and, although it's dangerous, she does it.

Write that scene in the right way, and your punter will be held, will feel sympathetic emotion, and will be impressed by your heroine's character.

Analysts of drama often insist that there must be conflict in every scene. Unfortunately, this all too often leads to scenes in which two characters stand toe to toe and shout at each other. To my mind, that is not very interesting either.

Playwrights and screenwriters would be much better advised, in my opinion, to concentrate on writing dialogue which reflects, as fully as possible, the thinking and the internal struggle which is going on in the mind of the characters who are involved in the action of the play.

To summarise: Uzzell advises that, if a writer wishes to produce emotion in a reader of fiction, she should do the following:

(i) Describe the stimulus which kicks off the whole emotion; in this case, describe the man coming through the door with a gun in his hand.

(ii) Describe the clash of desires going on in the head of the sympathetic character, who in this case is the bank clerk. She wants to save her own skin, but she also wants to protect the bank's assets, because she's a really

good employee. The period of time during which the character reviews the options and decides (naturally) to be a heroine may be quite short, but it involves *conscious* thought and Uzzell refers to it as the reflective delay.

(iii) Describe the physical responses which result from the thought processes, and the action which follows. If there is time, for instance, our heroine may imagine the gunman's bullet tearing through her, and she may start to tremble violently. Then she decides to take the gun off him; or duck for cover; or whatever.

If you want to know any more about Uzzell's theories you'll just have to hunt down a copy of one of his two books on technique.

I have, incidentally, chosen to illustrate my description of theory and practice with a rather down-market, commercial-fiction example. But all the principles hold good, of course, however intellectual and literary your purpose and your ambitions may be.

It is worth noting, in passing, that Uzzell took the view that the James-Lange theory of emotion was, so to speak, good enough for practical purposes. He argued that the internal clash of desires, occurring in the mind of the individual, led to action, which led to physical sensations, and that these physical sensations constituted the actual emotion. To Uzzell, the very essence of emotion seemed to be an awareness of bodily changes and sensations, and he emphasised the need to describe these sensations and changes fully if the reader is to become enthralled by a work of fiction.

## **There are no Great Novels**

The theory of emotion which is expounded in the previous sections has a number of interesting implications. Here is a discussion of the first of them.

Almost every teacher and lecturer in the field of English literature will seek to convince you that there is something called a Great Novel.

The alleged great novel may be, for instance, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book which, it so happens, I much admire; or it may be D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, a book which, it so happens, I find unreadable.

According to the professors and opinion-setters of our time, the great novel somehow has a stature all of its own; it remains a great book whether you happen to enjoy it or not. In fact if you, as an individual, happen to consider the great novel excruciatingly dull and boring, then it is you, the moron, who is at fault. The novel in question allegedly remains a great novel, regardless of whether or not you – the individual reader – have the good taste and intellectual equipment to recognise it as such.

Nonsense, is my view. I know of no argument which constitutes grounds for believing these ideas to be true, and I can put forward a strong case for believing the opposite.

Consider what we know so far about the novel.

If the novel is anything at all, it is a machine for creating emotion in the reader. Reading a novel may, conceivably, leave you better informed about hotel management or fetishistic sex, but readers do not, on the whole, buy and borrow novels in order to enhance their stock of general knowledge; consciously or unconsciously, they read novels in order to be made to *feel*. The main *function* of a novel,

therefore, any novel, may be said to be the generation of emotion in the reader. This is true whether the reader understands what is happening to her or not.

And what have we learnt about the generation of emotion?

We know that, in order for us to 'get the joke' – if we are to feel amusement, and if we are to laugh – we have to be able to speak the right language; furthermore, we need to have the right frame of reference. To understand a joke which is told in English, we need to speak English. To understand a joke told in English about Holmes and Watson, we need to know who Holmes and Watson are.

If we are German, or Japanese, and if we are Nobel-prizewinning chemists, are we necessarily intellectually inferior because we don't speak English, and because we have never heard of Holmes and Watson? I don't think so. We may, in fact be extremely bright and well educated.

Those persons who do not 'get' the joke about Holmes and Watson – and I have no doubt that there are many millions of them – cannot be said in any meaningful way to be stupid, ignorant, or lacking in taste. They are simply people who do not speak the necessary language and who do not possess the necessary frame of reference in order to appreciate the joke.

Exactly the same can be said, of course, about the communication of emotion via *Ulysses*, *Sons and Lovers*, and any other book which is held by the so-called authorities to be a great novel.

### *A brief excursion for ammunition*

At this point we need to make a brief excursion into the fields of quantum mechanics and information theory. But

fear not. It's all quite simple really.

In 1927, Werner Heisenberg pointed out a particular limitation of science. Heisenberg realised that if you wanted to know the precise location of an electron, you had to make it visible, so to speak, by bombarding it with electromagnetic radiation.

Unfortunately, when you bombarded the electron in this way, you also shifted its position. Hence you could find out where it was after you had 'shone a light' on it, but you could never know where the elusive thing had been while it remained in darkness, so to speak. This circumstance is known as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

Please note that the observer who examines an electron does not give 'reality' to that entity; but the act of observing does change the system.

In itself, the uncertainty principle does not seem to be all that big a deal, at least to the layman; it doesn't seem to have much to do with the price of fish. But it turns out that the principle has some profound implications in philosophy and science.

For example, Karl Marx and his communist colleagues had argued that a number of political developments were absolutely certain to occur in capitalist societies. *Certain* to occur, please notice, without any mights and maybes. Armed revolution by the working classes, for instance, was historically inevitable, at least according to Marx; you couldn't do anything to prevent it even if you wanted to.

However, when armed with the uncertainty principle, a number of critics of communism, notably Karl Popper, were able to demonstrate that the Marxists' claims were fundamentally unsound. Marxism, it turned out, was no more scientific than any other set of preferences or ideas about how things might happen in the future.

Popper was also able to show that Freud's ideas on psychoanalysis were distinctly less scientific and 'certain' than some enthusiasts had claimed. For a long time, Freud's supporters had managed the neat dodge of labelling any sort of criticism of their theories as being motivated by neurosis; hence, they argued, criticism of Freud's theories merely constituted further proof of how right those theories had been all along. In the end, this argument was recognised as specious.

To summarise: the important thing to note, from a writer's point of view, is that, in quantum mechanics, the observer has an effect on reality.

Next we need to have a brief look at information theory.

Information can be described as 'the difference'. For example, there is a difference, to most observers, between (a) the sky and (b) the grass in a field below the sky. A scientist and a cow can both see this difference.

To the scientist, however, the grass might represent something to be taken to the laboratory and tested for chemical content. To the cow, the grass would probably represent food.

Same stuff, grass, but two observers and two interpretations of the same information. In other words, in modern information theory, the observer becomes part of the equation.

Quantum mechanics and information theory both demonstrate that in any assessment of reality, the observer has to be taken into consideration. This contrasts with the view of nineteenth century scientists, to whom the observer was irrelevant; reality was thought to exist independent of any subjective viewer. But in the twenty-first century we are obliged to accept that the observer's participation makes a difference.

### *Back to the Great Novels argument*

When we consider fiction, we find an exactly analogous position to that which exists in quantum mechanics and information theory.

A novel exists as a physical object, a book. But the emotion which a novel creates is not of a fixed quantity or quality. The emotion varies according to language spoken by, and the frame of reference possessed by, each individual reader. The case for there being any such thing as a great novel is therefore fundamentally unsound.

This is not a secret. We already know this. We have seen it demonstrated many times over. When we come across a book which we ourselves find entrancing, we often recommend it warmly to a close friend whose tastes, we know, largely coincide with ours. But even then the friend may remain unmoved and unimpressed; the magic doesn't always work.

And why doesn't the magic doesn't always work? Because of the way in which emotion is generated. We know that, in real life, the series of events for creating emotion is: stimulus; conscious or unconscious thought; physical response.

The same mechanism operates, or fails to operate, when we read fiction. A stimulus is provided by the printed word; this creates conscious or unconscious thoughts, and stirs up memories; and a physical response may or may not arise.

Each reader (observer) brings to this interaction of stimulus, thought, and physical response, her own set of experiences, memories, hopes and fears. The contribution from the reader may or may not interact with the stimulus

provided by the writer in the ways which the writer intended. The precise opposite of what was intended may occur. The intensely serious play by an intensely serious young man may play like a farce which has the audience folded up with laughter.

There is not, literally, a two-way exchange of traffic between the novel and the reader; the words on the printed page do not change. But there is certainly an interchange, and there is certainly two-way traffic, metaphorically speaking. The reader invests the book, temporarily, with her own biochemistry and receptivity, and the novel succeeds, or fails, accordingly.

It follows, therefore, that great novels do not exist as entities in their own right. A novel only has the power to generate emotion when a reader of the right kind comes across it. And this is true whether we are talking about D.H. Lawrence or Mills and Boon.

### **There is no hierarchy of fiction**

Most professors of English literature, and most of the highbrow literary critics of this world, would have you believe that there is, metaphorically speaking, a hierarchical tower of fiction. This tower is something like a block of flats. At the top, in the exclusive penthouse, is a small amount of 'literature', i.e. Great Novels. In the basement is a large heap of trash.

Now, I am not much impressed by some of the more extreme feminist arguments about dead white European males, but I do have to admit that all this hierarchy malarkey has a distinctly masculine feel to it. The idea is almost phallic. Furthermore, it is a theory which is for the most part advanced by men, and curiously enough it

embodies the belief that most of the good stuff, at the top of the tower, is written by men. The 'generalised rubbish' at the bottom of the fiction pile is often identified, when push comes to shove, as romantic fiction, or women's fiction.

The truth, however, is that there is not a top-to-bottom hierarchy of fiction, with great books at the glorious summit and 'trash' or 'pulp' at the unspeakably vulgar bottom. If we must think of the range of available fiction in visual terms, it is best to think of a broad spectrum of books, which runs horizontally. You might care to imagine a street in which every building is a bookshop containing a particular kind of fiction.

This range, or spectrum, of fiction consists of a variety of types of novels which are accessible at different points to different kinds of readers.

Not every book appeals to every reader, in the sense that each and every reader will inevitably feel its emotional impact. It has never been so, and it never can be so. A novels will only 'speak to', and generate emotion in, those readers who are capable of understanding its language, and who possess the relevant frame of reference.

Let me remind you of what Edgar Allan Poe said, in that paragraph which I quoted earlier in the chapter. He spoke of a short story being appreciated 'in the mind of him who contemplates it *with a kindred art.*' (Italics added.) 'With a kindred art' is Poe's way of saying that you need to speak the right language and possess the right frame of reference.

As we grow older, and learn more, our knowledge of 'languages' usually expands, as does our frame of reference. We do not usually read and enjoy the same novels at age seventy-five as at age fifteen. At different stages of our lives we may very well access the spectrum of fiction at different points.

We know instinctively what we want from fiction, just as an animal knows when it needs salt, or water, and we seek it out. We read reviews, we ask our friends for advice, we question librarians and booksellers. But the point is that we move sideways on the available menu, not upwards – or even, occasionally, downwards.

This visual image of the range of fiction is, I suspect, a softer and more feminine view than the one which is offered to us by males.

And do you want to know why men are so keen on the hierarchy idea? Because it permits those who hold power in this particular arena to impress the opposite sex.

You think I'm joking? Try attending a party given by one of the leading literary publishers and watch the young lions (male writers) being surrounded by gullible young women. Seems to work every time.

Then again, consider the vested interest of all those who teach the subject of English literature. They are all doing pretty nicely, thank you, preaching the 1947 party line, and they're not too keen on having any revisionists question it.

The facts are really very simple. A book either works in terms of producing the intended emotion in a target reader, or it does not.

For instance, a literary work by, say, Salman Rushdie either fascinates and enthralls and 'delivers' to those who normally enjoy contemporary literary fiction, or it does not. Similarly, a Mills & Boon hospital romance either works for regular hospital-romance readers, or it doesn't. If a particular novel does satisfy most readers in the target audience, it may be said to be successful. To insist on calling it a 'good' book or a 'great novel' really doesn't help much.

Personally I do not believe that a book can be said to be

good or bad in any absolute sense – it is only successful or unsuccessful in terms of its intended audience. And its intended audience, to repeat a point made earlier, is a group of people who speak a particular language, either literally or metaphorically; it is a group of people who share a set of interests and a common frame of reference.

Some books continue to produce the intended emotion in readers over a long period of time. There are still plenty of people who can read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with pleasure, even though it was written in 1813. On the other hand, Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* does not satisfy many readers today, despite the fact that it was a huge hit in the years immediately following its publication in 1886.

Books which continue to be enjoyed for long periods of time tend to become known as 'classics'. This is a convenient shorthand term, but again, you should not be misled into assuming that it implies some absolute quality.

Sherlock Holmes is often thought of as 'immortal', and James Bond is still going strong at about fifty years of age. But were their creators, Arthur Conan Doyle and Ian Fleming respectively, any better writers than, say, Edgar Wallace or Margery Allingham, neither of whom is much read today? I don't believe so.

Books which continue to work for a long period of time, say several decades, do so I suspect more by virtue of factors other than the inherent character of the books themselves. Not the least of these is adaptation into film and television series.

As for striving to achieve classic status yourself – forget it. Your first task, when writing a novel, is to make it work for your intended audience today. Let the future take care of itself.

## **I am not more sensitive than you, and I don't mind admitting it**

If there is no hierarchy of books, still less is there a hierarchy of sensitivity when it comes to appreciating and experiencing the emotions which are created by fiction. But there are certainly plenty of people around who think there is.

You would not have to go far, I suspect, in any university department of literature, to find a professor who argued that the genuinely enthusiastic admirer of *Ulysses* is in some sense a more sensitive person, in terms of her capacity to feel emotion, than is the reader of a confession magazine. But how can such a belief be justified? On what possible grounds can the argument be based?

