



Harlan Coben

WRITING THRILLERS

“

I'm here to get you writing:
right here, right now.
We're getting started today.

B B C
MAESTRO

COURSE NOTES 2.0

The Lessons

	PAGE		
About This Course	03	12. Setting & Atmosphere	37
How To Use These Course Notes	04	13. Dialogue	39
01. Introduction	05	14. Pacing	41
02. Being a Writer	07	15. Suspense & Secrets	43
03. Inspiration: <i>The Idea</i>	11	16. Plot Twists & Rabbit Holes	46
04. Inspiration: <i>In Practice</i>	14	17. Reframing Writer's Block	49
05. Perspiration: <i>The Work</i>	17	18. Memorable Endings	52
06. Desperation: <i>The Motivation</i>	19	19. Editing	55
07. Research	22	20. Considering Audience	60
08. The Plot	24	21. Getting An Agent	62
09. Characters	26	22. Writing For Television	65
10. Villains	31	23. Conclusion	68
11. Starting From the Middle	34	Appendix: Glossary	70
		Books Mentioned	71

“

I want a world I can mess up in my very own way.
A quieter world makes for a bigger splash.

.....

About This Course

HELLO. I'M HARLAN COBEN...

...and this is my **BBC Maestro** course, Writing Immersive Thrillers. We're here to talk about every aspect of your very own immersive thriller: from coming up with the idea, through the process of writing, to getting it published.

There's something you need to know. I'm going to be all over the map on this: but don't worry – that's part of it. The course is divided up into lessons, and each lesson has its own title, but truth is that things bleed into each other all over the place. That's just how it is. Writing can't really be chopped up into lessons. Writing a book is a messy process, like life. It will be messy for you too.

That's where these course notes come in.

But I'm here to get you writing: right here, right now. We're getting started today.



[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



HOW TO USE THESE COURSE NOTES

Like I said, it's going to get messy, and that's all good. Even so, my advice is to work through both online lessons and course notes in the order they're presented. Watch the course; read the notes; reflect on the takeaways; do those exercises. We're building here, and what we are building is your novel. That's right. I want you to use the notes as a scaffold to build your novel as we go.

You might be tempted to skip to the section on plot or character or setting. Don't. Follow along. Because plot is character, character is setting, and setting is plot. All these things overlap. You're working on all of them all of the time. We're working on them together.

When you get to the end of the course, the purpose of these notes will change. Then, you can revisit the lessons in any order you like.

I hope you enjoy this course as much as I enjoyed putting it together. And I hope it inspires you to take meaningful action on some things that matter to you – and to cut yourself plenty of slack on all the ones you don't manage to find time for.

• • • • •

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- Inspiration, perspiration, desperation.
 - The blank slate of your open mind – ditch all those preconceived notions.
 - Notebooks – everywhere – even in the shower.
 - Enthusiasm and a willingness to roll up your sleeves and get to work.
 - Your own life – you're bringing that to the table in every lesson.
-

01. Introduction

LET’S TALK ABOUT GOALS

Mine first. I want you to acknowledge me in your book. I’m not asking for a dedication – that would be greedy – but when you finish your novel, I want to be acknowledged. I want to know that this course made a difference.

More importantly, what goals do I have for you? Simple. I want to change your life. I want you to start thinking like a writer. I want you to grab hold of the writer’s mind-frame and keep hold of it for the rest of your life. And I want you to start writing your novel. I want you to start writing your novel today and have the first draft finished very soon. Maybe even by the end of this course.

One thing we’ll be doing is sampling your life. We all know what it’s like to love and to hate, to lose and to win, to feel pain and joy and sorrow. I want you to harvest that knowledge. When it comes to creating emotion in your writing, that’s your richest resource.

There are three things that make a writer. We’ll look at each in detail as we progress through these lessons, but here they are in a nutshell.

- Inspiration: how to find ideas and then cultivate them.
- Perspiration: the hard work that’s involved, and some strategies for sticking at it.
- Desperation: to my mind, the prerequisite of being a published writer – it’s really got to matter.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

“

I want to change your life. I want you to start thinking like a writer. I want you to grab hold of the writer’s mind-frame and keep hold of it for the rest of your life.

• • • • •

It’s never too late to write a book. When I was young, I wanted to be a pro basketball player. Guess what? That ship has sailed. But you can become a published novelist or successful screenwriter at any age or stage of life. The greatest risk of failure comes from quitting too soon, and I’m not going to let you do that.

Since 1990, I’ve written thirty-six novels, all of them now *New York Times* bestsellers, nearly half at number one. Those books have been translated into forty-six languages. Many have been made into television series, in multiple languages, and one has become a feature-length movie – in French.

With all that practical experience under my belt, I feel more than ready to help set you on the road to bestsellerdom.

So let’s get started.

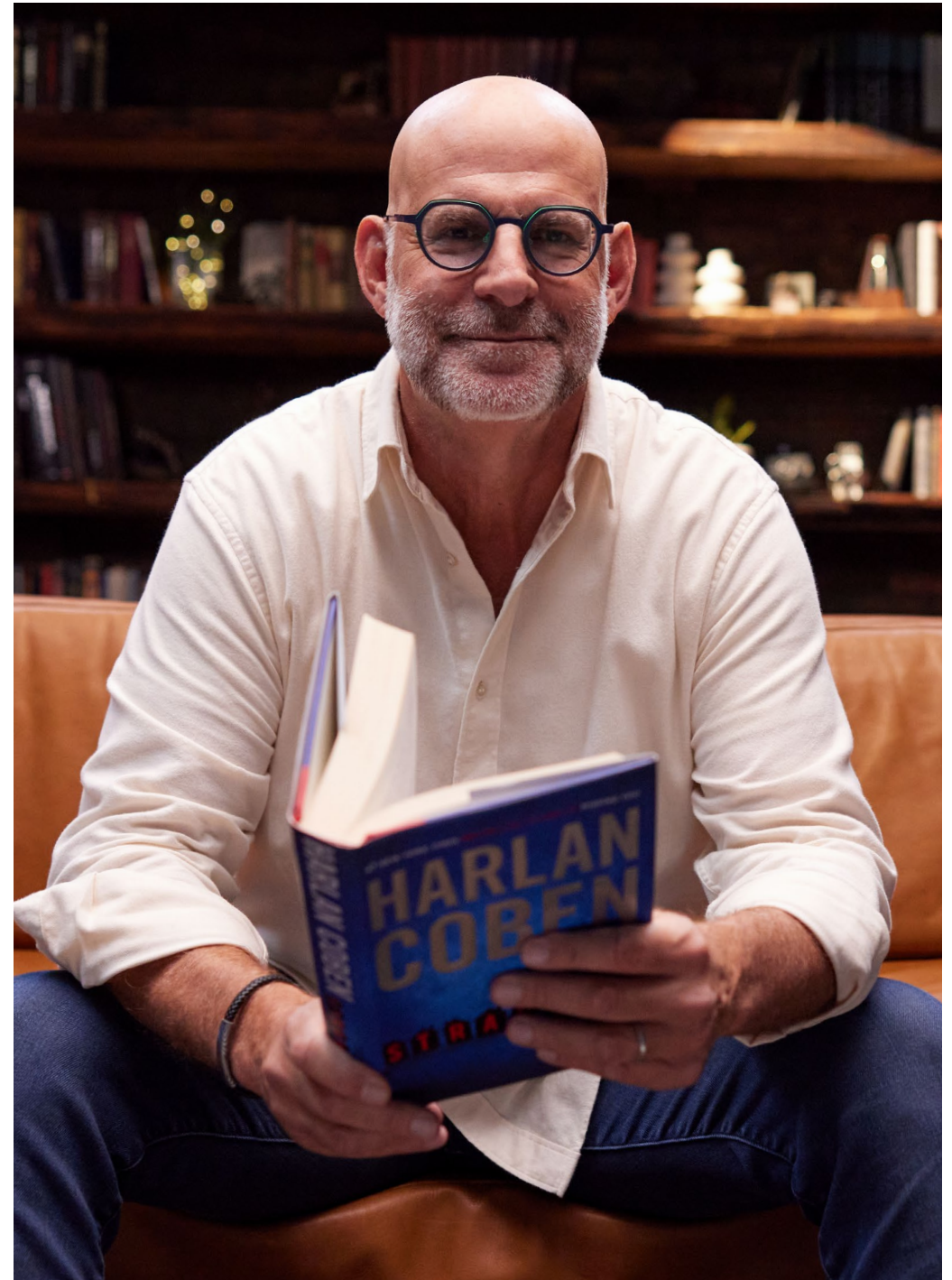
TAKEAWAYS

- Harvest your own life.
- Start today.
- You're never too old and it's never too late.

EXERCISE

Allow yourself to look back over your life. Have the courage to revisit the moments of greatest pain, as well as the moments of greatest joy. Dwell in the feelings those memories arouse. Describe them in your notebook. Pay particular attention to physical symptoms.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



02. Being A Writer

First, you need to adopt the mind-frame of a writer. More than any other, perhaps, I'm hoping this lesson will change your life. I'm hoping it will change the way you see the world.

You are a writer. We are writers.

What does that mean? It means process and creation. But first and foremost, it's viewpoint. You're walking down the street and see a guy with a weird hat: remember that hat, make a note of it. Everything you see, and everything you do, is now going to be material.

It so happens that most of your ideas are going to come from real life. My real life is fairly boring. That's okay – I subscribe to the view that you should be regular and orderly in your real life so you can be violent and original in your work. In fact, it's more subtle than that: I take the raw material of an ordinary life and twist and turn it into the extraordinary stuff of thriller fiction.

Second, you are now going to be thinking all the time about writing, about finding time to write, about writing all the time. You have to fight for that. You have to fight to be a writer. I'm not accepting any excuses.

When you try to give me excuses, I'm going to come right back at you with a writer named Mary Higgins Clark. Back in the 1960s, when Mary was thirty-seven years old, her husband died. The very next day, on hearing the news, her mother-in-law also died. Mary was left alone raising five young kids. So what did she do? She got out of bed and wrote from 5 to 7am. She woke the kids and got them to school. Then she went to her real job.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

So don't tell me you don't have time to write. You have time to write. You can write in the morning, afternoon, evening, whatever works for you. But you are a writer. This is the key to how you now live your life. Does it help me produce pages? Good. Does it not help me produce pages? Bad. Simple as that.

There's a fun side to this. You have to keep filling up your head with good things. You have to go to museums, watch television, read books. You have to fill up your head with stuff that you can twist and turn into fiction.

“
Everything you see,
and everything you do,
is now going to be material.

.....
There's a dark side to it too. You have to be desperate to write and desperate to be published. I'm sorry – you do. If you're here just to write for yourself, I'm not the guy for you. Writing is about communication. We're telling stories – to someone else.

I was there once. I know how badly you want to be published. But badly is not enough: you have to be desperate. If you don't really, really want it, it's not going to happen. So embrace that desperation. I still live for those moments: the first

BBC MAESTRO **Z** WRITING THRILLERS

time I see the jacket, or the book in the store, or someone reading it at the airport. Those moments never get old.

When I was a child, books were revered in our house. My parents read everything. I was big on *Peanuts* comics. My brother had *Doc Savage*. We would trade them. We didn't have a lot of money, but we could always buy books. My fondest memory is of our family driving from New Jersey to New York City to visit the Book Annex (for discounted books) on Fifth Avenue. They would give you a brown paper bag and you could fill it for five dollars. We would spend all day there, reading. At the end of the day, my father would fill up this bag. It was like a game of Tetris, making sure he maximised that five-dollar space.

I hope you always have a book around the house as well.

I grew up in the suburbs. Our house was built in 1962, on what used to be farmland. My older and younger brothers were both geniuses – I was the dumb one in the middle. I had great parents. My mom had a t-shirt that said: 'Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition.' My father worked nine to six as a practicing attorney. We were decidedly middle class and I had a peaceful, tranquil-on-the-surface childhood. But we soon find out there is drama in everything.

There were two rumours about my hometown of Livingston that now figure prominently in my work. One was that a leading mafia guy owned this big stone house with burnt bodies out back. The second was that the barbed-wire fences with 'no trespassing' signs we could see from the local elementary school belonged to a Nike nuclear missile base. When I grew up, I learned that both these stories were absolutely true.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



There's always more to 'normal' than meets the eye. I write a lot about suburbia. When I walk down the street, I remind myself that each house has a story. I look at the façade and think: what's really going on behind it?

None of us are what we appear. It's part of the human condition. We believe that we ourselves are uniquely complex, but also that we can read everybody else. We think: 'No one knows what I'm thinking, but I've got a pretty good idea of what that person's thinking.' It's unlikely that both those things can be true. It's something I'm conscious of when I'm raising my own children.

“
**Does it help me produce pages?
Good. Does it not help me
produce pages? Bad.
Simple as that.**

.....
I tell my kids: 'Every single person you see, in the street or in school, has hopes and dreams.' It's a simple enough thought. But start with that. When you're creating characters for your story, every one of them has hopes and dreams, just as you yourself do. What are they? How does this affect them? How does it affect you? These are the kinds of thoughts that you start to gather and put together when you have the writing frame of mind. It's like fertilising the ground for the seeds to take root.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

If you ask ten writers about their writing routines, you'll get ten different answers. My job is to help you find how you are going to do it. I change it up. Some writers have a desk; they always sit there. My friend John Grisham goes to a little cottage behind his house the same time every morning; he has no internet and finishes the same time every day. I'm not like that. I have different routines that work well till I use them up. It's like I'm riding a horse. The horse is going along nicely. I really push that horse. The horse dies. Now I've got to find a new horse.

When I was younger, I wrote better at night. I started at 8pm and wrote till two in the morning. Now I'm better in the mornings and finish around noon – I don't really do much after that. But the thing is, I'm always writing. Even when I'm not writing. My friends will say: 'Harlan's gone off to La-la-land again.'

Being a writer has to be your priority. It doesn't mean you're ignoring your family. I love my family. I have four kids and they're around me plenty. But they know there's a part of me that can disappear, that I go off on my own tangents. They know that at any given moment I might grab a pen and paper and start jotting things down, or pick up my phone and start talking into it. When I'm driving, I'll just say the idea out loud. 'Text me this,' I say to whoever is with me in the car. That is the writer's mind-frame.

I've always have a backpack with me. I've always got a notepad in there. I've always got my phone, my laptop, a tablet. Wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, I'm always ready to exorcise the demons that are channelling through me.

.....

TAKEAWAYS

- Think like a writer. Live like a writer. Be a writer. It's an existential choice.
- Embrace the desperation and use it as fuel.
- Take note of the surface. Then ask what it hides.

EXERCISE

Be observant and speculate. Observe the people and places you see around you as you go about your daily business. Then ask yourself: what can't I see? What's going on behind closed doors and closed faces? What are those hopes and dreams? What might they lead someone to do? What might be the consequences?

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



03. Inspiration: *The Idea*

I'm excited to talk about inspiration because most authors like to ignore it. They claim to hate the question of where they get their ideas, like there's a boutique in the village that sells them. I'm going to tell you a number of ways you can get ideas to turn into a novel or screenplay.

The truth is that 'idea' is what everyone else calls 'plot' or 'character'. Most people will tell you character is more important than plot. Really? If I tell you about a book or show, do you then ask me about the character's background? No. You want to know what the story is about. You want to know the idea.

So let's get down to basics.

Ideas come from many places. Mostly, it's about keeping your mind wide open. Every now and then something will catch on one of those little hooks in your brain. Anything that sticks, I write it down quickly. I write down a lot of ideas, and a lot of them will never come to fruition, but I always look through my ideas notebooks before I embark on a new book.

Most ideas come from my personal life. Once I was out to dinner with friends who confessed to putting spyware on their teenage son's computer so they could figure out what he was doing all day. Immediately I was thinking, *what if?* This became the seed that grew into *Hold Tight*, about some parents who put spyware on their son's computer because his best friend had committed suicide; then a cryptic message comes in, their son vanishes, and they have to figure out what to do.

Another time I overheard a group of teenagers I care about talking about drinking and driving, and I said to them: 'Promise me you'll never do that.' I gave them my phone number. I told them I'd come pick them up anytime, anywhere. I told them I wouldn't let on to their parents. Just so long as they promised me they would never get in a car with someone who had been drinking and driving. Nothing happened. They never called me. But a writer takes that real-life moment and asks, *what if?* What if a teenage girl calls my hero? What if he goes into New York City and picks her up at and drops her off at the address she gives him, then the next day no one at the house even knows who she is and no one has seen her? That was the seed of *Promise Me*.

Then one day I was on a hike in the woods with my family. I hate hiking. All those trees. Bring me to the city where I can see people's faces or go to a bookstore. Spare me the mosquitoes and bugs. Then I see a little boy on a parallel path, about five or six years old, and suddenly my mind is racing. What if that boy came out of the woods just now? What if he said: 'I've always lived in the woods. I don't remember my parents. I don't know how I got here.' Then what if, thirty years later, he finally gets a clue as to what happened? That's how I came up with *The Boy in the Woods*, when I was at my most miserable and grumpy.

Other ideas come from current affairs. *The Stranger* came from an article I'd read about a woman who had faked her pregnancy by going to a website and getting a fake belly. 'That's weird,' I thought. 'What can I do with that?' So I came up with this idea where a woman comes up to our hero and says:

'Your wife was never pregnant. She got a fake belly. She got a fake sonogram. She got it all online and pretended.' Then it occurred to me that we all have online secrets. Suppose this stranger went around dropping these bombshells on everybody's life?

“ Leave your mind always open, on the setting I call 'engaged'.

.....

Another time I noticed the sudden popularity of online genealogy. Out of that came *Runaway*, about a missing girl who was caught up in drugs and found out something really shocking about herself on one of those DNA websites.

I don't use cutting edge technology. I'm not a big researcher. The things in my books are everyday things. Take what you see in the world, the things we live and work with, and turn them into story.

This goes back to the writer's mind-frame. I don't sit down to read the news with the intention of searching for an idea. It's how my mind works. It's how your mind should work. Everything is material. What is she wearing? Maybe I'll use that for a character. That's an interesting name. Maybe I'll pinch it. Leave your mind always open, on the setting I call 'engaged'.

Some ideas have hit me with a *eureka*, but most take a little more time.

