



KEN FOLLETT

WRITING BESTSELLING FICTION

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If you haven't written
anything, you haven't
justified your existence.

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MAESTRO

COURSE NOTES 2.2

The Lessons

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I think for popular fiction, the narrative is paramount.

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About This Course

HELLO, I'M KEN FOLLETT

I have been writing thrillers and historical fiction for fifty years, and bestselling fiction for forty. During this time I have benefitted from the advice of editors, agents, and other writers, mostly older and more experienced than me, but sometimes younger as well. I'm hoping to share with you some of the things I've learned along the way.

First, I'll talk about what you have to do before you even write the first line. Then we'll look at how to write a story that the reader will never want to put down. And finally, I'll talk about publishing.

I never wanted to write for a small, literary audience. I always wanted to write for millions of people to enjoy the story. That was the fantasy. The idea of somebody sitting down with my book and being completely absorbed in it was the greatest of all kicks.

There are many different kinds of novel. I'm not talking here about the kind of novel that will win literary prizes. I'm talking about writing fiction for millions of people to enjoy. That's what I do – I write bestsellers. Now I'm going to help you write bestsellers too.



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HOW TO USE THESE COURSE NOTES

These notes are not simply a transcription of the online lessons. You might see them as complementary, an alternative take, a riff on that material. They give you a second bite of the cherry. However, they also distill the essence of what has been said under each heading, which makes them invaluable as a reference point to return to. You will see as we work through the course that keeping meticulous track of notes and diligently recording discussions are integral habits for writing a long, complex novel. The difference between an entertaining anecdote and a novel lies largely in the accumulation and skillful manipulation of detail. So keep these notes to hand. Use them to sharpen your skills and to navigate your way through that artful process.

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WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- A love of reading
- Imagination and the willingness to work with it
- Painstaking patience in research
- An open mind and the willingness to listen to others
- The Japanese attitude of **kaizen**
- Mulish obstinacy
- But forget all that... You need to be hungry

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01. Introduction

When we write a novel we create an imaginary world. That world must be credible: logical, detailed, fully realised. That's difficult, but it's not enough. Once you've created that world, you have to draw the reader into it. The reader must care about what happens to your characters almost as if they were real people.

That is the miracle of literature when it happens.

It's never too late to start writing, but it helps to have read a lot. I can remember very vividly wanting to read for myself. I loved stories from an early age. My parents read to me; so too did my grandparents and my many uncles and aunts. I pestered them all to read to me and it was never enough.

I must have been about three or four when my mother taught me to read. At seven, I joined the public library. That was the beginning of a lifelong passion. I've always read avidly and still do. I think I enjoy it now almost as much as I used to enjoy the *Noddy* books by Enid Blyton when I was four years old.

I wrote my first novel in 1973 because my car broke down. It was going to cost two hundred pounds to repair the car and I didn't have the money. The bank wouldn't lend it to me. At the time, I was working at the *London Evening News*. One of my fellow reporters had written a thriller and was getting it published. The rest of us were full of questions. 'How did you find time to write it? How did you find a publisher? How much money did you get?' And it just so happened that he'd got an advance from the publisher of two hundred pounds. Bingo!

I decided I would write a thriller. And I did. I wrote a thriller and sent it to the publisher. He gave me two hundred pounds and I got my car back. That was the beginning of my literary career.

Over the next few years I wrote nine more books. They weren't bestsellers, but they came out. I had a book to hold in my hands and show to my friends and a few hundred pounds in my pocket to take the family to Mallorca on holiday.

Each time one of those first ten books came out, I would go to the bookshop and look for it. At the front of the shop there would be a hundred copies of the latest by Frederick Forsyth and another hundred of the latest by Sidney Sheldon. Way at the back of the store would be my book – two copies on the bookshelf, spine out, not even face out – spine out. I remember thinking: what do I have to do to get my book from the back of the shop to the front, to have a hundred copies right at the front of the store? This question obsessed me.

By then I was working for a publisher. I would look at books submitted and think: will the booksellers think they can sell this, and will the readers go crazy for it? Gradually, this encouraged me to consider my own books in these terms: what is there about the book I'm writing that will make people go crazy for it and tell their friends?

What was wrong with those books? Starting out, I thought it was all about car chases, fights, sex scenes. It was only during this learning process that I realised this was not enough. The truth is that nothing is exciting unless you care about the people who are involved in it.

There's no formula for writing a bestseller, but there is that one simple rule: the reader must share in the emotions of the characters in the story. Without that, your book will not be a bestseller.

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Once you've created that world, you have to draw the reader into it. The reader must care about what happens to your characters almost as if they were real people.

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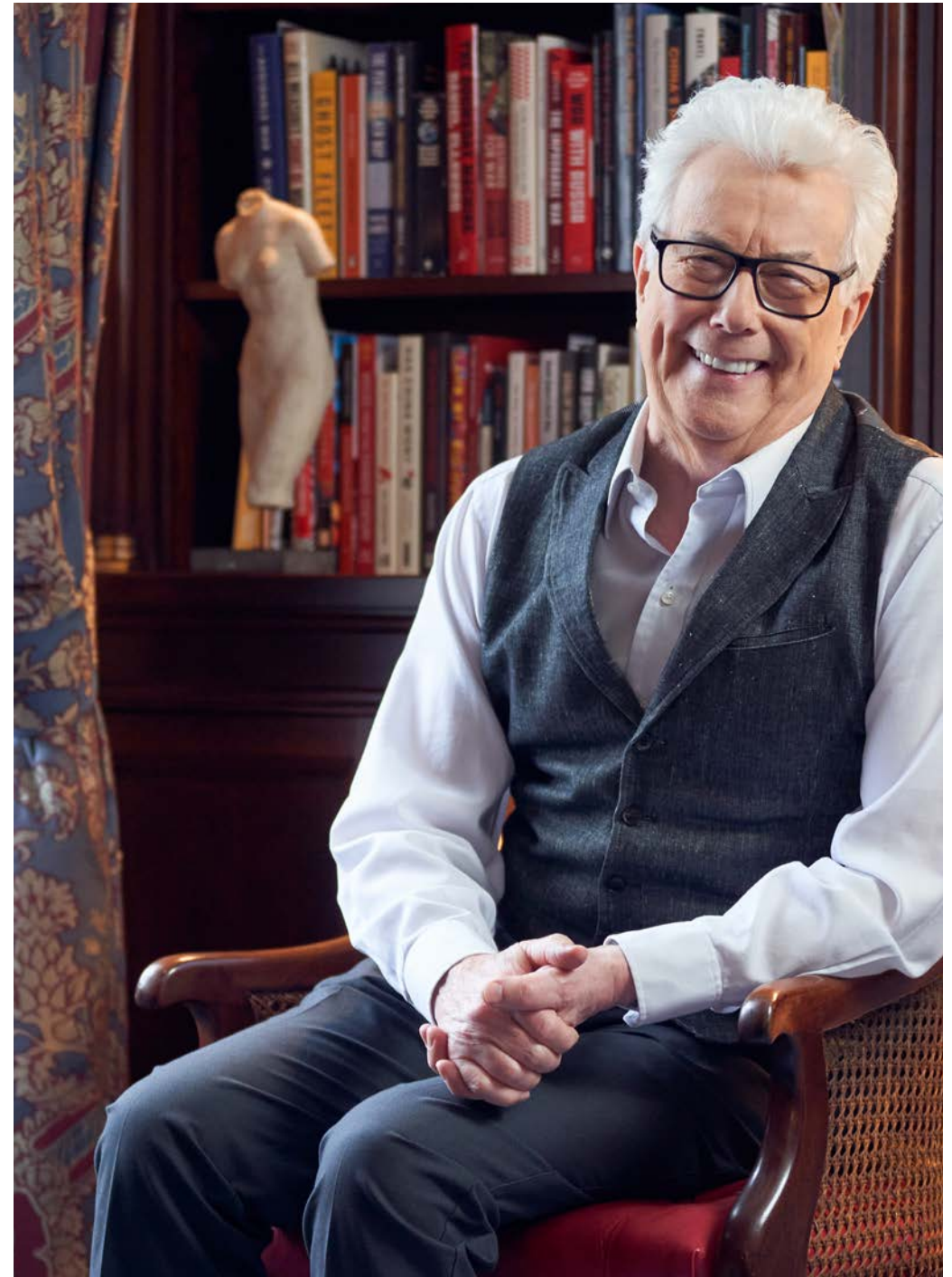
TAKEAWAY

- There are no rules for writing a popular bestseller. The one guiding principle is that the reader must share in the emotions of the characters.

EXERCISE

Choose a selection of books, some that you have enjoyed, others that you have not. What kind of relationship did you form with the characters as you were reading?

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02. What Makes A Good Idea For A Novel

What is a good idea for a novel? I don't look at current events for inspiration. I never base a novel on the latest fad because if I've thought of it, then ten other people will have thought of it too. And if the publishers like the idea those ten books will come out at the same time as mine, and by then the fad will be old hat anyway.

I get inspiration from all over the place. My imagination is always working. I can't help it. When I'm reading the papers or a history book or even a novel, when I'm talking to people or watching a movie, something strikes me and I think: I wonder if I could write a story about that? I think people who are novelists are constantly on the lookout. You might like to keep a notebook to record such incidental thoughts as they occur.

Sometimes we are offered ideas by readers or friends. Usually it's an idea that yields two or three scenes and might make a short story. Whereas an idea for a novel must generate fifty to a hundred scenes. Every novel is a series of dramatic scenes. That's how the story is told.

A lot of stories come from a question. Famously, I began to wonder how the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages were built, and why. I thought about that for some years and from those two questions eventually got my most popular novel, *The Pillars of the Earth*, which so far has sold twenty-seven million copies all over the world.

Why did we have World War I? That is the question behind *Fall of Giants*.

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For me it's quite important
that the reader is actually going
to learn something from this.

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What if there's a nuclear war: how will it start? That question produced *Never*.

What would it be like if a group of Victorian bankers suddenly had to peel their own potatoes and wash their own underpants? *A Dangerous Fortune*.

It's a bonus if you can attach the story to some historic world event, like a war or revolution. Not only are we deeply involved in the lives of the characters and what's going to happen to them, but the story is also about something bigger than that.

I like the reader to learn something too. Readers are what marketing people call 'knowledge seekers'. They enjoy a story which doesn't just entertain them, but also gives them a little bit of knowledge that they didn't have before.

All those things put together make a great idea for a novel.

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TAKEAWAYS

- Story matters more than character and story is driven by structure – within each scene, scene to scene, and overall.
- Pay attention to the questions that arise in the course of everyday life. You never know which of those questions might serve to kick-start your next novel. Keep an ideas notebook.
- An idea for a novel must have the potential to generate between fifty and one hundred scenes.

EXERCISE

Choose a book and count the scenes. Can you identify where one scene ends and a new scene starts? How many scenes are there per chapter? How much does this differ over the course of the book? How many scenes are there overall?

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Story matters more than character and story is driven by structure.

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03. Developing Ideas

Let's say you have a wonderful idea for a novel. How do you develop it into something that will be a hundred thousand words that the reader can't possibly put down? For me, as I said in the previous lesson, it generally begins with a single paragraph that states the big idea, the single question from which everything else will follow.

How do I develop that idea? I simply ask myself questions. Who are these people? Where do they come from? Why are they involved in this situation? What do they want in life? What was happening before this plot began and what do they hope will happen afterwards?

Each new question supplies you with more detail, but also suggests dramatic developments for the story. But to answer this question in more detail, I looked at two of the notebooks I used to write *Never*.

At the beginning it's scrappy. There's a list of experts I might consult. There's a timetable for writing the outline itself. The first notebook starts in June. The first summary of the story is five paragraphs, then every day I add to it and the process begins to accelerate. Next time round it's a page and a half, and by the 20th of August it has grown to six pages, getting longer and longer as I elaborate the story.

By October, where I have all the characters trying to prevent a nuclear war, the outline is twenty or thirty pages, and that's a lot of the hard creative work done. I do the outline longhand. I have the developing story on the right-hand page and as new things occur to me, I put a note on the left-hand side in a different colour and link it with a code.

I also draw diagrams. *Never* is a complex plot involving many countries, so I mapped out the relationships between them.

One thing you should give very careful thought to is how to start your book, because you really need to start with a bang. By the end of the first chapter the reader must be totally committed to reading the whole thing.

One of the greatest openings, in my opinion, is in *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown.

At first you think it's a routine detective story set in Paris. There's a body in the Louvre. There's a grumpy French detective, his gorgeous assistant, and an American expert. Naturally you expect the grumpy French detective to be a total failure and the American expert to solve the mystery and go to bed with the gorgeous assistant. But even as you are smugly working this out, the gorgeous assistant takes her phone and hands it to the American and says, 'This call is for you'. The American hears the voice of the glamorous assistant saying, 'Your life is in danger, you must get out of this building now'. Thus all your assumptions are blown out of the water and you are taken completely by surprise. That's a great reaction to get. Immediately the reader is gripped, and Brown is such a good suspense writer that he keeps up that level of tension all the way to the end of the book.

We can't all be Dan Brown. But that's the gold standard – that's what we're aiming for.

Even at the outline stage, it's already time to start watching out for boring bits. It's so easy to fall prey to them, because there's a certain amount of information that you have to get over to the reader to help them understand the plot. But if you want to write a popular bestseller, you can't have boring bits.

Let's say you find that you've written five dull pages but there's information in those pages that you absolutely have to get over. You simply have to work your imagination harder. You have to examine that scene and introduce a dramatic question. You have to give the principal character something to worry about or strive after, a problem or goal that you can then develop and resolve at the end. This way you deliver the vital information incidentally, as a byproduct of the drama.

The trick with information is to put it in the right place. For example, in my 1986 novel *Lie Down With Lions*, there's a gun. You can't just have a gun in the story, at least not since *The Day of the Jackal*. You have to say what make it is, whether it's a pistol or a revolver, what size of ammunition it takes. Even if, like me, you think of guns as somewhere between boring and hateful, you still have to write about them.

In *Lie Down With Lions* there's a scene towards the end where the hero and heroine are holding a Russian guy prisoner. The hero hands the gun to the heroine and says: 'If he moves, shoot him'. But she's never handled a gun before. So the guy, who is a CIA agent, has to tell her where the safety catch is, because if she doesn't know she'll pull the trigger and nothing will happen. Thus the reader learns all about the gun in the precise moment that the heroine needs to learn about it as well. Information done right builds suspense and is no longer boring.

The main thing is to be completely intolerant. Do not be tempted to think that some of the other scenes are so great that they will make up for the boring bits. You can't do that, because they won't. You have to be a perfectionist.

The other essential element that can't be boring is your characters. A popular novel can't have dull characters – we're spending too much time with them. If you have boring characters, people will stop reading. So if you think a character is dull, you have to do something about it.

To deepen a character, start asking yourself questions.

Let's say it's a man. What was his mother like and how does he feel about her? Same for his father. Did he have brothers and sisters? What was he like at school? Was he top of the class? Was he always in trouble? Was he the teacher's pet? Who was his first girlfriend and how does he remember that? Does that first romance make him feel happy or embarrassed, or both?

These characters, and the answers to these questions, may not appear in the book, but if you think about them it will enrich both the characters and your writing.

Every important character should have a life outside the plot in order to make them more real. They should have things they do that have nothing to do with building a cathedral or winning World War Two. They should have people they hang out with just because they like them. They should have a job, even if their job is not part of the story. Don't think of them merely as people in the plot. Think of them as people who, when they're not in the story, are doing other things.

The principal characters have to be a certain type of person. They have to be strong and determined. You can't write a good story about people who are timid and cautious, who let life flow by without ever protesting. You need the kind of character who is going to get into trouble, because without trouble there is no story. Of course, there are plenty of prize-winning literary novels about people who suffer, and either can't or won't do anything about it. But we're not talking about that sort of novel. If you want to write a widely popular novel, you have to have characters who do stuff.