Is there any evidence to show that the intensity of grief which is experienced on the death of a child varies according to culture, class, age, or education? Does the tribesman in the Amazon rain-forest mourn his dead child any less deeply than the Oxford don? Has anybody done any laboratory work on that? If so, it has escaped my notice.

Work has been done, however (and it was mentioned briefly above), which demonstrates that all human beings who are alive today come from a common stock. Given this circumstance, it is not surprising that Paul Ekman has been able to demonstrate that half a dozen basic emotions are the common experience of all humanity. (Others may well be common too, but that has not yet been demonstrated.)

When it comes to fiction, then, is the emotion which the aesthete feels when reading a 'recognised masterpiece' any more intense than the emotion experienced by the reader

of a confession magazine?

Take the Girton-educated aristocrat who reads Jane Austen. Is she somehow a more sensitive instrument, capable of registering a broader range or finer gradations of feeling, than is her cleaning-lady when she reads *Woman's Weekly*?

I wouldn't care to argue that myself. If you cut a magazine reader, does she not bleed?

I have, as it happens, seen some of the correspondence from such 'low-grade' readers; specifically, correspondence which was sent to the editorial offices of a confession magazine.

You and I, of course, being sophisticated and educated persons, we understand that confession-magazine stories are (virtually all) fiction, though they may be based on a sliver of truth. But the readers of such stories – considered by some to be semi-literate *Untermenschen* – take the material seriously. They write in to the magazines, in a pathetic barely joined-up scrawl, to pass on their thoughts on the morality and wisdom of the actions portrayed.

You and I may snigger at these illiterate ramblings. Well, you may, but I wouldn't, because they embody an intensity of feeling which I find quite humbling. And are you really going to stand up and tell me that the feelings experienced by these readers are somehow less powerful, less subtle, than those which I experience when reading *Ulysses*? If so, how are you going to demonstrate this?

Before you even try, perhaps you might care to remember that there was, in the mid-twentieth century, a group of people who did believe that certain classes and races of people were fundamentally inferior to the master race; so inferior, in fact, that the only sensible course of action was to eliminate them from the face of the earth. You may wish

to align yourself with that group. I don't.

My conclusion then is that there is no special virtue in speaking one particular language, and in possessing one particular frame of reference, as distinct from another. We may prefer to have, as our friends, people who share our own interests and tastes, but that's a different matter entirely.

### **What is a work of art?**

This is probably as good a place as any to give you a useful definition of a work of art.

The world is full of pompous prats. Sometimes, when you turn on the telly late at night, it's quite hard to work out what it is you're watching. Is it a genuine discussion group, peopled by distinguished academics and critics who are sounding off about 'art forms' and the like; or is it French and Saunders sending the whole thing up? It's sometimes hard to know.

Any one of these late-night TV pundits, whether genuine 'thinkers' or satirists, could give you a thirty-minute lecture on what constitutes a work of art, but I shan't detain you that long.

There exists in London a society called the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). Its full title is 'The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce.' This is a splendid organisation and I commend it to you; almost anyone of good standing can join.

One of the aims of the RSA, as its name suggests, is to encourage down-to-earth skills which have to do with business – skills which are involved in manufacturing and selling things. The Society gives prizes, for instance, to young designers who show signs of being able to create a

better mousetrap.

And this, I think, gives us a pointer to the most useful interpretation of the word 'arts'. In the RSA context, the word means 'skills'.

A work of art is therefore a work which has been created through the exercise of skill, rather than by accident. The most common use of the term is in relation to works which have been devised primarily to create emotion, as opposed to works which seek to carry out some function, such as catching mice.

You and I, for instance, can probably not draw a horse. (Well I can't, anyway.) But there are people around who can, and those people can sensibly be called artists; they are people who possess skills. A painting of a horse is made primarily to impress us with the beauty of the animal; i.e., to arouse emotion.

Artistic skills are normally based on some sort of natural aptitude, which is then developed through training. And one of the big problems about being a writer is, of course, that there is almost nowhere to go to get trained – but that's a subject for another book.

Applying this working definition of terms such as art, work of art, and artist, will enable you to sort out the nonsense from the worthwhile.

Some years ago, I heard the actor Zero Mostel tell a story about an 'artist' in New York. Mostel was genuinely interested in abstract art, and he made it his business to get to know any promising young painter. One day he went to see such a painter at work in his studio.

This particular individual belonged to the chuck-it-on-the-canvas-and-see-what-happens school. After the artist had done his thing for half an hour or so, he and Mostel sat down for a cup of coffee.

After a few minutes Mostel heard a pitter-patter sort of noise. He turned round to see what was causing it, and then he said, 'Why John – you've put so much paint on the canvas that it's dripping down on to the floor.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said the 'artist' airily. 'I mean it to do that.'

Yeah, yeah.

Whatever else you do, I implore you, do not fall into the trap of thinking that anything which you have written is automatically wonderful, just because you wrote it.

### **Down with expressionism**

Expressionism is the word used to describe a theory which is perhaps as old as the Greeks, but which in modern times derives from the writings of Tolstoy and Croce; it was then developed by writers such as E.F. Carritt (*Theories of Beauty*, 1914) and R.G. Collingwood (*The Principles of Art*, 1938).

The central doctrine of expressionism is that a work of art is an expression of the artist's emotion; this 'expression', in the form of a novel or painting or symphony, communicates the artist's emotion to the public (the observer or punter).

At the heart of the theory of expressionism is a belief in the overwhelming importance of 'genuineness' in the emotion expressed. Superficial emotions (whatever they are), or mere frivolous entertainment, are frowned upon.

An artist might have, in life, a series of horrible experiences which generated numerous negative emotions – terror, despair, and anguish, perhaps. These experiences might leave the artist severely depressed, and even psychologically damaged beyond repair. It would then be

considered perfectly in order, in terms of expressionist theory, for the artist to seek to recreate these horrible experiences, and to generate the deeply unpleasant and disturbing emotions, in the reader of a novel or the audience for a play. Not only would a work which did that be considered good art, by the expressionist believer, but it would also be considered the only kind of work which is worthy of being called art at all. Everything else is mere hackwork.

Expressionism, in short, is considered by its advocates to be a pretty good thing. More than that, any work of art which fails to conform with the tenets of expressionism is considered to be a bad thing.

I have some comments.

My first comment is that we must distinguish between a kind of writing which is therapy for a writer, and writing which is designed to do something valuable and helpful for the reader. Expressionism seems to me to be mainly the former. (And I note, in passing, that reliving unpleasant experiences very often slows down, or prevents, the very natural and desirable process of allowing the disturbing memories to fade away as quickly as possible.)

Second, expressionism seems to imply that, if a work of art is to be satisfactory and admirable, it must inevitably seek to convey to the observer the same emotion as that which the artist herself experiences. It also seems to be implied in expressionism that the artist can only create good art if she is experiencing a 'genuine' emotion while she is actually at work.

I disagree with both of these ideas. I think it is perfectly possible to create a work of art which generates, in the observer, an emotion quite different from that which is being, or has been, experienced by the artist.

There is a story from the early part of the nineteenth-century which illustrates this point. At that time there was a well-known music-hall performer called Grimaldi. He is often described as a clown, but in our terms 'comic entertainer' might be a better description. He did acrobatics and tumbles, and was famous for his comic songs.

The story goes that one day a middle-aged man went to see his doctor. He looked exhausted, thoroughly run down, and was clearly at the end of his physical tether. He complained of all the usual stress-related symptoms: couldn't sleep, had indigestion, felt depressed....

The doctor examined him and then said: 'You know, there's nothing fundamentally wrong with you, old chap. You've just let things get a bit on top of you. What you need to do is relax more. I tell you what – why don't you go and see this man Grimaldi at the Empire Theatre? He's terrific fun. When people come out of that theatre you can see from their faces that they're feeling so much better than when they went in. That Grimaldi fellow is a tonic in himself.'

'Ah yes,' said the patient with a sad smile. 'But you see, I *am* Grimaldi.'

In fact, poor Grimaldi paid a high price for making other people laugh. He retired at the age of forty-five, worn out and almost crippled from the strain of his highly physical performances.

Actors, of course, and notably those trained in the method school of acting, are notoriously keen on the idea that it is important for the actor to feel genuine emotion as he works. However, experienced directors take a different view of the matter. Ingrid Bergman related, at a tribute to Alfred Hitchcock, how she had once been discussing a scene with him. Hitchcock told her what he wanted, but

Ingrid hesitated; she told him that she wasn't sure that she could deliver that particular emotion.

Hitchcock gave her a beady look and said firmly: 'Ingrid – just fake it.'

Third comment. Expressionism can be interpreted, and often is, as implying that the very fact that the artist herself has experienced a particular emotion makes it, in some unspecified way, emotion of a more important and valuable kind than that experienced by mere mortals.

This is another version of the idea which I have attempted to demolish earlier in the chapter, namely the idea that there is a hierarchy of sensitivity. All too often, the expressionists would have us believe that the artist is some sort of special being, more worthy of our admiration, sympathy and respect than is the old woman across the road. And this idea is, of course, warmly embraced by those who consider themselves to be 'artists' and therefore somebody special.

I now ask again, as I did earlier, to be shown the evidence to support this contention. Why is your (the artist's) emotion any more important than mine? Even if I am a street-sweeper and you are a Booker prizewinner, I submit that we both feel the same emotions. If you believe otherwise, kindly show me the evidence.

Next comment, which is really an expansion of the previous one. The doctrine of expressionism can all too easily be perverted into a chant of 'me-me-me, aren't I wonderful?' by the infantile and the self-centred – of whom there are great numbers in the writing community. (Actors are the only group I know of who are quicker than writers at converting any given state of affairs into a service of worship which centres upon themselves.)

But we do not admire selfish and self-centred individu-

als in the world at large. At best they are merely tiresome; at worst they are psychopaths and criminals. So why should we admire such people in the arts?

An artist is a creature driven by demons, said William Faulkner. And many an immature mind has replied, Yes, and I am a creature driven by demons, and therefore I am an artist; and therefore I must be taken seriously and judged at my own evaluation; here endeth the lesson.

In Chapter 2 and in this present chapter I have pointed out that a cry commonly heard among those writers who consider themselves acutely sensitive, incredibly talented, and wholly unappreciated, is: I want to express myself!

What they usually mean by this is something along the following lines: I am a natural-born genius (because I say so). It is the duty of all right-thinking publishers to accept, immediately and without question, anything that I condescend to permit them to publish. All discerning critics will heap unstinting praise upon my head. Suitably fawning sycophants may be allowed to present me with the enormous cheques which are undoubtedly my due, on Thursdays at four p.m., provided they don't take too long about it.

Oh, and in the case of men: Presentable young ladies with bust measurements in excess of 34 DD should form an orderly queue outside my bedroom door from nine p.m. onwards.

Those who suffer from this kind of delusion seize upon expressionism to 'justify' their foolishness. For that reason alone, the theory is to be discouraged.

It is a remarkable fact that many of the consumers of all art forms have been successfully brainwashed by selfish and self-centred writers, actors, and other artists, over a long a period of time. Many members of the public are so

bemused by the expressionist propaganda that they can be bullied into buying, and even admiring – albeit grudgingly – works of art which actually bore them stiff.

Deeply embedded into our puritanical, prudish little minds is the idea that there is something wrong with us if we do not appreciate a particular work which has been praised by ‘good judges’. And, conversely, we feel almost ashamed of ourselves if we happen to find something funny and moving when it is clearly popular and vulgar.

Professional critics and opinion-formers have largely encouraged the writers, musicians, and artists of all kinds to indulge their selfish and childish natures at our expense. As if they needed any encouragement!

In the 1950s, in the tiny, inbred world of jazz, there was no greater insult than to say of a musician that he had ‘gone commercial’. Going commercial meant playing music which was specifically designed to entertain the general public, as opposed to playing music which expressed the torment of the performer’s soul – music which was appreciated, after a fashion, only by a minute clique. The sin of ‘going commercial’ was, in my view, entirely illusory.

I would like to encourage you, in your role as a consumer of art, to have a little more confidence in your own powers of appreciation, and to care a little less about the judgement of experts. And I speak as someone whose all-time favourite television programme is *Nearest and Dearest*, starring Hylda Baker and Jimmy Jewel.

I hope I have also persuaded you that a mature writer, with a properly modest view of her own importance in the scale of things, should concentrate upon the emotions and feelings of her readers, rather than spend her time fiddling about with her own obsessions.

The writer’s personal emotions are, of course, a data

bank upon which she can draw. But it is not a guarantee of quality to be told that the writer, when working on her latest opus, wept tears so copious that the keyboard blew a fuse. Neither are we certain to laugh at something which the writer, herself, found so hilarious that she nearly fell off her chair.

Edith Wharton – once a famous writer but now largely forgotten – tells us in her book *The Writing of Fiction* that as she worked she constantly tried to bear in mind that her characters must be ‘living’ to her readers but not to herself. Precisely. Uzzell, in quoting this passage, adds that, unless a writer can remember this advice, ‘he will be the slave of his characters and not their master.’ In other words, if the writer is to be in control, then the preconceived emotional effect is what must determine the nature of the characters and the events which befall them.

Earlier chapters have made the point (almost ad nauseam) that a writer is most unlikely to make any serious money, and that those who seek literary reputation or fame are chasing worthless illusions. Given that state of affairs, all that remains as a benefit of writing is the satisfaction of doing the job well.

For that reason, many writers will choose to use material which is personal, which derives from their own experience, and which seeks to create in the reader the same sort of emotion as that experienced in life by the writer. That is one thing. But to go further, and to argue that expressionism of that kind is the only worthwhile and morally acceptable form of art, is quite another.

Which brings us, rather neatly, to the question of the morality of the novel, and, for that matter, of art generally.

## The morality of the novel

To young readers, the morality of the novel may seem an odd topic. For a start, one seldom sees, these days, any sort of discussion of morality in the arts; it seems to be *far* too tricky a subject. This is probably the result of moral/value relativism – or some such. I seem to have heard something about this topic once or twice – younger chaps talking in a far corner of the common room, don't you know.