The third way I come up with ideas is to set myself the task of building a story out of a word or an image or a sentence. *No Second Chance* arose from the opening line: '*When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of my daughter.*' Why am I thinking of my daughter? Where is my daughter? Who shot me?

Similarly, *The Woods* starts with the line: '*I see my father with that shovel and he's crying.*' What kind of story can I make out of that? Why is he crying? What's he doing out there in the woods?

The last and probably most useful way I generate plot is by combining ideas. *Tell No One* is the best example I can think of from among my own books. I was watching one of those bad rom-coms on television, where the man loses his wife and feels like he can't go on; then *hey presto*, a hot woman walks by and he's fine. I was annoyed. I thought, 'Let's take the idea seriously. What about the man who truly lost his soulmate? Is there a way he can find redemption?' That's the first part of the idea. The second part came from real life. I lost my parents at a fairly young age. I missed them greatly. Then one day I thought: 'What if my parents had met their grandchildren? What if they were still around? What would I do if my parents walked by right now?'

I mashed those two parts together. A man can't get over the death of his wife. He gets an email; he clicks a hyperlink; he sees a webcam – his dead wife walks by. That's my story, right there. I know I make it sound like fifteen minutes' work. In fact, it's more like three months. Three months of sitting on the couch trying to convince myself that I have a job and I'm working.

.....

TAKEAWAYS

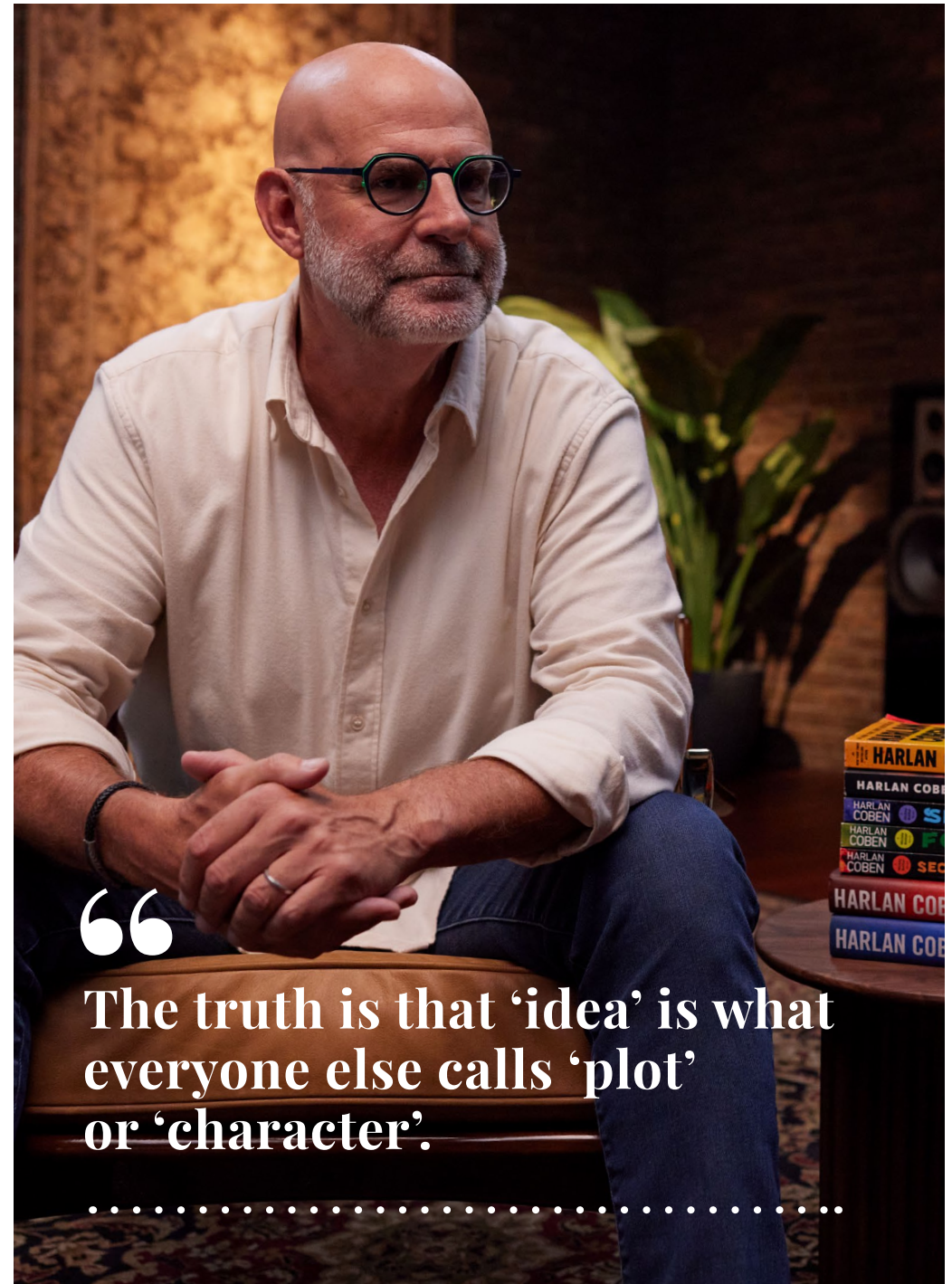
- Ideas often arise from an act of combination. Try combining something you've lived with something you've read.
- Keep your mind set to 'engaged'.
- Keep an ideas notebook.

EXERCISE

Take one sentence, one word, or one image. A moment you imagine or visualise. Use it to start developing a book. Make sure it launches you right into the story. Begin as close to the end as you dare.

It's time for you to start coming up with some ideas of your own. Think about the most traumatic thing that's happened to you. Combine it with something less extraordinary.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



“
The truth is that ‘idea’ is what
everyone else calls ‘plot’
or ‘character’.”

.....

04. Inspiration: *In Practice*

What do we do with all these ideas? How do we turn them into a novel? An idea is not a novel. An idea is simply the seed. I collect ideas in notebooks, then add them to a central file on my computer. I go through that file before I start a new book. Some ideas are decades old. Some will never see the light of day. Others may get their chance to shine. I never throw any away.

The first question I ask myself is: 'Am I going to be able to live with this idea for nine months to a year?' That's about how long it takes me to write a novel. Am I going to be fully engaged by that idea for that amount of time? If not, then it's probably not the right idea – which is why stealing ideas is harder than you think. It really has to be your idea. Sometimes someone will tell me an idea, and I go: 'Fantastic idea – you should write it.' You can't really turn an idea into a novel without going through a certain individual process.

Here's an example of how that process works for me. Recently I wrote a book called *Win*. I had an idea to write a kidnapping story, like the high-profile Patty Hearst case I grew up with. I had a second idea that involved some Seventies' radicals and a third about an art heist. These ideas were kicking around in my head and soon enough I came up with a fusion: a painting that was part of a heist; the owner of that painting; and the now rich, one-time radical who is hoarding it and has been missing since the Seventies. Thus three potential books become one. You have to read the book to find out where the kidnapping comes in.

When I start writing a new book, I know the beginning and ending. I know almost nothing in between.

Whether or not to outline is always a big subject of discussion in writing classes. The so-called 'pantser' knows little more than the first sentence of the book they're about to write. The plotter, on the other hand, may know everything. They could tell you what their lead character had for breakfast in September of 1972.

“
An idea is not a novel.
An idea is simply the seed.

.....

Most writers, like me, are somewhere in between. In my case, I need to know the ending. Take the example of *Tell No One*, where a man has lost his wife to murder and eight years after her death sees her on the webcam. How can that be? I need to know before I start. I need a destination to work towards. Without a destination, I can't make my journey, the same as if I'm travelling cross country from New Jersey to Los Angeles. Will I take Route 80 and go direct? Or will I go via the Suez Canal and stop over in Tokyo?

The great novelist E. L. Doctorow once compared writing to driving at night into fog with just your headlights on. You can only see a little ahead of you, but you can make the whole journey that way. That's what I try to do when I'm writing.

For me, the idea of knowing everything in advance takes an element of creativity out of writing. The book I envision when I start writing, or the TV series I envision when we start filming, never ends up being the book or TV series once we're done. When I hit those moments where something unexpected happens, those are the best moments of a story.

The best of writing, like the best of life, is often what you view in the periphery. If you ask people about their jobs, especially a job they love, it turns out that quite often, they haven't ended up doing what they planned or intended. Often, it was something that first caught their attention out of the corner of their eye that ended up enthusing them most. I try to take that wide-angle view, staying alert to the periphery of the story for things that might eventually move to the centre.

I also have a strategy that involves challenging myself to come up with the weirdest idea about the most mundane things. The plot of the TV series, *The Stranger*, came out of an insane idea in the writers' room about a teenager dropping LSD and eating his pet dog. That's not what happens in the series, but that's where discussion took root. So don't dismiss the weird out of hand. Check out where it takes you.

I walk through a neighbourhood and think: 'What's the weirdest thing I can imagine going on behind that door?' I go all the way out on the wild imagining, then dial it back in again. I love the idea of a placid pool where even a small stone can make a big ripple. I prefer not to work with a world that's already messed up. I want a world I can mess up in my very own way. A quieter world makes for a bigger splash.

You create your own world in a story, and within that world – whether you're writing dystopia*, utopia*, suburbia, city – there will be a set of rules; in fact, fiction respects rules far more than reality does. But I do encourage you to accommodate hyperrealism*. I'm often accused of stretching credibility, yet the truth is that the real world is always more messed up than anything you can invent in fiction. Fifteen or twenty years ago, no one predicted we would now be staring at our phones all day. No one predicted that a man in Algeria would set himself on fire and start the Arab Spring. No one predicted recent US politics.

That's freeing for us as writers. If you go too far, you can always tone it down in later drafts. I compare the process to diamond mining. The rock the miners take out of the ground is ugly, but that's where all the value is. The polish and shine come later. If I get the wrong words first time round, when I'm writing faster than I can read, it doesn't matter – no one else is going to see those words but me. By the time my words reach my readers, they'll be sparkling like diamonds.

Sometimes what angers or annoys you will help to stimulate an idea. A number of years ago, I wrote a book called *Just One Look*. It was the first time I had written a female lead and I had been directly inspired by a spate of terrible 'women in jeopardy' novels. For people still to be accepting that kind of nonsense in a book was ridiculous. Why were people not writing books about the kind of strong, intelligent, hard-working women I had known all my life? I resolved to take the things that drive me nuts in other books and make something that feels new, different and fresh.

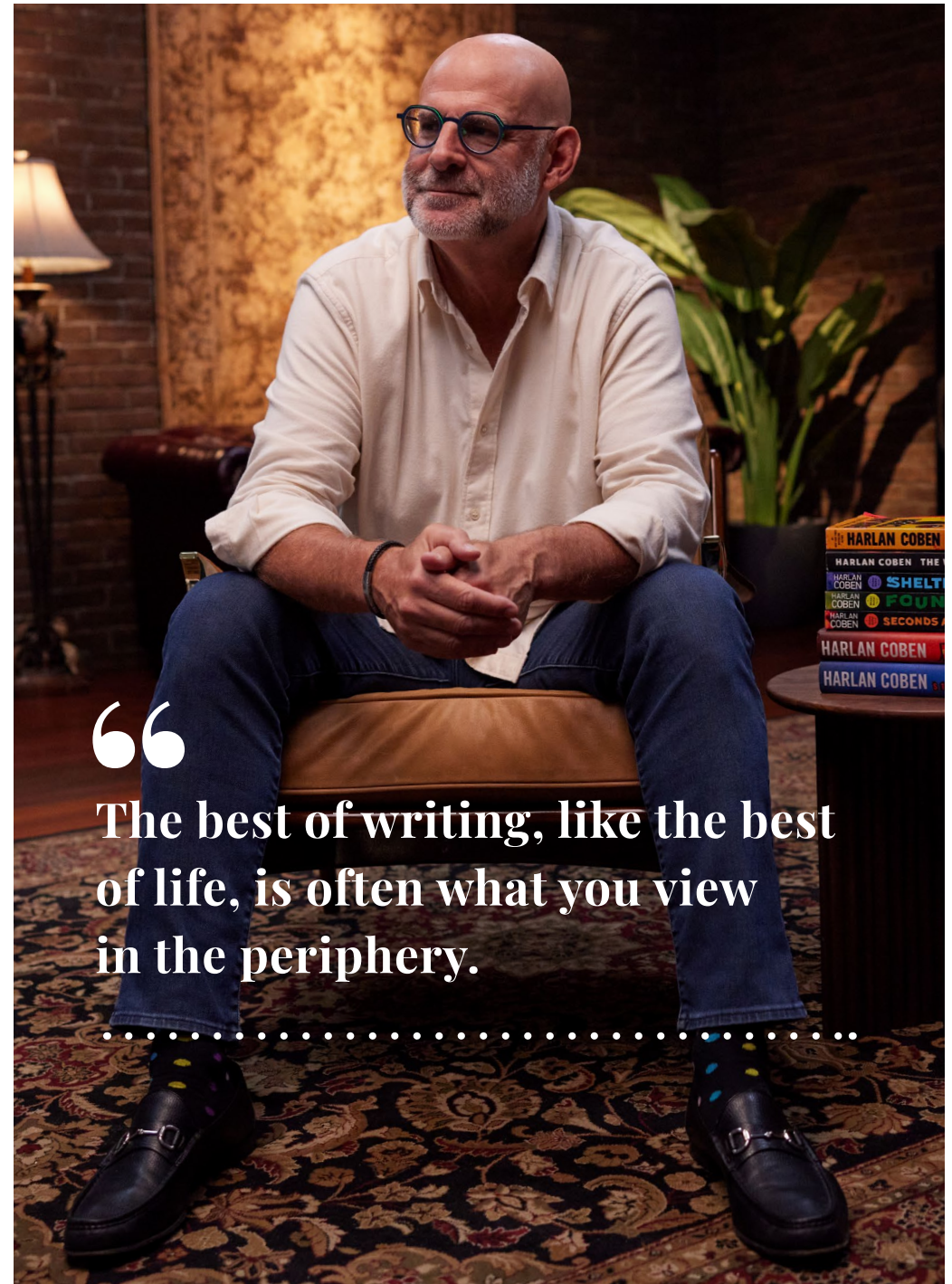
TAKEAWAYS

- Thriller fiction can have quiet beginnings. Think of life as a placid pool. Drop in a pebble and you'll get all sorts of interesting ripples.
- Mix and match your ideas until the connections start to fall into place.
- For the first draft, turn off that critical inner voice and let the ideas flow. If writing is going to school to do a day's work, the first draft is recess. Be a child in the playground. Be free.
- Write the impossible and make it possible. Push the boundaries – you can always pull back later.
- Rewrite the written. Turn things on their head. Take the ideas you hate and fix them.

EXERCISE

Keep your notebook to hand. Write in it every day for a week. Write down as many different thoughts and ideas as you can, because remember, your story will need more than one idea, more than one character. Make connections; be alert to the periphery. At the end of the week, read back over your notebook. Might you have enough content for a book? Are those notes a beating heart?

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



“
The best of writing, like the best
of life, is often what you view
in the periphery.

.....

05. Perspiration: *The Work*

Perspiration is the actual work of being a writer, because at the end of the day, that's all that matters: you have to write. Creating characters is not writing. Outlining is not writing. Watching me is not writing. Research is not writing. Hanging with your friends at a coffee shop is not writing. Reading is not writing. Only writing is writing.

Write that down. 'Only writing is writing.'

The only thing that really counts is producing words. If you don't have that, you have nothing. You have a house with no foundation. You have a body with a heart but no soul.

It's not always fun or easy. Amateurs wait for the muse to arrive – the rest of us get to work. A plumber can't wake up in the morning and say: 'Oh, you know what? Today I can't do pipes.' You have to do the work. The muse is not some angelic bird sitting on your shoulder singing you happy songs. It's more like my mother's voice on a Friday night: 'You want to go out with friends? You should be doing your schoolwork.' The muse is nagging, annoying. It will get on your nerves.

The first word is the hardest to write. But you have to write it. Sometimes I'll just sit down and write: 'Man, I'm not in a good mood today; I'm angry at myself; I better start writing.' Remember, an integral part of writing for me is self-loathing. If I don't write, I yell at myself. I get mad. It's the writer's mind-frame. You're not a writer if you're just doing the mind-frame but you're not actually writing. Writing is the only part that really matters.

I always enjoy the philosophical debate around creativity versus process. Do you like the process of writing, or do you just like the creation? There are times when

the process is beautiful. There are even times when it's joyful – when the world disappears, when time expands and contracts and magic happens. But there are also times when the process is bad.

Creation, on the other hand, is always good. When you finish for the day, you may have written a chapter or a paragraph. But whatever it is, think about it. There was nothing there before you started. Nothing at all. It was a blank page. Now there's something that didn't exist that only you could create. If that's not a marvel to you, then again, you're in the wrong business.

That's the beauty of it. We don't have to depend on magic.

Of course, there is also life balance: how well you are eating and sleeping; your relationships with your partner, family and friends. But the truth is: if I'm not writing, then everything else suffers. Conversely, when I am writing, my entire life somehow comes into balance. For me, that means I'm a writer.

You can also find motivation in the trappings. I know we're not supposed to care about the trappings. I know we're supposed to pretend that all we care about is producing the best book we can. But let me tell you a secret. When you walk past the bookstore and see your book on the shelf, it's a high. It's a high when you have a long line of people waiting for you to sign their copies of your book. It's a high when someone comes up to you and says: 'I really loved your book; I took it on holiday; it got me through chemo.'

So visualise those moments. Visualise the moment when you get a 'yes' from a publisher. There's no shame in that.