When I began writing it was normal for the female characters to be incidental to the story. They had to be rescued or they made things difficult for the hero. Thankfully those days are over, and I played my small part in this change, because in *Eye of the Needle* the hero of the story is female – I think this was a first for an outdoor adventure thriller. People often mention the strong female characters in my books. It seems they take strong male characters for granted.

There should be no incidental baggage in the story. Be economical. You only want characters who are making a difference. Even your victims have to have an active role to play. There will be people who suffer, but unless you want to write torture porn they must be seen to struggle and resist. You have to give the reader something to admire.

In the same way that you enrich character, you should also enrich setting. A prime example is *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo. At heart it's a routine crime novel, and if that was all there was to it, it would not have been the huge success that it was. But the crime is set in such a rich environment of Italian American culture and that environment described with such affection, that it almost makes you feel as if you'd love to be part of such an enormous family who all look after one another. These are the worst people in America, mass murderers, but we'll never forget the old man, Marlon Brando, saying that a man

should spend time with his family, or the young woman thinking of marrying into that loving family who has to confront the reality that her boyfriend thinks murder is a perfectly ordinary way to do business.

So if you have set your story in suburban Oxford, is there a reason you have chosen that location? There's a whole world to explore, so maybe this story could take place in Istanbul or San Francisco or Paris or Milan? Make sure the setting makes the most sense for your story and is somewhere the reader can enjoy exploring with your characters.

If you choose a too-familiar setting you may be too comfortable with it. Writing about somewhere you know less well presents its own problems, but problems are where creativity is triggered. So why not do something ambitious? Move the whole thing to Vienna in 1911. Be bold. That's the way you need to be thinking if you're trying to create a book that will be a big bestseller.

Likewise there is an appeal to the mundane, but beware this appeal. The mundane may appear easy to write about, but this brings with it a higher risk of complacency. It may actually be harder to produce your best work.

Don't be afraid of moral complications. The best moral complications have the reader not knowing what the character should do. The reader thinks, 'Yes, I'd take that shortcut', but also, 'Taking that shortcut would be really unkind', and so instinctively understands that the hero is going to have regrets either way. Making an unkind decision doesn't make someone immoral. The reader will empathise so long as you show the hero as a thinking person in a dilemma.

Sometimes you run across something that stops you. You've got a brilliant plot twist and suddenly you realise it couldn't have happened like that, because you've written something else that conflicts with it or your research rules it out.

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Be on the lookout for any unique selling point, or wow factor, that will make your book stand out from the rest.

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For example, in *A Dangerous Fortune* I wanted two people to get divorced and it turned out to be incredibly difficult for anybody to get divorced in the Victorian era. My first reaction was that this would mess up the whole plot, but then I realised it would simply make the plot more complex, which is good because it adds to the drama.

It's often like that. Something that seems like an insurmountable obstacle turns out to be an advantage. But I wouldn't intentionally paint myself into a corner. These days I am better at anticipating what could go wrong and maximising the benefit. A character may have a plan for solving his problems, but if I outwit him and think of five things that could go wrong with his plan, then I have five dramatic scenes.

Over the years I've developed a nose for what works and what doesn't, but in the early days there can often be false starts with an outline. I would sometimes work for a month on a story idea before realising it wasn't going anywhere, and that might happen several times over.

Be on the lookout for any unique selling point, or wow factor, that will make your book stand out from the rest. Take Thomas Harris, for example: Hannibal Lecter doesn't just kill people; he eats them. That's the wow factor – the shock and the horror. Take Frederick Forsyth: the wow factor of *The Day of the Jackal* is the realism, the way Forsyth told us in detail how to get a false passport (go to the graveyard; find a grave belonging to a person born about the same time as you but who died young; take their name and impersonate them) and how to adjust the sight of a rifle in a forest shooting at a melon in a string bag. Take Dan Brown: the wow factor in *The Da Vinci Code* is the blasphemy, with religious figures and great artists being treated like ordinary people.

The dream is always to write a scene that everybody talks about.

Every day I start by reading what I wrote yesterday, and I always improve it. I always make changes, whether big or small. For me it's really important to keep doing this. Then when I've finished the first draft, I show it to lots of people and rewrite it all over again. Throughout that process, you have to be thinking: what's going to make the story better, and grab the reader's attention even harder?

You have to spend a certain amount of time going back through what you've written and planting details that make sense of or enhance what comes later. If a character has a triumph half way through the novel, you can go back, and let it be known in advance that this triumph is something he's always longed for. Then when it actually happens, it's a bigger deal, with more emotion to it. If there's a battle, make it the turning point of the war. If somebody falls in love, make it the love of his life. Don't rob a bank – rob Fort Knox.

TAKEAWAYS

- Great stories often start with a question. The same is true for chapters and scenes. A novel is the sum total of a series of questions and answers.
- If there are boring bits in your story, you simply have to work your imagination harder. You must find a way of introducing drama into the situation.

EXERCISES

Return to the selection of books you made earlier – some you enjoyed, some you didn't. Check how the author delivers information. Is it integral to the plot? Does it serve to develop character? Or has it simply been imported into the text as an undigested chunk of prose?

Think of an object that appears in your story that requires technical explanation. Track down a users' manual on this object and copy down that technical information; alternatively, write it for yourself as a passage of instructional prose. Imagine a scene in which this object might first appear, and jot down the essentials of what is going to happen in that scene: beginning, middle and end, and any transitional steps along the way. Now write the scene, making sure that the necessary information about the object is communicated to both characters and reader simultaneously, as part of the dramatic action.

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04. Weaving The Narrative

Let's talk about weaving the narrative. Readers enjoy a complex story in which there are several groups of characters who all have their own ambitions and fears, but whose stories all interconnect. All soap operas are written this way.

By way of analogy, think of a complex piece of checked or striped cloth. This cloth is made of single strands of different colours of wool or cotton that have to be woven together on a loom in an intricate pattern. This is very difficult, but you don't see the difficulty – you just think, 'What nice striped curtains' or 'I'd really like a suit in that check'.

That's what we writers are aiming for. The reader must not see the difficulty that has gone into the making of this complex pattern of characters and storylines. No matter how arduous for us, to the reader it must seem effortless.

For me, story is more important than character. The story is what drives the novel along and keeps the reader turning the pages. Moments of high drama all come from the plot.

Of course characters are crucially important. Most should be likeable, a few the kind of people you would cross the road not to meet. But without a narrative, your terrific cast of characters is just a bunch of people sitting around doing nothing. I believe that for popular fiction in general, narrative is paramount.

Of course there are plenty of good novels that have a simple storyline that runs from beginning to end and are told from the first-person point of view of the principal character. Most people write their first novel in the first person, as I did, because it comes more naturally to tell the story as if it happened to you.

But it's restrictive, because you only get inside the head of one person and there are all sorts of scenes that are ruled out because that person can't be present to witness them or know about them in advance.

Personally, I like complex stories because I think they reflect society. If you focus on one person, you're focusing on one person, and I'm more interested in how people relate to one another in groups. So I go for multiple storylines, which of course means multiple characters.

By multiple characters I mean multiple point of view characters. A point of view character is one through whose eyes we see the scene. There will be two or three, perhaps a maximum of five or six such characters in a novel, and though the other, supporting characters are also important to the story, we don't look through their eyes. I decide who the point of view characters are going to be quite early on in the process. You can still make changes later, but usually my change would be to see a way to make a character not a point of view person and therefore view his or her scenes from the point of view of another already established character, just to simplify things a little.

Let's say we have five or six point of view characters. That's quite difficult to manage and you've got to do it right. My advice is to introduce them slowly.

A common mistake is to introduce a group of characters – the men in a commando squad, or the crew of a spaceship, or the guests in a country house – with pen portraits of each, all in the space of a few pages. Then the reader spends the rest of the book trying to remember whether Tanya is the blonde navigator or the punk bombardier and they never find out because they can't remember all that incidental detail from the beginning.

There's a way round this that I used in *Never*, which has a lot of characters. Chapter One is from the point of view of Tamara, a young woman working in North Africa for the CIA. In that chapter she has a rendezvous with an undercover agent called Abdul, who gives her some information. The next chapter is written from Abdul's point of view, but the storyline isn't broken because he's doing things that we're told he's going to do. Then the third chapter is set in the White House with the American president, but they're talking about information they've received from Abdul. Which means that although we've switched from one group and one place to another, the storyline is continuous, so the reader doesn't get confused.

What I think is a mistake is to start with one character group and do a chapter, and then go to a completely different character group with no connection. For the reader, that's like starting an entirely different novel. So my advice is to maintain the unbroken storyline and introduce the characters slowly. It's much better to switch to a different group or country because the story demands it, not whimsically. The storyline must remain intact.

Always start with the most important character but don't move on too quickly. Let us get involved. Tell us the things they are aiming for, or are scared of, or are worried about, so that we'll know not just their name and what they look like, but what their drama is. Then you can switch, because you've established that first character and the reader won't now forget them.

If you have two point of view characters in the same scene and find yourself asking whose point of view to choose, always opt for the character who cares most about what is happening, who is most emotionally invested in the outcome. Why? As always, because this is what will yield the most drama.

Most characters need to be the kind of people you care about – getting the reader to care is a fundamental strategy for writing a bestselling novel. But that doesn't mean they always have to be good. You can be on the side of a character even while he or she is doing something you don't really approve of. James Bond, for example, the most famous fictional character of the twentieth century bar none, had some pretty bad habits – sixty cigarettes a day, a great deal of vodka, and let's not get into his girlfriends – but we still identify with him.

I'm a great fan of the long novel, because people are more likely to remember it. After all, they live with it for several weeks. I have a friend who reads a mystery or thriller every day on the train and by the next week she's forgotten them. You can't do that with a book like *The Pillars of the Earth* – you can't gobble it up in a day. A long book is lingered over and talked about. A long book may excite booksellers with the promise of a blockbuster, and readers with the promise of a long-lasting thrill.

There's an argument that says an agent or publisher might hesitate over a long novel by an unknown writer, but the truth is, it all depends on the quality of the book. As for the idea that long novels are boring... If a long novel is boring, then it's better short, or better not published at all. People love long novels, if they're good – that's why they read sequels, because they want more of the same.

There are plenty of books that focus on individual psychology, featuring just one or two people. But most of us are more gripped by a story that focuses on the social relationships between people, whether in the family, at work, in the community or at war.

A multi-volume saga is even more challenging. My *Century Trilogy* was technically the most difficult thing I've ever done, because it follows five families through three wars: the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War. It took a lot of planning.



I was coming to the end of the first book, *Fall of Giants*, and was beginning to wonder how I was going to get the members of these five families to interact with one another during the Second World War in Germany, Russia, England, the United States and France, when I realised I simply didn't have enough characters. You'll notice towards the end of *Fall of Giants* that several couples have two babies in rapid succession – this was literally in order to populate volume two.

There's a rule that says there should be a story turn every four to six pages. A story turn is anything that changes the situation for the characters. It can be a big story turn like a murder, or a small story turn like somebody telling a lie. It's the pacing that is important. If they come more often than every four pages, the story will begin to seem frenetic. You're being given something new before you've digested what happened before. If it's longer than six pages, then it's likely to get a bit boring.

Even with the nineteenth-century novel, where the pace tended to be slower, you'll notice that among the more popular authors – Jane Austen, Balzac, Tolstoy, Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell – their story will turn at roughly that kind of pace. I recommend rereading Jane Austen regularly to study her construction, which is perfect, absolutely perfect, as is her pace.



TAKEAWAYS

- When writing a complex story, with multiple points-of-view, make sure that the thread of the story remains unbroken as you switch from one location or group to another. If the narrative becomes fragmented, your reader will tire and switch off.
- Readers of popular fiction are more engaged by relationships than interiority.
- Make sure you have a story turn every few pages to keep readers involved in the story.

EXERCISES

Read *Orley Farm* by Anthony Trollope, which is a complex courtroom drama with a large cast. Note how every time there's a story development, he goes right round the circle, dramatising the way it affects the destiny of that particular character or group of characters. Mechanical but brilliant.

To extend the exercise, make a diagram of how these characters all relate to one another. Some are neighbours, some relatives, some know each other through work. It will take you a while, but it's a strong exercise in how to write a novel with multiple character groups. In fact, I did this myself when I read it.

Please share your diagrams with us on social media, tagging [@bbcmaestro](#), [#kenfollettbbcmaestro](#).



05. Research

The thing I liked best about being a newspaper reporter was that I would go out and interview people and they would tell me all about their lives and work and explain things like the tides of the River Thames or how to run a restaurant kitchen. That curiosity has stayed with me and I love doing research for books.

But research matters for fundamental reasons. Most great stories are somewhat implausible and therefore we try to nail the story to reality by providing an accurate background. While crazy things are going on that might cause the reader to doubt, we also have all that contextual detail which is absorbing and interesting and imparts plausibility to the story.

Think about the first stories you ever heard, for example *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Bears don't live in houses. They don't eat porridge, they don't sit in chairs and they don't sleep in beds. But all that stuff about porridge and chairs and beds is disarmingly detailed and realistic. This is one of the best stories ever and because we were told it as children, and because we tell it to our own children and grandchildren, it helps shape expectations of stories across the generations.

Once you're grown up you want something more realistic, but that tension remains. Because if you told a story about something ordinary and everyday, who would be interested? 'I went to the bus stop, I waited for five minutes and the bus came along.'

Very few writers get away with stories about the purely banal. One of those few is the Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgård, who writes about making a cup of tea and putting his socks on, but that's a weird phenomenon, the exception that

proves the rule. Most of the time, what we want is a story about something extraordinary, but with sufficient plausibility to move the reader more deeply.

When I was writing *The Evening and the Morning* I needed to know the details of everyday life around the year 1000 AD. The only significant source of information is the Bayeux Tapestry, which is essentially a comic strip created through embroidery on linen. It's about the Norman Conquest, but it also shows people doing everyday things: cooking and eating, chopping down trees, shaping planks of wood and making boats, tending to their pets – things that are really helpful in making a story set in that era plausible. There were no piers or docks in those days, so there's a scene in which you see a guy boarding a ship, his tunic hitched up, up to his thighs in water and carrying his dog. The Bayeux Tapestry is accidentally full of that kind of invaluable human detail.

I start my research by reading books. Later, I look at maps and go to museums; I visit places, taking photographs and talking to experts. I put all this data into a ring binder and keep it by me as I work.

The ring binder for *The Armour of Light*, which is set in the Industrial Revolution, is divided into sections – such as cloth manufacture, Methodism, military, the Battle of Waterloo – and contains printouts, pictures and prices (it's so hard to find out the price of things when you're writing historical novels). There are photographs of eighteenth-century weaving machines, including one of an enormous Spinning Jenny, in those days known as a Spinning Mule. From books alone I couldn't figure out how this machine worked, but as soon as I looked at one in real life I could see how it could spin raw cotton into threads.

I also have a tatty copy of the *Lady's Diary* or *Woman's Almanac* that includes mathematical puzzles, which conflicts with our traditional picture of what women did with themselves in the eighteenth century and provided direct inspiration for a scene in which I have a young woman reading the magazine at the breakfast table and her father remarking sceptically on girls doing mathematical puzzles.

For *The Pillars of the Earth* I gathered together lots of medieval illustrations of the story of the *Tower of Babel*. There's one that shows a medieval building site and provides much of the information we have about building techniques in that period.

It normally takes me three years to write a long historical novel. The first year is preparation – planning, outlining, research – which means the research feeds into and informs the outline as it develops. For instance, there might come a point where I realise I don't know enough about the colour of soldiers' uniforms, so I look into that and discover that I am able to weave a little drama out of cheap dyes being used for ordinary soldiers as opposed to expensive dyes for officers. Research and planning can't really be separated. Each question I have generates new ideas in the answering.