In any event, anyone who brings up the topic of the morality of fiction is likely to be considered a suitable target for derision or hostility; so, naturally, most people avoid it. Not, I hasten to say, that I am in any hurry to start such a discussion myself. But there are a few points which might usefully be placed on record.

To begin with, a little historical perspective will not be out of place.

In the nineteenth century, novels, like actresses, were often assumed to be wicked by definition. The poet Swinburne once gave a novel to a friend of his, Lady Trevelyan. And – Lord preserve us! – this book was not only a piece of fiction but it was a *French* novel at that!

When the lady's husband heard about this gift, he ran to the drawing room, picked up the offensive object with a pair of fire-tongs, and deposited it on the blazing coals.

Quite right too. Filthy chaps, those Frogs. You only have to think of French kissing, French letters, and so forth, to understand that the bounders are up to no good. I understand they eat snails as well.

A deep-seated belief that fiction was likely to deprave and corrupt, particularly in respect of sexual morals, persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century.

In the 1950s, English magistrates competed with each

other for the title of twit of the year: works such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (written in the fourteenth century and famous ever since) were seized as obscene and destroyed. Even quite respectable publishers lived in genuine fear of going to prison.

The situation was perhaps worse in the United States. Younger readers of this book may be unaware that, fifty years ago, novels which now seem utterly harmless were then condemned as virulently dangerous: *Peyton Place*, for instance, caused an uproar when it first appeared in 1956. It was then labelled as sordid and cheap. In the year 2002, this unspeakable novel was dramatised on *Woman's Hour*.

Until 1960, the so-called four-letter words were not permitted to appear in print in England, and descriptions of sexual activity had to be shrouded in obscurity. In the cinema, no young Englishman so much as glimpsed a female nipple until... when? The late 1950s at least.

Eventually, however, attitudes changed. And I suppose it could be said that they changed quite quickly. For example, the city of Boston, in the USA, was at one time notoriously prudish. In the 1950s and '60s, the proud boast 'Banned in Boston' was one which could be guaranteed to add to the sales of any book. But, by 1986, when I visited Boston, all had changed. There was one city block, known as the Combat Zone, on which were located a whole parade of hard-core porno bookshops, blue-movie houses, and strip clubs. All were extremely explicit. (Or so I was told. I never went in them myself, you understand. Well, only the once. And that was just for research. And I certainly didn't enjoy it.)

If I have couched this discussion of morality in terms of sexual content, that is for the sake of simplicity. The point I am trying to make is that, in the quite recent past, novels

(and many other forms of art or entertainment) were regarded with deep suspicion by the political, social and religious leaders of society.

Today, by comparison, almost anything goes. The broadsheet newspapers still tend to print f\*\*\* and s\*\*\*, despite the fact that the uncensored versions of these words are now in the dictionary; and the tabloids have so far not ventured to show us any pubic hair. But no novelist any longer feels constrained by the law, or fears the wrath of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Such constraints as exist are imposed by publishers, who believe, rightly or wrongly, that they know what their customers will tolerate at any given time.

This being the case, why mention morality at all? Particularly when this is a chapter about emotion.

Well, I mention it *because* this is a chapter about emotion. If I am right in arguing that the novel (which, for the purposes of this discussion, may be regarded as a surrogate for all art forms) is best regarded as a machine for generating emotion, then we writers need to consider the morality of that process, if only for our own peace of mind.

The question is, can a writer feel assured that the process of creating positive emotions in readers is a moral one?

Sooner or later, even the least sensitive of us is going to wonder whether to include a particular scene or not. Is this scene going to do our chosen audience any harm? Is it going to do any good? Either way, is it something we would care to have our name associated with?

The subject could, I dare say, make a book in itself, but it may save a great deal of time if I admit, without equivocation, that the novel is, in principle, capable of doing

harm. So is a bottle of aspirin, if you take the contents all at once.

On the other hand, a bottle of aspirin is capable of doing good. Given a sensible attitude on the part of the aspirin user, the drug's potential for good far outweighs the harm, and life would get awfully complicated if we were to ban everything that is capable of being misused. Cars and carving-knives can be used to kill people, but I don't think we are likely to forbid any one to possess them as a result.

The risk of the novel, or any other art form, doing any serious harm to adults seems to me to be minimal. Children, of course, will require guidance in their access to the arts, just as no child should sensibly be allowed to drink a bottle of whisky.

To my mind, an involvement in writing fiction is consequently not something that you need to be ashamed of. Quite the reverse: knowing what we do about the effects of emotion, I suggest that writing fiction can be viewed, in a modest way, as the equivalent of practising medicine. Alternative medicine, perhaps, rather than full-scale surgery. Fiction helps people to feel better emotionally; and, given the interaction of mind and body, it may therefore help them to feel better physically.

If writers can be regarded as potential healers, and I believe they can, then it follows, in my thinking at least, that creating a novel is not only a moral activity but also – dammit – an honourable one.

## **Summary**

This chapter has dealt with the role of emotion in writing – and, by extension, with the role of emotion in art generally.

Art, you will recall, I define as any activity which

involves skill and which consciously and deliberately directs that skill towards generating emotion in the observer.

We have discovered that emotion is an area of enquiry which has been grossly neglected by science. This neglect arises from the fact that emotion is hard to investigate, yields little by way of results, and therefore offers scant hope of career advancement. Ha! And you thought scientists were objective, clear-thinking chaps who followed a trail wherever it led, regardless of such mundane issues as career grades and salaries. Well, now you know better.

In the absence of much serious input from the men in white coats, I have provided you with a working theory of how emotion is generated in general; this theory can be applied to writing the novel, or to pretty much any other form of writing.

Emotions can usefully be thought of as falling into two groups, positive and negative, and I have provided you with a taxonomy – sorry, list – of these which you can use as a starting point for your own thinking.

And you are going to do some thinking of your own, aren't you? Jolly good.

I have suggested that there are a number of conclusions which follow logically from the idea that the main purpose of the novel – or any work of art – is to generate emotion.

One conclusion is that there are no great novels, in the sense that the term is generally understood. Though there is, of course, a whole industry – nay, several industries, of which higher education and publishing are the chief – dedicated to the maintenance of the belief in great novels.

If there are no great novels, there is no hierarchy of fiction, with the good stuff at the top and the trash at the

bottom. Indeed, only the briefest of considerations will demonstrate that the trash is every bit as effective in generating emotion as the so-called good stuff. Usually, in fact, a lot better.

Forget the idea that some chaps – and, yes, ladies too – are more sensitive than other chaps. We just have different frames of reference, that's all. Different memory banks, different emotions, different collections of molecules stored in our receptors.

There is no particular virtue, we have decided, in the artist seeking to express only those 'genuine' and somehow 'real' emotions which she herself has experienced. And there is certainly no mileage in the idea that the artist must feel that emotion at the time of creating the work of art.

On the contrary, there are good reasons for supposing that the most effective works of art are created by those with a clear mind, uncluttered at the time of creation by what is often self-deluding emotion.

The idea that I, the Great Artist, am somehow a natural genius whose every spit and cough is of priceless value, is childish, selfish, ludicrous nonsense.

And, finally, I have suggested that those who dabble in the arts – provided they do it in a responsible and mature manner, as described – should hold their heads high and be proud of what they do.

## CHAPTER 6

### How to find the energy for writing

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THIS CHAPTER AND the next are really one, but for convenience I have divided the material into two parts. The overall topic is: how to find the time and energy to write. I begin by dealing with the second half of that question, how to find enough energy, because if you have an abundance of energy then the problem of finding the time to achieve your writing ambitions is halfway solved.

If you have ever tried to write a book, or a screenplay, or even a short story, you will have discovered that it's a time-consuming and tiring process. Almost invariably, the work has to be fitted in after a long day at the office, or a day spent looking after young children. And the problem is, of course, that by the time you're free to do some writing, you really don't feel like it.

The advice in this chapter, for what it's worth, is based on my personal experience of trying to write while pursuing a busy professional life in education and also helping, occasionally, to bring up two children.

I have now retired from my principal career, and I am free to write pretty much whenever I wish. But while I was still working for an employer I kept detailed records of the hours spent on writing; these records covered a period of some twenty years, and on average I managed to log up just over four hours a week.

Perhaps that doesn't sound very much, but the simple

fact is if that you can put in that sort of time commitment as a writer, year in and year out, you can produce a surprising amount of work.

In my own case, my output over the last twenty years in which I was still an employee included six novels, one academic book, five stage plays, three television scripts, and a host of minor projects. The books were all published, the work for TV was filmed and broadcast, and a couple of the stage plays were also produced.

Please note that I am not putting forward this record as an example of superhuman achievement. I am simply making the point that if you *can* find the energy, and fairly modest amounts of time, you can produce a significant body of work.

Most of my novels have taken me between 150 and 300 hours to write, although at least one took me 650; a stage play usually takes between 60 and 100 hours. So, on average, if you do four hours a week, you can complete a novel in a year or so, or a screenplay in a few months.

One point which I want to emphasise is that I definitely do not consider myself to be what the Americans call 'a high-energy guy'. Rather the reverse. I have always been relatively low in energy compared with my peers. Between the ages of 18 and 57 I never took any voluntary physical exercise, and I never liked either getting up early or going to bed late.

There was one thing I did do, however, once I realised that finding time to write was a problem; I made the effort to carry out a regular review of my personal goals in life. (I shall say more about how to review your goals in the next chapter.)

Once I had got my goals sorted out, I realised that I very much *wanted* to find both time and energy to do some

writing, on top of all my other commitments. I also realised that, if I was going to achieve that goal, I had to develop some working practices which would enable me to find the time and energy. This chapter, and the next, tell you how I went about it.

### **Do you sometimes feel too tired to write?**

Presumably, since you have bothered to start reading this chapter, you are not the sort of person who can manage on four hours of sleep a night, and who feels full of energy throughout the whole of the remaining twenty hours. It's much more likely that you're one of those people who suffer from fatigue, at least occasionally if not all the time.

Those who suffer from more or less persistent fatigue tend to wake up feeling tired; they travel some distance to work; put in a long day, often feeling less than enthusiastic about what they're doing; they make the tedious journey home; they cook themselves some sort of a meal (or have it made for them); and they then proceed to slump in front of the TV. Thoughts of doing any writing are put off until tomorrow. Or the weekend. Or even later.

If you are in that position, take comfort from the fact that I too was in the same predicament, nearly thirty years ago. In my case the situation was complicated by the fact that I had two young children who very naturally wanted to see something of me, and I of them.

After a year or two of that pattern of living, I decided that it was not sensible or reasonable that I should go through life feeling tired all the time; nor was it good for me to feel continually frustrated by not being able to do any writing. I decided to see what could be done to change this situation.

## **How to stop feeling tired**

The first thing I did was review my diet.

It seemed to me (and I'm sure I was right) that the fact that I often felt fatigued had something to do with what I was eating – or not eating. But what was the problem? And what was the answer?

I made a trip to the public library and looked up some books on diet, of which there are of course many thousands. And there I had a stroke of luck, because I came across a book by Adelle Davis. Its title was *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit*, which shows that it was aimed at the general reader rather than at academics; it was first published in 1971. Adelle Davis died in 1974, aged 70, but some of her books are still in print.

You need to be aware that much new research has been done in the last thirty years, and some of what Adelle Davis has to say must therefore be out of date. You should also know that Ms Davis had her critics even when her books were first published. Sometimes, when you read what she says about the need for certain vitamins, you wonder how you have managed to stay alive as long as you have. However, I think Ms Davis had absolutely the right idea about a number of basic principles of nutrition, and it is these which I intend to pass on to you.

In fairness, I must also mention that there are other approaches to diet which recommend quite different practices from those favoured by Ms Davis. My father, for instance, was interested in the Hay diet – which was invented by a Dr Hay and doesn't involve eating the stuff. However, since I myself have used Ms Davis's methods, over many years, and found them satisfactory, those are the ones that I am going to recommend to you.

### *Fuelling the engine*

Let's pretend, for a moment, that your body is a motor car.

If, first thing in the morning, you put into the tank a pint of petrol diluted 50/50 with water, you might just about get the car started, and it might just about get you to work; though it would no doubt splutter and cough a good deal on the way.

Then, during the morning and afternoon, let's say that you top up the tank now and then with a few further cupfuls of the weak petrol mixture, and you manage to get the vehicle to lurch its way through to the end of the day.

Finally, when you get home in the evening, and when the tank is virtually empty, you put in some really high-octane fuel. And then you put the car away in the garage, allowing the good stuff to evaporate overnight. In the morning you start the cycle again.

This doesn't sound like a very smart way to proceed, does it? And yet this is, in effect, what millions of people are doing with their bodies, every working day.

If you ask around, you will find that there are quite a number of people whose daily intake of food looks something like this:

Breakfast: cup of coffee

Mid-morning: coffee and a Danish (because they're hungry by this time)

Lunch: sandwich and a can of Coke

Mid-afternoon: Soft drink and a bar of chocolate (still hungry)

Dinner: perhaps an alcoholic drink or two, and a large two-course or three-course meal

Followed by: collapse in front of the TV

Trying to live a busy and active life, in today's hectic world, on an intake of food on this pattern is ridiculous – at least in my opinion. When you're young, you may be able to get away with eating in this style without becoming too exhausted. But as you get into your thirties and forties you are likely to find that you simply can't live this way without feeling fatigued – usually most of the time.

Food is fuel, and without the right food, at the right time, you are going to run out of steam. And if you're fatigued all the time, or even just at the end of the day, it takes much of the pleasure out of life. It also stops you doing any writing, which is what this chapter is about.

In her book, Adelle Davis makes the point that it is neither necessary nor desirable to put up with fatigue. She claims that you can cure fatigue in one day if you do the right things; and it is certainly true that if you make a number of relatively small changes in what you eat, and when you eat, you can markedly increase your energy level.