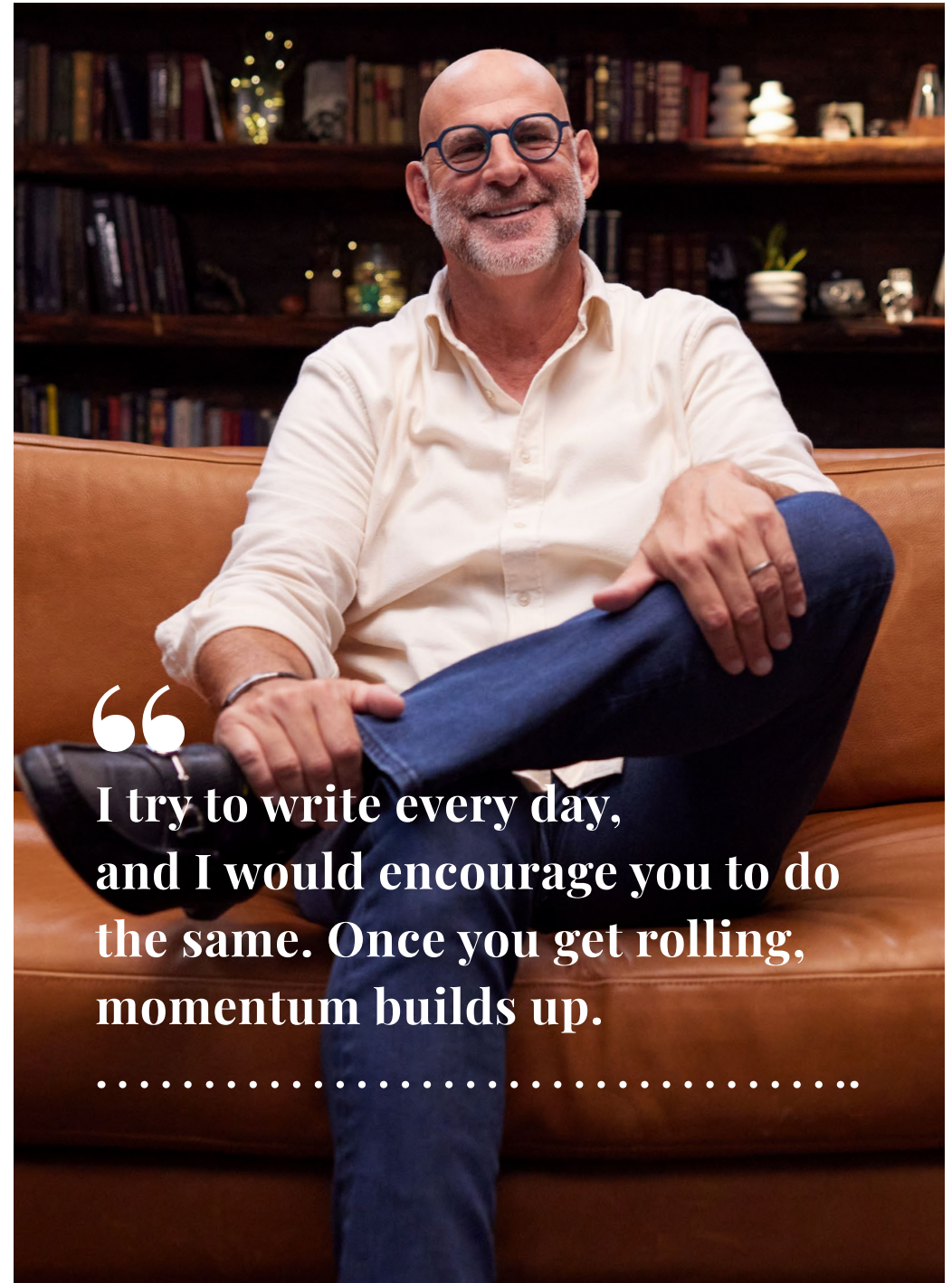
TAKEAWAYS

- Only writing is writing.
- We have to do the work of writing, even when it feels like a workout.
- Don't be shy of dreaming big.

EXERCISE

Write now. Write today. Write all day, if you can. Look: there's a paragraph that didn't exist before you wrote it. You created something out of nothing. Now you have something to build on.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



“
I try to write every day,
and I would encourage you to do
the same. Once you get rolling,
momentum builds up.

.....

o6. Desperation: *The Motivation*

I'm not fit to be anything other than a writer. I have no other marketable skills. There's nothing else I can do. I was once on a panel with a bunch of writers and somebody asked the question: 'If you weren't a writer, what would you be?' One of my friends said they would be a US senator. I'm thinking: 'Please, I'd be a duvet cover. I got nothing else.'

That desperation makes me want to be a writer even more.

I don't wish my own incompetence on you. But I hope that in your own way, you have that desperation too. You need that hunger. You have to want to see your name in print. You have to want to communicate with people.

There's the old saying about the tree that falls in the woods but nobody hears it, so it doesn't make a sound. The writer is like that tree. If nobody reads my book, I don't exist. To be a writer, I have to be heard. The more people who hear, the more I'm a writer. That's how I feel. The larger my audience – not that I'm catering to it, or pandering or dumbing down – the more of a writer I am. It just makes logical sense.

At the same time, I have a unique relationship with every one of my readers, because characters come alive in our heads in different ways. You're reading my book, or I'm reading your book, differently than everybody else. I'm not motivated by money. I've always found that if you chase people's hearts, the money will follow. If you chase the dollar, it won't work out. You have to believe in what you're writing. You have to write what you love.

Some writers will tell you they're writing for a specific audience. I want my book to appeal to someone like me. It can also help to write for a particular person – just one person that you would love to see read your book. Don't try to make your book for everybody. Don't be seduced by trends. When I was first starting out, medical thrillers were in vogue, and everybody was trying to jump on that trend. Big mistake. First, it's going to take you six months to a year to write your book, then another six months to a year to get published. Whatever trend that was is long since over.

You want to ambush, not follow, the market. Walter Mosley was writing about a Black detective in Los Angeles in the Forties and Fifties. No one in the marketplace was saying: 'You know what? I'm looking for this kind of book.' No one was begging Alexander McCall Smith to write about a group of middle-aged women solving crimes in Botswana.

I went to university with Dan Brown. When Dan first started writing books about weird religious conspiracies from the past, no one else was doing it. Now a million people have rushed in to follow, and few of them are any good. So do your own thing. Find what that thing is, and work your socks off.

I'm obsessed with my stories. Even as I'm doing this course, I'm thinking about the story I'm writing and jotting thoughts in my notepad during breaks. Obsession is a positive if it keeps you motivated to write. What else do we have?

Writing is a job. You have to treat it like a job. Every person I know who is an artist in any field, treats what they do as a job. The moment you treat it like it's magic, or the work of a higher being, it's over. The more you write, the better

you get. The muscle takes time to develop. You can't just go to the gym once every six months and start lifting weights.

I try to write every day, and I would encourage you to do the same. You don't have to write a lot. Just get started. It's a bit like pushing a rock downhill. Once you get rolling, momentum builds up.

I rely on the carrot but also the stick. I know in today's world it's all about self-care, but sometimes you've got to beat yourself up. Or at least I do. If I'm not writing, I'm not happy with me. I'm disappointed in me. I don't feel that I am a productive human being. I am grumpy. I am grouchy. I'm not fun to be with.

Most writers I know beat themselves up this way. If I'm driving my car, if I'm picking up the kids from school, there's always a voice in my head that says, 'You should be writing'. I'm not a big hobbyist. I do play golf, though I'm a terrible golfer. But even in those moments when I'm out on the course and I'm feeling good and the weather is beautiful, there's always that little voice in my head that says, 'This round is going to last four hours. You could be home writing.'

A while back, Stephen King contacted me. He was writing a book called *The Outsider*, and he said: 'I want to use you as a character. Is that okay?' As if it wasn't the most flattering thing that had ever happened to me. Then he said: 'I've already written it. I'm going to send it to you. I'd like you to read it.' And here's the thing: Stephen King was nervous about my reaction to his book. The insecurity of the writer never goes away. It lives with you. It's when you start to feel confident that you're in trouble.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



TAKEAWAYS

- Writing is communication. You need to be read.
- Steer clear of trends. Surprise the market with a story that is truly yours.
- It's normal to feel bad at what you do. That's what keeps you good.
- One 'yes' makes all those 'no's disappear. So don't worry about rejection.

EXERCISE

I want you to think about desperation. Why do you want to be a writer? I don't care what the answer is, but I want you to come up with your answer. Write it down, on paper, on your phone, on your computer. Then I want you to visualise the moment when that motivation is rewarded with success, when you reach the place you want to be. You only fail when you quit.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



07. Research

One of the most common things I get asked about is research. How do you do it? How much should you do? How do you find all these ins-and-outs that bring the novel to life?

My advice is to do as little research as possible. Others will tell you to be thorough and painstaking. I'm the opposite of that. I just want you to write your book.

So often, research becomes an excuse *not* to write your book. Going to smell the hot-dog stands on Park Avenue in New York City is much more fun than sitting there writing about it. Same with people-watching. I'm saying no. You know what it's like. You've already been there, and if you haven't, you've got your imagination – what else is it for?

No excuses. Don't let anything stop you from writing. If there are research-sized gaps, you can always fill them in later.

Have you ever read a book where the author gives you all kinds of cute little factoids, thereby slowing down the story simply because they've fallen in love with their research? You're not going to get that in my books: I don't know anything. You don't need to know anything either: all you have to know – and write – is your story.

If there's no getting away from research, I tend to start by phoning a friend. Very often that conversation will throw up some distinctive detail that I won't find in a book or an article: the one thing a dentist complains about, or the one thing someone loves about being a lawyer. That small thing, drawn from lived experience, will be sufficient to impart authenticity to your character or story, more so than reams of research.

Of course, it does depend on your genre and starting point. If you are writing a novel about seventeenth-century Afghanistan, you're less likely to have an expert close to hand. Which is one reason I choose to set my books in the everyday here-and-now, drawing on everyday knowledge and finding just that one little thing to bring it to life.

Let me give you an example. In *Just One Look*, Eric Wu is an assassin who can paralyse people using his thumbs. This was my character. I called my cousin, who is a spinal surgeon. He said, 'You can't do that. No one can do that. No one can paralyse someone with their thumbs.' They're really strong thumbs, I insist, but he's not having it. So I ask him for some language that will make it sound like I know what I'm talking about, which he duly gave me.

I don't want you to get lost in the weeds. Make that research snappy. You don't need to be the world's foremost expert in paralysing people with your thumbs. If you were, it would get right in the way of your story.

For *Runaway*, I put my DNA into one of those genealogy websites. I saw what happens when it comes back and I spoke to an employee – for minutes, not hours. Yet one thing I learned was gold dust. They don't tie the information into your relatives. They just give you a percentage. That percentage could pertain to an aunt, an uncle, a half-sibling, a niece or a nephew. So now I have mystery.

Mystery, I can play with. That's what you want from research. Not getting lost in the weeds.

If you love research, so be it. But if it's not producing pages, it's time to back off.

TAKEAWAYS

- Whatever makes us write, good. Whatever stops us writing, bad.
- Don't get lost in research. Live life, try things out, and call people on the phone.
- Be on the look-out for the detail that bestows authenticity.

EXERCISE

Put your character in a situation, or give them something to work with, that you don't know much about. Resist the temptation to stop for research. Try to write through that lack of knowledge, drawing instead on the imagination. If, looking back over what you have written, you feel uneasy about a particular detail, then try to limit your retrospective research to fact-checking only that point. Then keep any edits to a minimum. Don't overburden your reader with excess baggage. Proceed strictly on a need-to-know basis.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



o8. The Plot

I would argue that plot is the most important aspect of a novel. If you're too focused on character or setting or history, you're going to lose the plot, literally and metaphorically, and the novel won't be as good.

One of my favourite books on writing is *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamont. She tells the story of how her brother had to do this big report on birds, due the next day, and went to their father for advice, and how their father said: 'You have to do it bird by bird.' Corny though it sounds, it's the same thing. You have to write your book word by word. It's a 'what's next' process. Every day I wake up and think: 'What's next in the story?'

Here are some techniques I've developed over the years. These have to do with process, but process that also helps me generate plot.

Most people write on their laptop. So do I, but when I'm trying to think about plot, I go old school and put pen to paper. Why? First, there is something childlike and freeing about working on paper – it reminds me of being young, and willing to take all kinds of chances. Second, I like to draw arrows and cross things out. When you delete something on a computer it's gone, but on the page I can move around; I can see where I've been and I can see where I'm going. The page becomes my thinking area, my plot playground. Third, I don't count words as done until they are on my laptop, which means that my first typed draft is already my second draft and I feel like I've done a lot of the hard thinking and grunt work.

Then, as per Lamont, I think: what's next? The opening line of my recent book, *I Will Find You*, is:

'I am serving the fifth year of a life sentence for murdering my own child. Spoiler alert, I didn't do it.'

Right away we have David in prison, accused of murdering his own young son. Great. What's going to happen next? First principle is: I have to get this story moving. Suppose he gets a visitor – who should that be? Let's have a question mark. Let's make that visitor a surprise.

One of the guards tells David he has a visitor. But David hasn't had a visitor in five years. Already the reader is interested in knowing who it is, and in a couple of pages they're going to find out: it's David's sister-in-law, Rachel. I didn't wait fifty pages to answer that question. I answered it right away. But the answer raises more questions. Why is his sister-in-law here? She hasn't been here in five years. Why is she here now? Then Rachel shows David a photograph.

Plot is developed through raising questions and then answering them. Too many writers will claim that the best way to hold you in suspense is to not give you the answer. That's wrong. The best way is to give you the answer, but let that answer lead to more questions. That way you give the reader more and more reasons to be engaged. It's like Alice going down the rabbit hole: you're going further and further down and it's getting stranger and stranger. The more questions, the better, and the more answers, the better the new questions.

I'm sometimes accused of over-stuffing my plots. There's rarely a twist I don't like. If you want straight-ahead narratives, I'm not your guy. I love to have you go down one direction and fool you and take you in another, over and over again. Sometimes I overdo it, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. When you start out writing, I'd rather you have too much than not enough plot. You can always pull back later and edit some of it out.

• • • • •

To start with, go in gung-ho. Imagine you are writing the scene between David and Rachel. Give me every person's perspective, and different perspectives on all of them. Think about what Rachel is going through at that moment, and David himself, and the guard who is watching them. Is someone sitting next to them? Is someone listening in? What else is going on in that room and how can that help generate more plot? What does Rachel want? Why has she come to David and not someone else? What is David going to do with this information? You don't want David to go to the police. You don't want David to do anything that would make this a non-starter of a novel. David needs to act on his own terms. Whoever has the kid may do him harm; it's only a blurry photograph; he's not even positive it's his own child. You want David in a situation where he has to figure out his next step, which is what people do every day.

Another method for coaxing plot along is trial and error. In fact, that's what writing is all about. You keep trying. If it works, great. If not, you try again. You're hitting your head against the wall. You're putting characters in situations they don't know exactly how to handle, and you're not sure how they're going to handle it until it happens. There's an old army expression that you don't know how a soldier is going to behave until a grenade is thrown. The one who appears bravest might be the one who runs away. The one you think is the coward may be the one who jumps on the grenade. It's the same for your characters.

I've put David and Rachel in a perilous situation, and the photograph of David's son is the grenade. How are they going to react?

TAKEAWAYS

- **Plot is a series of questions and answers, at both macro and micro levels.**
- **Your first priority is to keep plot moving.**
- **Better too much plot than too little: you can cut back later.**

EXERCISES

Place two characters who have some history together in unforeseen circumstances – what history, and how recent? What circumstances, and why unforeseen?

They should be subject to certain constraints – what constraints, and how is each affected? Hit them both with a shock revelation – what revelation, and why does it come as shock? How do – how might – the characters react? And what impact do their reactions have on each other?

Keep the basic scenario simple and streamlined; then sketch out some of the (countless) plot paths you can generate by asking question after relentless question.

09. Characters

This lesson is about creating characters.

I want to stress again – I can't stress this enough – that character is story and story is character. We have to resist the idea that one comes first or is more important than the other. Most writers will tell you character is more important, but they're wrong. It's just that character is what stands out to them most. Especially in series. In series, you think about James Bond or Batman or Wonder Woman, but what really creates those characters – what defines them and brings them to life – is what they go through.

So instead of focusing on character, I'm asking you to focus on plot to *create* character.

Take Batman. When Batman was a child, the villain who we later find out is the Joker shot and killed Batman's parents in front of him. Is that character or plot? It's both.

Take Spider-Man. After he gets his superpower, and because of his own ego, he lets a criminal go by him and that criminal ends up killing his uncle Ben. That's character-plus-plot at its best, because not only do we have the story of what happened, but we also know that – unlike Batman – Spider-Man could have prevented it. Spider-Man had the chance to save Uncle Ben and the guilt of not doing so is what fuels him.

When I'm starting a book, I come up with the idea first and then ask myself who will tell the story.

In *Tell No One*, a man lost his wife and couldn't go on, then discovered she might still be alive. Who was going to tell that story? I invented an inner-city paediatrician named David Beck. The story for *Fool Me Once* was prompted by all my friends getting nanny cams. What if your husband had been murdered, and you go home and check out the nanny cam and see him playing with your daughter? Who's going to tell that story?

This is where fiction overlaps with memoir. I was at a UK military base on a United Services Organisation trip, entertaining the troops. In the old days, they got Bob Hope and Marilyn Monroe; now they get me. I met a woman who was one of the first helicopter pilots to fly combat missions in the Middle East. She was great. So I thought: what if I make this story happen to her? How would she react, and how would that differ from a lawyer or doctor or television presenter? As an added bonus we'd learn about her life and her experience overseas. This chance encounter offered me a completely new character in completely new circumstances.

For the most part, I try to write about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Maya, from *Fool Me Once*, is a little different and so too is Myron Bolitar, from the Myron Bolitar series, but mostly I write about people who are trying to live life as best they can and wrong still seems to find them. I love the American Dream: getting married, having 2.4 kids, a picket fence and a couple of cars in the garage – now life is perfect, right? It's certainly perfect for the writer. Because where life is made perfect, that's where the dream can darken into nightmare. That joy is very fragile. It's a bubble. When you prick it with a pin, that's when your characters will emerge from the shadows.

I like to make characters a mosaic of people I've met: the way this person wears their hair; the way that person walks; what makes that person's dialogue tick. I don't plan them out that much in advance, because I like to learn about them as you do – as the reader does.

But I start from a base. In *Fool Me Once*, that base was the woman pilot I met in the UK. I called her Maya and put her in the situation that I'd already devised and observed her reactions. That's what I mean about plot being character and character plot. When Maya returns from overseas duty to find her dead husband playing with her child on the nanny cam, then what she does next informs me of who she is. If I'd decided in advance that she was stoic, so wouldn't react at all, or hysterical, so would go nuts, it would take away a bit of the juice for me.