In *The Pillars of the Earth*, I started with the question: What's the first thing you do when you decide to build a cathedral in the Middle Ages? Lay out a ground plan, I suppose. But how? They used a sharp instrument on a large block of mortar known as a tracing floor, with a pair of compasses to produce curves and circles. The marks traced then gradually faded, so when they had finished with one drawing they could simply do another on top. Some of those tracing floors have survived – I've seen two at cathedrals in Wells and York.

What about measurement? They didn't have tape measures and an inch or foot or yard wasn't the same in one town as the next. So every building site had a yard stick – no matter what a yard was – and every craftsman had to take his measures from that metal rod.

They also had to figure out how to orient the cathedral exactly east-west, and I have to figure it out as well. The same with scaffolding. They didn't have steel scaffolding, but simply tree branches tied together with ropes; it was very unstable and people often fell off, especially as they drank a lot of beer in the Middle Ages. Guillaume de Sens, the French architect of Canterbury Cathedral, fell off the scaffolding at Canterbury and died, and was replaced by William the Englishman – same name, different nationality. So of course I have somebody falling off the scaffolding, which gave me a way for somebody to die building the cathedral. You start with questions; the research gives you the answers, and the answers become storylines.

There is no such thing as dry historical fact; it all depends how you use it. In writing *The Armour of Light*, I learned that the day before the Battle of Waterloo the food wagons for the British Army failed to arrive. From the fact that the men had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours before they were due to fight, I invented a story about the wife of one of my soldiers – women were camp followers who carried things and did chores and were very brave – who walks to the village of Waterloo in the pouring rain in the pitch dark of night and carries a fifty-pound sack of baked potatoes on her back all the way back to the battlefield. Sal is probably the main character in *The Armour of Light* and this is an act of heroism. Later that day her husband is killed.

Not all the research you do will be used in the book, but you have to organise it carefully in such a way that you can follow up a vague memory with some hope of success. After maybe six months you begin to develop an instinct. You might feel able to judge what kind of dress a woman is likely to wear to a wedding without phoning an expert because you've looked at hundreds of eighteenth-century dresses for all types of women. In doing so, you've also learned a lot about cloth in the eighteenth century: you know they had cashmere and linen and silk mixes – you no longer need to check.

Much of the second half of *Eye of the Needle* is set in Scotland and I had never been to Scotland when I wrote the book. But I found a touring guide at my local public library in Farnborough that was thirty years out of date, which was perfect for me because Scotland in the 1940s was exactly what I was describing.

I couldn't then afford to go to Scotland on a research trip. Nowadays I like to go to the places I write about. I find it helpful and inspiring. I get story ideas. But in those days it wasn't possible and you can certainly manage without. For one of my more recent books, *Never*, I wasn't able to travel because of lockdown. *Never* is mostly set in Chad in North Africa, a place I'd never been. But between the internet and movies and Google Earth, I was able to look at every location my characters passed through as they crossed the Sahara Desert from south to north in a rickety bus.

I still enjoy the leg work because I'm learning all the time. But these days I also pay people – often university professors – to fact-check my first draft. I pay them well because I want them to take the job seriously; it's not enough to query something by underlining it in red ink.

Before I could afford to pay experts, I used my friends. When I was writing *Eye of the Needle* I recruited a television script writer who was old enough to remember how much eggs cost in wartime Britain and whether poor boys had socks. There was also a television producer who'd been a photo-reconnaissance pilot in North Africa who checked my first draft for authenticity. I look back with immense gratitude at those two men, who spent time helping me for no particular reward other than the satisfaction of supporting a young writer.

It can be infuriating when you have a great plot line and make a discovery during research that blows it out of the water, such as the inability to divorce when I was writing *A Dangerous Fortune*.

But not everyone is so governed by historical accuracy. There's a wonderful novel called *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, which is also a great film, in which she mentions the female protagonist hearing on the radio a song called *Times They Are a-Changin'* by Bob Dylan. In her endnotes she acknowledges that the song had not been recorded or even written at the time the story is set, but that she couldn't resist the temptation to include it. That didn't spoil the book, because she was up front about it, but I would never knowingly violate history, even over something trivial.

TAKEAWAYS

- Research feeds directly into the outline.
- A setback in your research can be a positive, because in dealing with it you're forced to invent something new – a problem becomes an opportunity.
- Be ready to throw research away: one of the worst mistakes is to cram it all in just because you put in the hard hours. Be strict with yourself and use only what makes your book more entertaining. Reading is for pleasure: background information is a bonus, but the story is the thing.

EXERCISES

Try reading or rereading some nineteenth-century novels. Note how they pay close attention to detail in order to boost plausibility and enhance the illusion of reality. Look out for things that seem incidental to the plot, too trivial to mention, and ask yourself: Why are they there? The famous French literary critic, Roland Barthes, picks out a barometer on the wall in Gustave Flaubert's short story *Un Coeur Simple* (translated in English as *A Simple Heart*), as a defining example: the significance of the barometer is its insignificance. It signifies 'the real'. If it wasn't there you might not miss it. But the fact that it is there makes you more likely to believe in the story.

Now, take a scene from your own story, preferably set in a recurring location. Choose a scene that feels a bit skimpy or sparse. Rewrite it, introducing a new detail that grounds that scene more convincingly (though unobtrusively) in reality. This in-itself insignificant detail should register at one or more points in the story on one or more of your principal characters, however fleetingly. Then do this for each of your key locations.

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o6. The Outline

I mentioned earlier how important a plan is to me. In a popular novel, you want the reader to keep turning the pages, so there must always be something happening that makes them want to read on. To guarantee this I need a plan that specifies what happens in each chapter: who the people are, what the dramas are, and how they are linked.

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In a popular novel, you want the reader to keep turning the pages, so there must always be something happening that makes them want to read on.

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My third and final outline for *The Evening and the Morning*, a book about the Anglo Saxons, Vikings and Normans, is thirty typed pages. I was especially pleased with the opening of this book. It begins with a young man who is planning to run away with a slightly older woman who is already married. He gets up in the middle of the night, creeps out of the house and makes his way along the beach towards the agreed rendezvous point. He's a boat builder and has a boat of his own. As the sun comes up, he looks out to sea and sees a fleet of Viking ships bearing down on his village and all the people he knows and loves.

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Suddenly you realise that this book is not going to be about him running away with his beloved: it's going to be about the Vikings seeking to devastate his town. There's tension right from the start, but then the stakes are immediately raised.

I sometimes think of the novel in terms of fractals. A novel has a beginning, middle and end, but within that overarching structure, each chapter also has a beginning, middle and end, and so too does each scene in each chapter, and even each paragraph. Cumulatively this is what imparts drive to the whole.

There's no rule about how many action scenes you need, or how many love scenes. The only rules have to do with how those scenes work: beginning, middle and end; something driving the scene forward; the reader feeling the emotions. In theory you could write a thrilling scene about the jeopardy of making a strawberry cheesecake. It's not the content, but how it's handled and how much it means to the person in the story.

Sometimes you might want to show the outline to a publisher and aim to get a contract in advance. That's quite difficult to achieve when you're a beginner, but thinking in terms of how the publisher will react is good discipline regardless. What you want is for the publisher to say: I must have this book; I don't want any other publisher in town to have it; it has to be one of mine. This in turn focuses your mind on what is most likely to attract the reader.

I may be relatively unusual in paying so much attention to the outline. I know that Lee Child, for instance, sits down and writes Chapter One and then thinks: what is this story about? I've never been able to work that way. Another friend of mine, Erica Jong, says she always knows the beginning and the end but the middle is a voyage of discovery. I'm a planner, but you have to do what suits you.

There are some obvious disadvantages to not having an outline. You may be several hundred pages into the first draft when you realise that a particular character who is a man would be more credible as a woman, which then entails making lots of changes.

The outline sketches out the characters' hopes and fears. It defines the shape of the story by setting up tensions at the start that won't be resolved until the end. Elizabeth marries Mr Darcy, the Jackal fails to kill General de Gaulle and Hannibal the Cannibal escapes from prison – these are not necessarily happy endings, but resolutions that provide closure. And it tracks the additional challenges and partial resolutions that constitute the development of each scene, and thereby the overall story.

Middle sections are trickiest. It's easy enough to set somebody up with a problem, and to know what the solution is, but you have to keep the reader glued to the page while you get from one to the other. You need to surprise them; you don't want them getting bored because they feel they've read it all before.

Suppose you start with a guy who loves a woman but has never spoken to her. The resolution will be that they are happy ever after or they're not. But what happens along the way? At some point they are going to speak, which is your first drama. How will she react? Will she be intrigued, revolted or indignant? That first conversation is a great scene. Then let's say they become romantically involved. They must eventually have a quarrel: first, because that's real life, and second, because quarrels are useful to novelists, enabling characters to learn more about each other and the reader to get to know them better too. This is another great part of the story. Then comes the resolution of that quarrel, and so on. With imagination you can think of a half-dozen ways to play that drama out.

I've never had writer's block. Sometimes I get stuck at a particular point and just pace up and down until I figure it out. Some writers advise doing something else completely, like going for a walk, but for me, the further you get from the keyboard the less likely you are to find the solution. The only thing that works is sticking at it and wracking my brains.

Over the years I've developed a nose for what works and what doesn't, but in the early days there can often be false starts with an outline. I would sometimes work for a month on a story idea before realising it wasn't going anywhere and that might happen several times over.

I once wrote an entire first draft of a book about the Russians taking over a bank in order to cause financial collapse in the West. Then I got a letter from a woman saying she'd just read *Eye of the Needle* and it was so exciting that she sat on the edge of her chair to read it. Which made me look again at my book about bankers making phone calls and calling meetings, and even though my publishers and agent liked it, I thought: this won't do, and threw it away. That book was called *Country Risk*. It was a good title and a decent idea, but it was never going to make anyone sit on the edge of their chair.

I show the first draft of the outline to my editors and various others who can help me, and they give me their comments before I rewrite it. Normally there are two main drafts and then a final tweak, but I think I rewrote the outline for *The Man from St Petersburg* seven times.

Looking back at my first outline for *Fall of Giants*, I see that it has mainly been annotated by my agent at the time, Al Zuckerman of Writers House. On reading Chapter Five, which takes place in America, Al remarks that one of the characters, Leonid, is of interest to him only to the extent that he causes

problems for his brother and the women in his life, and that it strikes him as odd that some of the action is set in Buffalo, New York. In response – this is an email exchange that I have copied straight to the notes – I explain that I chose Buffalo because the first Russian Orthodox church in the US was built there in 1895 and I wanted a city with a large population of non-Jewish Russians. Al wants to cut the action in the US but suggests introducing a notable American character in London or St Petersburg, but I disagree because it wouldn't be true to history and might not be smart commercially either. But I do decide that everything in this chapter will now not happen to Leonid but to Grigori.

“ I’m a planner, but you have to do what suits you.

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That exchange is fairly typical of the kind of conversation I have with anyone who reads my drafts: we have a back and forth about it, and I do something to address the thing that bothered them; I never just say they're wrong.

I only show the outline to people I trust, but I usually find that anyone who is interested enough to read it has something useful to say. I don't follow every piece of advice I'm given but, generally speaking, if somebody has stopped to make a note then there is probably something that needs attention, even if their precise diagnosis is incorrect.

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The outline is like a condensed version of the finished product, divided chapter by chapter; if the book is divided into parts one, two and three, then so too is the outline. Reviewing the outline in light of third-party comments is often a matter of looking at a particular chapter and saying: this is a dull chapter, not much happens, there's very little emotion in it; it's a rather mechanical chapter that advances the story but not in a thrilling way. Even the outline should show the emotional elements, and what it is about each chapter that is going to make the reader's heart beat faster.

In Hollywood they use the phrase 'pitch document' for what is essentially the outline of a film, and it might be useful to think of your outline as a pitch document for your publisher. Remember that the key questions are: What will make the publisher say, 'I have to have this'? What will make the bookseller say, 'I'd better order a hundred and fifty copies'? What will make the shopper say, 'I'll buy that'? That's a pitch document.

A variation on this is the elevator pitch, a one-liner version you can sell to someone in the lift before you reach the next floor. This is handy, because people will always be asking what your book is about and there isn't always time to sit down for an hour over a drink. What you need is: 'It's about a German spy in wartime England who discovers the deception plan for the D-Day invasion and has to get home with the information.'

Right from the start I like to have a working title. When in doubt, I favour biblical titles. Most English-speaking people have heard or read the words of the Bible, which of their nature signal authority and importance. All my Kingsbridge books have biblical titles.

Essentially, the key to a good title is that it should tell you something about the content of the book, but also what is alluring about it. It must be honest, otherwise you'll have a reader who feels cheated. But it must also seduce.

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It's a very good discipline
to think about how a publisher
would react because you're
also thinking about how
the world would react.

.....

TAKEAWAYS

- **Everything starts from the outline. It starts small and focused, then develops through the step-by-step elaboration of individual scenes until suddenly you can see your way through the shape of the novel and you're good to go.**
- **Story matters more than character and story is driven by structure – within each scene, scene to scene, and overall.**

EXERCISES

Choose a book you've read recently, or a classic you know well, and write the outline that the author might have sent to the publisher. Try to help the publisher sell it to the bookseller: what will tempt the potential reader to open the book and take a look at the first page?

Write your own outline for a novel you've finished, or for your work in progress. You should consider what other books your book is like, but also what makes your book stand out from them. You should introduce your main character and pose your big question: what intrigue will drive the reader through from beginning to end? Rather than answer the question prematurely, try breaking it down into a series of questions, a cascade of questions that will get publisher, bookseller and reader hooked.

Take a selection of books you have read and try to think of alternative titles, considering the pros and cons of each.

07. Finding An Agent Or Publisher

When you have an outline and a title, you might start thinking about how to get an agent and a publisher. My experience is somewhat out of date, so here is a conversation with a young writer at the beginning of her career, **Alexandra Overy**, who also happens to be my granddaughter.

KF: *Like most people, you started out writing the kind of stories that you like to read.*

AO: I have always loved to read for escape. So it made sense for me to write the kind of thing I loved, which is fantasy. Specifically, I write young adult and middle grade fantasy.

KF: *Initially your efforts didn't meet with success.*

AO: It's an industry full of rejections. Even once I had an agent my first book didn't sell, so it's taken a lot of perseverance.

KF: *Perseverance is really important. Tell us about the process for acquiring an agent.*

AO: These days there's quite a set procedure. Most publishers will not accept unsolicited manuscripts, so it's generally best to have an agent who acts as your representative. They negotiate contracts for you and ensure that everything is fair, providing support legally, personally and professionally. The most common way to get an agent is through a process called querying. You write a query letter that pitches your book and sets out your credentials and you submit a sample of your work. If the agent likes it, they'll request the full manuscript, at which point they may also arrange a conversation. Then, if they offer to represent you, they'll often suggest edits before sending the manuscript out to editors so as to give it the best chance it can possibly have.

KF: *What makes a good query letter?*

AO: A good query letter is crucial to hooking an agent. Looking back at my first one, from 2017, I can see now how I could make it stronger, but I can remember sitting down and trying to hit all the key points. There are no hard-and-fast rules, but apart from anything else it's a way of demonstrating that you can write clearly and succinctly. It shouldn't be more than a page. Agents can get a hundred queries a week – you don't want to put them off by rambling on too long.

You start with a sentence that is a short pitch of your book – for example, 'An evil princess bargains with the thief she sentenced to death to try to find her sister's killer' – then take a paragraph or two to go into your story. This shouldn't be too general or vague – it's not enough to say, for example, this will be a bestseller, or this is going to be the next Ken Follett, or my hero is going to save the world. You want to go into specifics: what makes your book unique and interesting, what are the characters facing and what are the stakes for them personally, and why the agent should care. Mention genre and word count, then wrap up with a final paragraph about yourself.

KF: *Why is it important not to use too many names in a query letter?*

AO: This is always relevant, but especially in fantasy, where names and places are often made-up and can be tricky at first to grasp. If you include too many names, it's too easy for the reader to lose track. They start wondering, who was that again? I think it's often better to use place-holders, like 'the main character's boss' or 'the main character's sister', which helps to clarify context and relationships.