To summarise, Adelle Davis's advice is:

Breakfast like a king

Lunch like a prince

Dine like a pauper

If we follow this advice, we need to begin by looking at what we have for breakfast.

## **What to do about breakfast**

### *Theory*

What follows is inevitably a simplified version of a complicated physiological process, as described by Adelle Davis, but let me try to summarise.

Your level of energy depends on the amount of sugar in

your blood. The standard measurement for the blood-sugar level is expressed as the number of milligrams of sugar in 100 cc of blood.

At a blood-sugar level of 90 or 95, energy is well produced.

If your blood-sugar level drops to 70, you will feel tired and hungry. Lower still, and you will feel exhausted. If the level falls further, headaches, wobbliness, and palpitations of the heart will occur.

As the blood-sugar falls, you become progressively more irritable, moody, and depressed. Your efficiency at driving a car, for instance, falls off alarmingly. You are a case of road-rage going somewhere to happen.

Conversely, if your food intake is adjusted so that your blood-sugar level rises, and stays elevated, energy is easily produced. You will have a sense of well-being. Your thinking is quick and clear. You are cheerful and cooperative.

Please note the emphasis here on how you *feel*, which affects how you *behave*. Most modern books on diet concentrate on losing weight, but the real point about food is not that it influences your waistline but that it affects your mood and your general equilibrium.

I think you will easily be able to decide, from reading the paragraphs above, that it is better to have a high blood-sugar level than a low one. The question therefore resolves itself into how we ensure that our blood-sugar level is kept at its optimum.

Ms Davis maintains that well-being and efficiency in the hours after meals are mainly determined by the amount of protein eaten. The meals which are most effective are those which combine a small amount of sugar, which is the source of energy, with a substantial amount of protein and

some fat; the latter two slow the digestion and allow the sugar to trickle into the blood over a lengthy period.

Incidentally, the word 'sugar' in this context does not mean the white powdery stuff that you put in your coffee. It means the sugars which are found in food.

Yes, of course you can give your blood-sugar level a quick boost by eating something sweet, such as a Mars bar; the reading might zoom up to 155 or more, very quickly, but it will then dive down soon afterwards. If you take too much sugar without the protein and fat you will, sadly, overload the system and end up feeling fatigued once again.

The answer to the problem of how to feel well and to have a consistently high level of energy therefore lies in beginning the day by eating the right sort of breakfast.

And already I can hear people saying, 'Oh, I couldn't possibly eat a big meal (or anything) at breakfast-time – my stomach just won't take it.' The first point to note, therefore, is that in order to breakfast like a king, you don't have to eat a big meal. What you do need to do is make sure that you have at least 20 grams of protein. Double that would be better.

### *Practice*

A breakfast with 20 grams of protein can comfortably be achieved by having, for instance, a bowl of cereal, a boiled egg, perhaps a slice of toast, and a glass of what Adelle Davis called fortified milk, or 'pepup'. I will give you the recipe for pepup later.

The main value of the bowl of cereal lies, of course, in the milk. The protein content of milk is about 1 gram per fluid ounce. So, if you have half a pint of milk, you are

getting about 8 or 10 grams of protein.

The food value of most packaged cereals, such as cornflakes, is modest. Some years ago the BBC did a feature on packaged cereals. They found that in most cases the food content of the packet was greater than that of the heavily advertised contents; the only snag is that you can't easily digest cardboard.

Since the food value of most breakfast cereals is minimal, you can, if you wish, skip the cornflakes (or whatever) and just have a glass of milk. But if you like cereal, and I do, the best one to eat is also the cheapest: porridge.

A boiled egg gives you about 6 grams of protein. A slice of bread, about 2 grams.

What the above paragraphs demonstrate is that you can, very easily, arrange to have a breakfast which provides you with that basic minimum of 20 grams of protein.

If you can face a cooked breakfast, you are well on the way to solving all your problems. Adelle Davis describes how, when she was a youngster in Idaho, they used to eat breakfasts made up of steaks, ham and eggs, sausages, and fried chicken (though presumably not all of these were eaten at one sitting). A large pitcher of milk was always on the table.

I recently read the autobiography of an SAS man. As you probably know, the selection procedure for the SAS involves a series of fearsome physical tests, such as making your way thirty miles across country, in a limited time, with an 80 lb pack on your back.

The SAS man prepared for his cross-country trek with an absolutely *monstrous* breakfast. He packed as much bacon and eggs and sausage and fried bread into himself as he possibly could. Even then he almost failed the test

and had to be helped to the finish by a friend.

Adelle Davis says, 'I have yet to meet a red-blooded man who did not enjoy a high-protein breakfast.' Well, I have met quite a few men who couldn't face fried eggs, not to mention anything more substantial. And if you are one of those who go queasy at the mere thought of eating anything cooked, first thing in the morning, then you should definitely consider drinking fortified milk or pepup.

### *The recipe for pepup*

Let's deal with fortified milk first, because it's very simple.

Fortified milk is made by taking a pint of whole milk (i.e. not the skimmed variety) and adding to it 2 or 3 tablespoons of dried milk. These two ingredients are then combined by putting them into a food mixer (what I call a whizzer) and giving it a quick blast.

Pepup requires more effort to make. It is a milk-based drink which Adelle Davis designed to contain as many of the essential nutrients as possible. In particular, she tried to create a drink which you can consume at breakfast-time, digest very easily, and in so doing top up your protein intake quite significantly.

The recipe for a pint of pepup is set out below. Making this drink is not an exact science and you can vary the contents to suit yourself, but the basic ingredients are as follows:

- 1 pint of milk
- 1 tablespoon of safflower oil or some similar oil
- 2 heaped tablespoons of dried milk
- 2 heaped tablespoons of dried brewer's yeast powder  
(or less until you get used to it)

1 or 2 teaspoons of granular lecithin

Optional extras include: a raw egg; about a quarter teaspoon of magnesium oxide; some frozen orange juice, or perhaps a teaspoon of vitamin C powder; chunks of fruit such as banana or pineapple; wheat germ; and yogurt.

If you are going to drink pepup regularly, you really ought to try to get hold of a copy of Ms Davis's book, *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit*, and read for yourself what she has to say about it. It's a useful book because it contains a table which lists the nutrients in all the foods you are ever likely to eat.

Most of the ingredients of pepup are readily available, but the brewer's yeast and the lecithin you will have to get from a health-food shop. Lecithin, in particular, is not cheap.

When you have assembled your ingredients you again put the whole lot into a food mixer and make sure they are well combined. Then you put the mixture into a jug, keep it in the fridge, and drink about a glass a day, at breakfast. The way I make it, a pint of milk plus the extras provides me with a glass of pepup for three days. It won't keep longer than that anyway, because the milk goes off.

It has to be said that some people think that pepup tastes absolutely revolting. My wife and daughter won't touch it. My son and I, on the other hand, think it tastes perfectly acceptable.

In any event, the point is not whether it tastes wonderful – the point is what it does for you. And what it does for you is quite simple, and very valuable: it enhances your energy level without requiring you to spend a long time eating, and without having to persuade your stomach to take solid food

at a time when it isn't very interested.

Although pepup was designed as a breakfast drink, you can in fact drink it at any time during the day; and if you are ill, or under unusual strain, you might be well advised to do so.

Finally, a comment for those who think that it all sounds like too much trouble. You just can't be bothered with buying all those special ingredients, remembering to mix them up every three days, and so on.

That's understandable. In which case, just make sure to eat some protein at breakfast and drink plenty of plain milk or fortified milk. Personally, however, I have been drinking my own version of pepup for over 25 years, and I don't intend to stop, because for me it is useful.

## **The effect of eating the right and wrong breakfasts**

We have seen that you determine how you feel throughout each day by the type of breakfast that you eat. If you have the right breakfast, you can continue to feel well and have energy to spare for the rest of the day. If you have no breakfast, watch out.

In her book, Adelle Davis reports the results of several research studies, as well as her own experiences, which illustrate these points.

Typically, a person who has a cup of black coffee for breakfast, and nothing else, will soon suffer a drop in blood-sugar, accompanied by lassitude, irritability, hunger, fatigue, and headaches.

A high-fat breakfast, consisting of a packaged cereal with whipping cream, is also ineffective.

A breakfast of two doughnuts with coffee, sugar and

cream (a high-carbohydrate breakfast) will result in a rapid rise in the blood-sugar level, but within an hour the level will fall back below normal, with all the usual unpleasant and undesirable effects.

A similarly rapid rise and steep fall in blood sugar were experienced by those who had orange juice, bacon, toast, jam, and coffee with sugar and cream. However, when those who had this type of breakfast *also* drank a pint of fortified milk, the blood-sugar level rose to 120 and stayed there throughout the morning, allowing those who had eaten it to feel fit and well and to function effectively.

If you can take in 55 grams of protein you can expect your blood-sugar level to remain high for six hours.

To show what happens in extreme cases if you don't 'eat right', Adelle Davis tells of four men who came to see her because they were convinced that they had heart problems. In all cases their 'heart attacks' had occurred at the end of days when they undertaken quite heavy physical activity without eating any food. One man had been climbing a mountain.

Another patient of Ms Davis was a lady who 'hated breakfast'. When she became hungry her habit was to buy a pound of chocolates and eat them all at once. This resulted, several times, in her blacking out in the street. Adelle Davis tells us that this woman wondered what was wrong with her; the answer, I'm afraid, is that she was a complete idiot.

### **What to eat later in the day**

'Lunch like a prince' is Ms Davis's advice. What this means is that you should, if possible, eat your main meal in the middle of the day. For most people this means meat (or

fish) and two vegetables, followed by a dessert.

Of course it's not always convenient to take your main meal at midday, but it's surprising what you can arrange once you understand how important it is, and once you have experienced the benefits.

As with breakfast, this midday meal does not have to be a large one – it just has to be a meal of the right kind. Why eat an enormous amount at one sitting? You will probably feel sleepy afterwards, and it is far better to eat smaller amounts but more often.

In the middle of the morning, and the middle of the afternoon, Ms Davis not only allows you but even encourages you to take a snack. But you have to choose the right things. It's a complete waste of time to eat, say, a Mars bar or some other brand of chocolate accompanied by a can of Coke. That will do nothing useful. But if you have a glass of milk and a banana, or some other type of fresh fruit, you are doing yourself nothing but good.

If you follow this pattern, you will find that by the time it comes to thinking about dinner in the evening you really don't need anything massive. My wife and I often have sardines on toast, followed by a piece of cake, or some more fruit.

## **Sources of protein for energy**

Now that you understand the pattern of eating to aim at, it will be helpful to get to know all the major sources of protein.

The best sources of protein are as follows: meat of all kinds (liver and kidneys are particularly good); fish; poultry; eggs; milk; yogurt; cheese; brewer's yeast; and wheat germ. Most of these contain lots of B vitamins,

which are excellent for combating fatigue.

If you are feeling stressed, you should eat liver and yogurt.

In short, if your body is basically healthy, there really isn't any reason why you should suffer from fatigue if you organise your eating to deal with the problem.

### **Other suggestions about eating for energy**

One of the problems about food is that the 'experts' are continually contradicting themselves. One week you read that butter is lethal, the next you read that you can't survive without it. While writing this chapter, for instance, I read a scare article in the press telling me what horrors can result from drinking milk (various allergies, apparently).

Nevertheless, despite the obvious confusions, there are a few tips which I think are fairly sound and which I can pass on to you.

Avoid processed foods. If you can choose, have unrefined food rather than refined.

Prefer fresh to frozen.

Eat wholemeal bread.

Avoid soft drinks, white rice, and packaged cereals. The point is not that these things are poisonous, but that they blunt your appetite for the good stuff.

Personally, I think it's a good idea to cut down on the use of white sugar. Candace Pert says that relying on sugar to give us a quick pick-me-up is analogous to, if not as dangerous as, shooting heroin. If you take sugar in your coffee and tea, try going without it. After a week you won't miss it, and after two weeks you will find that the sweetened versions of these drinks taste revolting.

In my time I have lived as a bachelor and made extensive use of ready-made meals which you just heat up in the oven. But they're never very interesting to eat, and you really don't save much time. Simple cooking of plain products is not nearly as difficult or time-consuming as you might think, and to me at least the result tastes far better.

If you do decide to review your diet in order to improve your energy level, one recent book which you will find particularly useful is *The Glucose Revolution* by Jennie Brand Miller (ISBN 034077021X). There is a follow-up volume called *The Glucose Revolution – GI Plus*; the authors are Jennie Brand Miller and Kaye Foster-Powell (ISBN 0340769920).

These two books will tell you quite a lot about recent research into our food intake. More specifically, they provide important facts about the glycaemic index of various foods.

The glycaemic index is a guide to how fast the carbohydrates in foods are absorbed into the body. As Adelle Davis demonstrated, what you need is food which is absorbed slowly; this releases energy gradually during the course of the day. The authors of the above books can show you which foods are good at this and which are not.

More importantly, perhaps, foods which have a low GI index also turn out to have other health benefits: they reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and certain cancers, and they help in the management of diabetes.

Now, having dealt with food, let's deal with water.

### **Improving your energy level with water**

It may seem odd for me to suggest that you can improve your energy level, and your general sense of well-being,

through drinking water – but I assure you that you can.

About three years ago my average daily intake of fluids looked something like this:

Tea: 4 or 5 large cups

Coffee: 5 or 6 large cups

Alcohol: 1 beer or a double Scotch

Occasional glasses of fruit juice and milk

If I had water at all – perhaps at lunch or on a hot day when I was working in the garden – I would flavour it with a fruit squash or cordial of some kind.

And what, I hear you ask, is so very terrible about all that? Everyone drinks coffee and tea.

Indeed they do, but the snag is that coffee, tea, and alcohol are all diuretics – and diuretics are substances which encourage the body to excrete fluids.