The truth is that I probably do know almost everything about my characters before I start. But what I don't do is dwell on it, or consult that knowledge at every turn. It's like the iceberg effect. There's a whole world that exists under the water that I sense, but the character is going to reveal it to me in the same way she reveals it to you.

Writing in general is about empathy'. One of my favourite things is to give characters viewpoints I don't agree with. In trying to make such characters empathetic, you learn more about them and better understand where they're coming from. Most probably you still won't agree with them. But you can't have every character consistently match your own philosophies. It doesn't matter whether it's a good guy or a bad guy. Each guy needs a philosophy of his own.

I will often give the villain a philosophy that I personally subscribe to. I find that more interesting. After all, every character is a part of you. Every villain has a bit of me in them. So too does every hero.

Seeing things from the perspective of a character is different from sympathising with them. Sympathy is feeling sorry for the person. Empathy is putting the reader (or viewer) in the character's shoes. Empathy, for better or worse, is feeling what the character is feeling.

As I said earlier, fiction is a variant of memoir. This is what surprised me most as I prepared this course: how much of my real life is in my stories. For example, I wrote a young adult book called *Shelter*, which is also a TV series on Amazon Prime.

When I was a little kid, we used to go to the Little League field. There we heard stories about the Bat Lady who lived on Hobart Gap Road. If you stayed out too late at night or cut through her yard, the Bat Lady captured and ate you – my guess is you probably had an urban legend like that in your town as well. There really was a bat lady who lived on Hobart Gap Road, but I don't think she ever ate anyone. But as I grew up, I started to empathise. Later, when I adopted the writer's mind-frame, I began to think: 'What's it like for her? She's in this house alone and everybody's terrified of her. She's an old woman. What could I make her be that would surprise people and make them think again?' Then one day the idea occurred to me: 'Suppose she's Anne Frank. Suppose Anne Frank had survived World War II and was living in this house and using this persona to hide her identity.' That was the creation of Bat Lady and eventually, *Shelter*.

A great example of creating characters from urban legend derives from Richie 'The Boot' Boiardo, a famous mobster. *The Sopranos*, and in part *The Godfather*, are allegedly based on his house, and growing up listening to the stories that swirled around him and all the consequent questions: who really lives there, and who lives there now?

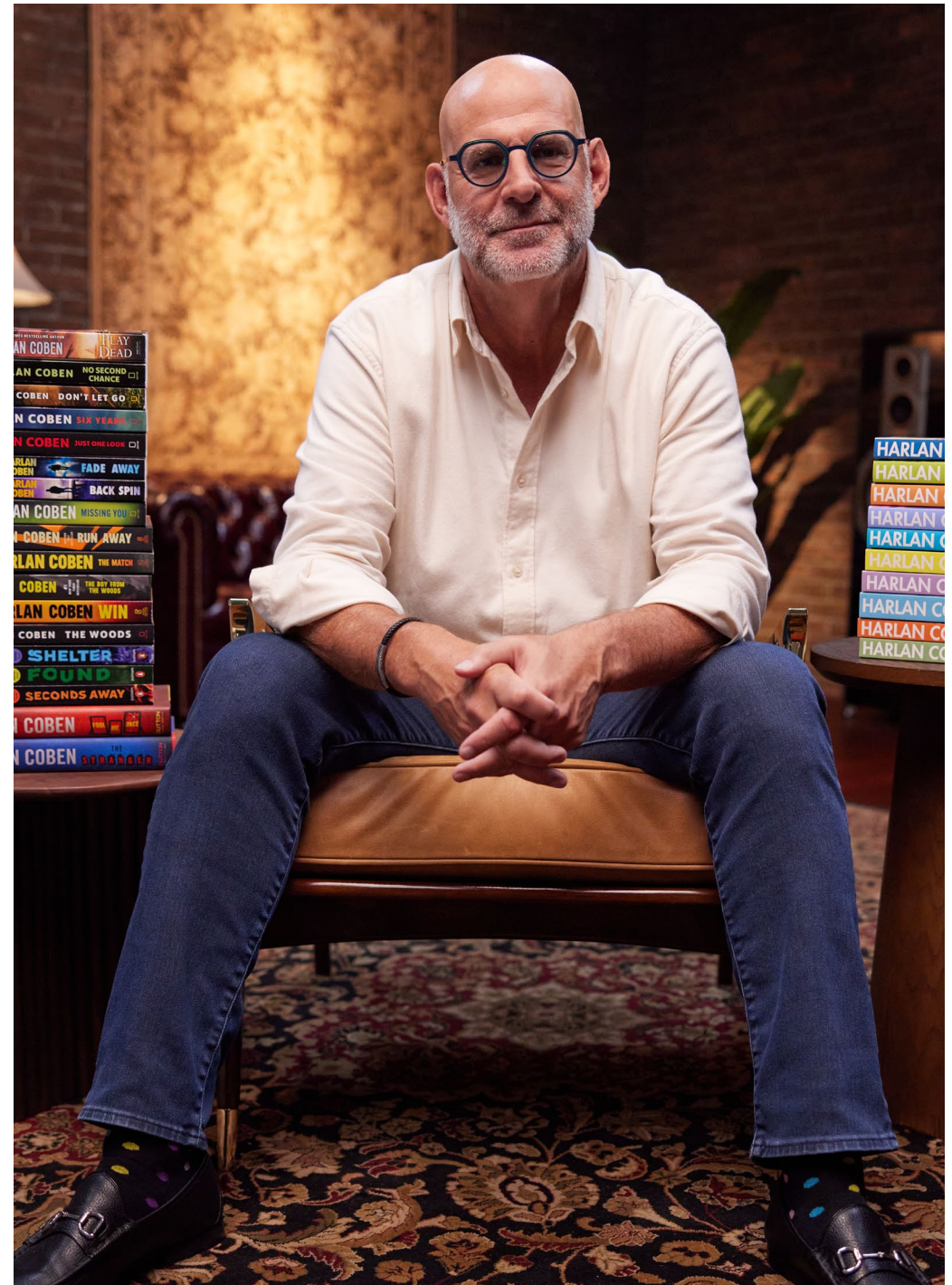
“ Focus on plot to create character.”

.....

Stories my kids told me also come into play. My son came home the first day at a new school and told me how he was in line for lunch and some other kid walks up to him and says, 'You want my spoon?' 'Are there no spoons up there?' my son asks, and the kid says: 'No spoons up there, but I thought you could use mine.' There's stuff on the spoon, and my son says: 'Yeah, no, I'm good.' As he's telling me this my mind is racing, and if you read *Shelter* or watch the TV show, you'll see there's a character named Spoon that I created from this kid my son met at school.

Here's another example. The Goth character in *Shelter* is a large girl. My daughter was a large girl at the time and was put into these team-building exercises at school where they would carry each other across water. She was mortified, and coming home in tears. I channelled the anger that aroused in me into creating this character and the situations she finds herself in.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



Another way of creating character is to defy expectations. The serial killer, for example, might play with dolls. I was doing a TV series recently and the cop was getting married and the writer had his fiancée working on the flowers and all the arrangements for the wedding. I said, 'Let's make it the opposite. Let's make the tough-guy cop the one who cares about the decorations.' It's a detail, but makes the whole thing more interesting. Similarly, I used to get complaints from people who didn't like Myron Bolitar's girlfriend. In every other series they had read, the lead detective has this wonderful girlfriend! That, of course, was the point. I don't want you to like his girlfriend. I want you to think she's bad for him.

I also gave Myron loving – and beloved – parents. I lost my parents when I was young, and through Myron I imagine what my relationship with them might have been had they survived. Myron has a close bond with his parents even as they get older, something my parents never got to do. Yet what makes this work is not simply the fact that it's written from the heart, but rather that in so many other books you've read, the father was abusive and the mother abandoned. Wouldn't it be interesting, I thought, if we finally saw a detective who had a really great home life?

Sometimes plot takes me months to work out. It isn't the same for character. For character, I start with the basic story idea and build from there, seeing how things play out.

One thing you'll hear constantly is that your character is going on a journey and must change; he's going to become an entirely new person. I want you to ignore that. Did you watch *Succession*? Were those people different at the end to the beginning? No. They went through a journey, sure, but they stayed pretty

much the same. People don't really change that much. Of course, it's fine if your character does change, for a good reason. Luke Skywalker, for example, evolves into something very different from the character he was at the start of the first Star Wars movie. That makes complete sense: he was a boy; he grows up. My point is you don't have to force it.

“

I come up with the idea first,
and then ask myself,
'Who will tell the story?'

.....

Another thing: people are always saying that if two characters are in a room, there must be conflict. Not so. Sometimes the greatest moments in a story are when you think there's going to be conflict and there isn't.

Never think, 'Oh, I haven't done a violent act in seventy-five pages. I need action.' Yes, your characters are going to need some bounce back-and-forth; yes, you're going to need balance – but don't force it. Never think that you have to have three acts, or thirty plot twists, or seven. That's all nonsense. Forget all that stuff. Just write your story. Just tell me the best story you can. Let the rest just fall into place.

TAKEAWAYS

- Character is story and story is character. Story creates character.
- Fiction is a form of memoir. Mine your own life for the details of character.
- How will your character take cliché and stand it on its head?
- The more you try to force things to fit a formula, the less authentic your book is going to sound.

EXERCISE

You have your notebook of story ideas. Choose one idea, and think about who is going to tell that story. Then tell me, what is the one thing – you can only pick one – about this character that brings them all the way to life? Write a variety of scenes to test out this defining feature.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



10. Villains

Villains are no different to regular characters. They have to be just as human and you have to care about them as much.

There are several types of villain. Some hide away from the reader until the very end. Some are out in plain sight. Others appear along the way for an added injection of fear. What they all have in common is that they don't tend to see themselves as the villain.

No one is the villain in their own story. Sometimes I scan social media. People are always talking about break-ups, but it's always the other person who is to blame; it's always the other person who is toxic or narcissistic. How about we turn that on its head? Can you take that same story and make yourself the villain? That's the key to creating the perfect villain. We all share the ability to rationalise what we do. So too does a villain.

I've written a few hitmen and psychotic killers. But I'm more interested in the everyday villain.

Here's an example, not from a book I've written or read. Imagine the nice old lady who does all the volunteer work at the local church, for no profit and little thanks. She collects the money. She works tirelessly. One day she ends up staying late. She doesn't want to walk home in the dark. She takes a taxi and figures the church should pick up the cost. She spends a little of that money she's collected, but tells no one. Next time she's thirsty and buys a drink on the way home. Then a window was broken at her house, because she was never there, because she was giving all of herself to the church. Shouldn't the church pay to fix it? That's how that nice old lady slowly starts embezzling money. That's how, step by step, she turns gradually into a not-so-nice villain.

Her entire reputation is invested in the church. A man finds out what she's been up to. She entreats him to understand and promises to pay back what she has 'borrowed'. But he's going to spill the beans. Her life is about to be ruined because he won't listen to reason. So she strikes out. She hits the man on the back of the head and he goes down. She can't leave him lying there, bleeding. She's got to finish the job. She's got to dispose of the body. Suddenly that sweet old lady is now a ruthless killer.

That's how I want you to create your villains. You'll know your villain is plausible if there's a little part of you that admits that if push came to shove (or shovel), you could see yourself acting much the same way. We all stand on the edge every once in a while. What happens when we step off?

I think of the bad guy as somebody who's walking the foul line of a baseball field. It's a narrow line, made of nothing but paint or lime. If you step on it too often it becomes blurry, so that fair is foul and foul is fair. That's where I want my villain to be playing: as close to that line as is humanly possible. He's just the same as your hero, only one little thing went wrong. If he'd taken a different turn, he might actually be your hero. But he didn't. Which is why he's your villain instead.

The best kind of villain is someone who might live next door. But that person who lives next door: what does he care about? What pressures does he face? What is at stake?

• • • • •

The key to any story is emotion. I can write a fast-moving plot that will get your pulse racing and stir up your mind. But that plot will be wasted if I don't also stir your heart.

The writer has to make you empathise. The writer has to put you in the position of the villain, make you understand the villain: be, for a moment, the villain. There are times when we are all of us stretched to breaking point. What happens when we finally snap?

Here is an illustrative extract from a Myron Bolitar novel, *Promise Me*. There are two killers following Myron. We've seen them commit horrible violence, but we don't otherwise know anything about them. The scene is from their point of view.

'From the front seat of a Buick Skylark, the Twins watched Myron walk down the Wolfs' driveway.

"There's our boy."

"Yep."

They weren't really twins. They weren't even brothers. They didn't look alike. They did share a birthday, September 24, but Jeb was eight years older than Orville. That was part of how they got the name – having the same birthday. The other was how they met: at a Minnesota Twins baseball game. Some would claim that it was a sadistic turn of fate or ridiculously bad star alignment that brought them together. Others would claim that there was a bond there. Two lost souls that recognised a kindred spirit, as if their streak of cruelty and psychosis were some kind of magnet that drew them to each other.

Jeb and Orville met in the bleachers at the Dome in Minneapolis when Jeb, the older twin, got into a fight with five beer-marinated head cases. Orville stepped in and together they put all five in the hospital. That was eight years ago. Three of the guys were still in comas.

Jeb and Orville stayed together.

These two men, both life-loners, neither married, never in a long-term relationship, became inseparable. They moved around from city to city, town to town, always leaving havoc in their wake. For fun, they would enter bars and pick fights and see how close they could come to killing a man without actually killing him. When they destroyed a drug-dealing motorcycle gang in Montana, their rep was cemented.

Jeb and Orville did not look dangerous. Jeb wore an ascot and smoking jacket. Orville had the Woodstock thing going on – a ponytail, scruffy facial hair, pink-tinted glasses, and a tie-dyed shirt. They sat in the car and watched Myron.

Jeb began singing, as he always did, mixing English songs with his own Spanish interpretation. Right now, he was singing the Police's "Message in a Bottle". "I hope that someone gets my, I hope that someone gets my, I hope that someone gets my, mensaje en una botella..."

"I like that one, dude," Orville said.

"Thank you, mi amigo."

"Man, you were younger, you should do that American Idol. That Spanish thing. They'd love that. Even that Simon judge who hates everything."

"I love Simon."

"Me too. The dude is far out."

They watched Myron get into his car.

"So, like, what do you think he was doing at this house?" Orville asked.

Singing: "You ask me if our love would grow, yo no sé, yo no sé."

"The Beatles, right?"

"Bingo."

"And yo no sé, I don't know."

"Right again."

"Groovy." Orville checked the car's clock.'

Having these two villains do ordinary things – like discuss *American Idol* – makes them scarier and more interesting than if I simply had two psycho killers sitting there with scars on their faces, holding knives and talking about how much they love the sight of blood. The more normal, the more frightening. Orville and Jeb end up being more frightening than probably any killers I've ever dealt with. Not just by their actions, but by how casual they are at the same time – singing songs and talking about weather.

Try something different. Don't follow the well-trodden path.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

TAKEAWAYS

- The villain is just like your hero. Only one little thing went wrong.
- The key to any story is emotion.
- A great plot is like an expensive car without gasoline, or petrol. That fuel is the heart and soul and character.

EXERCISE

Take the hero of the story you're writing. Change one thing about him or her: a detail about their backstory, a choice they make in the present, a turning they take. What are the consequences of that single change – in the short term, in the long term? How quickly does your hero reemerge as a villain? What does that teach you about both characters? Does it add depth to your original hero?

11. Starting From The Middle

Try not to start your story at the beginning. Instead, aim to start in the middle. In fact, Kurt Vonnegut said you should start as close to the end as you can – on both a macro and a micro level. Starting at the beginning is an elementary error.

Let me explain what I mean. You're writing a scene, but you're not sure how to get your characters into the room. How do you get them from left to right? How do you get them started? The answer is: start in the middle. Start with the most important part of the dialogue and see what happens.

The first line of *No Second Chance* reads: *'When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of my daughter.'* I didn't start with the protagonist upstairs; I didn't have him enjoying a sandwich. Boom, he's already shot. We're already in the middle of the action and the challenge now is to maintain the pace. One of my favourite examples of this kind of beginning is from *Star Wars*. There's a brief prologue, then you're thrown straight into the scene. Darth Vader, Princess Leia, R2-D2: you don't know who anyone is, yet still you are glued to the screen. This is a great technique to try.

Do you want to do this all the time? Probably not, but I do it a lot. Don't give me four pages of sunrise to kick things off. Don't have the guy walking into his house. Have him already in his house. Start in the middle, or as close to the end as you dare.

Let me give you a couple more examples:

The first line of *The Innocent* is: *'You never meant to kill him.'* As the book opens,

Matt is caught up in a fight at college. (I got this idea from my own experience, when I once intervened during a fight. I was grabbing this guy and kept thinking to myself: 'What happens if I throw him? What happens if he hits his head and dies? What happens if I end up in prison?') I don't have my characters grabbing some drinks and settling in. The reader doesn't even know who the speaker is. We're getting straight into the action.

“
Start in the middle. Start with
the most important part of the
dialogue and see what happens.

.....
I'm not saying cut out what matters. I'm not saying I don't want the heart and the soul. I'm simply saying, give me that stuff a little later. Get me started at the most important part of the story. Interrupt the life of your character at its most exciting point.

Batman's story begins at the moment his parents are killed. Sure he had a life before that. We may go into it later, but for the origin story, you need to start there. Start as far along as you can. The reader can figure out context more than we think. I'm not saying give the reader no context. The problem is too much context.

The problem is thinking that the reader needs the whole backstory, including what this guy’s favourite alcoholic drink is and if he prefers blondes or brunettes.

What the reader needs is to get into the story.

This is one of the challenges of television. I can be interior in a book. I can get right into the guy’s thought process. In *The Innocent*, knowing how Matt Hunter feels during the fight means I don’t really have to give you the context of how he got there, or how the fight started. We’re inside his head. For television, I may need to set the scene a little more. You might think it would be the opposite, but with a visual medium it’s actually harder to jump into the middle.

Even in *Star Wars* they cheated a bit, with those words coming up on screen to tell you about the Death Star. In a way, they’re both showing and telling. Which reminds me: don’t pay any attention to that ‘show, don’t tell’ rule. We don’t always want to show. Sometimes it’s fine to tell. Showing can slow the story down.

Starting in the middle means starting fast and creating something right away.