KF: Is there a way to find out what a particular agent is interested in?

AO: There are so many resources on the internet. I used querytracker.net, which lets you search by category and age range, so you can check that whoever you're looking at actually represents the genre you've written. You can see which other authors they represent too, and even their average reply time. There is also a website called [Manuscript Wish List](http://ManuscriptWishList.com), where agents set up a profile spelling out what they're looking for or listing recent books they've enjoyed. If you happen to have a book that corresponds closely to something on that list, then obviously it's a great thing to mention in the query letter.

Some agencies have a 'no from one, no from all' policy, so you want to be sure that you are targeting the right individual within that agency from the outset. You need to do your research, not only to identify the specialists and the best fit for you as a writer, but also to be sure that the agency is reputable and treats its authors well.

KF: Tell us about comparison titles.

AO: Some online forms will have a specific section asking for existing titles that are similar to the book you are submitting, not only to potentially intrigue and excite the agent, but to give them an idea of the potential fan base. For example, for my debut, the two comparison titles were *Spinning Silver*, for its magical fairy-tale feel, and *Three Dark Crowns*, for its politics. Those two books served as a kind of touch stone for the agent as to the kind of audience my book would be for. It's good to choose relatively recent titles, as it shows awareness of the current market.

KF: So maybe Ken Follett meets Danielle Steele...

AO: Yes. The agent would think: that's an interesting combination, I wonder where it might go?

KF: When Stephanie Meyer's series began with a book called *Twilight*, I remember asking: what's it about? And the agent – who also happened to be my agent – said, 'vampires in high school'. Turned out that was a brilliant combination. Should you approach agents one at a time?

AO: It's better to query several at once: agents are already dealing with things they are currently being paid for, so they won't necessarily get to queries very quickly. I advise doing it in rounds of six and when you get a rejection, send out a new query. That way you always have six on the go. You want to personalise each submission, but be wary of agents who require an exclusive, because you need to have options.

KF: Tell me about [Publishers Marketplace](http://PublishersMarketplace.com).

AO: *Publishers Marketplace* started as a trade magazine for the publishing industry. It both prints and lists online all the recent deals, including foreign deals, so it's a great tool for checking to see if an agent has recently made a deal within the genre and age group you write, and to see if they're making deals with the kind of publishers you want to work with. For a comprehensive list you need a subscription, but it can be worth taking one out for a limited time while querying. They also have several newsletters, like *Publishers Lunch* and *Children's Bookshelf*, which send out weekly roundups of the week's deals. It's a good way of keeping an eye on what's selling.

KF: *You like to be up to speed with what's going on in the business of publishing.*

AO: You don't necessarily want to write to trends, but I think it's good to be aware of what's going on in the market.

KF: *What other ways are there of finding out about agents?*

AO: The first piece of advice I remember getting from someone about how to figure out who to query was to pick up three of your favourite books, preferably in the genre you're writing, and flip to the Acknowledgements section. More often than not, the author will thank their agent, and that's a great way to find out who represents them; then you can Google the agent and see if they're open to queries.

KF: *What about the contract itself?*

AO: The most important thing is that an agent should never make money until you make money. Agents work on commission. The industry standard is fifteen percent, and although it can be a little higher for foreign or film rights, it shouldn't be higher than twenty-five. If someone asks for money up front or charges fees, that's generally a red flag that they may be trying to take advantage of you. The rule of thumb is that the agent is motivated to work alongside you because they make money when you do.

KF: *What happens after you sign with an agent? What was your experience?*

AO: I knew my first agent wanted quite extensive revisions on my manuscript before taking it out to editors. I think that is becoming more common, especially with newer agents who may have more time and are willing to put the work in. I did about three rounds and six months of revisions on that book before it went out on submission.

In a lot of ways submission is similar to querying, but with your agent doing most of the work. They can either keep you up to date as rejections come in, or they can fill you in once a month, for example. There's a lot of waiting in publishing.

KF: *What happened to that first book?*

AO: It didn't sell. Typical responses were 'I liked it, but I didn't love it', or 'I don't think it will stand out in the marketplace'. No specific notes, which you sometimes get, that might help with the next round of submission. An editor needs to connect with a book enough to want to work on it for a couple of years, which is a pretty big commitment.

We were on submission for almost a year and it was quite a painful process. It's not always easy, because it can be very distracting having those rejections in your brain, but I highly recommend working on the next thing while your book is out on submission. That way, if the book doesn't sell, you're not stuck; you're in a good place and can simply say, 'let's send the next one out'.

KF: *Perseverance again. What about your second book?*

AO: We had worked on that together while the first was out on submission, so we didn't brood too much over that first rejection. I didn't feel I'd hit this big roadblock and everything was over. After about six months of the second book being on submission, I got the very exciting news that an editor wanted to speak to me on the phone. We spoke early on a Monday morning and later that day they sent in the offer – a very surreal moment.

Once that first offer is made, your agent contacts everyone else who has the manuscript to see if they're interested in making a competing offer. If they are, you either choose according to preference or go for an auction. Then once an offer is accepted, your agent gets down to contract negotiation, to secure you the best possible terms.

KF: It's a pretty good moment when your first book is about to be published. Tell us a little about *These Feathered Flames*.

AO: *These Feathered Flames* is YA (Young Adult) fantasy. It's a retelling of the Russian folktale, *The Firebird*, following two sisters, one destined to be queen and one destined to be the firebird, a magical creature that must ensure the price of magic is always paid. They have opposing duties. Then their mother dies suddenly, so they're thrust into figuring out what's going on in the palace, what their relationship to each other is, and who killed their mother.

It's fantasy, but with *Game of Thrones*-style politics and a murder mystery aspect as well.

KF: And while it was going through the publishing process, you were writing the next one?

AO: As soon as it sold, I started writing the sequel. People are often surprised that because of the way contracts work, the sequel is entirely written before the first book even comes out. I signed the contract for *These Feathered Flames* in September 2019, but it didn't come out until April 2021.

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I was working on a children's book as well, *The Gingerbread Witch*, for the eight-to-eleven age range. Partly because I was worried about the rejections and started wondering if the YA genre was too saturated and I wouldn't be able to stand out. I have very fond memories of Middle Grade books from when I was a kid, so shifting sideways to that area helped me not get stuck in a negative headspace.

Then I ended up selling both, which was very nice!

KF: Then something bad happened.

AO: My agent left her agency! I was about four months away from my first book coming out and suddenly agent-less, which was daunting, because the agent is who you turn to whether you have a marketing question or a worry about the cover. The agent is your mediator and advocate.

So I queried all over again, though it's a little different when you already have a book under contract or published. That time I didn't have the full manuscript, but queried with a partial. Normally this is not advised, but partly because of timing and because I had books coming out, I felt relatively confident in doing so.

KF: One thing you should look out for in the contract is anything to do with movie rights. For the record, you should not give the publisher fifty percent of the movie rights. In fact, you shouldn't give the publisher any percentage of money from the movie. You should have a separate agent who represents you to Hollywood, and they will want as a minimum that standard fifteen percent.

Another thing I have a bee in my bonnet about is publishers who include what's called an indemnity clause, which says that if they get sued over your book for any reason, fairly or unfairly, you have to pay the legal costs. This is something that, in my opinion, no author should ever sign. Because you could lose your house. Somebody could sue the publisher for a million dollars and it might be a completely specious thing, but the legal costs of defending that could be a hundred thousand pounds – then what are you going to do? I never sign an indemnity clause. If it comes to a fight, I'll sign it with a sub-clause stipulating that the amount of money owed should never exceed the amount of money paid to me under this contract. That way you could lose what they've paid you, but you're not going to have to sell your house.

AO: Contracts can seem daunting, but it's advisable to read them. You can also ask to see the contract before you decide whether or not to sign. There are websites like [Writer Beware](#) which share standard contracts for reference as well as lists of potentially problematic clauses.

I had an international rights contract that included a clause saying the translated text might be edited in accordance with the social norms of the country. Which when you think about it could be a problem; for example, being queer is not legal in a lot of countries. In fact, I've seen authors have things like queer relationships taken out of their books in translation.

KF: *I've never seen that kind of clause. The standard clause is that the foreign publisher must make a true and faithful translation. Of course, you would never know. Nobody speaks that many languages. The only way you find out is if a bilingual fan writes to you.*

AO: My agent modified it to say that any substantial change must be approved by me. But that was something I picked up on in the contract that my agent hadn't noticed.

KF: *It's good to have friends who are authors, especially when you're starting out – you can share your experiences and learn from one another.*

AO: Yes, and that includes online communities. Of course, there are always negatives, but you don't necessarily have a lot of people who are interested in, for example, YA fantasy just where you live. I found a wonderful debut group online for the year that my first book came out, so we were all debuting together and all supported each others' books. It's great to be able to talk to someone who is going through the same process and experiencing the same highs and lows.

KF: *You should get a guarantee from the publisher, which is commonly called an advance, even though you don't always get it in advance.*

AO: Most publishers offer some kind of advance on royalties. This means you won't get paid royalties until you've recouped that advance. So, say your advance is ten thousand dollars, you won't get any royalties until you've hit that ten-thousand-dollar mark. But it's helpful in a practical way, because it tides you over between the time your book is accepted and the date it actually comes out and starts earning.

As a new or debut author, you might sometimes have to accept a lower royalty rate on your first few thousand sales, but most agents will try and negotiate so that, for example, if your first ten thousand copies are sold at a twelve-and-a-half percent royalty rate, once you reach that threshold, it will go up to fifteen.

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KF: *So if your book is a huge success and sells a million copies, you won't still be getting the twelve and a half percent, you'll be getting the fifteen and they'll be making money as well. Royalty statements take a bit of getting used to.*

AO: The first one I got, I called my agent and had her talk me through it.

KF: *I once told my publisher I was bringing my royalty statement to lunch in New York so he could explain it to me, to which he responded by bringing along the company accountant, because he didn't understand it either.*

To my way of thinking it's a bit dishonest to deliberately make things difficult for the author. And publishers do make mistakes. For example, you've negotiated that step up to fifteen percent royalties at a certain level and if you look carefully, you find that you've got to that level but they've forgotten about the escalator and are still paying you twelve and a half. It's always an honest mistake, but I don't really believe in honest mistakes, because none have ever been in my favour.

What happens about new media such as eBooks and audio books?

AO: Most eBooks are included as part of the general contract, even if at a different royalty rate. But audio books are likely to have a clause of their own or even be sold separately. Digital media are evolving rapidly – for example, I've had friends whose books have been adapted into online comics and graphic novels – so it's important to reserve as many rights as you can.

KF: *And to think I met my first publisher by chance in a pub...*

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TAKEAWAYS

- Pay attention to what is happening in the market. It rarely pays to work in total isolation.
- Read the contract and ask questions if there are things you don't understand or that concern you. Both agent and publisher have an obligation to answer.

EXERCISES

Pick three of your favourite books, look in the acknowledgements, and figure out who the agent was. Then look up that agent to find out their submission requirements. That will give you some practice in navigating an agent's website.

Come up with two comparison titles for your story taken from the last four to five years. Think carefully about the specifics of your story rather than just the general idea and try to express the links clearly and succinctly: for example, the character arc of Book X meets the world building of Book Y.

Look at one of your favourite books and consider how you would pitch it. Imagine you are the agent: how would you sell the book to an editor? It's always helpful to think about books from a different perspective and might give you insight into how to pitch your own.

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o8. The First Line

You've got a title and an outline. Now you've got to write the book. And it starts with the first line.

The first line has to do a lot of work. Bookshop browsers quite often open the book and read the first line, and you want to make sure that it's your book they buy.

In this lesson we'll look at a range of first lines and discuss how they work.

The oldest story that we know of, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was written down about four thousand years ago; it was certainly told orally long before that. So let's have a look at the very first, first line.

'There was a man who saw the deep, the bedrock of the land, who knew the ways and learned all things.'

Not bad, I'd say. Gilgamesh turns out to be eighteen feet tall – a sort of Babylonian Jack Reacher.

The first line that we probably all remember begins:

'Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a land far far away...'

That's a great first line. It tells you that this story, which is probably about giants eating children, isn't something that happens in the child's own world. It takes you to a completely different universe.

You want to catch the reader's attention. You can do that with an intriguing first line.

'Until he was four years old, James Henry Trotter had a happy life.'

Which immediately raises the question: what happened when he was four years old? The book is Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, and because it's Dahl, what happens is something quite cruel – both his parents were eaten by a rhinoceros.

If I say *'until he was four years old'* to primary school children, they all know what the book is and they all know what comes next, which is proof that it's very memorable. Dahl had the knack of combining terrible violence with humour, which is something kids love.

Something completely different but equally intriguing:

'On a mountain above the clouds once lived a man who had been the gardener of the emperor of Japan.'

That really got me. I read the whole book and it's as good as it promises to be, despite the misleading title, *The Garden of Evening Mist*. It's not about fairies and toadstools; it's a tough book by Tan Twan Eng about the aftermath of the Second World War in Malaysia.

You can be mysterious.

'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect.'

Wow! You know immediately that this story is surreal, but you also think: now what? He's still in bed in the morning and he's a giant insect instead of a man? Where is the author going to go with this? It's got you. *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka.

You can shock.

'There were only three of us left now; the others had been hung over the ramparts, one every morning.'

This is what Stephen King calls a 'gotcha', because once you've read it, you're hooked. You have no option but to find out the fate of the three who are left. This is a short story by Naomi Mitchison, *The Hostages*.

You can start with a joke.

'There were one hundred and seventeen psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna and I'd been treated by at least six of them.'

It's just about plausible that a hundred and seventeen psychoanalysts might have been on a flight to the birthplace of psychoanalysis. But the funny part is, *'I'd been treated by at least six of them'*, which suggests that none of them are doing her any good. That's the opening line of *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong – a huge bestseller in the 1970s and an iconic feminist novel.

Mostly the first line tells you what sort of story is coming, and that's good.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.'

This very famous first line from *Pride and Prejudice* tells us three things right away: this is going to be a romance ending in a marriage; it takes place in a prissily ordered society; and the author is gently poking fun at that society (something about Jane Austen's work that is often lost on film). After all, it's not a truth, it's not universally acknowledged, and a man in possession of a fortune might not be in search of a wife.

Similarly:

'All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.'

Enigmatic, but loaded with significance. This is going to be a thoughtful book, probably a bit sombre: *Anna Karenina*, by Leo Tolstoy.

You can set a mood with your first line. This is a favourite of mine.

'This is the saddest story I have ever heard.'

Terrifically emotional, but delivered as if somebody has just sat down with you by the fire with a decanter of whiskey. You're relaxing together and he's going to tell you about something he has actually heard. So although logically this is artificial, because it's a novel, it makes it feel as if you're listening to one of your mates. This is from *The Good Soldier*, by Ford Madox Ford.

'The scent and smoke and sweat of a casino are nauseating at three in the morning.'

Vivid, simple and very effective, creating an atmosphere of decadent luxury. You're thrown right into the world of Ian Fleming's first Bond story, *Casino Royale*. Mr Bond of course is a great gambler; he's often up at three o'clock in the morning and he's always smoking.

Some first lines give you the maximum information in the minimum number of words.

'Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.'

Referring to Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia as Mr and Mrs in the opening line of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* makes them seem more distant, less friendly; their boring address is a caricature of suburbia; describing them as normal means they don't like magic, and *'thank you very much'* lets us hear Mrs Dursley's smug, snooty voice. In short, we know we are not going to like them.

'Behavioural science, the FBI section that deals with serial murder, is on the bottom floor of the academy building at Quantico, half buried in the earth.'

This is going to be a realistic thriller, grounded in convincing factual detail. This author clearly has inside information. Behavioural science sounds like a department in a university but the story is about a serial killer. And there is a touch of the sinister in being *'half-buried in the earth'*, like a coffin. *The Silence of the Lambs*, by Thomas Harris – a book I wish I had written.