What this means in practice is that, if you drink a cup of coffee, your body begins trying to pass that amount of fluid through the system *plus a little bit extra*. Your body is, in effect, constantly trying to push out more fluid than it has taken in. You are in a constant state of dehydration. As a result you experience thirst, because the body tries to top up its fluid level, and you then drink more coffee, which makes the body call for more fluid, and so on and so on.

The effect of this never-ending cycle of dehydration is not immediately disastrous. You will not collapse and die from drinking large amounts of coffee and tea. But you will place your body under unnecessary strain, week after week, month after month.

There is reason to suppose that, over a period of years, this strain will lead to unnecessary and avoidable aches and pains in the body; it also contributes to that general feeling

of being ‘stressed-out’ with which most of us are all too familiar. Over time, dehydration seems likely to be a contributory factor in a number of more serious problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Fortunately you can eliminate all this needless strain on the various glands and organs of the body by taking one simple step. Drink more water.

In the UK there is now a clear medical consensus that all adults should drink two litres of water a day. Two litres is about 4 pints.

This advice is given in a wide range of contexts. I have seen it, for instance, in guidelines for athletes. (There is some published scientific research which shows that the level of skill in footballers falls off if they are allowed to become dehydrated.) I have also seen the same advice – two litres of water a day – in a newsletter for recovering cancer patients. But this recommendation about drinking enough water does not just apply to keen sportsmen and convalescents; it is sound advice for anyone.

When I say drink water I mean just that. Do *not* add anything to it; no squash, no flavouring, no fruit juice. And don’t bother buying the expensive bottled stuff. Ordinary tap water will do.

If you are very unlucky you may live in an area where the tap water is so heavily purified with chemicals that it tastes unpleasant. In that case you need to fill a jug from the tap and put it in the fridge for a few hours. Some of the chemicals will then evaporate and it will probably taste acceptable.

The main time to drink water is in the morning, because that is when you are most dehydrated. Personally I find it convenient to use a pint glass, because then I can easily remember how many I have had during the day.

First thing in the morning I always go downstairs to feed the cat, and, incidentally, to make a cup of tea. You are still allowed to drink tea. Once I am downstairs I pour myself a pint of water, and I find that it goes down very easily. By the time I have finished making the tea and dealing with the cat, I have usually finished the glass.

Once the working day starts I have another pint glass beside me, and that is usually gone by lunchtime. And yes, I still do drink coffee, but nothing like as much as I used to. The third and fourth pints of water are consumed later in the day. Quite often I have more than four pints of water, particularly on hot days or when I am doing something energetic.

I have noticed, however, that it is much easier to take in the necessary four pints on days when I am at home than it is on days when I am away from home. If you're travelling, or working in an office, it does require a fair bit of self-discipline to remember to take a bottle with you, and to keep drinking from it. If you find yourself having trouble in this way, the trick is to get the first two pints into you before you even leave home. Then you only need to consume one further pint in the morning, and one in the afternoon.

If you can manage it, make sure that you have a glass of water before a meal rather than during it. This will aid digestion.

The beneficial effects of this water-drinking regime are likely to be long-term and they won't be dramatic. However, I have noticed some real health benefits since I first began to follow it. For some forty years I have often been troubled by headaches, and in the past year or two these have significantly decreased. I don't think that's a coincidence. I also have a friend who has suffered from severe

headaches over many years, and hers have disappeared entirely now that she drinks sufficient water.

If you are interested in learning more about the effect of dehydration, you should read a book called *Your Body's Many Cries for Water*, by Dr F. Batmanghelidj. Don't be put off by the catchpenny title. As with the Adelle Davis book, the title is designed attract the average reader, but in fact the book contains quite a lot of scientific data.

I first came across Dr Batmanghelidj's book while on holiday. I noticed that a friend of mine, who is a chiropractor, was reading it. I asked him if it was interesting. Oh yes, said my friend. In fact it contained so much useful information that he was reading it for the fifth time!

Dr Batmanghelidj claims that many illnesses and conditions can be cured, or at least alleviated, by making sure that you drink sufficient water. Personally I am always dubious about miracle cures, but my own experience suggests that if you increase your water consumption you will at least enjoy an enhanced feeling of well-being.

A friend of mine had a girl working in his office who suffered from eczema. He asked her what she had to drink each day. It turned out that she drank almost nothing, and what she did drink was either coffee or fruit juice. My friend suggested to the girl that she should try drinking four pints of water a day, and see whether it was of any benefit. One week later, the girl's mother rang to thank him – the eczema had almost entirely disappeared.

## **How to boost your energy through physical fitness**

At this point a number of readers are going to say Uh-oh. He's going to want us to go to the gym.

No, I'm not. Of course you can go to the gym if you want to – and I do. But what I *am* going to suggest is that you will have more energy, and you will enjoy better health generally, if you are physically fit. The problem is that getting fit, and keeping fit, takes time – and time is what we're often short of.

However, let's consider first what you need to do to obtain the health benefits of being fit, and then we can consider how you can achieve fitness in the minimum amount of time.

### *Defining fitness*

The cardiovascular system consists of the heart and blood supply, and people are said to be fit when their cardiovascular system is working efficiently.

The level of an individual's fitness can be tested by measuring the amount of work which can be done at a given heart rate. Most people today, if subjected to such a test, turn out to be hopelessly unfit. Most of us do not walk very far, much less run anywhere. We no longer do any manual work. The house is full of labour-saving gadgets, and we feel breathless when we climb the stairs.

Perhaps, you say to yourself, this doesn't matter very much. But it does matter, because those who are unfit are more vulnerable to disease, and they often lack the energy to do the things that they would quite like to do.

To my mind, the evidence is clear (and I speak as someone who never did a stroke of exercise for nearly forty years). You will get more out of life, feel better, and have more resistance to minor infections such as colds and flu, if you achieve a reasonable degree of physical fitness. I myself have been both fit and unfit, and I can tell you for

certain that fit is better.

OK. So how do you get fit?

Well, you get fit by taking exercise.

At which point most readers will shudder and turn the page.

But wait a minute. It really isn't very painful. If it was, I wouldn't have done it.

### *Start with gentle exercise*

What you need to do to get fit is to take *some* exercise at least twice a week. Three times a week is better, and every weekday is better still. But don't exercise on seven days a week, because your body strengthens itself during the pauses, so to speak.

To do you any good, the exercise needs to raise your pulse rate to a reasonable degree, and it needs to last at least 20 minutes, continuously.

To begin with you could just take a walk. But don't take the dog with you, because he will keep stopping, and you need to keep going. If you walk fast enough so that you are just breathless, and find it a little difficult to talk, that is quite sufficient.

If you start a fitness programme by walking, and keep at it for a few weeks, you will soon notice a difference in the way you feel. And if you have had enough self-discipline to impose this modest little routine on yourself, you will then benefit from approaching exercise in a more methodical way.

### *More serious exercise*

The great beauty of the exercise business is that it is really

quite scientific. And if you want to approach it scientifically, and sensibly, you need to buy yourself a pulse monitor. They cost about £75.

A pulse monitor consists of a narrow belt, which you wear around your chest, close to your heart. The belt transmits information to a watch, strapped to your wrist, which tells you how fast your heart is beating.

The first thing to do is to establish your maximum heart rate. In crude terms, this can be taken as 220 minus your age. In my case I am 63, so my maximum heart rate can be said to be 160. In fact, since I have measured my heart performance exactly, rather than in the broad-brush way, I know that my maximum heart rate is 10% less than the crude calculation would suggest, i.e. 144.

Exercise can be said to be effective at certain proportions of your maximum heart rate. At 55% to 65% of the maximum you are burning fat (something which will be helpful to most of us), and at 65% to 85% you are bringing about cardiovascular improvement.

Let's take my own case as an example. I know that my maximum heart rate is 144, so to do myself some good I need to get my heart rate up to 65% of that figure, which is 94. I find that I can do that by walking at a steady 4 miles an hour; this is best done in the gym, on a machine which allows me to fix the speed.

At this rate I am comfortable, but I am having to make a definite effort, and the effort will make me sweat a little in warm weather. If I need to increase the effort, to take my pulse rate up a little further, I can adjust the machine so that it simulates walking uphill.

Of course I could take my pulse rate up to 85% of my maximum if I chose to jog or run, but that would feel like very hard work indeed, and at my age I don't see the need.

Regular exercise of this kind, twice a week in the gym, has brought me up to a level which, when tested, is rated as 'excellent' for my age. Of course I am not fit enough to run a marathon, and in fact I wouldn't care to run a mile. But I can walk five miles in the country, or do an afternoon's work in the garden, without feeling exhausted, and that's good enough for me.

Some people become very keen on working out, and find that it gives them a sense of euphoria. I can't say that I have ever experienced that myself, but I quite enjoy taking gentle exercise, and since I am no longer in full-time employment I can please myself as to what time of day I go to the gym.

### *What about an exercise bike?*

For those who really can't find the time to visit a gym (and it also involves expense), I have a suggestion. Consider the possibility of using an exercise bike. These machines are like an ordinary bicycle, except that they have no wheels. They just sit on your bedroom floor (or wherever), and you cycle away while you watch the TV, or listen to music. Some people read. As with the machines in the gym, the bikes have a device for increasing the load on the pedals, so that it feels as if you are cycling uphill.

Some of these machines are very sophisticated indeed, but whatever you do, don't buy a new one! If you look in the small ads in your local paper you will find several up for sale – the reason being, of course, that people buy them in a fit of enthusiasm, never use them, and then get sick of having the machine in the house. The last time I looked in my local press there were half a dozen for sale at very modest prices.

The television presenter Miriam Stoppard (who is about my age) recently described how she used an exercise bike to get herself fit.

Having rashly promised to take part in charity bike ride, Miriam realised that she would have to take the job seriously. At first, she was so hopelessly out of condition that she could only cycle for a minute or two before having to stop for a five-minute rest. After a few months, however, she looks and feels so much better that people are asking her whether she has embarked on a new love affair.

So you can get fit if you want to.

## **How to avoid aches and pains**

Let's suppose, just for the sake of argument, that you have got your diet and water intake sorted out, you have raised your fitness level, and you now have the energy to actually undertake some writing.

At this point you need to be aware that, if you work on a word-processor, writing poses certain risks.

### *Repetitive Strain Injury*

Sitting for many hours in front of a computer screen, without changing your position, can lead to a form of damage to the body called Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI).

The subject is controversial, with some medical authorities denying that there is any such thing as RSI. Let's leave the experts to argue that among themselves. What is absolutely undeniable, because I have had this problem myself, is that typing for hour after hour, day after day, can leave you with severe pains in your hands, wrists, arms, and neck.

If you are a person who works at a keyboard during the day, and then comes home to do some more writing in the evening, you are obviously at greater risk than most.

RSI is not at all amusing or trivial. If you find that you are having pains in your hands and arms, the best thing to do is to find a physiotherapist who specialises in this field, and let her diagnose where the problem is. She will then give you some exercises to do to correct the problem. (Yes, more exercises I'm afraid.)

The physiotherapist who treated me was formerly employed by a big firm in a nearby city, where there were hundreds of office workers. She told me that there were so many members of staff who suffered from this type of injury that she was overwhelmed with work.

Prevention is better than cure. If you work at a keyboard at all, make sure that your chair is properly adjusted so that your feet, back, arms and hands are all in the right position. (There are lots of charts and diagrams available which illustrate how to do this; you will probably find that there is one pinned up in the office where you work.)

Secondly, make sure that you get up from your chair at regular intervals. In my office at home I have a kitchen timer which I set for 30 minutes. When the bell goes, I get up, walk around, have a stretch, and do a few quick exercises. Yes, this is a damn nuisance, but it's a lot better than suffering severe pain and being unable to type.

So far, incidentally, I have not found a satisfactory piece of software which will allow me to dictate into the computer. There are several programs which claim to do this, but in practice none of them work well enough to satisfy me. For the moment I continue to type.

### *Dr Sarno and back pain*

Even before I developed RSI, I had for years experienced pain, stiffness and 'pulled muscles' in my neck and back. If you have problems of this sort, I have good news for you. There is a book which will almost certainly help.

Dr John Sarno is a professor at New York University School of Medicine. For years he has studied neck and back pain, and he has written several books on the subject, the most relevant of which is *Healing Back Pain*.

Dr Sarno accepts, of course, that there is such a thing as a back injury caused by lifting a weight in the wrong way, or through an accident. He argues, however, that much of the pain which people experience in their backs and necks is the result of emotion.

To summarise very briefly and crudely, Dr Sarno says that pain is caused by tension in the muscles, which deprives those muscles of oxygen. The primary cause of this tension is emotion, of various kinds, the most common of which is anger.

Consciously or unconsciously, many of us feel intense anger about all sorts of things. We may get mad with people in the street; perhaps we hate our jobs; sometimes we are at loggerheads with our wives, husbands, boyfriends or lovers – and so on. Anger translates into tense muscles which translates into pain.

So what, you may say. My neck still hurts. Perhaps it does, but Dr Sarno has found that if the pain-sufferers understand what is happening – if they have this mental and physical interaction explained to them – then the pain will often go away. Not for every patient, and perhaps not all the pain, but much of it. In New York he runs classes for back patients in which his theories are explained at some

length. A very high percentage of those attending these classes find that their pain is much relieved.

If you don't live in New York you will have to make do with reading Dr Sarno's book, but it is well worth doing so, I can assure you. In my view it is a quite brilliant piece of work, explaining as it does the way in which the powerful emotions which are generated by life can tie your body into knots. Fortunately, Dr Sarno has worked out ways to minimise the damage.

If you remember what Candace Pert had to say (I referred to her in the last chapter), you will probably have no difficulty in accepting Dr Sarno's thesis. However, if you think his theory sounds a little far-fetched, then consider this. I recently read a newspaper article in which a 'back expert' reported that many of the patients coming to see him had injured their backs when cleaning their teeth, first thing in the morning.