Here are the opening paragraphs of *Gone For Good*:

‘Three days before her death, my mother told me – these weren’t her last words, but they were pretty close – that my brother was still alive.

That was all she said. She didn’t elaborate. She said it only once. And she wasn’t doing very well. Morphine had already applied its endgame heart squeeze.

Her skin was in that cusp between jaundice and fading summer tan. Her eyes had sunken deep into her skull. She slept most of the time. She would, in fact, have only one more lucid moment – if indeed this had been a lucid moment, which I very much doubted – and that would be a chance for me to tell her that she’d been a wonderful mother, that I loved her very much, and good-bye.’

“Interrupt the life of your character at its most exciting point.

.....

What have I done there? I’ve created several mysteries. The big one is: why would she say his brother is still alive? Why is that a surprise to him? What happened to the brother? I’ve also created emotion: emotion for this dying mother, and for the brother that our lead character must have thought was already dead. We’re starting in the middle, not only in terms of action, but of feeling too. And I’m using what I felt in the moment of my own mother’s death, which means the emotion is real and authentic.

Think about it. I haven't skipped twenty or thirty pages of *Gone For Good* to find you a dramatic part of the story. This is the very first page, a page that I hope any potential buyer is going to read when they pick up the book in the bookstore. And as a writer you are competing with movies and television and streaming services, with computers and the internet and social media – even with DVDs. So you can't afford to mess about. You have to get straight into the story.

These are the opening lines of *Tell No One*:

'There should have been a dark whisper in the wind. Or maybe a deep chill in the bone. Something. An ethereal song only Elizabeth or I could hear. A tightness in the air. Some textbook premonition. There are misfortunes we almost expect in life – what happened to my parents, for example – and then there are other dark moments, moments of sudden violence, that alter everything. There was my life before the tragedy. There is my life now. The two have painfully little in common.'

Then we're going to have that violent incident. I'm not going to wait forty pages. I'm not going to tell you how the sun is rising or falling. We're going to get to the action as soon as we can.

• • • • •

TAKEAWAYS

- **Start the book as late as you can in the story. But don't lose the emotional richness.**
- **Starting in the middle means we hit the accelerator right away.**
- **Give the reader story on the very first line.**

EXERCISE

Take a story idea and experiment with different starting points. How close to the end can you get and still pull off the story? Which starting point do you think works best, and why?

12. Setting & Atmosphere

Remember what I keep saying: everything overlaps; everything bleeds into everything else; nothing is separate. Therefore setting is not just setting. Setting is plot, and setting is character.

Take that favourite image of mine, the house.

First, I see your house from the outside: that's your façade. Next I go inside and see how you've decorated the house: what does that tell me? Then I go deeper. I rummage through your drawers and open up your medicine cabinets: what do I learn? In that simple example, setting is both character and story.

Whatever genre you write, you need a fully-fledged setting. But with a thriller, you don't want to spend too much time on it, which means you're on the look-out for the little things that can bring it quickly to life. I'm not going to detail the four lanes and multiple strip malls of Route 23 in Wayne, New Jersey; instead, I'll tell you about the tattoo parlour called 'While You Wait'. How else would you get a tattoo? Leave your arm behind while you go do your shopping?

It would be a mistake to infer from my emphasis on story that I'm short-changing: that I'm not having description, that I'm cutting to the bare bones of plot. No, you have to have description. But even your descriptions must be compelling.

I belong to a group of mystery writers called the Adams Round Table. We used to get together once a month. Mary Higgins Clark was a member. So too were Nelson DeMille, Lawrence Sanders, Lee Child and Susan Isaacs. One time the question arose: what is the scariest noise in the world? Is it a man being tortured? Is it a woman screaming? Is it a baby crying? Then someone said,

'No. The scariest noise in the world is: you're all alone in a cabin in the woods; you know you're all alone; no one else is out in the woods; you're downstairs alone, and from upstairs you hear the toilet flush.'

That's the moment you're looking for as a writer: the flushed toilet moment – the moment when something, one little thing, can bring everything else to life.

“
Even your descriptions
must be compelling.

.....

If the grass in somebody's yard is overgrown, I might say it's so tall that it could go on the adult rides at the amusement park. If somebody's lawn is perfectly manicured, I might say it could pass muster at a professional golf association event. Look for the detail that sums up setting in a single line, that catches the attention of the reader and keeps them interested.

You should also bear in mind who is telling the story. I set one of my books partially in Paris. I've been to Paris many times, but I'm not a Parisian and I don't want to sound like one. I want to sound like somebody who is viewing it from the outside. If I mention the Eiffel Tower, I'm going to find something different to say about it. Maybe I can bring Paris to life through a single brick on a corner, or the smell of brie coming out of the cheese shop.

• • • • •

I'm not so concerned with setting as some other writers, which has the advantage of freeing me up to change location quite easily in adapting my books for television. I can relocate my plots to the United Kingdom or Spain or Poland on demand, which in turn, because everything bleeds into everything, will subtly alter the story. I have no problem with this, because I don't expect the adaptation to be the same as the novel. If you want what the novel offers, then read the book.

Here is one of the most interesting things I've learned about setting. Most of my books take place in New York and New Jersey. The more I make the setting uniquely New York and New Jersey, the more universal the appeal. The books are read in forty-four languages. The film adaptations are shown in over two hundred countries. People in each one of those places want that element of difference. If you set out to court your audience in Bulgaria by making your story more Bulgarian, it's like signing your own death warrant as a writer.

There's a strong emphasis in my books on American suburbia because American suburbia is what I know best. In *The Boy From the Woods*, however, I created a character named Wilde, who had been abandoned in the woods as a boy and couldn't adapt to suburbia. Therefore we keep going back to the woods, where he is living off grid. You may remember that I hate the woods. For me, pretending to be out there all the time was in itself a journey, an adventure. I didn't have to do it in real life. Why? Because I have an imagination.

So too, do you.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

TAKEAWAYS

- **Setting should also reveal character, which then helps to build plot.**
- **Keep eyes and ears open for the 'flushed toilet' moment.**
- **Subordinating setting to story makes your work more adaptable to other media.**

EXERCISE

Find the little thing, the one thing that would maybe scare you if you were all alone in the wood or the one thing that would bring you comfort? Give that to your character.

13. Dialogue

I love dialogue. I love reading it. I love writing it. I love trying to create it and I love what it does. What it does is work in an integrated way to further both plot and character.

The way a person speaks tells you more about them than anything else – where they were born, where they were raised, the big trauma of their life. The way I'm speaking to you on this course is telling you more about me, Harlan Coben, than I could ever convey by describing myself. We're hanging out. That's how you learn about people.

Here's some quintessential* dialogue saved on my phone from a brief text exchange between my wife and my teenage daughter (don't tell them I shared it).

M: Why are you home?

D: Stomach wasn't feeling well.

M: Oh, mine too. Diarrhoea.

D: Bye.

There you have the whole mother-daughter dynamic in four snippets of conversation. You know exactly the relationship between my wife and my daughter. That's how you do dialogue. You want to keep it as economical as possible.

You want dialogue to sound authentic. That doesn't mean you want it to sound real. How people really talk does not make great book dialogue. People talk in circular ways, with lots of redundancy, so you have to extract the meat and potatoes. You have to pare it right back, so you're going back and forth between speakers as quickly as possible.

Some people claim that a character should speak in a unique way, so that you never have to say 'Bob said' or 'Sue said'. You should be able to tell who they are purely by the way they speak. That's baloney – we all of us often say the same things. It would be a false narrative to force a character to speak that distinctively – and probably unreadable too.

I suggest that you include dialogue tags – the 'he/she/whoever said' – consistently in your first draft, to keep track of what you're doing; you can always come back later and take it out. I don't have an issue with the word 'said', because I think most people skim over it when they are reading anyway. So don't be afraid to use it. And yes, without forcing it, there should be some distinctive note to a character's voice.

One of the best ways to learn about dialogue is eavesdropping. Eavesdropping is a fringe benefit of the job. When I go to the coffee shop, I listen in on the people next to me. I'm not (just) being nosy – it's research. It's research for you, too. The writer's mind-frame allows – even requires – you to listen in on people. Go ahead. The only obligation is to make a note of whatever you think makes some particular conversation compelling. What's that little turn of phrase, that signature expression, that brings it all to life?

When you read back over your dialogue it should flow like a piece of music, without missing any beats, without hitting any false notes. The very last thing I do in writing a book is to read the entire manuscript out loud. That's when I pick up any lingering issues with dialogue, because people do talk in a certain way; they can't be allowed to say things that don't belong in their particular mouths. Reading aloud makes the glitches stand out.

• • • • •

Certain characters talk a lot and others very little. On the principle of defying a few clichés, I wanted Myron Bolitar to be a gregarious, outgoing guy. Most detectives walk down these mean streets alone. Myron walks down no mean streets alone. He always has his friends with him. He's always talking. He's always expressing his feelings. That's in stark contrast to Wilde, who as a boy lived feral in the woods. Clearly Wilde is not going to be so verbose. The way he speaks, or doesn't speak, and the way he uses silence, should tell you more about the man than me trying to describe the minutiae of those many years spent alone in the wilderness.

It's true of all writing, but dialogue in particular is a matter of trial and error. I play around with dialogue in rewriting probably more than any other aspect – moving things around, changing the phrasing to find the exact form of words. Two problems to watch out for are overuse of dialogue and unnatural exposition*. Every line of dialogue must be compelling.

There are moments when characters go off on a tangent about some weird philosophy. That's fine, so long as it's compelling and feels natural. Anything that disrupts the flow has to go. I don't know if it was Hemingway or Faulkner who said it first, but when it comes to dialogue you really do have to be prepared to 'kill all your darlings'. Sometimes I think of a great one-liner – I'll have it jotted down in my notebook and soon enough, I'll have some character say it. I can tell you now: that will always be the piece of dialogue I cut out.

Some things just have to stay in the notebook.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

TAKEAWAYS

- Dialogue, like setting, furthers character, and thereby plot.
- Every writer is an eavesdropper. Dialogue is the sociable dimension of writing.
- Fill up that notebook with ideas. But don't feel you have to empty it all in your book.

EXERCISE

Other books are among our greatest tools. If you love basketball, you don't get to watch Michael Jordan or LeBron James every day – but every day you can read books by the greatest authors in the world. So what are your favourite books that you've recently read? Go through them and examine the dialogue. Which dialogues most affect you and why? Does it have to do with the prose? Or is it that the story moves forward in a compelling way? Make notes. Look for dialogue that does more than one thing. It doesn't just create character. It doesn't just move the plot along. It isn't just exposition. It isn't just funny. It's all – or at least several – of those things. Dialogue has to multi-task, serving more than one purpose.

14. Pacing

Pace is the speed at which the story is told. Generally speaking, descriptive passages are somewhat slower, dialogue and action sequences somewhat faster. So how do we figure out the pace for our story?

First of all, it's dependent on the kind of story. I write thrillers, and that's what this course is about. For the most part, my books are fast-paced. We're sitting around a campfire, telling stories. We're cave people. If I bore you, someone's going to whack me over the head with a big rock. You have to write your story with that kind of energy.

My favourite quote on writing comes from the great Elmore Leonard: 'I try to cut out all the parts you would normally skip.' Isn't that brilliant? It's a bit like Michelangelo saying he simply chips away at the stone to reveal the statue underneath.

The problem is, you start believing that everything has to be fast. That's wrong. If a storm goes on forever, you're no longer in a storm. The storm has become the norm. Same if you're in a household that's always yelling and screaming. You need sound and silence, ups and downs, fast and slow. You need balance. You need to break up the action with description.

There are one-pace movies and books where you're shot from a gun the whole way through. Those books and movies don't speak to me. I need those human moments that stir the heart. Otherwise, the great thrills are nothing but a soon-forgotten joy ride. You have to move people. They have to be emotionally engaged.

So how do you get balance? Again, a lot of it is trial and error. You read back over what you've written and think: this is getting too boring; it's too much of a good thing.

Here are two short paragraphs from page two of *The Innocent*.

'You shoot for the Ivy Leagues, but they are just a little out of your reach. Harvard and Yale reject you outright. Penn and Columbia waitlist you. You end up going to Bowdoin, a small elite college in Brunswick, Maine. You love it there. The class sizes are small. You make friends. You don't have a steady girlfriend, but you probably don't want one anyway. In your sophomore year, you start on the varsity football team as a defensive back. You play JV basketball right off the bat, and now that the senior point guard has graduated, you have a serious chance of getting valuable minutes.'

It is then, heading back to campus between the first and second semester of your junior year, that you kill someone.'

This is the voice of Matt Hunter. It's second-person point of view, which is unusual (we'll talk more about narrative point of view elsewhere). We met Matt on page one and we know he's involved in some kind of fight. Now we discover that he's a normal, college-age kid. Then we have the punch line, which packs all the more punch for the mundane nature of the preceding exposition.

Effective pacing depends on different degrees of speed. In this example, the description is slow and the action fast, but you can try it the other way round as well. Keeping people off balance, keeping them engaged by changing up the pace, by varying your sentence lengths, mixing the highs with the lows, the lulls with the storms, is more important than charging straight ahead with your story.

TAKEAWAYS

- Take a scalpel to your prose. Keep it lean, so as to reveal the story more clearly.
- Keep readers engaged by varying the pace.
- Break up action with description.

EXERCISES

Write a one-paragraph scene in short, staccato sentences. Try repeating sentence starts, perhaps in a group, or groups, of three. Read the scene aloud. Note the points where it works and the points where it doesn't. Now go back and join some of those short sentences – not all of them! – while developing others in greater detail. Read the scene aloud again. Any better? Go back and identify the climactic moment. Try to delay that moment with a longer, more complex, preceding sentence, so as to deliver it with greater impact. Would the climax now be more dramatic as a separate, second paragraph?

Play around with the elasticity of your prose.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



15. Suspense & Secrets

There's no better feeling as a reader than when you can't put a book down. There's no better compliment for a writer than hearing a reader say they went to bed with your book at 11pm and were still reading at four in the morning.

How do we do that? Well, we do all the things we've already talked about, attending to plot, character and emotion. We keep the emotion front and centre.

But we also have tricks of the trade. We have suspense, and we have secrets.

It won't surprise you by now, since everything bleeds into everything else, that 'secrets' is about building character.

When I'm creating character, I remember that lesson I taught my children.

Every person they see on the street: every one of those people has hopes and dreams. They also have secrets. Everybody has secrets. When you write a book, especially a book of suspense, you have to figure out what those secrets are. Sometimes the reader won't learn the secret until well into the book. Sometimes the secret surprises even the writer. When I was writing the character known as Ghost, in *Gone For Good*, it was only when I came to the end of the story that I realised there was an altruistic reason for his actions. The secret had been a secret even to me.

For every person, in every scene, ask yourself: what is that person's secret? What are they not telling us?

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Secrets lead naturally to suspense. In fact, they do the job of suspense for you, by building tension through a series of questions and answers.

One way of controlling suspense is through narrative point of view. Essentially, this is a personal choice between first and third person. Of all my books, only five or six have been entirely in the first person. Sometimes I've combined the two.

“
For every person, in every
scene, ask yourself: What is that
person's secret?

.....

If I have my first-person hero walk down a dark street, I'm in that character's head. I know what he's thinking and what he's worried about, all while trying to create an atmosphere through what he can actually see and sense around him. If I choose a third-person point of view, I can still lean into my hero's perspective, but I can also show you that around the next corner there's a guy waiting with a gun. Immediately that ratchets up the drama and suspense. I can go back and forth. My hero takes two steps. The guy grips the gun a little tighter. My hero takes two more steps. The guy looks around the corner.

That's third versus first person. One is not better than the other. They're simply choices you have to make, depending on the story you want to tell.

People say you shouldn't mix the two, so as not to disorient the reader, but that rule exists to be broken. Some writers alternate chapter by chapter. I've never done that, but sometimes I do switch. The first time was in *Tell No One*. I started in first person. Then around page fifty, I really wanted to go into another person's viewpoint. So in the spirit of trial and error, I switched from first to third – and it worked.

Do I recommend you try that in your first book? Probably not, but if you want to – go for it. Who are you going to hurt?

My main advice is to base your choice on what you think is likely to maximise suspense. It needn't involve a gun, or violence of any kind. One of the first times I grasped the concept of suspense was in reading Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* when I was around ten or twelve years old. It's still one of my favourite books of all time. What I remember most vividly is how badly you want Charlie to get a golden ticket. It's a visit to a chocolate factory, not that big a deal – but every time Charlie starts to open a new chocolate bar, you are held in suspense.

How did Dahl do that? He did it by making us care about Charlie. If you learn how to build suspense, even the smallest things matter. Even the smallest things become freighted with emotion.

I like people who vanish. They are my golden ticket to creating emotion. When somebody's dead, they're dead. You may solve the crime. You may put the pieces back together. You may get justice, but you will never get full redemption. It's finite. When somebody is missing, the possibility exists that they may still

be alive. Imagine – and this all stems from that early loss of my parents – if the people who have vanished, presumed dead, turn out to be alive? That, to me, is more suspenseful, because more emotional, than any straight-up murder story I could write. With missing people there is always hope.

I write about hope. Hope is the most wonderful, most terrible thing in the world. It can lift your heart like it's on wings or crush it like an eggshell. Hope is how I increase the stakes. Hope is how I create suspense.

It's not merely a matter of cliffhangers. Yes, I use those, and so should you. It's that you care about the characters and their journey. They are going for something they desperately want and you want that for them too. You're intrigued by the mystery but moved by the heart. You need both to propel the story along.

How much you plan these things – how much you know in advance of writing – is up to you. In this case, I am definitely more pantsner than plotter. I do it by feel, like pace. But as a general rule I don't want to put off the secrets and revelations for too long – they might perish if kept on the shelf.

My strategy is to answer a question, but have the answer lead to another question. Here's an example from *The Match*, the second in the Wilde series, about the young man found in the woods as a six-year-old boy. No one knows how he ended up in the woods. No one knows what happened to his parents. No one even really knows how old he is. Now, thirty years later, he is standing across the street from his biological father, having tracked him down through DNA. I didn't mess around. I didn't put the reader through whole chapters to get to this point. This is page one. Immediately, the reader is held in suspense.