Here's one of mine, the opening line to *The Key to Rebecca*, my third bestseller. I like it, though some find it melodramatic.

'The last camel collapsed at noon.'

You know you're in the desert. The travellers must have started out with several camels. Therefore whoever is travelling is really in trouble. It's informative and I toned the melodrama down by swapping in 'collapsed' for the original 'died'.

Here's another, more subtle, from *The Pillars of the Earth*.

'The small boys came early to the hanging.'

Another short, declarative statement, just eight words. It's a surprise, because we don't normally think of a hanging as something that little boys would be allowed or would want to watch. And indeed the next scene has them doing childish things like pretending to be hanged and making grotesque gestures and peeing up against the gallows. I think this is probably my best first line, because its simplicity implies so many complexities. It really works for the book.

I wanted to give the sense of a violent and cruel society. It wasn't all brave knights in armour jousting and maidens being rescued from high towers, the sort of romantic Middle Ages that comes from early French poetry. I wanted to make it clear from the outset that this was going to be a very gritty picture of the Middle Ages, because the cathedrals were built by people who were poor and hungry and slept on the floor, who were cold and had bad clothes and hard lives. Yet they built the most beautiful buildings in the world – that's the romance of the period for me.

These are all great examples. But don't worry if it takes you a while to come up with a good first line. I would spend a couple of hours thinking about it and if you don't get one, don't let it hold you up. Put in a place marker and come back to it, because you don't want to spend days not writing anything else.

But do take the first line seriously. Remember the selling role it has and always be prepared to think of a better one later in the process, because it really is important.

TAKEAWAY

- Start grippingly, as you mean to go on. If the first line flops, the novel flops.

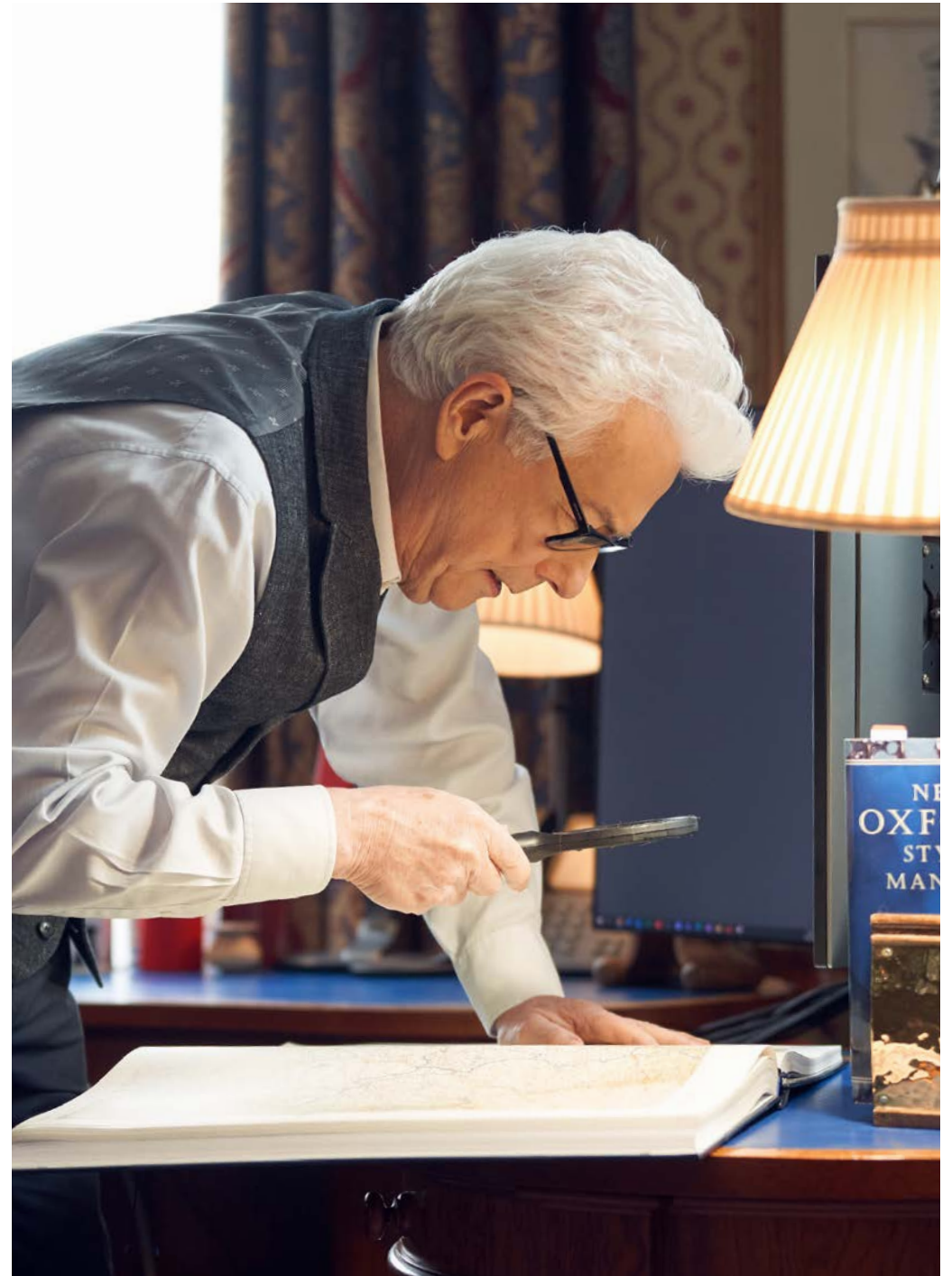
EXERCISE

Pick ten novels at random. Write down the first line and make a list of what's good and bad about each one. Then do the same for some of your own. Before moving to judgement, analyse how each one works on the reader. How does it make the reader feel? What expectations does it arouse, what hunger?

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Don't worry if it takes you
a while to think of a great
first line.

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09. Outline To Draft

Now you have to turn your outline into a novel. Every paragraph has to become five or six pages. All those bright ideas that you gaily jotted down now have to be made to seem real.

This is going to work your imagination; you're going to wrack your brains – but that's what brains are for. You're going to describe landscapes, buildings, move people in and out of rooms, give each character a look, a presence, a way of speaking.

Every description that you write has to do two jobs.

First of all, you've got to draw a picture in the reader's mind. You want notable features, bright colours, unusual things. Brown eyes and brown hair is the worst possible character description. You want something vivid that the reader will remember.

But that's not enough. The description of what a person looks like should also hint at their character. There are clichés in this regard, like *'his beady eyes were so close together that I knew he was untrustworthy'*. But there are more subtle ways of doing it. You could say *'she had beautiful blonde hair'* or *'her beautiful blonde hair was very carefully arranged'*. You can picture the hair, but now you also have the suggestion that she's fussy about it. She might be a little vain, or she has taken trouble with her appearance because this is a dramatic scene.

This principle also applies to description of landscape. Here is an example from *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, by John Buchan, famous for his evocation of the Scottish landscape. In this excerpt, our hero Richard Hannay is on the run.

'I was on the central boss of a huge upland country and could see everything moving for miles. In the meadows below the road, half a mile back, a cottage smoked. Otherwise, there was only the calling of plovers and the tinkling of little streams. There was no cover for a tom tit in those bald green places.'

The fact that he could see everything moving for miles sows a seed for what's coming next, and there's surprise and delight in the idea of the cottage smoking. But the key sentence is the last: even a tiny bird couldn't hide in that place.

The description does two jobs. You picture the scene. But on the very next page, the people who are chasing Hannay appear in a small plane and we've already established that there is nowhere for him to hide. So this pause to take in the landscape is in fact the beginning of a terrifically dramatic chase scene.

Here's a description of a room from my book, *Never*. The scene takes place in China. The head of the army is visiting the foreign minister and as in every country, these two people are at odds with each other – the soldiers think the diplomats are namby-pamby and the diplomats think the soldiers are reckless.

The foreign minister has only one object on his desk – a priceless Ming vase. The head of the army sits down, lights a cigarette and taps his ash into this vase in a gesture of contempt. The foreign minister then moves the vase to the other end of his desk. One-all.

Both desk and vase are doing a job: I'm using them to make a point about the relationship between the two men. This is what I mean by vivid description. You see the scene, but the mute interaction between the characters raises it above the level of mere description. That is something always to aim at.

When it comes to emotion, don't hold back. Embarrass yourself, put it all in. Then take a step back and ask – does this go too far? Or show it to somebody else and see how they react. The chances are you won't need to tone down what you've written. This applies particularly to sex scenes, when people are liable to chuckle and say, 'I've read that scene – you don't really do that, do you?' You can't let such things inhibit you.

But emotion, like description, doesn't stand on its own. Imagine somebody is treated very badly and feels profound resentment. In order to express that resentment, you might have them fantasise about killing the person who wronged them, even though they would never even kill a mouse. Then two hundred pages later, that person may have a chance for revenge. The emotion generated in the early scene will drive the later scene in which the injured person can finally act, and the reader, whose sympathy has been engaged, will think: go for it. Alternatively, the injured person might choose to be magnanimous and the reader will approve and admire. Either way, emotion plays a role in the story.

Characters in popular fiction should feel the threat of something that could actually happen rather than something imaginary: violence, hostility, poverty, loss, rejection. There must be a specific, identifiable cause that could ruin their lives.

Moments of very high emotion might demand special effort in the writing. Generally speaking, I don't do much fancy writing. My prose is clear, direct and light on imagery. But there are times when you need something more.

Here is a passage from *Exit Ghost* by Philip Roth, one of my favourite authors. It's about the central character, who is an old man with a fatal illness contemplating his own death.

'I would die too, though not before I sat down at the desk by the window, looking out through the grey light of a November morning across a snow-dusted road onto the silent, wind-flurried waters of the swamp, already icing up at the edge of the foundering stalks of the skeletal bed of plumeless reeds.'

He doesn't tell you how he feels. He communicates that message by describing a terribly bleak landscape. It has the indirectness and power of a poem.

But we can't all be Philip Roth, probably the greatest literary novelist of the last fifty years.

The last thing you want is for the reader to become conscious of the writer striving after effect, but it is possible to analyse how this passage works. The snow-dusted road and wind-flurried waters, already icing up: these images convey the irresistible approach of winter, further intensified by 'skeletal' and 'plumeless'. This accumulation of suggestive words is what makes you want to burst into tears.

Let's return to simpler things. You're writing the first scene. Like every other scene it will have a beginning, middle and end, and a dramatic question that will drive the reader through the scene.

Amos, in *The Armour of Light*, is nineteen or twenty and works for his father. He has no money because his father is mean. Amos is a nice-looking chap and he's crazy about a girl called Jane. Jane is pretty. She loves good clothes and is always beautifully dressed. Amos hesitates to approach her because he's still a mere apprentice working for his father. But he makes up his mind to speak to her.

In the eighteenth century, a romance began with the couple 'walking out', and just prior to this scene Amos asks his mother about when she started walking out with his father. This again does two jobs: it not only tells us about Amos and his state of mind, but also explains this eighteenth-century custom to the reader.

Amos and Jane are both Methodists and they're in the Methodist Hall. Jane has her pick of the town's young beaux. There's a particularly good-looking guy called Rupert who has her attention, so Amos begins to hate Rupert even though the two of them are friends. The suspense builds up. Amos is going to ask the big question. We know his hopes – that Jane will say yes; and his fears – that she might prefer one of the other boys.

'Would you walk out with me?' he asks. And she replies: 'I want a life of parties and dresses and jewellery. And you can't offer me that. I'm sorry. I like you, but I'm not going to walk out with you.'

There we have it. A very simple scene, but perfectly formed. We have the set-up (hopes and fears), the development (the other boys) and the resolution (negative, and Amos is miserable).

Every scene should be more or less that shape.

The thing that works for me as a bridge between the outline and the scene is to write down each of the things that has to happen. So in this case it might be:

1. Amos talks to his mother about when she was walking out with his father.
2. He goes to the Methodist Hall.
3. Jane is there and she looks fabulous.
4. There's already a little crowd of handsome young men around her.

5. He makes up his mind to do it.
6. She tells him he's no good for her.
7. He accepts his rejection and walks away.

You've gone from a single sentence in the outline to seven things that are going to happen in this scene – measurable progress.

There's a scene in *Never* which in my notebook is headed 'ups and downs at the diplomats' ball'. The president, Pauline Green, is due to attend a ball in Washington DC. There are about ten things that have to happen. The scene starts with Green anticipating the cocktail reception. She knows who's going to be there, including some very important people in the world of foreign policy. She thinks about who she's going to talk to. She feels optimistic. She works the room. Some conversations please her. Some present obstacles.

To avoid a long scene like this becoming monotonous, I look at any given moment and ask myself: will this encourage her or will she be dismayed by it? And alongside each of the points there's either an up-arrow or a down-arrow, indicating her feelings. Then if necessary you can shuffle things around to create a wave of ups and downs that will keep the reader's interest in the scene lively, with each incident having weight for the main character and being germane to their project.

The President's aim is to win support for a demilitarised zone between two countries threatening to start a war she doesn't want. She wants in particular to see the Saudi ambassador. At first she can't see him, so she engages briefly in small talk. Then she runs into the French ambassador. Sometimes the French support the US and sometimes they don't, so when the ambassador promises to back her proposal, it's a big up-arrow. Then there's a distraction. She's fired somebody who has offended against the rules of sex and romance for politicians, so when he shows up, the last person she wants to see, that's a downer.

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Then the Saudi ambassador tells her that his government refuses to support her proposal, which is a much bigger downer. She doesn't know what else to do. Finally, she makes a speech in which she talks in code about the zone and the need to avoid wars wherever we can. The speech goes well and she leaves, which is the end of the scene. She's had both ups and downs and it has been constantly interesting.

The resolution is partial. Some questions have been answered, positively or negatively, in line with her initial hopes and fears. There's been some drama, with both progress and setbacks, and at the end she still has work to do. So overall things have changed, but there is still plenty of story left. Which is about what you want. You want the reader to think, 'what is she going to do next?'

I never make a list of things to change later. The list would get too long and I'd forget the detail of what I had in mind. If something needs changing I'll do it immediately, however tricky it may be. This is the safest approach, because changes may entail consequences that affect what comes next. To my way of thinking, putting off changes and corrections is a very bad idea.

Like a lot of authors, I also review each morning what I wrote the day before. It gets you back in the zone and gives you a second chance to spot any issues.

Follow this process and you can write the scene. Once you've written the scene, you've jumped from outline to first draft: you're a novelist.

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TAKEAWAY

- **Make your words work double time: description should always tell you more than the mere appearance of things.**

EXERCISE

Pick up a novel and find a long scene. List the eight or ten things that happened in that scene and check whether there are up moments and down moments, how these are mixed and balanced, and whether the author has created a good wave.

Take note of passages of descriptive prose in the books you are reading. Analyse them to see whether or not they imply more than they say. If you come across an extended description that appears to signify no more than its surface level, try rewriting it to reveal something about the characters involved or the situation in which they find themselves.

Compare the opening passages of these three thrillers. The first is from *The Modigliani Scandal*, published in 1976. The second is from *Eye of the Needle*, my break-out success, published in 1976. The third is from *Never*, published in 2021. All three are thrillers. Each passage is accompanied by a non-exhaustive list of questions to help you reflect on the work being done by the words.

How do you feel about the characters? Do you know how you feel? Do you want to get to know them further? Are you compelled to read on?

THE MODIGLIANI SCANDAL

The baker scratched his black moustache with a floury finger, turning the hairs grey and unintentionally making himself look ten years older. Around him the shelves and counters were full of long loaves of fresh, crusty bread, and the familiar smell filled his nostrils and swelled his chest with a quietly satisfied pride. The bread was a new batch, the second that morning: business was good because the weather was fine. He could always rely on a little sunshine to bring the housewives of Paris out into the streets to shop for his good bread.