Now, ask yourself a question. Do you think it likely that these patients 'pulled a muscle' because of the immense strain and effort of leaning over a basin and brushing their teeth – or do you think it more likely that they experienced a sudden muscle spasm because they realised that they would shortly have to go into that god-awful office (or school, or factory) for yet another day?

I don't think you need to be much of a physiologist or a psychologist to work that one out.

Speaking for myself, I can only say that, having read Dr Sarno, I am now convinced that virtually all of the intense neck and back pain that I experienced, over a period of many years, was caused by emotions, the chief of which was anger.

Now that I understand the mechanism by which this was brought about, I can truthfully say that my situation is

vastly improved. I still get the occasional twinge in my neck, but I can usually work out what caused it. Quite often it's a letter from some blithering idiot of a publisher.

### *The Alexander technique*

If reading Dr Sarno doesn't help to relieve your neck and back pain, another sensible step would be to have lessons in the Alexander Technique.

This technique is very difficult to describe in words, and you can't learn it by reading about it; you have to have a teacher, on a one-to-one basis.

What the teacher does is demonstrate to you how you are creating pain in your neck and back by holding your body in the wrong position. (Tension in the muscles again.) She will help you by putting your body into the right position, and by teaching you how to stop misusing use your body in the future.

Dr Sarno's treatment costs no more than the price of a paperback. Lessons in the Alexander Technique are considerably more expensive, because you need a professionally-trained teacher. You will also need a course of at least ten lessons, and twenty would be better.

### **Emotions and energy**

Having touched on the importance of emotions, it's worth having a look at the impact which the emotions generated by various events will have on your energy levels, and hence on your ability to make progress with your writing.

If, by first post tomorrow, you get a letter from a publisher's editor, telling you that she is going to buy world rights in your wonderful novel, and offering an advance of

£100,000, what emotion will you feel?

Amazement, probably. Joy, almost certainly. Euphoria, possibly.

And what impact will those feelings have on your willingness to sit down and write more? My guess is that they will give you a terrific burst of energy. You will be stimulated to work until midnight and later, convinced that you have now made it and that from here on in everything will go smoothly. Which it may, or may not.

But what about a less happy event? Suppose you spend all your spare time for the next year, slaving away over a novel. You give up going to the movies, you turn down invitations to dinner, you don't even watch TV. Instead you work on the book.

The book finished, you send it off to an agent, or perhaps a publisher. And what happens next? Probably nothing, for months. And then, one day, you get a postcard – not even a letter. The postcard says sorry, but this is not quite what we're looking for. How do you feel then?

Furious, if you're anything like me. Bitter, angry, disgusted, sickened, resentful. The air turns blue.

Later, much, much later, you may one day be able to face rejection with more equanimity, but in the beginning you are likely to feel intense emotion. And strong emotions, as we have seen, can damage your health.

Less importantly perhaps, emotion can also damage your motivation. Some people, after receiving a standard rejection card, may feel stimulated to work even harder, on the general principle of 'I'll show the bastards'. But most of us, I suspect, are going to feel seriously demotivated. What's the point of going on?

I can't give you any easy answers as to how to deal with this situation. All I can tell you is that a writing 'career' – if

that is not too pompous a word – is not created overnight, or even in a year or two. It takes a very long time to learn the craft, and even longer to get a foot in the door. Dean Koontz, for instance, who is now enormously successful, wrote 54 novels over a period of 18 years before he wrote a book that reached the bestseller lists.

If it's any comfort, I can tell you that almost the worst thing that can happen to you as a writer is to have a success too soon. You are then faced with the problem of repeating that success, without having any real understanding of how you achieved the first one. That can be a very nasty position to be in, and I can think of two writers who committed suicide as a result.

There is evidence to show that writers tend to suffer more than most from a number of dangerous emotional disturbances. The novelist Alan Garner wrote an article about his own two-year battle with what was diagnosed as 'endogenous depression', which is depression without external cause.

While trying to understand his condition, Garner came across some research done by Professor Kay Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. This showed that 38% of a group of eminent British writers and artists had been treated for a mood disorder of one kind or another; of these, 75% had had antidepressants or lithium prescribed, or had been hospitalised. Of playwrights, 63% had been treated for depression. These proportions are many times higher than in the population at large.

Apparently, in Alan Garner's case, his manic-depressive illness is genetic in origin. But often it is hard to decide whether a writer becomes depressed because of constant rejection, which is a very common fate for writers, or

whether the person became a writer because of a tendency to depression which was somehow in-built.

In any event, I am absolutely certain that anyone who wants to be a writer is going to have to develop a high degree of emotional resilience. You are certainly going to have to learn to cope with rejection. In fact, my advice, when you meet with either disaster or triumph, is to 'treat those two impostors just the same.' Which means that you must learn to see both in perspective.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have advised you that, if you are in normal health, you can improve your energy level by eating the right food at the right time of day.

You should also drink two litres (four pints) of water a day.

It is not necessary to become a gym freak. For one thing that will take up too much of your time, and what you are trying to do is find the time and energy to write. However, a little gentle exercise three times a week would not do any harm.

Anyone who spends many hours in front of a word processor is likely to be subject to various aches and pains, and I have suggested ways to minimise and resolve these.

Finally, I have issued a gentle warning about the possible physical and mental effects of the emotional upheaval which is an inevitable consequence of doing any significant amount of writing.

## CHAPTER 7

### How to find the time to write

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THERE ARE QUITE a number of people in this world who want to have the benefits (or the *perceived* benefits) of being a writer without actually doing any work. And just in case you're in any doubt, let me say that much of the work involved in writing is pure drudgery.

For example, as I've been writing this book, I have been making a list on a piece of paper, chapter by chapter, of all the points that I need to check.

Does demotivated have a hyphen after the second letter? (Apparently not.) Should wheat germ be written as two words or one? (Two.) What is the correct definition of the cardiovascular system? (As eventually stated.) And so on. Checking up on these points is not much fun; it is just something that has to be done – or at least it has to be done if the book is going to be published to a professional standard.

If you find yourself with ambitions to be a writer, you will inevitably have to accept that you will have to put in many hours of sometimes dull work, over many months, to produce anything useful. And in order to find those hours you are going to have to give up something else.

Only you can decide whether this is worthwhile. I can't decide for you.

## Setting your personal goals

Generalised ambitions and wishful thinking are all very well, but it would be sensible, I suggest, to do just a little serious thinking before committing yourself to months of work.

As my family never cease to remind me, I am something of a fanatic about making lists. I am laughed at, kindly, both to my face and behind my back (I believe). Well, that doesn't bother me. I find it useful to make lists. Not only do I make lists, I also *prioritise* them. I will never, even in my dreams, succeed in doing all those things that I would like to do. But at least I know what those things are, because I have a list of them; and I know whether one of the things I want to do is more vital to me than another, because I've thought about it.

One exercise which I found useful earlier in life was to work out my lifetime goals. I didn't invent this exercise – I found it recommended in a 1973 paperback by Alan Lakein, who was, according to the cover of the book, a renowned time-management consultant. I see from Amazon that Mr Lakein still has a couple of books in print, and you could do worse than have a look at them.

The process of deciding your lifetime goals is quite simple. You sit down in front of a sheet of paper, and in a couple of minutes you write down the main things that you would like to achieve during your lifetime. Such as: get married; have six kids; win the pools; travel to China. Whatever.

Next, you answer the following question: How would I like to spend the next five years? I won't even begin to suggest what you might write down here.

And finally, you answer another question: If I knew

today that I would be killed by lightning in exactly six months from now, how would I live until then? (Isaac Asimov answered this question by saying 'I would type faster.' I think he was joking. In any event Asimov died in 1992 from Aids, an illness which he contracted through a blood transfusion nine years earlier.)

The next step is to prioritise your goals. From the list of lifetime goals, you select the three most important.

You do the same thing – choose the three most important – from your list of things to do in the next five years, and from the list of what you would choose to do if you only had six months to live.

You have now identified nine key goals for your life.

At this point you take a fresh piece of paper, and pick out the top three goals from your overall list of nine.

You have now zeroed in on what it is that you really want to do with your life as you see the position at this time.

Of course your views will change as you grow older, and perhaps wiser, and for a number of years I used to do this exercise every time I had a birthday.

Once you know what your main goals are, you need to work out the steps that you need to take in order to achieve those goals. For example, if you want to become the chief executive of your firm, you may feel that you need to get an MBA degree. After that, you need to arrange a transfer to the Baltimore office, so that you have some experience of the American branch of the business. And so on. Once again, you prioritise the steps which are necessary to achieve your goals, so that you have identified which are the most important – which are the ones you need to do first.

You can go on dividing and subdividing these tasks right

down to working out what it is that you need to do later on today. And as a matter of fact I find it very useful to do so.

This may seem like a cold-blooded and mechanistic way of planning life, and it certainly will not appeal to everyone. I can only say that I have found it extremely valuable, at certain stages of my life, to think in these terms and to carry out these exercises.

Since I am now in my sixties, I no longer do the goals-planning exercise in quite the same way. But, as every 'retired' person will tell you, you never have enough time to do all the things you want to do, even when you no longer have to go to the office. So I do think very carefully about how I am using my time. The writing of this book, for instance, was not undertaken lightly. It was placed in a priority list, and it had to wait several years to come to the top of that list.

Perhaps it is also worth mentioning at this stage, since we live in such a hectic era, that when you plan your schedule, whether for the day or the year, you should build into it a certain amount of time when you do absolutely nothing – or at least something which is not directly connected with achieving particular goals. All work and no play makes Jill a hard-nosed, unattractive bitch. Your Grandma told you this, and much else besides. Remember it.

## **The rhythm method**

Let us assume, for the moment, that you have reviewed your personal goals, and that writing a book or a screenplay still figures among them.

The best thing to do next, I suggest, is to allocate a period of time in each day, or week, when you can do some

writing, and stick to it.

The allocation part is a lot easier than the sticking to it. However, if you have done your goals planning sensibly, you will have decided that there are certain times of each day or week when you will watch television, or simply have a snooze, and certain other times when you will work on your book.

You can, of course, change your priorities at any time, if you lose faith in the book you're writing, or if you suddenly decide that the effort involved in writing a book outweighs all possible satisfaction which can be derived from that activity.

My assumption in writing this chapter is that you, the would-be writer, spend most of your day doing something else. You have a full-time job, or a family to look after. If that assumption is correct, then you have three main choices as to what time of day you do your writing. You can either write before you begin work on your other commitments, or after work, or in between.

'Between' is not a choice which is open to most people. But it is possible that some housewives might be able to get the kids off to school, go rapidly round the house with a vacuum cleaner, and then sit down to do a couple of hours in front of the keyboard. Then, when the children reappear, our housewife and mother will revert to the day job.

'Before' will not appeal to most people, I suspect. But it is worth noting that this is the way in which some successful writers have worked.

The crime novelist P.D. James used to get up early and put in a couple of hours every morning before she went off to work as a senior civil servant. (She was also, incidentally, looking after a sick husband at the same time.)

'After' is the way in which I used to work. I had the sort

of job where I could easily have worked until six or seven each night, but I used to try to leave the office at a sensible time (5.30 p.m. was my target). Then I would come home, have a meal, have a short rest, and after that fit in an hour or more on my writing.

I was assisted in this arrangement by the fact that, for many years, my wife had numerous evening commitments of her own, which took her out of the house. And my children, once they got past the age of about twelve, were often involved in homework.

The problem with trying to schedule your writing after a day's work, of course, is that if you have a reasonably high level of education, and if you hold any but the most basic of jobs, you are likely to get caught up in this modern nonsense of staying late at the office.

In some companies, particularly big ones, this is a sort of madness. There is a macho creed in some organisations which holds that the first one to leave is a wimp. If you work in that kind of environment, and a lot of young people do, I feel sorry for you.

If you are a very strong personality, you may be able to resist the pressure to devote every waking hour to the company. But all too easily you can damage your career prospects if you insist on working the official hours and no more. In such a situation you may find that for you the only option for finding time to write is the weekend. Of which more in a minute.

I do have to remind you, however, of something I mentioned earlier, namely that at least one high-powered advertising executive has had a successful writing career. He is James Patterson. In 1996, when his ninth novel, *Jack and Jill*, was published, Patterson was still Chairman of the advertising powerhouse J. Walter Thompson in New York.

It is also worth mentioning that James Herriot, who had a string of bestsellers about twenty-five years ago, did all his writing at the end of a long day's work as a veterinary surgeon. As a vet he could never predict what time his day would finish, and he used to come home at some very odd hours. He would then sit down in front of the TV with his family. His wife would bring him his meal on a tray; he would eat it, have a chat and a rest, and then get out his pad and begin to write. With his family beside him. With the TV on.

Colin Dexter is another part-time, evening writer. When he was writing his Morse novels he used to begin work after the end of *The Archers*, and put down his pen in time to end the evening by going to the pub for a couple of pints.

I mentioned the question of working at weekends. This is certainly a possibility, but you need iron self-discipline to do it. However, the former literary agent Carol Smith has related in interviews how she wrote her book *Kensington Court*: she worked on it for four hours every Sunday, from 2 to 6 p.m.

The main point is, of course, that all the writers mentioned above had a regular time set aside for work, and at the appointed hour they sat down and did *something*, however unsatisfactory it might be.

A slightly different method is to set yourself a number of words to write, rather than a particular amount of time. Graham Greene used to aim for 300 words a day, and then he would stop, even in the middle of a

Sentence.

Find your rhythm and stick to it.

And if you find it all very difficult, just ask yourself a question. Do I really want to write this book or not? It's not compulsory.

## **Final thoughts**

There are no quick fixes. But if you work out a plan for making time to write, and stick to it, week in and week out, you will in the course of a few months have something which you can offer to the market.