This is also key. There is only so long I can keep him across the street, and if I have the father go into the house and the son knock on the door and disappear inside, that's only going to frustrate the reader. So once I've set up the opening, pretty soon Wilde is going to confront his father and ask him: 'How did I end up in the woods?'

The answer will lead to more questions, more mystery, more suspense.

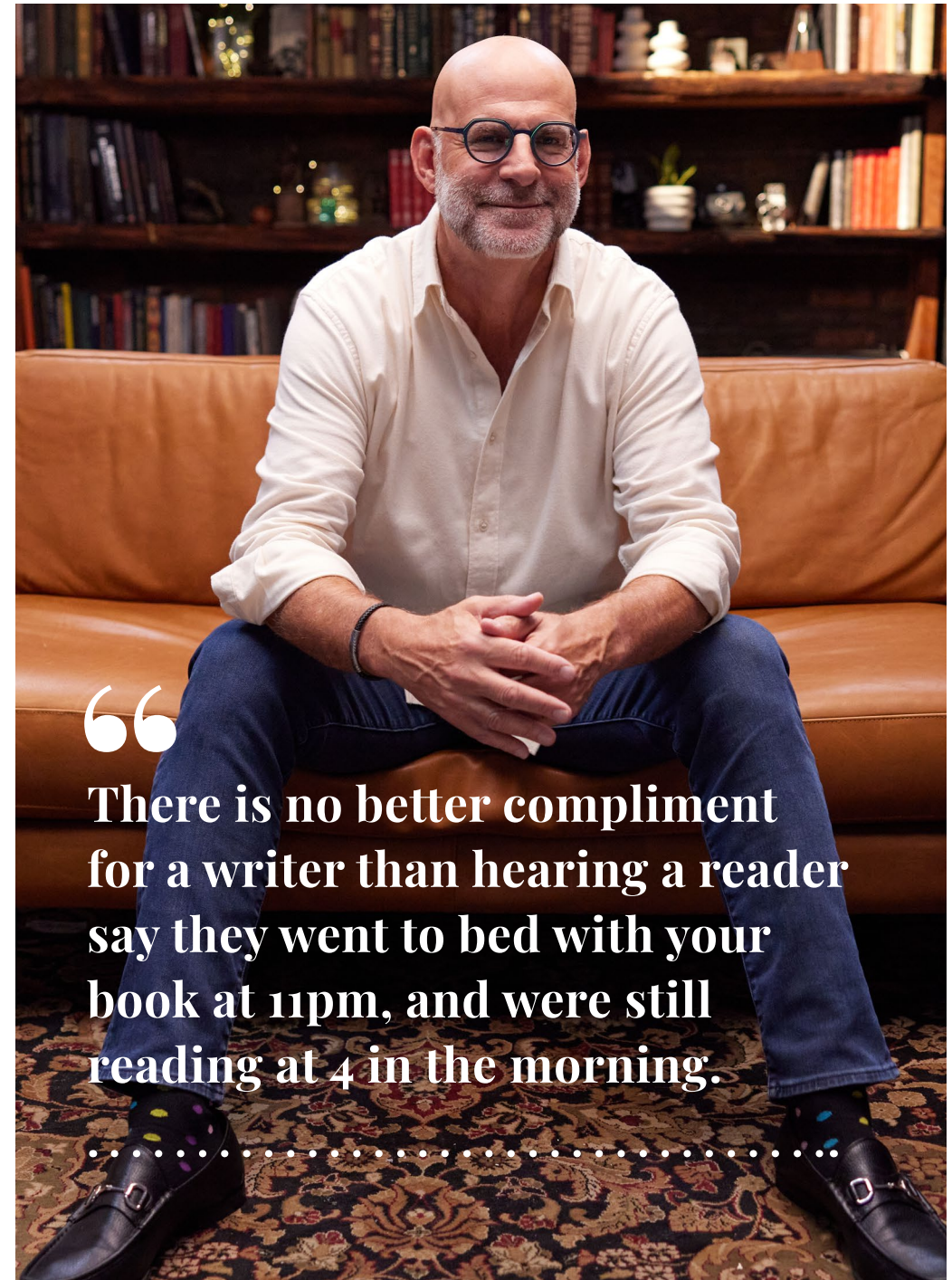
TAKEAWAYS

- **Suspense is about secrets.**
- **Make your choice of narrative point of view based on which will be most suspenseful.**
- **There's a fine line between frustration and suspense.**

EXERCISE

Look back through your work in progress. How many suspenseful questions have been posed, and how many have been answered? Check the delay between question and answer – have you kept the reader waiting too long? Check that each answer generates a new question that propels the reader onwards through the text. How many question-and-answer moments can you deliver in a single chapter? Push it to an extreme. You can always tone it down later.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



“
There is no better compliment
for a writer than hearing a reader
say they went to bed with your
book at 11pm, and were still
reading at 4 in the morning.
.....

16. Plot Twists & Rabbit Holes

I love plot twists. I'm known for my plot twists. I twist a lot. Perhaps I over-twist. I suggest that for now, you try over-twisting too. That's how you flex your twisting muscles.

One technique is simply to look for twists at every turn. At every single point in your story, ask yourself: what can I add here that will surprise? You're not going to use them all. For every twist I include, there's five or six I let go by. Look out for twists in others' stories too. Train your mind to spot and anticipate them. When you're reading a book or watching a show, especially if it's a mystery, think about other ways it could have gone.

The trick is to ground your extraordinarily outrageous twists in ordinary reality. That's how you get the reader to keep believing.

In *Tell No One*, as you will recall, a man and woman are happily married. They've been together since they were children. They're having this wonderful time at their lake house and the wife ends up being murdered. Eight years pass. The man gets an email to click a hyperlink at a certain time. He clicks on the link. His supposedly dead wife walks into view, looks into the camera, says 'I'm sorry' – and then vanishes again. The following short extract comes as the main character, David Beck, is thinking about what he's just seen.

'I looked at the blank screen, and the truth struck me anew: I'd just seen Elizabeth.

I could try to rationalise it away. But this wasn't a dream. I'd had dreams where Elizabeth was alive. Too many of them. In most, I'd just accept her return from

the grave, too thankful to question or doubt. I remember one dream in particular where we were together – I don't remember what we were doing or even where we were – and right then, in mid-laugh, I realised with breath-crushing certainty that I was dreaming, that very soon I'd wake up alone. I remember the dream – me reaching out at that moment and grabbing hold of her, pulling her in close, trying desperately to drag Elizabeth back with me.

I knew dreams. What I had seen on the computer wasn't one.

It wasn't a ghost either. Not that I believe in them, but when in doubt, you might as well keep an open mind. But ghosts don't age. The Elizabeth on the computer had. Not a lot, but it had been eight years. Ghosts don't cut their hair either. I thought of that long braid hanging down her back in the moonlight. I thought about the fashionably short cut I had just seen. And I thought about those eyes, those eyes that I had looked into since I was seven years old.

It was Elizabeth. She was still alive.'

How is that a plot twist?

By showing Beck's frame of mind, we start to believe that it really is Elizabeth. The dream where you feel someone is still alive and then realise you are dreaming and are about to wake up is awful, and awfully real. You want to reach out and grab that person. That's happened to me with my parents, which is what gives this scene emotional heft. We just saw the twist where Elizabeth appears on screen, but instead of answering the questions that are going through the

reader's head, we're going in deeper, like Beck, and buying into it, like Beck. The twist is being twisted a little further, and the emotional investment is twisting up too.

I'd like to walk you through another couple of plot twists, this time from TV.

We've established that a twist should lead to an increase in emotional engagement. It should also, if possible, still lead in the wrong direction. You've just had the revelation. You think you're heading into the light, but really you're heading straight for more darkness.

“

Ground your extraordinarily outrageous twists in ordinary reality.

.....

In episode two of *The Stranger* we meet a killer, played by Paul Kaye. We've just seen him brutally kill a woman. We're wondering who this creepy guy is. We've now seen him twice, but don't yet understand his role in the story. As the episode ends, we see him drive up to a place we don't yet know. This is building suspense. You're curious as to where he is going. Then, as the episode comes to an end and the camera spins round, we realise that he's now in the police station, which we've seen before, and that he's greeting a detective sergeant we've already met.

Clearly they are friends. Clearly he is a cop, actually working on the case. But that particular penny dropping only raises more questions. We have the answer to who Kaye is, but the fact that he's on the inside doesn't seem to square with what we've just seen him do, so immediately, we realise it's going to be more complicated than we thought. The twist gives way to another twist. The resolution delivers a new mystery.

That's the key to writing a twist. Don't close down the story. Keep on opening it up. This is plot twisting to create more story. It compels you to watch the next episode.

The second twist I want to discuss comes at the end of episode five. It occurs in a subplot involving the actors Stephen Rea and Richard Armitage. Rea is a sweet old man who is trying to stand up to the evil empire that plans to knock down his block for new housing. He holds fast throughout, even chaining himself to the building, but everything is stacked against him. Armitage has been trying to help.

We've loved this old man. He lost his wife many years ago and lives on his own. Now he has finally lost the case. They're going to tear down his house. Then they're tearing it down. He's lost everything. He closes his eyes.

Then, just when we think it's all over, we see something fall from the building. Everyone moves in closer to look, and suddenly, the scales fall from our eyes. Now we know why Rea didn't want the place knocked down. Now we know why he wanted to go on living there forever. It's not because he's a sweet old man. It's because he was hiding the body of his wife inside the walls.

• • • • •

That's the end of Rea's moment. It leads to the end of the episode and the end of a subplot that has tugged at our hearts all the way through. It's a story that has duped not only the viewer, but one of the lead characters too, and the viewer has warmed all the more to Armitage for doing his best to help out the old man.

Those are two examples of how a twist can at one and the same time satisfy curiosity and propel the plot forward. I came up with both as I was writing, by constantly seeking out the twist at every turn.

• • • • •

TAKEAWAYS

- **The more outrageous the twist, the more vital it becomes to ground it in the reality of the story. One way of doing that is to go into the hero's skin, thereby also developing character.**
- **Some of the most satisfying twists work by standing expectations on their head. We've been played for fools, but in a totally reasonable way.**
- **A twist often arises out of a revelation that appears to solve a mystery while generating another.**

EXERCISES

Come up with at least one good twist in whatever it is you're already writing, irrespective of genre. Think of something that's going to change the direction of the story, propelling it forwards and developing character while deepening emotional resonance. Be as bold as you can, but keep me believing, by grounding your crazy twist in fictional reality.

Revisit a thriller you have loved and/or pay close attention to the next one you enjoy. Without introducing any additional characters, try and come up with a series of different ways the writer could have arrived at the same ending. Can you introduce more twists and turns? Which of your revised routes do you think is most exciting? Why? Do you think any of them might represent an improvement on the original?

17. Reframing Writer's Block

Everybody goes through writer's block. Everybody wants to know how to fix it.

To fix it, you need to reframe your idea of it. Imagine you are travelling smoothly down the road and all of a sudden, this gigantic block of concrete has dropped right in front of you. Your first instinct is to bludgeon your way through it with some kind of blunt instrument. I think that's the wrong strategy. Maybe that big concrete block is simply encouraging you to take another route. Maybe you could go around the block: back up and turn right, or back up and turn left, or even climb over the top.

In other words, the block isn't necessarily a negative. At times it's a positive. Maybe your story right now is a little *too* smooth. Maybe your hero needs more obstacles put in his way. Maybe the block is what you need to run up against.

At the time it feels terrible. There are days when the muse is singing on my shoulder and the words are flowing freely. Not many. Most days, writing is like having a case of constipation that could kill a horse, with every word a struggle to get out.

No problem, I tell myself – that's part of the process. But how do I get over it?

Some writers rely almost ritualistically on having a fixed routine. Not me. So first, I try switching things up. If I'm writing at night, I start writing during the day. If I'm writing in my house, I write outside my house. If I'm writing on my computer, I go back to pen and paper. Or the other way round. My writer's routine is to constantly change my writer's routine.

One day, when I was writing *The Stranger*, I took my first-ever Uber into New York City. I felt tremendous guilt about it. But as always, I had my pad and paper. So I sat in the back of the Uber and started to write. I wrote really well. For the next three weeks, I took Ubers all over. I finished *The Stranger* in the back of an Uber, just by switching it up. It let me see things from a different angle.

I didn't break the block or tear the block down. The block was still there. I just found a way round it. *The Stranger* is written in first person, but that didn't mean the first-person hero had to do all the work. This was a scene with three people in it, so what about the other two guys? What were they thinking? Could they help me out?

Mickey Spillane once said that when he was having trouble exiting a scene, he just had somebody show up and fire a gun. That seems extreme, but the moral of the story is that when you're stuck in a moment and can't get past it, try something crazy. Even if you don't end up using that crazy idea, it's bound to help you get moving.

Sometimes writer's block is just you being a bit lazy. Which brings us back to perspiration. Sometimes, you have to sit in front of that screen until you come up with a solution just to alleviate the boredom. Sometimes you have to take a walk, or debate the meaning of life with your phone until you've talked your way out of it.

Sometimes writer's block comes not from a lack of ideas, but from having too many choices: so many avenues you could go down that you're afraid of taking the wrong route. If you go right instead of left, your whole life could be different. Don't let that wealth of possibility paralyse you. Your story has to go one way or the other: take one of those routes and commit. What's the big deal? You can't go back and take the other route in real life, but you can in books. Worst case scenario, you write yourself into a corner – you can always write yourself out again.

You can also fall back on the writer's mind-frame. The best writers I know all have a childlike curiosity. So tap into that. Draw, create, paint, play – whatever it takes to get that inner child moving. The adult is scared and sees the block as a problem. The child sees it as fun and a challenge.

“
Sometimes writer's block
comes not from a lack of
ideas, but from having
too many choices.

.....

Writer's block is part of the process. It can help you create cool things. In *Backspin*, there's a scene where Myron Bolitar goes to a hotel that does hourly rates. He knows he'll have to bribe the guy at the desk to get the information he needs. The guy will be unshaven, hair a mess, wearing a dirty white t-shirt; he's going to be burping up beer behind bulletproof glass; Myron's going to slide him a fifty-dollar note; the guy's going to take that fifty and go. But no. When Myron walks into that seedy hotel, there's a guy in tails behind a beautiful reception counter with a sign saying 'concierge'. If you're going to commit adultery here, you're going to do it in style.

All of a sudden there are new possibilities. It's a funnier scene. It somehow feels more real that this guy is bragging about his mother being proud that he's the manager of this dump. He's not going to take Myron's fifty and Myron is going to have to come up with another way of getting his information. We've ditched the cliché for something fresh and new.

My last piece of advice regarding writer's block is to sleep on it. It's not my favourite approach. It's a little passive for me. I prefer to keep moving forward. But there are times when I sleep on a problem, with a pen and pad by my bed.

I always have a pen and pad to hand. I even have a waterproof one in the shower.

.....

TAKEAWAYS

- Everyone gets writer's block. It's not a big deal.
- See writer's block as part of the process – it will feed you new ideas.
- Don't wait for a perfect solution. Commit to a course of action that will get you moving again.

EXERCISES

Next time you run into writer's block, use a writerly trick. Call it something different. It's just a metaphor, a figment of the imagination. Come up with some other image, something less monolithic*. Change the way you think about this solid object and it will melt away like the illusion it is.

If that doesn't work, outwit it, by switching up your routine.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



18. Memorable Endings

We've done characters, plots, ideas, dialogue. We know how to do suspense. We have secrets. Now we're approaching the ending. But first, a caveat to those of you who skipped straight to this lesson. It's the same as with fiction: endings out of context don't really amount to much. Start here if you want, but I wouldn't do it that way. I would go back to the beginning.

A lot of my favourite writers start their books with no idea how they're going to end them. That's not me and it's not what I recommend for you. I know the ending before I write the first word: who did it and what really happened. I don't know how I'm going to get there, but I know where I want to get. In *Tell No One*, I knew how the murdered wife came to appear on her husband's webcam eight years after her death. I knew what had gone on that had led her to where she now was.

My process is to figure out the ending after I come up with what seems like an impossible twist. This sometimes takes months – I think it's the hardest, and most important, part of making a thriller or suspense novel work. American television personality Barbara Walters used to say that it doesn't matter if the middle of an interview is merely so-so if the start and finish are both strong. I try to make everything strong, but it's the ending that brings the reader back. If I let you down at the end, you're not going to pick up the next book.

A good ending takes time and effort on the part of the writer. I don't have a quick shortcut to offer, or a secret. There will always be an element of experimentation, but the ending has to make sense and thus I seriously recommend that before you start, you have some idea where you're going. The story is a journey. I want you to twist and turn on that journey, but you'll do that more freely if you know

where you want to end up. Think about the map app on your phone. So long as you input your start point and destination, you can go off on all sorts of weird tangents secure in the knowledge that you'll still end up where you need to be.

“

I know the ending before I write the first word: who did it and what really happened. I don't know how I'm going to get there, but I know where I want to get.

I also know that I'm going to have more than one ending. I don't like a story that has just the one boom and we're done. It's a personal thing. I like to have three, four, five, six revelations. I want as many revelations as I can get – the hardest part is figuring out how to do one without tipping off the others.

In *Tell No One*, the hero has to figure out what happened to his wife – if she really is still alive, instead of dead, and if so how and why, and who the bad guy is – and I have to figure out how to reunite them. I don't want the reunion first because that's something I want you to wait on. But I can't have it last, because I still have

one more twist to go after it takes place. So where to put it? By telling you who the bad guy is, am I tipping something else off? I have to make sure all these things are in the right order. In my experience, the only way to do that is by trial and error. Sometimes I've had to reverse the order I first started out with, as in the book *Win*, where the main character has to figure out who stole the painting, how it ended up where it did, who kidnapped his cousin and where the killer is now. The order those things happen in is important: I don't want one revelation to tip off another, and I want maximum emotional bang for our buck.

Maybe I want you to shed a tear at the end, for example (spoiler alert) in *I Will Find You*, when David finds Matthew, having served five long years in prison believing the son he was wrongfully convicted of murdering was truly dead. I want the moment when David finally comes face-to-face with his son to be ridiculously moving, but I generate that emotion by setting the reunion up very carefully, by making the reader or viewer incredibly anxious for that moment to happen.