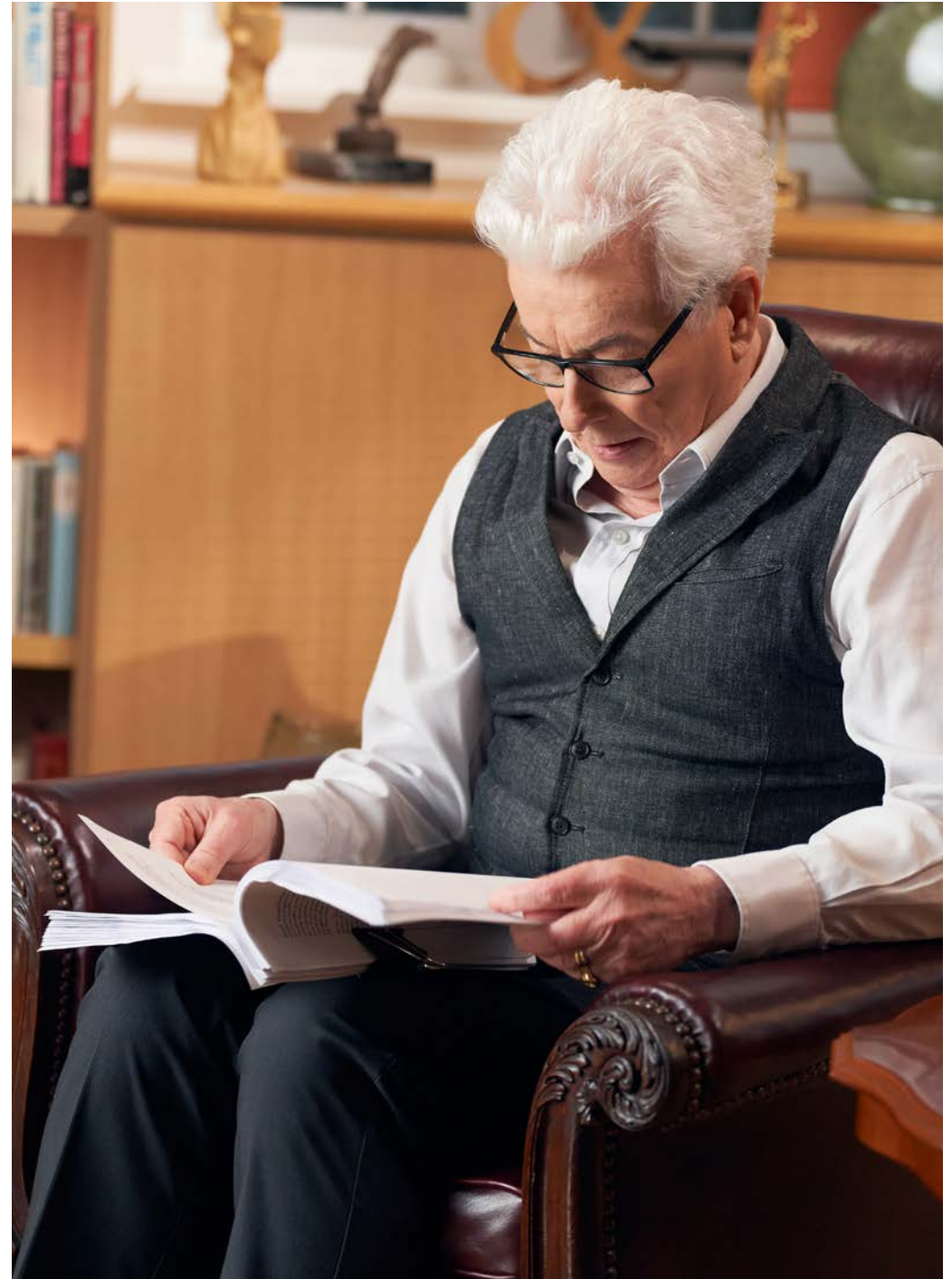
He looked out of the shop window, narrowing his eyes against the brightness outside. A pretty girl was crossing the street. The baker listened, and heard the sound of his wife's voice, out in the back, arguing shrilly with an employee. The row would go on for several minutes – they always did. Satisfied that he was safe, the baker permitted himself to gaze at the girl lustfully.

Her summer dress was thin and sleeveless, and the baker thought it looked rather expensive, although he was no expert in such things. The flared skirt swung gracefully at mid-thigh, emphasising her slim bare legs, promising – but never quite delivering – delightful glimpses of feminine underwear.

QUESTIONS

1. Location is established. How hard is the description working?
2. No time is referenced. What are the effects of this on the reader and their interpretation of the extract?
3. The point of view character is not named, but is defined by his profession. What impact does this have?
4. What impression does the reader have of the characters thus far?
5. What questions are raised by the opening paragraph, and by the passage overall?

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EYE OF THE NEEDLE

It was the coldest winter for forty-five years. Villages in the English countryside were cut off by the snow, and the Thames froze over. One day in January the Glasgow to London train arrived at Euston twenty-four hours late. The snow and the black-out combined to make motoring perilous: road accidents doubled, and people told jokes about how it was more risky to drive an Austin Seven along Piccadilly at night than to take a tank across the Siegfried Line.

Then, when the spring came, it was glorious. Barrage balloons floated majestically in bright blue skies, and soldiers on leave flirted with girls in sleeveless dresses on the streets of London.

The city did not look much like the capital of a nation at war. There were signs, of course; and Henry Faber, cycling from Waterloo Station toward Highgate, noted them: piles of sandbags outside important public buildings, Anderson shelters in suburban gardens, propaganda posters about evacuation and Air Raid Precautions. Faber watched such things – he was considerably more observant than the average railway clerk. He saw crowds of children in the parks, and concluded that evacuation had been a failure.

.....

“

You’re going to rack your brains but that’s what brains are for.

.....

QUESTIONS

1. Location and period are swiftly established. How does this help the reader?
2. All three paragraphs are descriptive. Is that description doing more than one job?
3. What have we already learned about the character? What further questions have been raised about him? How is our perception of the character affected by the wartime context?
4. Does Henry Faber remind us of anyone? How does this connect to the adjective ‘average’?
5. Why use ‘nation’ rather than ‘country’?

“

The emotion doesn't stand alone; the emotion plays a part in the story.

.....

NEVER

Seen from a plane, the car would have looked like a slow beetle creeping across an endless beach, the sun glinting off its polished black armour. In fact, it was doing thirty miles per hour, the maximum safe speed on a road that had unexpected potholes and cracks. No one wanted to get a flat tyre in the Sahara Desert.

The road led north from N'Djamena, capital city of Chad, through the desert to Lake Chad, the biggest oasis in the Sahara. The landscape was a long, flat vista of sand and rock with a few pale-yellow dried-up bushes and a random scatter of large and small stones, everything the same shade of mid-tan, as bleak as a moonscape.

The desert was unnervingly like outer space, Tamara Levit thought, with the car as a rocket ship. If anything went wrong with her space suit she could die. The comparison was fanciful, and made her smile. All the same, she glanced into the back of the car, where there were two reassuringly large plastic demi-johns of water, enough to keep them all alive in an emergency, until help arrived, probably.

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QUESTIONS

1. Location is swiftly established. How is the first sentence of this book different, grammatically and in content, from the other two?
2. How do the first and second paragraphs set up the third?
3. We see the landscape through Tamara's eyes. What does her perception of it tell us about her character, origins and situation?
4. What further questions are raised by the final sentence?
5. What is the impact of the final adverb, which is also the final word of the paragraph? How is it ambiguous?
6. How have adverbs been used across all their extracts? Analyse their effectiveness.

.....

10. Character

For me, the story comes first. Once I have the story, then I ask what kind of people would do these things. As I said earlier, you don't want milk-and-water people in a popular novel, rather people who are bold to the point of being foolhardy. Yet they must all have individuality.

I start with broad strokes. Are they handsome? Are they smart? Are they kind? What are their dreams and obsessions? Then I begin to refine those rather cartoonish images.

A smart person will not be smart about all things: he might be smart about engineering and dumb about people. A good-looking person might be good-looking in a craggy way. A beautiful woman might not be conventionally beautiful, but have terrific allure. That kind of twist on broad-stroke characteristics is very useful.

Then push it further. Memorable characters need to be just a little larger than life. Not too much – just enough. You might have a character who's embarrassed about being short. Don't stop there: make him neurotic about it while completely sane about everything else. Have him wear shoes that make him look three inches higher. Have him ask: 'Do these clothes make me look short?' This is the kind of weird detail the reader remembers. In other words, your short character is perfectly normal.

You might have a character who is a brilliant strategist – but he shouldn't have superpowers, because that is a different kind of story. Broad characteristics, with a twist – like tough-guy hero Harrison Ford being afraid of snakes in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

I never base characters on real people, because real people wouldn't necessarily do what I want them to do. But I use bits of people. If a character is mean, I might remember somebody who's been mean to me, and consider his manner and expression at the time. Was he smiling? Did he look full of hatred or was he triumphant? These are details you can steal from someone without using them as a whole person.

You can also keep something in reserve. You don't have to lay the complete character out at the start. Rather it can be a slow reveal over the course of the book. A third of the way through, you might reveal that this character is mean with money or shy about sex. This gets the reader involved because it's what happens in real life. You get to know somebody. You become acquainted with their broad-stroke characteristics, then you begin to appreciate their complexity.

Take an example from *The Pillars of the Earth*. William Hamleigh is a horrible villain and in my mind it's clear that he was made a horrible villain by his excessively domineering mother; he still does what she tells him to do. Hence he becomes a man who hates women, even while having sex with them; he has sex in a hateful way. Rather than spell all this out, I left it as something the reader might simply infer. In the television series, in contrast, they created an incestuous relationship between mother and son, because in a mini series there's no time for subtle exposition.

With point of view characters, everything is filtered through their perception. With secondary characters, you can simply state what they are like, what other people think of them, and what role they play in the story.

One of the point of view characters in *The Armour of Light*, a weaver, falls in love with the bishop's wife. The bishop is a prig. The weaver, by contrast, a widower of ten years, is a smart, successful businessman. The bishop's wife is a secondary character, but we know what she thinks and feels because she talks to both her daughter and her lover. We see a new personality emerge through the affair, and even though we don't see her 'interior', we know everything we need to know to really like her.

Interaction between characters is important, because as we said earlier, popular fiction tends to focus on relationships rather than individual psychology. When one character says of another, 'I like him, but I think he tells lies', it has greater authenticity because it comes from someone within the world of the story. It illuminates both characters and provides relief from the author telling you what to think. It's still the author really, but the illusion of naturalness is enhanced.

People sometimes ask if you have to present characters in past history as being radically different from characters in the present. But I write about things that are common to all ages in all countries – love, war, hatred, revenge, money, family. *A Dangerous Fortune*, for example, is a study of family relationships and business dealings, which perhaps explains why a book that is ostensibly about Victorian bankers should be a bestseller in Brazil. The lives of historical characters are different – surroundings, clothes, food – but their basic passions are the same.

In a historical novel there are always real historical people and you need to find a basis in history for anything you say about such characters. The same applies to anything your fictional characters say about them, but with the nuance that you must also take into account the fictional character's personality. So if he's talking about Winston Churchill, as happens in *Fall of Giants*, is that fictional character an aristocratic conservative or a trade union organiser?

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The safe thing to do is not to have your fictional characters talk about real people, unless there is documentary evidence for what is said. Instead of using my own opinions of Churchill in the mouth of one of my characters, I can borrow the words of another historical figure who is recorded as having an opinion.

There are always good guys and bad guys in books, though we try not to be too cartoonish about it. Bad guys are the easiest to write. You have only to keep thinking of more and more mean things for them to do, always in line with their character: if the person is a miser, he'll do mean things with money; if he's a Lothario, he'll be dishonest with women.

There is an argument that holds that even the worst character should have at least one redeeming quality. I don't necessarily subscribe to that. Hornbeam, in *The Armour of Light*, is a wicked character who has a soft spot for his grandson, but Hamleigh from *The Pillars of the Earth* has absolutely no redeeming qualities, and of all the characters I've invented, he's the one people talk to me about most. Sometimes they ask why I didn't kill him earlier, to which the truthful answer is: because I'm not mad. Hamleigh is a great character and I want the reader to hate him not just for a hundred pages, but eight hundred pages, until right at the end of the novel they read of his very unpleasant death.

Good characters are more difficult.

It's a given that they're intelligent, kind and brave – but intelligent, kind and brave risks being dull if you don't liven them up. Some writers give the good guy an eccentricity: think Agatha Christie and Poirot's vanity, or P. D. James making Adam Dalgleish a poet. It can be as simple as a hobby that contrasts with their job or a failing that sets off their innate goodness. Good people are good, but must be real, not saints.

The big advantage good guys have over bad guys is that the reader is happy to spend more time with them, to join them in their affairs of the heart and their triumphant battles against wickedness and wrongdoing.

All characters have a moral code. Good people generally choose to do or not do things according to societal norms of what is right and wrong, and when compelled to contravene those norms they justify it as a necessary exception. But even the burglar might steal from the rich because he believes they don't deserve what they've got, and that is the logic against which the author must apportion that burglar's actions. There's a fine line here between moral code and excuse, but this in itself is revealing of character.

Moral conflicts enrich a story. It's a plus when you have a heroic person who is tempted to do something relatively unheroic or shabby. Not only is that temptation itself an interesting drama, but if the person succumbs, then how he feels about it afterwards adds further depth and nuance. Does he dwell on it or move on? Is he defiant or regretful? The tension between these opposing impulses ensures that you have a more complex, credible character.

Good, bad, heroic or cowardly, you have to be able to write characters who aren't like you. You've got to be able to get inside the heads of both high-status and low-status people, whether rock stars, dukes or the homeless. These people populate your fictional world and you have to be able to imagine what life is like for them.

If an author wants to write from a perspective that is not their own, then they must make a habit in real life of listening, rather than merely talking to others. Listen carefully to those around you and resist the temptation to impose yourself.

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I have a friend who came to London in 1959 at the age of ten, exactly as I did, only she came from Trinidad. I've been horrified by the things she's told me about how she was treated as a little girl. I was living in the same city – but a completely different life. Over years of shared conversation she has given me such insight into the experience of families coming to the UK in the 1950s that I would feel pretty confident now about writing the story of a West Indian immigrant. Though I would of course make sure to consult her.

Increasingly, writers run up against the view that it's presumptuous or disrespectful to write about people of different cultures to our own, that we are stealing something from them. But you're supposed to use your imagination – that's what being an author is all about.

Having said that, if you are writing about a culture other than your own then it is your duty to exercise special care, to be as true to that culture as you possibly can. The best way to do that, in my experience, is to ask people to help you. In *Edge of Eternity* I wrote about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, about Martin Luther King and John Lewis. During my research I interviewed the eighty-year-old Lewis: as a young man he'd got his skull cracked by a policeman's baton during a terrible fight on a Mississippi bridge, but he was a tough guy and recovered to become a distinguished congressman. I also hired a freelance African American editor and asked her to make sure I didn't make any embarrassing mistakes with my African American characters. She was a great help.

It can be difficult to keep track of all the information that I accrue during the planning phase. It's especially vital that I keep track of my large casts of characters, because I have to make it easy for the reader to keep track of them too – nothing in your book should be a chore for the reader. The way I do this is to create an Excel spreadsheet.

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Every time a new character appears, I add that character's name to the spreadsheet. I paste in anything I've said about their physical appearance. In my planning notes for *The Armour of Light*, for example, by the name 'Joseph Hornbeam', I've written: 'a tall, frowning figure in sober, but costly clothing, a curly light brown wig, his only concession to vanity'. If I then have to describe Hornbeam again, perhaps when he walks into a room and is seen through another character's eyes, I refer back to the spreadsheet – for two reasons. One, I don't want to contradict myself; two, I don't want to use exactly the same words.