Whether the market will want it is another matter entirely. But, just by way of encouragement, let me say that while I was looking at the press-cutting about James Patterson, whom I mentioned above, I noticed that an early novel of his, which he also wrote in his spare time, was rejected by 30 publishers before being bought by Little, Brown. It went on to win the Edgar Award for the best first novel of 1976.

## **Summary**

If we were to question a hundred writers and ask them what they felt was the biggest problem they faced, I dare say that a majority of them would reply 'finding the time.' Chapter 7 has therefore looked at potential solutions to this problem.

The answer, I have suggested, lies in analysing your personal lifetime goals, and finding out where the business of writing falls in your overall list of priorities.

If you confirm to yourself that writing is indeed something that you wish to take seriously, then you should set aside a particular time, on a particular day, and do some writing in that time-slot, no matter what.

Avoid, for once, following the advice of Ernest Hemingway on how to write a novel: 'First,' he said, 'you defrost the refrigerator.'

## CHAPTER 8

### How to sell your work in the digital age

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THIS BOOK IS aimed primarily at novelists and other creative writers; and you will have gathered by now that life is not easy for such tormented souls.

First, any creative writer is more or less obliged to train herself to do the job. Yes, I know that there are now some university courses in 'creative writing', but I wouldn't personally commit a year of my time and a good many thousands of pounds to taking one. Better, in my view, to read the available material on fictional technique and then *practise*.

The next problem, even if you write a book with real promise, is getting it recognised as a book with promise. Whether your work is commercial or literary, the evidence that I have provided shows that most people in publishing are not clever enough to make the right call; not, at any rate, ten times out of ten. I have, I hope, given you enough examples to make that point.

At present, you can more or less forget about getting into serious print if you are aged over 30. The trend may change, but you, of course, will be getting older while you wait for it. Francis King, when 78, had difficulty in finding a publisher for his 27th book. Apparently a 26-book track record is not sufficient evidence to convince a modern publisher that you are up to scratch. Eventually King did

find a small firm brave enough to back him but it was evidently a struggle. This experience probably did not constitute much of an encouragement to write book 28.

Finally – well, I was going to say finally, but it isn't finally at all; it's just another of the multitudinous snags and difficulties that you will have to face. Next, then, you will discover that, even if you do succeed in finding a publisher, and do manage to make your literary or commercial mark, you will for ever afterwards be expected to go on doing the same thing. Over and over again. Pretty much for eternity.

If successful writers are anything, they are a kind of brand name. The name comes to be associated with serial-killer books, or regency romances, or cutting-edge literary experiment. Or something. Even Agatha Christie found it burdensome to go on writing whodunits all the time, and every few years she would amuse herself by writing a romantic novel under the name Mary Westmacott.

Should you succeed in establishing a brand name of sorts, and even if you are happy to go on churning out clones of the first book, your problems are still not over. These days the computer at the point of sale rules everything. Write one book which doesn't do as well as the last, and the booksellers, closely followed by your publisher, will begin to lose interest. Write two like that in a row, and you will almost certainly get dumped.

Where can you go after that? With publishers constantly merging into ever bigger conglomerates, the odds are high that there won't be anywhere else to go. So your career is now over. All you can do is start again in your wife's name. And I am not, believe me, joking. Some writers are seriously considering just that.

In short, as I may have mentioned before, there is little

that can be said in favour of even trying to make a career as a creative writer. But, for those who are determined to make the attempt, here are a few comments about the conditions that apply in the digital age.

### **The role of the agent**

Now here's an interesting thing. And unlike some of the points which have been made earlier in this book, this one has never, so far as I'm aware, been made by anyone else.

The concept of the literary agent was invented in the late nineteenth century. A number of informed observers of the then literary scene noticed that publishers were, relatively speaking, big, powerful, experienced in the ways of the book trade, and commercially savvy. Writers, by contrast, were small, weak, knew nothing about the book trade, and were commercially clueless.

In those circumstances, writers might not always be given a square deal. Indeed the standard operating procedure for some publishers was that the writers were sold short. (Never give a sucker an even break.) This created an opportunity for a few bright boys who did understand the book trade, and some of them decided to set themselves up as authors' agents: in this role, they offered to negotiate contracts on behalf of the less experienced writers, making sure that they were paid a fair share of the proceeds.

Because these agents were familiar with the book trade, they were in a position to know what publishers could really afford to pay, and what constituted reasonably fair terms and what didn't. So, the agent would represent, let us say, one hundred writers. He would deal with publishers on the writers' behalf, and he would take 10% of the

writers' earnings by way of recompense.

This was soon recognised by writers as being an attractive deal, at least if the agent was honest, reliable, and hard-working. True, writers lost 10% of their income, but they usually gained a more financially rewarding contract as a result. And in those quaint old days, you will note, the writer simply chose and appointed the agent; she didn't have to beg and grovel to be taken on to the agent's list.

That was how the agency business began. Over the course of time, however, relationships have shifted.

What happens now, in practice, is that publishers use the agents to sort out the publishable from the impossible. This means that agents incur, in effect, costs which were formerly borne by publishers; and those costs are met out of the commission which agents charge to writers.

The point which I have not seen mentioned before is this: as a result of the changed role of agents, successful and published writers are now paying for some of the costs of sorting out the publishers' raw material.

This situation does not apply in other industries. In the production of motor cars, the manufacturer meets the cost of all the parts which go into the car, and he passes those costs on to the eventual purchaser. But in publishing, some of the cost of the raw materials and parts is borne by the very people without whom publishing cannot exist: the writers.

I would like to be able to say that this state of affairs was the result of a cunning plan, developed by those beastly fiends the publishers. If I could say that it would allow me to heap further obloquy upon their heads. But unfortunately I can't say it, because they weren't clever enough to have dreamed up this scheme. It was just something that happened.

Anyway, the fact is that, in today's world, if you want to get a novel into print with any firm which might reasonably be called a leading publisher, you are going to have to find a literary agent who will represent you. In the past it was certainly possible to sell a novel without an agent, but I take leave to doubt whether it is possible now.

### **Finding an agent**

It is often said that it is harder to find an agent than a publisher, and I believe it to be true.

Why? Well, for a start, consider the facts about being an agent. Let us review how it feels to be dealing with those well known philanthropists, the trade publishers, when you're trying to make a living out of the resulting commission.

I am reluctant to write these words, but honesty requires that I must: being an agent is the toughest job in publishing. Yes, harder even than being a writer.

Let's do a bit of a bit of arithmetic. As a rough rule of thumb, an agent needs to earn twice her salary in order to cover the business overheads. Let's say, being extremely conservative, that an agent is prepared to work for a salary of £25,000 a year. This is a modest sum, I suspect, for a mature and experienced person working in London; as we have already noted, a train driver on the underground earns about £31,000.

To support a salary of £25,000, plus overheads, the agent has to generate £50,000 a year in commission, just to keep ticking over.

Let's also assume that the agent is charging 15% rather than the traditional 10%. Even so, she still needs to write contracts worth about £335,000 a year, just to earn her

£50,000 in commission. On that basis, a middle-sized agency could just about afford to keep the agent on as a junior member of the firm. If she is a sole trader, she will, I guess, need to generate quite a lot more commission than that. How is she going to do it?

Well, it is true that some agents have negotiated contracts worth £335,000 in respect of a single book. But not many of them, and not very often. This is a highly competitive trade.

We don't know what the average book contract is worth, but I suspect it's barely into five figures, if that. Work it out for yourself: 15% of £10,000 is £1,500. And on that basis the agent needs to write about 35 contracts a year just to earn her basic bread and butter.

How easy do you think it is to find 35 books a year that are worth publishing? And not only that, but 35 books a year which you can *sell* to those discerning judges at Big Green or HarpicCleanser. Not the easiest of tasks.

Now you begin to understand why being an agent is the toughest job in the business. And now you know why agents are not really interested in you and me. They are only really interested in writers who can command contracts worth £100,000 a book, or more.

A contract of that size is worth spending some time on. Not only is it a valuable source of commission in itself, but it's big enough to give you a fighting chance of selling the book in the USA and Europe; and, maybe, a movie deal.

Yes, by all means try to find yourself an agent. Buy *The Writer's Handbook* or the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, or both, and go through the list. Some of the bigger agencies also have web sites from which you can learn a great deal. And if you have been reading the book-trade press during the time you've been writing your book, then

you will already have some idea of which firms are likely to be interested in your kind of work.

You should also read Carole Blake's book, *From Pitch to Publication*. She's a leading agent herself, and has lots to say about how to sell yourself to her or her colleagues. I won't paraphrase or plagiarise that advice here. But at the end of the day don't be remotely surprised if all you get back from your preferred agent is a polite, printed postcard.

Smart, successful agents do not often select manuscripts from the slush pile. As a matter of fact, agents are beginning to get just as picky as publishers, and some of them won't read any unsolicited material.

So, where do agents find their clients? Well, they approach those writers who are already being published and don't yet have the benefit of agent representation (but there are not many of them nowadays). They keep their ear to the ground for news of writers who have an agent but are not too happy with her for some reason. They ask for recommendations from existing clients or publishers. And, occasionally, they do a bit of tactful poaching. Seducing other agents' clients is against the rules, of course – against the rules both written and unwritten – but it does happen; there have already been rows about it.

All of which leaves the average provincial housewife, who has slogged her guts out to finish her first romantic novel, looking a bit pale and unwanted, like a wallflower at her first dance.

Yup. Well, don't say I didn't warn you.

At the risk of earning a reputation as a Cassandra, I also have to point out that, if and when you do eventually strike lucky and persuade an agent to take you on, you will then find yourself in precisely the same situation vis-à-vis the

agent as you are in relation to the publisher.

In other words, unless you turn out to be a top-earning writer for the agent, you may very well get dumped.

Agents, like publishers, are often personable and pleasant on a one-to-one basis. But agents are faced, even more than publishers, with the economic facts of life. And they can't afford to be too nice.

In particular, agents have to deal with the 80/20 rule. What that means is that most of the commission (80%) is earned by a handful of authors (20%). Or thereabouts. Most of an agent's clients will take up time without bringing in any serious money. An agent whose eye is on the ball will sooner or later take a hard look at her list of clients, and will weed out those who are taking up lots of time without generating lots of income. Painful it may be, but that's the way it goes. An agent cannot reasonably be expected to do anything else.

Dean Koontz once described one of his former agents as having 'the spirituality and humanitarianism of Al Capone.' And Koontz *did* make serious money.

## **Digital doings**

The heading of this chapter refers to the digital age, which, without being over-technical, is a reference to the existence of various forms of electronic publishing.

If you are not already computer-literate and familiar with email, the internet, and other miracles of modern communication, well, perhaps you should be. It's not so difficult. If you can drive a car you can certainly learn how to use the internet.

Once you find your way on to the web, you can hardly go far without coming across electronic publishing. I am not

going to say much about it here, because anything I write will be well out of date by the time you read it. I will limit myself to telling you, or reminding you, that the web offers various new means of publication.

Whether any of these new means of publication are worth a round of drinks remains to be seen. As in most things, you will need to proceed with caution.

At the time of writing, the only people making any money out of electronic publications are the people selling ebooks which tell you how to make a fortune out of ebooks.

It was ever thus. You only have to open a writer's magazine to find lots of people who are offering to show you how to make a million as a writer. You will understand, of course, that if they really knew how to do it they wouldn't be advertising in the magazines.

Traditional book publishing is also changing more rapidly at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it has in the past. Experienced commentators such as Jason Epstein have forecast that the big publishing firms and the big bookselling conglomerates are going to have a hard time continuing to make profits.

Epstein points out that the large publishers and the major bookshop chains both depend heavily on selling the product of the brand-name authors. In fiction these are the John Grishams, the Danielle Steels, and the Tom Clancys.

However, as Epstein also points out, once a writer becomes a brand name, she no longer needs the big publisher at all! She could just as easily set up her own marketing and distribution system and go it alone. And probably make more money.

If the big-time writers are continuing to use the big publishers, and at the time of writing that is the case, then it can only be because such an arrangement suits their

convenience; it is not because they are unaware of possible alternatives.

Small-time writers, meanwhile, can go their own way as they always have, publishing their own books if need be (of which more below).

So who does that leave for the traditional publishing firms to publish? Answer, it leaves publishers with the writers of so-called mid-list books – the books which fill out the catalogue but enjoy only modest sales. And yet these are the very writers that the major publishers have been dumping as fast as they can! Remember what I said about publishers looking at the electronic returns from the sales tills?

As we have noted in this text from time to time, a myriad of small publishers have disappeared over the last twenty years; they have been taken over, amalgamated, and in one way or another sucked into the greedy maw of the half-dozen big firms. And now even the monsters seem to be trying to merge further. If things go on as they are there may one day be only one major publisher.

The bookshop scene has also seen the effect of mergers and takeovers, and the big chains, like the publishers, depend for their profits on a ceaseless flow of bestsellers.

To some extent, as we have noted, these bestsellers can be manufactured by hype. That's not too difficult to accomplish in non-fiction; for that sort of work publishers can draw on a crowd of experienced journalists, who for the right sort of money can be persuaded to write books instead of articles.

In fiction, however, it's a different story. The only way to learn the craft of the novel is through experience and practice; and if there are no fourth-division teams in which you can learn how to kick a ball, then how is the learning to

be done?

Not my problem, I'm happy to say, and if the big boys run into trouble because there are no new novelists who can impress the readers, then some of us are going to have a really good laugh. Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of fuzzy thinkers.

In these circumstances, it may be that fiction publishing, in particular, is going to be handed back to the people to whom it properly belongs – namely the writers. Which leads me on to a brief discussion of self-publishing.

### **Self-publishing**

Six years ago I was approached by a local man, a retired ambassador, who wanted me to help him to find a publisher for his autobiography. I advised him as to which were the most suitable firms to approach, and I drafted a letter for him to send.

The Ambassador was, incidentally, taken aback by the way in which he was treated by some of these distinguished firms.