There is rarely just one way of ending a story. I had two endings for *Tell No One*, including a bonus twist right at the very end that I was never quite sure about. My American publisher begged me to keep that last twist and my British publisher begged me to ditch it. In the end, I decided to keep it. But we got rid of it for the movie. Like the director, I wanted to end on a shot of husband and wife back together again. It didn't seem necessary to then have one further twist. It's not a question of right or wrong answers – it's something you do by feel.

I like to give the reader the satisfaction of figuring out a few twists. Ideally, they should both have that gratification – to feel good about themselves – and be fooled at the same time. That's two kinds of fun. The best example I can give you (another spoiler alert) is from the television series, *Stay Close*.

About midway through episode eight, the detective hero finally realises that the woman he fell in love with earlier in the show is in fact the serial killer. A lot of people – not only those who'd read the book – were able to guess this ending, to which there were plenty of clues. But so caught up were they in the emotion of that moment that they were likely to overlook two unanswered questions: who pushed the car into the lake; and what happened to Carlton Flynn, who disappeared at the beginning?

It's not until the end of the show, with just a minute or two left in the series, that Megan's husband confesses to her, during their wedding, something we already know: that he pushed the car into the lake to protect his daughter. 'No more secrets,' Dave says. The story is over; we have our happy moment; we have all our answers. But do we?

“

It's the ending that brings the reader back.

.....

What we didn't yet know, and husband Dave didn't know either, is that someone was trapped in the trunk of that car when it went into the water. Megan knows, because the daughter had told her, and henceforth she has to live with that lonely truth: that her beloved husband, unbeknownst to himself, is in fact a killer. Megan started the story with a secret and ends it with a new secret. The ending is both happy and sad.

• • • • • • • • • •

Endings don't have to be happy, but they have to be satisfying. Sometimes the most satisfying ending is also the darkest. I wrote a book called *Long Lost*, which involved a terrorist plot. The terrorists were so good at what they were doing that even when the hero succeeds in rescuing the love of his life and everything has been resolved, we realise, as the book ends and we see a boy boarding a bus, that the plot is going ahead all the same. That felt like the right ending for that particular story.

Often, I'll test out both an optimistic and a pessimistic ending. The key thing is that I do all that testing out in advance and by the time I actually start writing, I know which of those endings it's going to be, which means I can play around with how to present it. Sometimes I've been lucky enough to end the story in such a way that I can pick it up again in a second book, without short-changing the reader on answers and resolution.

Once I even ended a story in another story, when we made a TV series in Poland based on *The Woods*. I had the two lead characters, who had gone their separate, damaged ways at the end of the original book, finally get back together again. This doesn't mean the ending of the book wasn't satisfying – I hope it was. It doesn't mean the ending wasn't real – it was.

But endings can also lead to new beginnings.

• • • • • • • • • •

TAKEAWAYS

- **Knowing your destination before you set out helps you navigate the best route.**
- **There's more than one way to end any story. And any thriller should have more than one ending. It should end in a series of endings.**
- **Reserve your biggest twists for the end game.**

EXERCISE

Whatever story you are writing, figure out the ending. Then add to it. Layer it. It's not enough to have just one ending. It's not even enough to have two. Give me three endings. Give me an ending on the very last page, if you can. Then ask yourself these questions:

- Am I surprising people?
 - Does this change how I feel about things?
 - Am I shedding any tears?
-

19. Editing

Some writers say they only do one draft: they get it right first time. I don't believe them.

I do a lot of rewriting. How do I do it?

First of all, I turn off any negative voices in my head and throw the first draft down.

But editing is already part of that process. Each day I go back and reread what I've written. I go all the way back to the beginning and reread and rewrite. By the time I've completed that first draft, I've already rewritten chapter one eight or nine times. This is true of almost every writer.

I don't edit much for story. My story pretty much stays the way it is. I rarely have to go back and take out a whole chapter because I messed something up. Maybe a small thing, but not a big thing. Mostly, the story is in place. Editing is more about the prose and getting the right dialogue. It's about removing the unwanted stuff. On my home computer I have a file called 'Spare', which is where I put all that stuff in case I change my mind and want it back again. If a novel is five hundred pages long, then my 'Spare' folder usually runs to between fifty and a hundred pages – that's how much I end up cutting. To date, I have never once put anything back. I see this as part of the process, not waste. It's part of the process to get me where I want to go.

In short, I rewrite a lot and I rewrite every day. I suggest you do too, to get yourself a running start.

Remember, no one is going to see that first draft. It can be as rough as need be. Just get the story down. Then you can fix it. Let me repeat an analogy I've already used: it's like diamond mining. You pick this ugly stone out of the ground, but that's where the value is. Then – in your second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth draft – you begin to cut and polish and set that stone, and transform it into something that will entrance all those who set eyes upon it.

My editor is Ben Sevier, who is also the executive vice-president and publisher of Grand Central Publishing. Our first book together came out in 2008. That book, *Hold Tight*, was also my first *New York Times* number one bestseller.

Here is a conversation with Ben that I thought might be helpful for students taking this course.

Harlan Coben: *Ben, what happens when I send you my finished manuscript?*

Ben Sevier: *I read it immediately. I always know when you're on the point of delivering a manuscript because you go quiet for a few weeks just beforehand. So when it finally lands, I run straight home and start reading. I usually read it in one sitting. I approach it first and foremost as a fan. I want to react as quickly as I can. That reaction is almost always wholly positive.*

HC: *So you're reading it like someone who just bought it in the store?*

BS: *That's right. Your stories are so pacy and twisty that I'm racing through it, and I think that's the experience your readers are having nine months later when it's a book. If I catch something, I make a note, but in that first read I don't examine every word. I just want to enjoy it.*

HC: *You're right: if a book is about four hundred pages long and it takes me nine months to write it, then around the eight-month mark, I may be on about page two hundred; that last month, I vanish and write the remaining two hundred, sometimes as many as forty or fifty pages on the last day.*

BS: *I'm aware that you're writing at your pace, and that you're writing so fast in the last three weeks that the reader can't help but be flipping the pages. I've always imagined that you are as into it at that point as the reader is, waiting on those twists in just the same way.*

HC: *What happens next?*

BS: *I'll call or text and give you an immediate reaction. Then I'll call your agent, who has been reading it at more or less the same time. We compare notes. Then, over roughly a two-week period, I go back through the manuscript and remember what my first reaction was to characters, or scenes, or twists. I try to be a little more thoughtful at that point. I'm also looking for little mistakes you've made in the haste of writing. That's the period in which I'm producing an editorial letter for you, with an itemised list of things to take another look at.*

HC: *I go through that list fast because I'm feeling that momentum. I work on the presumption of innocence. I agree on principle with everything you're saying. I sleep on it. Then the next day I'll work through the manuscript and decide what I really do and don't agree with, then call you to discuss it. For us, that tends to be a fast process.*

BS: *We're not making rookie mistakes anymore. We've developed a relationship over many books. We trust each other.*

HC: *It's important as a writer that you don't get defensive. My view is that if seven or eight or nine readers tell you something is wrong, then they're right. Even if you still think you're right, clearly something isn't quite connecting. Editors are very good at identifying problems, even if they don't always know how to fix them.*

BS: *That's why that first read is the most valuable – to get that gut feeling for what might be slightly off, just slightly discordant.*

HC: *I'm still nervous at this point. It's one of the paradoxes of writing. You think you're a terrible writer, yet you still have the hubris to say: 'I'm going to write a book and you're going to pay me to read it.' Same thing here. I'm confident the book is good, but I'm still worried it's not working until we speak and you tell me it is.*

After a few rounds of back-and-forth between us, the manuscript goes to the copy editor. Copy editors are great. Sometimes I have characters go to bed on Tuesday night and wake up on Friday morning. I'll have them drive someplace in thirty minutes that would normally take four hours.

BS: *The copy editor produces the final manuscript that with your approval will be printed. It's their job to check facts as well as grammar and spelling. It's detailed, difficult work. One technique some of them use is to read sentences backwards so as not to be distracted by the story while looking for errors. Copy-editing usually takes a week to two weeks. Then it's off to the typesetter.*

HC: *When do you start thinking about the cover and marketing?*

BS: *I start to think about that as soon as you deliver the basic idea.*

HC: *I always send you the first hundred pages too, just to check that you think I'm on track. Same for the agent.*

BS: *Every author is different in every way. But that's a good example of how it works with authors who are delivering a book a year as you have done. We're working on your books all the time; it's my job to orchestrate the company on behalf of you and your books. From the moment I know what you're working on, I'm thinking: What should the title be? What should the cover look like? What's the marketing campaign going to be? Is there anything special about this book? Is there a hook that we're going to lean on as we talk about it with retailers? I try to keep you away from it while you're writing, but that process is unfolding from that very first moment, in parallel.*

HC: *You mentioned titles. I would say that of the more than thirty books I've written, only seven or eight of those have been published under my titles. I shouldn't even reveal this, but my working title for Tell No One was Big Tears Fall. At least I had the right number of words. Sometimes the author is too close to the book to name it.*

BS: *Titles are hard and there's no recipe. You know the right title when you see it or read it, but I've made many lists of potential titles for your books. I should archive them somewhere.*

HC: *You normally send me a few cover concepts for us to discuss. How many might you have seen by that point?*

BS: *Usually dozens. We have a big art department. We look at options and I keep sending them back till I have something I'm excited about that I want you to see.*

HC: *How is the editorial process different for new writers?*

BS: *It might take longer. You might go through more drafts and really think and talk about every word on every page. How a writer and editor learn about each other is a wonderful process too.*

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

HC: *What do you look for in a manuscript?*

BS: *The number one thing I'm looking for is a book that takes me someplace new – something I haven't seen before, plus characters I love and want to spend time with. If I'm immersed – if I would rather continue reading than get back to my Inbox, then that's something I might want to publish.*

HC: *What about following the market? Let's say medical thrillers are big, and everyone's writing medical thrillers because they're convinced that's what editors are looking for.*

BS: *Chasing trends is a fool's errand in publishing. It takes a year to write a book – maybe three or four years to write your first. Culture moves at the speed of light. So what you think is a trend today will be a distant memory by the time the book gets published. The advice I give new writers is that you've got to write the book you have to write, and if it's good it will find its market.*

HC: *I don't chase the market. I chase the reader's heart.*

Let's get technical for a moment. What are some common mistakes new writers might make?

BS: *Just the fairly obvious things. Don't describe every physical detail. Don't write the book as if it's a screenplay or describe it as if it's a movie. Writing a book is a specialised skill. The novel is a form with conventions. Writers should not be afraid to break those conventions when it makes sense to do so, but you can tell when someone hasn't taken their work seriously: manuscripts that are not polished, that haven't been put through multiple drafts, that clearly haven't been tested out on a trusted reader.*

HC: *Tell us more about the trusted reader.*

BS: *Every writer has a different configuration, but a potentially successful writer will have friends, writers' groups, family members: someone who's reading*

behind them, and the writer will be open-minded about what they're hearing. It's common sense to smooth the path for the busy agent or editor. I can get to 'no' very fast, sometimes in the first five minutes – getting to 'yes' is a longer process.

HC: If an editor does like a manuscript, what happens next?

BS: Most publishers have a handful of editors who are scouting books; they have relationships with agents and get manuscripts on submission. A literary agent is a critical part of the process. I think every writer who wants a successful career in trade book publishing, which is what you and I work in, needs an agent.

Editors have particular tastes and know what the company is good at. When they fall in love with a manuscript they talk to their colleagues. They have colleagues in editorial, publicity, marketing, sales and then ultimately a publisher who will give the final go-ahead, which is the role I have these days. So their job is to transmit their enthusiasm to the rest of the team. I love it when I get a phone call or see someone in the hall and they say: 'I read something last night that I love.'

HC: I think this is what we want to close on. There seems to be a belief that the system is against you, but an editor is looking to fall in love everyday. They want each manuscript they open to be the next big thing they're excited about. That's good news for us all.

BS: Successful editors get into the business because they have a passion for books and reading. I give them the same advice that I give writers: you can only edit and publish the books that you love.

• • • • •

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



TAKEAWAYS

- Don't be defensive in the face of editorial feedback.
- Do recruit some trusted readers before submitting your manuscript.
- Readers are sensitive to glitches, even when they cannot necessarily diagnose the problem.

EXERCISE

Polish up a substantial section of your work in progress. Give it to three trusted readers and ask for their feedback. Ask them to read it twice, if possible: once for overall impression, then again, more slowly, for points of detail. Pay particular attention should all three readers zoom in on the same area.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



20. Considering Audience

There's a theory that you should consider your audience as you write. My advice is to ignore that advice. I think it leads you astray. The first problem with it is: who is that audience? More importantly, your job as a writer is to take the reader where he or she doesn't know they want to go. You're not supposed to give them exactly what they want. You're not supposed to give them exactly what they expect.

Write what you love. Write what you care about. If you don't like romance novels, don't for a moment imagine you can write one.

The audience for your book is the people who like the books that you like too. That's not the same as saying that you are writing only for yourself. When I write, I'm trying to write a novel that I would like to read myself, but I'm not writing it for me. Saying that you only write for yourself is like saying that you only talk to yourself – only writing is much harder than talking. If you want to write something for yourself alone, that's a diary; that's therapy.

You are writing so other people can read your book and experience what you want them to experience. But if you think about that audience during the actual process of writing, if you're worrying about who you're going to please or offend or upset, it's simply not going to work. You must focus on telling your story the best way you can.

The one exception to this rule might be the use of bad language. When John Grisham was asked what made his novels so popular, he said it was because he never cursed, never swore, never used four-letter words. It's a fact that there's a large constituency of people out there who won't read any book that contains the f-bomb. It's up to you. I've tried it both ways, but in the end, I prefer to do

what feels right for the characters and story. I don't want to compromise on that, for any audience.

The problem with targeting markets is that trends change very quickly. Not so long ago I wrote a book called *The Match*, which arose out of the US television show, *The Bachelor*, and has to do with social media influencers. I didn't write it because I was chasing that big audience. I was intrigued by how manipulative this kind of show can be, and how reality TV is so often so obviously fake and scripted. I found an angle that I wanted to explore and embedded those ideas and themes in a larger mystery. *The Match* was a thriller, but also more than a thriller. If you want to attract romance or science fiction readers to your genre, you need to find a way of pulling them in without compromising your own interests and strengths.

Don't dismiss the audience, but don't write as though that audience were looking over your shoulder. If you do that, your book simply won't be as good. It won't be as inventive, nor as commercial.

I'm a commercial writer. I live in the modern world. My books take place in the modern world. They reflect contemporary reality and have relevance to contemporary social issues. Which means I am able to find an audience naturally, without chasing it.

I don't chase the audience. I bring the audience with me.

When a TV executive tells me they've figured out what the audience wants on the basis of an algorithm or survey, I always dismiss it, because frankly, it's always wrong. Just because *The Sopranos* was good doesn't mean that

• • • • •

audiences want shows about the mob ever after. Not only does it not feel good to write to order, it simply doesn't work – not even if your aim is purely to make money.

The audience doesn't know what it wants till it gets it, and your best chance of producing that elusive thing is to follow your heart.

One more thing...

I've mentioned several times that fiction is memoir and how surprised I've been to discover how much of my own life, and especially my own trauma, has ended up in my books. I shouldn't be surprised though, because like I said: my mantra is to write about the things I care about. I write about family and I write about loss, sometimes even about joy, and the fact that I care is what gives life to my books and draws an audience in.

• • • • •

TAKEAWAYS

- **Write your book, not someone else's.**
- **Don't chase after the audience; let them come to you.**
- **Unlock the power of your lived experience.**

EXERCISE

Give it some serious thought. What do you care about? What has hurt you, scared you, thrilled you, delighted you? Get those strong feelings into your book, even if you transfer them to different objects. Where are your passions? That is where you will locate your unique voice. You have to open your heart to the world.

21. Getting An Agent

I started working with Lisa Erbach Vance, from the Aaron Priest Literary Agency, in 1996. I was a relative unknown. I had had a couple of books out already with a very small press and no agent. Then I had an agent that didn't work out.

Harlan Coben: *Lisa – I seem to recall we were introduced by another author.*

Lisa Erbach Vance: *You were looking for a new agent and came to us. You'd published a few of those early Myron Bolitar books and my first – superficial – thought was, 'I don't think so.' I'm not a big sports person, so I thought mysteries about sports weren't going to connect with me. But right away I was charmed by your narrative voice. I just kept turning the pages. About twenty per cent of the way in, I realised I was completely engrossed. I read that first book so fast. Then I picked up another and read that right away too. I knew that what you were doing was distinctive and that I had to work with you and your books.*

HC: *Thank you. That book, by the way, was Fade Away. One good lesson to take from that anecdote is that this wasn't necessarily what you were looking for. If somebody had pitched to you the idea of a sports agent who solves crimes, your first reaction would be 'no'. It's a reminder that we shouldn't just follow the market.*

Tell us about the submission process and what makes you say 'yes' to a writer.

LEV: *Most people submit via query – or cover – letter. I get thousands of email queries a year. It's a lot in total and a lot every day. I'm very happy to have them. I'm always hopeful that I'm going to like what I see, but some things just aren't for me. Some things aren't really quite there. Sometimes I meet people at writers' conferences and they'll pitch to me in person. If I'm interested, I'll ask them to send me some pages.*

HC: *Many people starting out think it's them against the machine, David against Goliath. But every time you read a query letter or a new manuscript, you're hoping to find the next big thing.*

LEV: *That's absolutely true. Every query I start reading, I'm thinking: this could be it; this could be that million-dollar idea; this could be that idea that's not a million dollars, but I'm going to love it and there's a career here and it's going to be exciting and I'm going to be thrilled to represent this person. The same thing happens when I start a manuscript. We're looking for that thing we can support wholeheartedly, because that's what good agenting is.*

HC: *I seem to recall I was your very first client. I was a newbie and you were a newbie and we kind of grew up together. So if you like the look of something, what's the next step?*

LEV: *I expect to see a sample chapter with the query letter. Be it first chapter or prologue, I need to know how the book begins and I also want a taste of the writing. Then, if I like the idea expressed in the query, and if I'm engaged by that opening chapter, I will ask for the manuscript.*

HC: *We're glossing over that to get to these levels is hard, like winning a minor lottery ticket. The first step is one out of a certain percentage; the second is one out of another percentage; then the third step, where you end up taking a writer on, is especially hard to reach. This is not an easy thing to accomplish. No one should take it personally, but it's not.*

LEV: *The odds are tough. There are so many people writing and looking for an agent. And let's not forget, it's a subjective business. So if a book is not right for me, it very well could be right for someone else.*

HC: But it's not going straight into the void. You're giving it a chance, which is important for people to know.