Also in the outline for *The Armour of Light*, I see Arabella and the many descriptions that feature her hair. Arabella has a strong face that shows determination; I mention her age – thirty-seven at the beginning of the story – and include a detailed description.

She was tall and shapely with a head of light brown hair that had a touch of auburn. Her nose was freckled which people considered a blemish, though somehow it looked charming on her. Her hair smelled good. She was using a perfumed pomade on her auburn curls.

I also add the character's date of birth. This means that the spreadsheet automatically calculates the character's age whenever he appears, which is immensely helpful in a story that might cover several decades. Sometimes I also look on the internet for an image that resembles my character and paste that in as well, which saves me having to thumb through a hundred pages to see if he has blue or brown eyes.

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If characters are to be memorable, they need to be a bit larger than life.

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TAKEAWAYS

- Interaction between characters involves the reader more effectively than commentary from the author. How the characters feel about each other will influence how the reader feels too.
- Pay attention to the logic of individual characters. They need to act 'in character' for your reader to believe in them.

EXERCISES

Study a selection of your favourite fictional characters. Can you identify their defining characteristics, both physical and moral? What details has the author chosen to amplify? What distinctive traits make them so memorable?

Read a novel, or study the novel you are writing, and make a spreadsheet in Excel that will tell you the name, date of birth and physical appearance of the character exactly as you described them in the book. As you continue reading, watch out for any discrepancies.

11. Pace

In this lesson I want to look more closely at pace, and in particular, story turns. A story turn is anything – small or big – that changes the situation for the characters.

Let's imagine that we have three people escaping. A small turn would be that they were hoping the snow on the mountain would have melted only to find that it hasn't – they still have snowy terrain to get through. A big turn would be that one of the three dies, and he was the one who knew the way. Either of these turns is good, because each creates a new problem or problems for the characters to overcome.

A story turn doesn't have to consist of a challenge, though it usually does. A triumph, when something goes the way of the point of view character, can also work; in this case you should linger on the build-up to maximise the moment.

The best kind of story turn may be one that starts out minor but gradually becomes worse and worse. Somebody telling a lie is a classic case of this, because at first the character is likely to get away with it, but the longer the lie is sustained the more it escalates, perhaps into something major.

More than six pages without a story turn and you risk boring the reader. But the opposite may be the greater fault: if the story turns too often then it becomes frenetic and the reader will feel they are struggling to keep up. Balance is essential to the control of pace.

The overall pace is crucial too, because you want to increase the suspense going through the story. The ideal is to start with a dramatic question that is significant, but not a matter of life and death, then raise the tension a notch with each new chapter so that the reader becomes more and more engaged, to the point where they are still reading at four in the morning and simply cannot put the book down.

Romance needs to be subtly paced. It's best to initiate the connection with the smallest detail. A woman may notice that a man keeps looking at her. A man may remark on a woman's features; this happens in *The Armour of Light*, where the two characters are in a cathedral and a shaft of sunlight lights up the woman's hair and the man says nothing but thinks how lovely it is. This particular romance begins with the physical, but it could just as easily begin with an act of kindness. A woman might not have much interest in a man, but a casually thoughtful act might prompt her to see him in a new light. Which would lead in due course to physical intimacy and the tensions of anticipation... Will she mind if I open my mouth when we kiss? Will he mind if I put my hand on the back of his head and pull him closer? The drama in romance lies in those moments of uncertainty.

If you have an important romance in the story, start slow and draw it out. You need some reason why the lovers can't be together; maybe both are married or they're on opposite sides of a war. Then after all the trials and setbacks, once all obstacles are overcome, the modern reader definitely wants to know what happens when they finally end up in bed together; we need a degree of physical intimacy for satisfaction and closure.

When it comes to pace, I like to think in terms of television drama. Whereas the reader tends to be committed to the book they have in their hands, the viewer, on the other hand, has little hesitation in changing the channel or getting up to make a cup of tea. That's what the television writer has to contend with. A television drama has to be written even more tightly than a suspense novel, simply because it's so easy to lose your audience. And while a reader may not abandon their book so lightly, it can't hurt to learn from the experts.

I like the analytical way television writers talk about their work. The A story is the main drama of the show, the B story is a sub plot and the C story is a minor, often slightly comical element that may be introduced for light relief. That isn't the structure for a book, but it's still a useful approach for reflecting on the interweaving strands in a complex novel. How is your A story different from your B story? How is it a different kind of drama? And if they are not different kinds of drama, they should be, because you don't want your book to feel repetitive.

The best way of switching from your A story to your B story is to have a storyline that weaves through the different groups of characters, so that when you switch there's a development in the story that the reader is already following. Alternatively, though this is not as strong, things may be getting very grim in the A story (men dying on the battlefield) and the lighter B story (young couple in love) may afford the reader some brief respite – a grim scene is fine, but a grim book is not. Such consideration of the reader's feelings is a perfectly legitimate reason to switch stories, but the ideal is for the switch to be enforced by the storyline.

Beware of the soggy middle. It's relatively easy to set up tensions and not that difficult to resolve them, but the middle is all about partial resolutions and onward development. A detective may discover that the murderer is called Jim, but not yet know his surname, for example, which sets his next interim challenge.

Even novels by great writers can have a soggy middle. My go-to example is *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, which opens with Magwitch appearing in the graveyard. Everybody is gripped by that scene and everybody will remember it. Then Pip goes to London and starts to lead the life of a young man about town and we don't really like him that much because we are bored. No doubt Dickens wanted to tell the story of how a callow youth can end up being a very decent grown-up, but while it may be true to life, it's no fun to read. Then the end of *Great Expectations* is absolutely fantastic.

So beware. If you find yourself trudging through the middle of the book, you're in trouble. You've got to take a good hard look and say no: this has got to be as dramatic as those initial problems were and as that climax is going to be. This means working your imagination harder. You have to identify where the rot starts – a scene where nothing happens that takes us nowhere – and you have to invent more story. The easy way out is to bring in a new character, but the reader won't much like this and imaginatively, it represents a failure. Much more likely to succeed is to think of more story about the same people.

This was what made *The Pillars of the Earth* so difficult to write: I had never written a book so long. *The Pillars of the Earth* is about four times the length of my early thrillers. I had boldly decided from the outset that it would cover about fifty years, because everybody knows that building a cathedral takes a very long time, but I hadn't fully appreciated the difficulty of making up more and more stuff about the same bunch of people – it's much easier to write a novel of a hundred thousand words and then start again with new characters, new ideas and a new plot. One reason *Pillars* took three years and three months to write was that for a lot of that time I just didn't know what to do with the middle. In the end I thought of six more dramas that could happen during the building of a cathedral and I wrote them big.

Examples of such scenes from the middle of *The Pillars of the Earth* include Alfred taking over from Tom Builder and the ceiling collapsing, Aliena marrying the wrong person, the builders going on strike and the monks running out of money, but crucially, all these things happen to people who were there at the start and they all affect the resolutions at the end. They're not shoehorned in gratuitously; rather, they continue and develop existing dramas.

As well as the soggy middle, you need to avoid the ponderous ending. I have in mind that kind of story where the detective reveals who the murderer is, then someone among the assembled suspects asks for further clarification, which is just the author being meticulous and tying up loose ends but is boring, because now we know who the murderer is the drama is over. If there are questions to be answered, make sure you address them before that big reveal, in a way that still intrigues.

I made a mistake of this kind in one of my early novels, *Triple*. Rostov is a stowaway on the ship. At the end of the book, the ship goes into port and the drama is over. In the first draft I had a scene where Rostov got off the ship and an editor said to me: nobody's interested now, take out that scene about Rostov because the drama's over and we don't care much about Rostov anyway because he's not a very nice character. So I duly took it out. Then I got lots of letters from readers saying: what about Rostov? Which taught me that taking out the scene wasn't the answer to the problem the editor had rightly identified. What I should have done is resolve the Rostov issue before the final climax of the novel.

There are often ways of heightening the ending to maximise impact on the characters.

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The best kind of story turn
may be one that starts out
minor but gradually becomes
worse and worse.

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Let's say we have a story about a war criminal. He's being chased, he's finally smoked out, and the story ends with him being convicted and punished. That's a good ending, a satisfying ending, but you can still heighten it. And you want to heighten it, to enhance the pay-off.

For example, you could have a main character who is obsessed with war criminals. He's very angry that they so often get away with it and end up living nice lives under a new name. You could also have a secondary character, related to the hero, who has suffered at the hands of a war criminal, which increases the personal investment in revenge. On top of all that you could have a second bad guy who is invested in helping the first because he himself has committed the same crimes and knows the hero will be coming for him next.

By building in these elements you have heightened the impact of the ending on three major characters, thereby tripling its emotional power. Your ending has gone from being merely satisfying to electrifying.

TAKEAWAY

- Learn the lessons of television: you don't want your reader changing the channel to another author.

EXERCISE

Consider the novel you are currently reading. Does it drag or skip along? Are you tempted to put the book down or desperate to read on? Make a note of each story turn. Count how many pages there are between each. Does what you discover correspond to your reading experience? Pick a sluggish section and try rewriting it to pick up the pace.

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A story turn is anything
– small or big – that changes
the situation for the characters.

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SCENES vs STORY TURNS

Here is a short extract from *Eye of the Needle* (1978). Immediately after this extract, the point of view switches back from Mrs Garden to Mr Faber. The extract comprises a short scene, about four scenes in to Chapter One. It ends with a major story turn, prefigured by the hint of a story turn with the introduction of the screwdriver.

There was nobody on the landing. She found the stairs in the darkness. She intended to step over the stair that creaked, but she stumbled on the loose carpet and trod on it heavily; but it seemed that nobody heard, so she went on up and tapped on the door at the top. She tried it gently. It was locked.

The radio was turned down, and Mr Faber called out: 'Yes?'

He was well-spoken: not cockney or foreign – not anything, really, just a pleasantly neutral voice.

She said: 'Can I have a word with you?'

He seemed to hesitate, then he said: 'I'm undressed.'

'So am I,' she giggled, and she opened the door with her duplicate key. He was standing in front of the radio with some kind of screwdriver in his hand. He wore his trousers and no singlet. His face was white and he looked scared to death.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, not knowing what to say. Suddenly she remembered a line from an American film, and she said: 'Would you buy a lonely girl a drink?' It was silly, really, because she knew he had no drink in his room, and she certainly wasn't dressed to go out; but it sounded vampish.

It seemed to have the desired effect. Without speaking, he came slowly toward her. He did have hair on his nipples. She took a step forward, and then his arms went around her, and she closed her eyes and turned up her face, and he kissed her, and she moved slightly in his arms, and then there was a terrible, awful, unbearable sharp pain in her back and she opened her mouth to scream.

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Generally, a scene change involves a shift of time, place or personnel. A story turn is a twist, big or small, in the development of the plot.

This scene is easily visualised. But what do the words tell you beyond what you see? Examine the passage analytically: how much work do the words do?

12. Sex & Violence

Sex first.

Why do we have love scenes? There's a very simple reason. We want the reader to like our characters, and a good way of doing that is to have somebody else in the story love them. The author doesn't tell the reader to love the character; rather, the author shows the reader that the character is already loved.

So how do we write a good love scene? First, you have to prepare the ground. Two people suddenly jumping into bed isn't interesting in a novel, however fun it might be in real life. In a novel, you have to build these characters. You have to show them getting interested in one another. You have to show them being prevented by external factors from getting together. That way it becomes a story of frustration and yearning that you will have the pleasure, in the end, of resolving. In a way, every love story is a variation on *Romeo and Juliet*.

For hundreds of pages, your star-crossed lovers are looking at one another across metaphorical crowded rooms. Then finally they do get together and it's joyous: all that pent-up emotion explodes into action. That's the great love scene.

You will have to decide what words to use. How explicit are you going to be? Fancy euphemisms for sex and parts of the body can easily become comical. What I advise is to be guided by the characters. If you have two worldly characters who are frank about sex, then it makes sense to use the kind of language they would use. If you have a shy, inexperienced couple, use words that would not offend them. Be guided by the way they speak.

In both cases, beware of cliché. No crashing waves. No erupting volcanos. If you're going to use imagery, make it subtle and unexpected.

In my opinion, sex scenes should not be viewed as the currants in a bun or the icing on a cake. Rather, as with violence, they should be justified by and integrated in the story. And every sex scene should have its own beginning, middle and end, its own unfolding drama. Which is easy, because the sex scene you describe will be the first sex scene, where there is built-in scope for nervousness, uncertainty, misunderstanding, exploration and discovery.

There are really only three ways for a sex scene to end. One partner is happy and the other unhappy. Both are happy. Both are unhappy. All of which raise, and possibly simultaneously answer, the question of whether they want to do it again.

Sex scenes in books have mostly changed over the years in the same way that all relationships between people who love each other have changed in my lifetime. I feel it's no longer acceptable to do the traditional scene where a strong willed man is over bearing and persuades or bullies the women into sex and then she enjoys it. It's a formula and is wrong for today's world, and it is certainly wrong for today's literature.

Sometimes people remark on the fact that sex is a positive thing in my books, which both surprises and doesn't surprise me. Because why wouldn't it be? On the whole I choose not to write about coercive behaviour because I find it unpleasant to think about.

In the book I've just finished writing, one of the female characters is sentenced to two months hard labour. There's no question that in the eighteenth century she would have suffered sexual abuse and I wasn't going to skate over it. My solution was to not accompany her to prison but present her as she comes

out, when she confides in a woman friend on condition that she not tell her husband lest he kill somebody. This approach enabled me to respect historical fact while not going into painful detail.

I don't shy away from bodily intimacy. I say what happens. I know there are people who don't like this and from time to time conservative readers in the US object to the fact that *The Pillars of the Earth* is in the school library for teenagers to read. It's only the sex they're worried about, rather than any violence, but in my view there's no point in trying to shield kids from the facts.

I listen to my readers and don't want to displease them. But if they don't like the way I write honestly about sex between heterosexual and same-sex partners, for whom intimacy is part of their love, then they simply shouldn't buy my books.

Now violence.

In many ways, action scenes are like sex scenes. Again, you have to prepare the ground. A fight between two or more people is not interesting if you don't know who they are.

Ideally, a fight scene is the culmination of a long and increasingly bitter rivalry or conflict. This is what makes it count, when you have characters who have reason to hate one another who finally explode into physical action. The way they fight then reflects and reveals their characters.

Like every other scene, the fight needs to have a beginning, a middle and an end (this basic principle can't be overstated): a beginning that features the hopes and fears of the principal characters, a middle that dramatises those hopes and fears, and a resolution that is satisfying while also posing a new question for the next or future scenes.

It follows logically from these points that a fight or sex scene should never be the first scene in the novel, because as readers we only care about the outcome if the characters already mean something to us and we are already emotionally invested.

Conversely, you will find that many novels end with an action scene, as the physical expression of long-standing emotion, which is what makes such scenes important in the first place.

Take Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which many consider the greatest novel ever written. It's the story of a woman who leaves her boring husband for a charming soldier. It's a long book and the entire thing is about her being torn between her love for this young soldier and her love for her son – whatever choice she makes, she's in hell. The novel ends with her throwing herself under a train. That suicide is the physical expression of her intolerable emotional situation.

Or take *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. A young woman marries a gloomy widower and moves into his house, which is called Manderley. The novel begins with the famous first line: '*Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley again.*' But Manderley is the place where the man lived with his first wife and Rebecca is tormented by the ghost of her seemingly perfect predecessor – to such an extent that the novel ends with the house burning down. Once again, that catastrophic event is the physical expression of emotional turmoil.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, by Charles Dickens, there's a rotter called Daniel Quilp. He torments his wife and is unkind to little Nell, but appears invincible. He's such a strong character that it seems nobody can stop him being so horrible. Quilp ends up drowning in the River Thames.

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These are just three examples showing why big action scenes – fire, suicide, murder – are so common in literature. It's because they manifest outwardly something important that has been going on in people's minds. Try it. It has worked for hundreds of authors and it will work for you.