'They told me *lies!*' he remarked, in some astonishment. 'They swore to me that the managing director had read the book over the weekend, but he couldn't have done because his secretary had returned it to me three days earlier.'

Gee whiz, I replied, how extraordinary. Never heard of anything like that before.

As it turned out, none of the most suitable firms was interested in publishing the Ambassador's life story. But in the course of time I did manage to find a reputable publisher who was prepared to go ahead, provided the author would meet the cost of the publication – in this case, £6,000. The Ambassador was, in fact, willing to

invest such a sum.

At the time when that deal was done, a figure of £6,000 to cover the cost of production was not unreasonable. Today, however, changes in printing technology mean that we can produce a book for a small fraction of that sum – less than a hundred pounds for the set-up costs in some cases.

Given that publication can now be arranged for such a small amount of money, many more writers are going to be interested in publishing their own work than was the case in the past, when a substantial investment was required.

But there is more. Not only is the set-up cost now modest, but you no longer need to print more than a handful of copies at a time. Twenty years ago, few printers would have dirtied their machine for a print run of less than 1,000 copies. Today you can find printers who will gladly do 20 at a time; or even less.

This is not a textbook about self-publishing. There are some books on the subject, and if you're interested you should do some research. But the great virtue of the present situation, to someone like myself, for instance, is that I am no longer obliged to go cap in hand to one of the major (or minor) publishing firms, begging and pleading for the favour of being put before the public. Instead I can raise two fingers at them – and I sometimes do, as you may have noticed. Thanks very much, boys, I can say, but I really don't need you any longer.

Today, with an investment of a few hundred pounds, I can set up my own publishing company and publish my own books without interference from anyone.

If I want to publish a book of 45 pages, I can do so. Ditto with a book of 1500 pages. Well, more or less. I might have difficulty in cramming 1500 pages into a print-on-demand

paperback, but you get the point.

No longer do I have to put up with an editor half my age, who has never written a word of fiction, telling me that Chapter 19 will have to be completely rewritten, and oh, by the way, while I'm about it will I please cut 20,000 words out of the whole thing, because paper is getting to be so expensive.

No thanks. Been there and done that, and I have no intention of ever going there and doing it again.

Once you have your self-published book in print, you can offer it for review wherever you wish. Armed with a few reviews you can then seek to sell the mass-market paperback rights, or the French rights, or whatever. The possibilities are limited only by your energy and willingness to invest time and money.

I did read about an American writer who invested \$75,000 of his own capital in marketing a novel which he had eventually placed with a small independent press. This is not a practice that I would recommend, or at least not on that scale, but such sums can easily be spent on marketing and publicity if you have a mind to do so.

You won't sell very many copies as a self-publisher. But then regular publishers often don't sell many either. One of last year's Booker shortlist was shown in *The Bookseller* as having shifted 1440 copies. Think of it! All that free publicity, pages of it, and only 1440 people were persuaded to part with their money. Hell, I've written books that sold more than that myself.

If you do print and publish two or three books of your own on this basis, someone in mainstream publishing might perhaps take a bit of notice of you. Don't depend on it, but it is at least a possibility.

And you will, of course, continue to hold all the rights of

these books, which may, ten or twenty years down the line, prove to be marketable for useful sums. Once he became famous, Dean Koontz was able to sell the paperback rights of some of his early books for half a million dollars a pop.

A couple of writers have done extremely well for themselves with self-published books. Both are American, since that is where the big money is.

Richard Paul Evans published *The Christmas Box* on his own behalf, after having had some discouraging replies from conventional publishers. After building the book into a commercial success he was later able to sell the rights to Simon and Schuster for \$4.25m.

Michael Hoeye did less well but still quite nicely thank you. He sold his self-published children's book *Time Stops for No Mouse* to Putnam and Puffin for \$1.8m.

You will not, of course, be misled by these two exceptions into imagining that the self-publishing route will inevitably lead to great fame and wealth. It won't. What it used to lead to was a big pile of books in the garage; but fortunately, now that we have short-run printing and print on demand, that is no longer an inevitable consequence.

There are parallels here with the music business. This is what the rock star Prince had to say in 2001 – and the peculiar orthography is his own: 'The airwaves, record labels and record stores, which r now all part of the "system" that recording companies have succeeded in establishing, r becoming increasingly dominated by musical "products" 2 the detriment of real music.'

But the web, of course, and the increasing cheapness of digital production, offer the opportunity for young (or old) musicians to change all that.

Similar openings seem to exist in the visual media. Do you remember that profoundly irritating advert for a brand

of beer, in which various unsavoury-looking gentlemen phoned each other and asked 'Whassup? Whassup? Whassup?'

That advert began life as a short film called *True* which two young men made for their own amusement and posted on the internet. It was seen by an adman who showed it to his agency who showed it to a client and... so on. One of the young film-makers subsequently signed a contract to develop a sitcom, and his partners became, for a while at least, media stars.

I can't immediately think of a way to make a similar impact with a piece of writing, but that's because I'm old. Somebody will do it. Why not you?

## **Summary**

Some commentators regard the digital revolution as ushering in a golden age of opportunity for writers. I don't see it that way myself, and I believe that the pace of change will be slower than some observers suggest.

However, some facts are undeniable.

It is now much harder to break into print as a fiction writer than it once was, at least in terms of conventional publication.

But, by way of compensation, it now costs much less than it once did to be able to hold a copy of your very own book in your own over-excited hand.

The problem, of course, is still one of selling your book to readers. And I have no easy solution to offer to that.

## CHAPTER 9

### The secret of success

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to this book I did promise you that, towards the end, I would explain the secret of success. What's more, I declared, I would give you an explanation which was couched in mathematical terms.

No doubt you have been thinking, every now and then, that it was time I delivered on my promise. So here is my explanation.

First of all, if we are going to talk about success, we need to define the term; after a fashion. But rather than lay down my own definition, in absolute terms, I am going to suggest that you formulate your own.

I did explain in Chapter 1 that there are several different benefits which can be derived from writing – the chief ones being money, fame, and literary reputation – and that different individuals will wish to achieve different combinations of these. So, feel free to do your own pick and mix for defining the term success. This won't matter a bit, because the mathematical formulae, or expressions, that I shall be giving you, will hold good whatever particular definition of success you have chosen.

You will doubtless be familiar with the use of the equals sign, as in  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But you may not, perhaps, be familiar with another mathematical symbol, written in the form of two colons, as in  $X :: Y$ . When used like that, the  $::$  sign

means 'varies as to'. The :: symbol was introduced by William Oughtred in a book published in 1631.

How might we use this symbol in relation to writing and publishing? Well, we might say that the thickness of a book varies as to the number of pages; which means that the more pages there are, the thicker the book is. We could also express this statement as  $T :: N$ , where T stands for thickness and N is the number of pages.

Now let us turn our attention to success inasmuch as it concerns writers, and try to determine the factors which create success. In other words, we need to find the missing part of the expression  $S :: ?$

We might begin by making a list of all possible factors which govern success, and these might include the following: talent; hard work; connections (i.e. knowing influential people); perseverance; good reviews; a powerful agent; a major publisher; and so on.

We might try out a number of combinations of these, and see how they look in the light of experience. So, for instance, we might say that

$S \text{ (success)} :: T \text{ (talent)}$

Which means that the more talented you are, the more successful you inevitably become.

This is nice and simple, but unfortunately it is complete nonsense. There are lots of talented people about who are not successful (many of them, no doubt, are reading this book); and, conversely, there are lots of writers whose talent is barely discernible but who are very successful indeed. (You have your list; I have mine.)

Just in case you think I am being grumpy and graceless again, let me quote the actor John Nettles, from his

autobiography *Nudity in a Public Place*. Nettles was in turn quoting a friend of his, whom he described as ‘a great literary figure and a major celebrity’. This unnamed individual remarked to Nettles: ‘Nothing is more common today than successful men with no talent.... Success and celebrity do not necessarily depend on talent in these dog days and it is a good thing you never ever believe they do, otherwise you might miss out on the joke of the century.’

So, to say that  $S :: T$  is clearly unacceptable, and we need to refine our formula a little further. We might try, for instance:

$S :: T + \text{HW}$  (hard work)

Personally I don’t think that is very satisfactory either. A recent issue of *The Author* carried an article by a man who had written ten complete novels between the ages of 18 and 34 without selling any of them. Then he took up meditation, which he claimed did wonders for clearing his mind, and finally he did manage to sell his eleventh book. This man evidently had some talent, and an enviable capacity for hard work, but the two together were not immediately effective.

One can continue with almost endless permutations, such as:

$S :: T + \text{HW} + \text{WYK}$  (who you know)

And so on ad infinitum. But none of these is ultimately satisfactory, at least to me; they all seem to me to be based on false assumptions.

As far as I am concerned, there is only one formula which embodies the truth about the relationship between

writers and success, and that is this:

S :: C

And what, you ask, is the mysterious C? Well, it isn't the speed of light, as in Einstein's equation  $E=mc^2$ . What C stands for, in this context, is Circumstance.

And what is the definition of Circumstance?

Circumstance is a factor which some might call chance, fate, luck, serendipity, or karma. But none of those words conveys the necessary flavour of the word Circumstance in relation to writing; they are not appropriate synonyms.

Take the word 'luck' for example. I am inclined to argue that, to some extent, you make your own luck. The golfer Gary Player was once told by a rival that he was always lucky. 'Yes,' said Player. 'And you know what? The more I practise, the luckier I get.'

So luck won't do, and neither will any of the other suggested synonyms. The right and proper definition of the term Circumstance, in the context of our formula for success, is *everything that you cannot control, or even influence*.

Allow me to present an example, drawn from another field of activity. William Goldman, in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, tells us that, in the 1950s, the actor Montgomery Clift turned down the lead parts in four films. He declined (1) the part in *Sunset Boulevard* which was later played by William Holden; (2) the part that James Dean later played in *East of Eden*; (3) the Paul Newman part in *Somebody Up There Likes Me*; and (4) the Marlon Brando part in *On the Waterfront*.

As you will already have noticed if you know anything about the history of the cinema, each of the actors who

picked up the part which had been rejected by Montgomery Clift used that part to establish his own name; each of the four actors who accepted what Clift had declined became a famous star as a result.

None of which would have happened if Clift had decided to play any of the parts himself. And the point is, of course, that the four unknown young actors who benefited from these decisions could in no way have influenced what Clift did.

That is Circumstance at work.

Consider also the case of Harry Potter, which was referred to in Chapter 4. We noticed that the first person of any consequence, in publishing terms, who read the name Harry Potter was the receptionist in the office of literary agent Christopher Little. But did J.K. Rowling know anything about that receptionist? Of course not. Did she even know much about the agency? I suspect not.

There are, I suggest, not only good reasons for supposing that our formula for success ( $S :: C$ ) is valid and true, but there are also substantial benefits to be gained from keeping it ever in mind.

I have warned you, from time to time, that becoming a writer involves considerable wear and tear on the emotions; indeed more than once I have mentioned that writing can literally damage your health. But you will, I believe, find it much easier to cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune if, when you next receive a particularly stupid letter from a particularly stupid publisher, you repeat the following mantra:

Success varies according to Circumstance....

Success varies according to Circumstance....

Success varies according to Circumstance....

Repeat this phrase over and over again, until a sense of calm is restored to your bosom.

There is no point in getting yourself into an uproar over matters that you cannot control. Or even influence.

## ENVOI

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NOW THAT I have come to the end of this book, I find that there are two things that I am pretty sure of.

One is that I have told you the truth, as I see it.

The other is that this book could only have been written by someone who really, truly, genuinely, does not care tuppence whether he ever eats lunch in this town again. If the book has any merit at all, and if it proves to be useful to you in any way, then that's the reason why. And if what I have written has upset any of the powers that be – well, that's their problem.

It is now nearly fifty years since I was first paid for writing something. Looking back, I think I have had a pretty good set of experiences as a writer; though I certainly didn't always think so at the time.

As things turned out, I combined a full-time career in education with a parallel, part-time, career as a writer. This suited me well. In the early days I had ambitions, as you might expect, to be a full-time writer. But I really don't think I would have enjoyed the life, had Circumstance ever enabled me to give up the day job.

You too probably have ambitions, or you wouldn't be reading this. And you may be wondering, in view of some of the things I've said, whether you really ought to bother trying to realise those ambitions.

That, of course, is a decision for you. But if you do decide to proceed, then I suggest that you should try to do

so without becoming obsessive about writing. My daughter the psychiatrist assures me that the desire to write is not an obsessive-compulsive disorder, but personally I'm not so sure. So try, if you can, to see your ambitions in perspective.

S :: C, remember?

Good luck in your endeavours.

‘There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.’

Mark Twain

### **ALLEN’S AXIOMS – lest you forget**

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WRITING IS AN activity which can seriously damage your health.

As far as income is concerned, most writers would be better off working behind the bar in their local pub.

The desire for fame should be sufficient, in and of itself, to get you sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

Serious literary criticism is written in a language called litbabble, which is a form of postmodern, deconstructed gobbledygook. Its practical value, in terms of helping you to write a better novel, is nil.

Unsolicited submissions, from writers who are not represented by an agent, are accorded the same degree of respect as would be given to something left on the publisher’s doorstep by a dog with diarrhoea.

Without writers there are no books.  
Without books there is no publishing.  
Without publishing there is no free lunch.

The so-called advance is actually a retrospective.

Most publishers can recognise a bestseller, but only when it was published two years earlier and they have the sales figures in front of them.

Publishing depends, for its continuance, upon a ceaseless flow of mugs, suckers, and assorted halfwits who are prepared to work for a year or more without any serious prospect of remuneration.

Properly understood, the role of writer is analogous to that of healer. It follows therefore that writing is both a moral activity and an honourable one. But keep this knowledge to yourself, otherwise you will seem horribly pompous.

The degree of success experienced by a writer will vary according to circumstance, and the definition of circumstance is everything that the writer cannot control, or even influence.

THE END  
and not a minute before time

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