LEV: Absolutely. We read the queries and samples, and if it all strikes a chord, then off we go. Sometimes there's a little editorial involved before I'll submit the manuscript, but that's how the process works.

HC: You read my books at the same time my editor does and you get back to me quickly with a response, usually with a couple of suggestions. But how does it work for new clients?

LEV: First, we get the manuscript all polished up as best we can make it.

HC: You never just take a manuscript and say, 'Okay, we're ready'.

LEV: I don't think that has ever happened. A little polishing is part of the process. Authors have to be prepared to keep revising. Your agent might ask you to revise, and then of course your editor will ask you to revise. Once it's polished up, I call a few editors. It's my job to know who likes what, so I call the people who I think might engage with the manuscript and pitch the story to them. With a bit of luck they will ask to read it, then after a short while, come back to me with offers.

HC: What kind of mistakes do people make with their queries?

LEV: The fundamental thing is to know who you're querying. Different agents have different interests and different tastes. I might state explicitly that I'm not interested in science fiction but still get science fiction submissions, for example; I'll still look at them, but it's likely to be a 'no'. So do your research.

Then the query letter itself is so important. There's no magic bullet, no trick, but best is to keep it as straightforward as possible. I want to know what your book is, but all I need is a single, well-written paragraph on the story.

If you are writing suspense, then that paragraph should really tantalise me. There should be a great hook: what's the setup? Then leave me dangling, and wanting more. I like it when a book is about more than plot: it's about relationships, families, a concept or theme. I like to know that as well.

Then I like a sentence or two on the author. If your main character is a doctor, are you also a doctor? What is your background? How does your life relate to your writing? It's an opportunity to include something personal – I like it when people say something about their pets, or their kids. It doesn't have to be stiff and formal. I like to get a glimpse of the person behind the query.

Even so, the query should be straightforward. I don't need bells and whistles. I just need clarity on the story. It sounds simple, but it can actually be quite difficult to distill four hundred pages into a single paragraph. If someone can do that, it signals to me that they know what they're doing. They know what they're trying to accomplish. Their story is defined but is about something greater than plot.

An agent analyses the parts of the query letter very carefully to see if the writer is clear and can put words together in an engaging way. We get a lot from that letter. There's a lot there. One suggestion is to think of that initial approach in terms of the flap copy for the potential book.

HC: How long should the query letter be?

LEV: One page should do it: the introductory paragraph, something more about the book, and who you are. If the letter is too long, you run the risk of losing the agent's attention.

TAKEAWAYS

- Research the agent's interests before submitting a sample of your manuscript.
- But also, write the book you want to write. Your book could be the book an agent doesn't know they're looking for.
- Keep your query or cover letter clear and straightforward. Say just enough to leave the agent wanting more.

EXERCISE

Write a query or cover letter to accompany your book. Even if you haven't yet finished writing the book, it will help you understand what it's about. Think in terms of copy for the flap or back cover: how are you going to sell your story? What will you share about yourself?

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



22. Writing For Television

James M. Cain, the author of *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, was once asked if he hated what Hollywood had done to his books. To which his answer was: 'They've done nothing to my books – they're right here.' That's my philosophy too. A book is a book and a television show is a television show – they are entirely separate things. When someone says the book is better than the show, or the show is better than the book, I never quite know how they expect me to react. I love both and see them as very different.

What's the difference between writing a novel and a TV show?

First of all, when you're writing a novel, it's completely solo. You are by yourself and you are everything. You are writer, director, lights, sound and key grip. You are catering. The novelist is all things to the novel.

Television, in contrast, is a great collaborative effort. You are working with lots of other people who have ideas of their own. I enjoy that interaction. I love listening to the actors or the cameraman or the director come up with new ideas. It's a team effort. Like being captain of the World Cup football team instead of Wimbledon champion.

Most writers tend towards self-sufficiency. Most writers are not temperamentally inclined to play well with others. But when it comes to television or movies, you have to respect the views of the team. Day to day, you don't have that much of a say, though you may have some power of veto.

The other thing is that they're very different mediums for storytelling. One is happening outside of you and the other takes place inside your head; in one you're a spectator, in the other, a more active participant. For television, visuals matter vastly more. In the book, *Tell No One*, there are a lot of scenes at black-tie charity events. For the TV series, the director decided to switch those scenes to the world of horse-jumping – way more interesting to watch than a whole bunch of people standing around in evening dress.

You need flexibility around casting as well. You have to be able to let go of your own specific vision. We had the chance of getting the great Kristin Scott Thomas for *Tell No One*, but it meant changing her character from a certain type of model to a chic restaurateur. I was happy to rewrite that character.

Books can sometimes feel dated when it comes to adapting them for screen. Most of my books are set in the US; some were written twenty years ago. I love to change things up. I love to change up location, race, creed, colour, gender, sexual persuasion. Not because it's supposedly politically correct, but because it makes the story better. I'm all about the story. Whatever I have to do to make the story work, that's what I'll do, whether it's a book or TV.

I tend to think that the worst adaptations are the ones that stay slavishly devoted to the text. I understand that people who love the book want to see that book faithfully reproduced on screen, but I don't really understand why. If you want the book, read the book! I love the idea that you're going to see something fresh and new when you watch an adaptation. I love the way my books have been adapted in different countries: Britain, Poland, Spain, France – they each have their own distinct style and character. Your story grows with every move it makes.

I'll tell you a secret. There's nothing cooler than having your work adapted. It's always a thrill. There's always that moment when I go on set and look at the several hundred people working to recreate my story and think: 'Wow. I had this little idea in the corner of my room in New Jersey – now here I am on the streets of Paris with all these talented people bringing it to life and then millions of people are going to watch it.' If that's not motivation, I don't know what is. It's exciting and fun, and there's no reason to pretend otherwise.

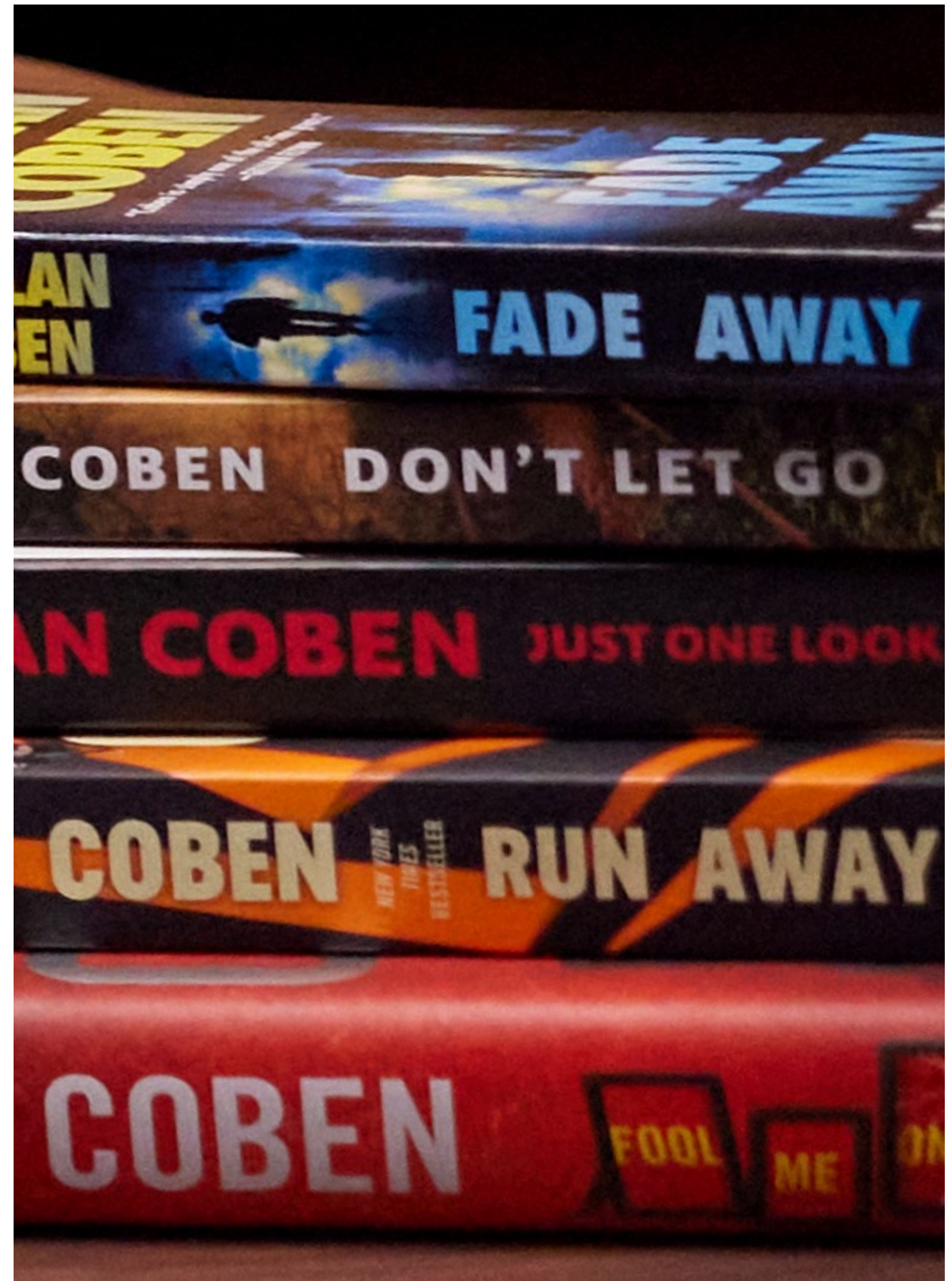
“
There's nothing cooler than
having your work adapted.
It's always a thrill.

.....

I've also developed original ideas for television. The first was called *The Five* and was filmed in the UK. When I came up with this idea, there were four lead characters. One of the four has a little brother and one day they all go out into the woods together. The older teenagers tease the little brother and make fun of him. The brother disappears. Twenty years later and the four are grown adults, still scarred from this moment. One is a cop and finds a murder scene that matches... I never even thought of this story as a book; I saw it visually from the outset.

.....

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



• • • • •

I love television. Not all writers do. They don't want to get involved. They want to sell the book and move on. But not only do I love television, I also wanted a new challenge. Now I get involved in the adaptation process as much as I can, especially for the English-language shows: I help write them, I do the casting, I talk to the team every day. One time in New York I stayed up all night talking to the director about his ideas.

With movies you have to take a hammer to the book and decide which fragments to salvage. It's the difference between a twelve-hour read and a two-hour watch. In *Tell No One*, for example, there was a whole sub-plot involving the lead character's father and all of that had to go.

With **long-form television**, on the other hand, there may be room to expand. There may be characters with small parts whose worlds I can explore further, or with untapped visual potential. The challenge with a series is figuring out the number of episodes, but it's a challenge I relish. In the days of network television you had to conform to a set format – twenty-two episodes, each exactly forty-two minutes long, each with three acts, a beginning and an end. The beauty of streaming is that it allows for creative flexibility. It also allows for something closer to that sentimental ideal of translating the book faithfully to the screen.

• • • • •

TAKEAWAYS

- A book and a TV show are two entirely different things, even if they come from the same source.
- Television is an exercise in collaboration.
- You have to be flexible to work with others.

EXERCISE

Take whatever story you're writing now and try to adapt it for a television series and/or movie. Do the job fully, so that it could potentially be offered to a producer or studio. Even if it isn't, the pay-off will be that you are going to start thinking more visually, which will feed back into the book itself. It could even be a way round the dreaded writer's block. So enjoy the process: cast the lead actors, choose your director, decide on your ideal location for the shoot.

23. Conclusion

No excuses, we said. But let's be honest. If you're a writer, you're going to use any excuse you can not to write. Sometimes I'll be sitting at home saying: 'I'm going to write – but first let me put wood panelling in my basement.'

I want you to eliminate the sort of thing that can get in the way of you starting to write. You don't need four hours, or six, let alone a full day. You can write in a half-hour, or even fifteen minutes.

Confession: in that backpack of mine I don't have just one notebook; I have several. I have seven or eight pens, because they're always running out of ink or maybe I want a different colour. I have a couple of snacks in there as well. I'm never going to say: 'I don't have a spot' or 'I don't have the material' or 'I've got to go eat.' I'm always ready to write. If you wait for the right moment, the right moment will never come. If I arrive early for a meeting, I take out my stuff and get down to work.

Like I told you at the beginning, I always loved books. In my early twenties I worked briefly for a travel agency on Spain's Costa del Sol, as a guide for visiting Americans. I was a terrible guide. But I wanted to write about the experience. So in my senior year of college, I wrote an entire novel about this really cool tour guide and his really weird clients. It was a terrible novel. Even so, from that first experience, I got the writing bug. It's like a virus that you never shake off.

From then on, I knew what I wanted to do. I started to write the kind of novels I love. I call them novels of immersion. I want my book to be the book you take on

holiday, but then you don't want to leave your hotel room. You have to know what happens to Bob and to Sue and to all the other people in it. It's that important. You just disappear into the book till you find out.

That's the kind of book I want you to write, too.

That first terrible novel is still sitting in a drawer somewhere. I think I wrote three novels before I had one published. I don't look at those years or those books as a waste. Neither should you. You can have the talent of Michael Jordan. If I put you on a basketball court and you've never played basketball before, you're not going to be any good. Why should it be any different for writing? Writing is one of the few activities where quantity generates quality. You have to put in the work.

I look at those early books as lessons in writing. They taught me, eventually, how to write a novel.

It never occurred to me to give up. The first thing I did when I finished my first book was to start on the second. Not send out the first to be published. That's my advice to you as well. Why? First, because your first novel is not as good as you think. Second, because you're a writer. You just climbed this wonderful mountain, but now you're seeing the other mountain in the distance. You want to go for that one as soon as you can.

Let's back-track to that blank screen.

• • • • •

First, you have to ignore those negative voices in your head and write that first draft, secure in the knowledge that you can always rewrite it later. Second, don't talk about the book with your friends. I think you need to harness that energy. Harness it all for the writing. Harness it all for the book.

I'm dying to tell you about my next book, but if I start talking about it now, it's like a balloon – I can feel the air rushing out. Maybe you could make an exception for a writing group, or a single trusted friend, but otherwise, keep it all to yourself. You can't afford to squander that energy.

We've reached the end of the story. I knew what this ending was going to be, but there were plenty of twists in the middle that I never saw coming. We started by coming up with ideas and combining them. We went into plot, character, setting, dialogue. We saw how everything is entangled and how each aspect of book-writing blends into the others. We spoke to my agent and editor. We set you up to adapt your work for the screen.

So be on your way. You have more than enough tools to get started. Don't forget: when your book is finished, I want you to send me a signed copy, with my name in the acknowledgements. I want to see a photograph of you with your book in the store. I want to be invited to the movie première.

I'm Harlan Coben, and this is my **BBC Maestro** course on Writing Thrillers. Thank you for joining me on the journey.



[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

BONUS TAKEAWAYS

- **Check the contents of your mind. Are you ready? Get that mind-frame in order.**
- **Be greedy. Hoard all that creative energy for yourself. Pour it straight into your book.**

BONUS EXERCISES

Check the contents of your bag. Are you ready? Make a promise to yourself. Wherever you are, at whatever time of day or night, be prepared to record your thoughts, by whatever means you have at your disposal. Never put off till later a note you can make right now.

Banish those voices of doom. Visualise yourself writing four hundred pages. Visualise the moment when a reader spends twenty-five bucks on your book and some eight or ten hours to read it. Hold that positivity firmly in mind when the voices of negativity start knocking at your door.

Appendix: Glossary

DYSTOPIA (noun)

An imagined state or place in which there is great suffering and injustice

EMPATHY (noun)

The ability to understand and share the feelings of others

EXPOSITION (noun)

A clear and full explanation of an idea or theory

HYPERREALISM (noun)

Art in which realism is heightened, such that the ordinary appears extraordinary

MONOLITHIC (adjective)

Formed of a single large block of stone, indivisible

PANTSER (noun, informal)

A writer who works without an outline, by 'the seat of their pants'

QUINTESSENTIAL (adjective)

The most typical example or most important part of something

UTOPIA (noun)

An imagined state or place in which everything is perfect

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



Appendix: Books Mentioned

BY HARLAN COBEN

Backspin

The Boy in the Woods

Fade Away

Fool Me Once

Hold Tight

The Innocent

I Will Find You

Just One Look

Long Lost

The Match

No Second Chance

Promise Me

Runaway

Shelter

Stay Close

The Stranger

Tell No One

Win

The Woods

OTHER AUTHORS MENTIONED

Lawrence Block

Dan Brown

James M. Cain

Lee Child

Roald Dahl

Nelson DeMille

E. L. Doctorow

William Faulkner

John Grisham

Ernest Hemingway

Mary Higgins Clark

Susan Isaacs

Stephen King

Anne Lamont

Elmore Leonard

Alexander McCall Smith

Walter Mosley

Mickey Spillane

Kurt Vonnegut

OTHER BOOKS MENTIONED

Double Indemnity; The Postman Always

Rings Twice – James M. Cain

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

– Roald Dahl

The Outsider – Stephen King

Bird by Bird – Anne Lamont

Let The Greatest Be Your Teacher

BBC Maestro is a streaming platform for online courses, designed to educate and inspire people to explore their creativity.

The world's most experienced creators have personally devised these courses, teaching their craft and process in this intimate way for the very first time.

Learn anytime, anywhere with our **mobile app** (available in select regions) – you can stream lessons or download them to watch offline, Airplay to your TV or simply watch in any browser on your computer or tablet.

Enjoy beautiful, substantial courses filmed in 4K, with several hours of content over 20-40 lessons and course notes packed with practical tips and inspiring exercises. You'll learn at your own pace and can rewatch lessons as often as you like.

Buy an annual subscription for unlimited access to all courses or choose an individual course to focus on one specific goal for the year.

Which course will you try next?



www.bbcmaestro.com

© 2025 BBC Maestro

All rights reserved

B B C
MAESTRO