Such climactic action scenes should be big. The stakes should be high and then, as I've said before, you should raise the stakes even higher. It shouldn't just be about which of the two antagonists is going to win. It should be about whether a secret, perhaps of national importance, is going to be kept or revealed. Perhaps it has to do with information that will change the course of a battle. There might be a terrorist threat and a hundred thousand people are going to die unless person A kills person B before he can set off the bomb.

Not only should these scenes be big, they should last for a long time. Why? Because if you've constructed the book correctly, the action scene will be the expression of something that has been building for many hundreds of pages. You have to think through all the moves, how people hit one another or how they reach for a gun or how to push someone over. In *Eye of the Needle*, there's a fight scene that takes place on the edge of a cliff, which adds to the possibilities of what can happen, from third-party interference to the weather.

It's not a simple matter of violence and smart moves. You have to bring out the relationship between what people are doing and what they are feeling and what they have felt in the past. You have to charge the action with emotional history. Then it will be not only exciting, but truly moving.

Don't be afraid of action scenes and love scenes. Make sure they involve emotional as well as physical relations. Make sure they express something important that is intrinsic to the story. Make sure the reader is invested too.

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TAKEAWAY

- **Sex and violence are a given in most popular bestsellers. But they should always be the expression of something greater than themselves.**

EXERCISES

Study the set-piece scenes in the novels you read. Analyse what they tell you beyond what is actually happening. This will help you appreciate how a writer works the emotions and controls the responses of the reader. Consider the connotations of words and look out for loaded language. How does the writer get the reader on side?

Now write a climactic action scene of your own, possibly involving characters from your own work-in-progress. Bear in mind the following check list:

1. What is the deep background to this moment? What has led the characters to this point? You should not rehearse this in detail in this scene (though you may embed some subtle reminders) but it will boost the emotional charge of the encounter, not only for the characters themselves, but for the reader too.
2. How long would the action last in real life? Multiply this by at least a factor of three.
3. What are the stakes? Whatever they are, heighten them. The wins should be big, and the losses even bigger. Make the outcome matter to someone beyond the hero. Make it matter to lots of people.
4. This scene will be focused largely on what happens, on what the characters do. But make sure that what they do arises from who they are, and reminds the reader of their essential nature and what they represent.
5. The atmosphere likewise should be highly charged. Imbue your description of the setting (not merely place, but time and weather) with emotion. Choose words that let the reader feel what the characters are feeling. Exaggerate those feelings. Push your hero to the brink of disaster.

13. Genre

I'm not sure we have much choice about the genre we write in. Certain kinds of story seem exciting to me and that's the kind of story that I write. I think most writers are the same. I also suspect that it's unwise to meddle with fate. Kingsley Amis, a literary comic novelist, wrote a James Bond novel called *Colonel Sun* that was as dull as a turnip. It was terrible. Another literary novelist, Brian Moore, wrote *The Colour of Blood*, a thriller which didn't thrill. Conversely, John le Carré tried his hand at a literary novel called *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*; it flopped, and he never made that mistake again.

I think we're probably stuck with our genres. There are certain types of story that fit you and those are the kinds of story you're destined to write.

I have written in two genres: the historical novel, where I've had greatest success, and the thriller.

The thriller is driven by danger, which is easy to invent. If the reader likes the characters, that danger generates anxiety. Then the anxiety makes the reader keep turning the pages.

The first thriller was *The Riddle of the Sands*, by Erskine Childers, published in 1903 – a huge bestseller. It's about two young men on a boating holiday in the Frisian Islands on the coast of Germany. They stumble across a German invasion fleet preparing to invade England. They have to get home with the information. It's a plot I recycled fifty years later for *Eye of the Needle*. *The Riddle of the Sands* featured highly detailed, accurate geography of the islands, which as I've said previously, lends authenticity to a story that is otherwise far-fetched.

Childers laid down a template but never wrote another book. In fact, he was an Irish Nationalist and was hanged by the British. But the baton was picked up by John Buchan, who wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and four more thrillers featuring the same hero, Richard Hannay. With this series, Buchan took the kind of story that Childers had invented and turned it into a genre.

Buchan is the forbear of thriller writers like Ian Fleming and Frederick Forsyth – and indeed, me. But in 1927, Joseph Conrad published a completely different kind of spy story. *The Secret Agent* is about a small and ineffectual group of low-life anarchists in London around the turn of the century, whose ambitions and fantasies are ridiculous. One of them blows himself up with a homemade bomb, an incident based on a real event that took place in Greenwich Park. We're in completely different territory here. No James Bond drinking martinis and wearing smart suits.

This thriller too had its descendants. The thrillers of Graham Greene and Le Carré are less about heroic characters than ordinary people in raincoats, caught up in extraordinary events.

The thriller has been a terrifically successful genre. If you like them, you should write them too.

The historical novel is different. As the name suggests, the story grows out of history. Here's an example from my own experience. One day I was reading about London's Barings Bank going bust in 1890. I thought about the people who owned that bank and the enormous change that must have taken place in their lives when suddenly they had no money. I imagined those very upright Victorian bankers, accustomed to having dozens of servants waiting on their every need, suddenly peeling their own potatoes. And that was the genesis of *A Dangerous Fortune*.

The Pillars of the Earth is a novel about building a cathedral in the Middle Ages. It was the cathedrals themselves that inspired me. Like many others, I asked myself: how did they construct such colossal buildings with no cranes and no power tools and not even a proper tape measure? Further, why did they build them? And who was paying for them to be built? That history intrigued me and made me ask questions, which led to the novel.

Eye of the Needle came out of books I was reading about deception in the Second World War. One of the great deceptions was a phoney army that was built in East Anglia to convince German reconnaissance planes that there was an army assembling there that was going to invade Calais. Only it wasn't a real army. The lines of barracks only had roofs and no walls and they were cardboard Spitfires in the fields. It occurred to me when I read this almost comical piece of disinformation that if there had been just one German spy on the ground who could have looked at those fields and could then have got home with the knowledge of what they had seen, then the D-Day invasion might have turned out a failure.

I'm sometimes asked how you can mix fictional with real-life characters and have them talk to one another. I'll give you an example from *Fall of Giants*. At the end of this book a conservative aristocrat called Fitz goes to a party and meets the prime minister, David Lloyd George. This is shortly after the Russian Revolution, and Fitz tells the prime minister that he should expel two Russian Bolsheviks who are stirring up the English working class and have given money to a British newspaper to promote revolution. Lloyd George replies that the more the British get to know about Bolshevism, the less they will like it. '*You mark my words. It is formidable only when seen at a distance through impenetrable mists.*'

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You might well ask how I can put those words into the prime minister's mouth. And the reason I can is that Lloyd George wrote a memo to the civil service explaining his thinking and that memo is in the standard Lloyd George biography. I have simply taken the words he wrote and allowed him to say them to a fictional character. This is why I feel that scene doesn't violate history.

You can always find out what was said in Parliament because it's in Hansard, the official written record of Parliament, and you can have a fictional person in the gallery watching the speech. But you're not always so lucky as to find the exact words you're looking for. Sometimes you have to make words up, in which case you must be meticulous and try to work out from the available evidence what a person is likely to have said.

I don't try to pick stories that mirror in the past something that's happening today. What interests me is to ask: how did we get from there to here? For example, when he was thirteen years old, my Grandpa Evans started work as an apprentice coal miner in a town called Mountain Ash in South Wales. Yet we would be horrified now if thirteen-year-old boys were sent down the pit.

Examples of such progress are legion. There was a time when people thought the idea of women being able to vote was almost comical. Of course they couldn't. They were too emotional, they couldn't possibly make such decisions. This was the consensus of the day. Then the suffragettes ran a political campaign and won, and now we rightly look back on those views as ludicrous.

For me, this change is the great drama of history. All my historical novels start with injustice – religious dogmatism, or the repression of millworkers – and then comes resistance to that injustice, and sometimes, the rebels triumph. When people fight for their rights and win, that's a great story. And the interesting question is always, how? Because the oppressors are the ones with the power.

The reason we are drawn to genres is simple. When you've read a novel that you've really enjoyed, you want the same again. Not exactly the same, but something very similar. We want to reproduce that same enjoyment, which is what accounts for the happy phenomenon of people buying more and more books by the same author, which I have no reason to complain about.

In the preface to P. G. Wodehouse's third book he says that when his second book came out, it was criticised by a reviewer for being 'the same old P. G. Wodehouse stuff with different names', and then adds: 'I have spiked the man's guns. This is the same old P. G. Wodehouse stuff with the same names.' He wrote very similar novels for nearly a hundred years and I reread them all the time.

If we have a good experience, it's human nature to want that same experience all over again. Let's say you've read and loved a novel set in the time of the Tudors, about King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I and the wars of religion and the Armada; naturally you seek out another novel set in the Tudor period because you think you might enjoy it just as much.

The same with thrillers. The best thrillers are really exciting stories. You just gobble them up. And then you want another one, as soon as possible.

On the other hand, I talk to readers often and many don't care about genre. They'll tell you about books they've enjoyed and you'll notice that one is a literary novel and one a romance and another a science fiction story. So the importance of genre shouldn't be overestimated.

I read all kinds of books myself. But there are still a couple of genres that I like best of all, and that's why I write them.

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“ What interests me is to look at history and say, how did we get here from there?”

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TAKEAWAYS

- **An awareness of genre conventions will stand you in good stead, as will all knowledge of your chosen subject.**
- **Don't allow genre to dictate or become a straitjacket. All that matters is that the reader is invested in your story.**

EXERCISE

Most of us end up writing the kind of stories we enjoy reading. This is where we are on surest ground. So spend some time pinpointing what it is you most enjoy about the stories you love best. What pleasure do you want to recreate for your own readers?

Make a list of five of your favourite novels.

What are your favourite scenes and why?

Who are your favourite characters and why?

14. Writing Style

I feel that our first duty as writers is to make our meaning clear. If we fail at that, then we've failed at everything. I try to write what I call transparent prose. This means that a sentence should be like a glass window: you don't look at it, but *through* it. The idea is that you should not notice my prose at all, but 'see' right through it to the story you're reading.

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.....
I greatly admire writers who have a completely different attitude to style. I love writers who are extravagant. Let me read you a couple of sentences of Dickens describing a schoolmaster called Wackford Squeers.

He wore a white neckerchief with long ends and a suit of scholastic black. But his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.'

That's a convoluted sentence, the opposite of my transparent prose. Yet it works so well and is so vivid. It also includes a favourite Dickens trick, which is to use the two words 'as if' followed by some bizarre and surprising image.

P. G. Wodehouse was another flamboyant stylist, who once described a character as looking '*like a man who had drunk the glass of life and found a dead beetle at the bottom*'. Perfect.

There's nothing wrong with imitating the style of writers you like. I started out trying to write like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. I particularly remember Hammett's line: '*She was a woman who would take a drink. She would take a drink if she had to knock you down to get the bottle.*'

I tried to imitate those two writers and nobody ever noticed. I don't think you ever really succeed in sounding like someone you imitate. You simply sound like yourself, writing in a certain style. So I don't think it matters.

Imitation is also a form of apprenticeship. There's a phase in the life of every young guitar player when he gets into imitating, note for note, every Jimi Hendrix solo, and nobody wants to listen to him because if they wanted that, they would listen to Hendrix. What then happens is that the young guitarist learns those solos and moves on, and that period of learning helps him develop his own musical style. It's like that with writing. If you copy somebody, you'll get to know what you like and don't like about their style and develop your own in response.

Aim to pick words with impact. English often has two words for the same thing. One word will be Latin and posh, the other earthy and Anglo Saxon. In my opinion, you should always pick the Anglo-Saxon word. Don't say 'malediction', say 'curse'. 'Curse' is a better, nastier word. Don't say 'maternal', say 'motherly'. 'Motherly' carries real emotion. Don't say 'residence' or 'ignominy', say 'home' and 'shame'.

There are two ways to write dialogue.

The hard way is to write dialogue in an accent or dialect that expresses the character's personality. Here is another example from Dickens, where the Artful Dodger is explaining the ethics of pick-pocketing to the young Oliver Twist.

"If you don't take pocket handkerchiefs and watches," said the Dodger, reducing his conversation to the level of Oliver's capacity, "some other cove will, so that the coves that lose them will be all the worse, and you'll be all the worse too, and nobody half a ha'porth the better except the chaps what gets them and you've just as good a right to them as they have."

At some level that's a pile of nonsense, but it certainly gives you a powerful impression of the Artful Dodger's character.

Stephen King, himself rather a Dickensian writer, is good at this too, but not many writers are.

Most people write dialogue that sounds just like them writing. In Proust, for example, everybody – aristocrats, soldiers, prostitutes, business people – speaks exactly the way Proust writes, in long, convoluted sentences full of subordinate clauses and conditionals, sentences that go on for a whole paragraph, or even a page. Likewise in Philip Roth. Everybody in Philip Roth speaks in deeply thoughtful, analytical sentences.

Clearly this is not the way people actually speak. The problem is, the way people actually speak is incomprehensible if you put it down in print. So it has to be artificial. I try to write snappy dialogue in which one sentence leads quickly to another, which is really an admission that most of my characters speak more or less like me – I can't do it any other way. Most of us can't do it any other way. If you happen to have the talent of putting a person's whole character into the way he or she speaks, go ahead and use it, but it's one in a hundred of us that does.

Most people who do accents in dialogue are satirising every accent except their own and there is a danger that you may come across as condescending. If you haven't done accents for posh people, you shouldn't do accents for poor people. Just write the words and if you want, describe the tone of voice. That's not to say don't find distinctive character voices – just don't do it by parodying accent or grammar.

You can often use conversation to tell a story, particularly if one of your point of view characters is absent from the scene of something, so another character then comes to update them. It might seem ponderous, because everything is happening off-stage, but you can make it work if both characters – narrator and listener – have feelings about what happened when only one of them was there. Even better if their feelings differ and there is a degree of friction.

I like lively conversation that is like a tennis match, with short quick-fire sentences – serve, return, volley, backhand, forehand, smash, or in other words, aggression, resistance, pacification, extravagance, moderation, annihilation – and this is perhaps a defining feature of my style. Ed McBain wrote thirty or forty novels in his *87th Precinct* series, with dialogues that could go on for pages, usually with detectives asking a question and a suspect replying. He could maintain the interest and suspense all the way through because there's a kind of battle going on with words. I have always admired that skill, and learned from it.

Many of McBain's books start on the first day of the month and end on the last. When I finally met him, when he was already quite old, I asked if he'd actually written those books in a month. And he just smiled and said, 'Faster'. They were short books, but he was very, very fast.

To sum up, your writing style will be your own. Mine is what I call 'windowpane prose'. Yours will be something different. Like me, you probably admire the prose styles of many other classic writers, but like the kid who copies Jimi Hendrix, you will eventually find your own groove.

TAKEAWAY

- Be wary of dialect in dialogue. There is a risk of condescension towards your reader.

EXERCISE

Examine the dialogue in some books by your favourite writers. Do they all speak the same way? Do they all sound like the author speaking, or are they distinct individuals? If the latter, are you able to analyse how the author achieves this feat?

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If you want to write in the style of somebody that you admire, go for it! But be prepared to learn that you have a style of your own.

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15. Fact-Checking

Right in the middle of the first draft of *The Armour of Light*, I ran up against a problem that I couldn't solve. A character was taken up by the press gang. The press gang was a group of semi-official thugs who went around coastal towns in England kidnapping men, taking them out onto ships and letting the ships sail out to sea. One night you might be out drinking and you would wake up the next morning five miles from land. That was how the Navy recruited many of its sailors.

When one of my characters got press-ganged, the problem was: how does his wife find out what's happened to him?

I looked on the internet for answers. I looked in all the books I had about the eighteenth century. No clue. Then I came across a book called *Naval Wives and Mistresses*.

Whoever wrote that book, I thought, can answer my question. And she did. Which is why I've invited **Margarette Lincoln** to talk to me as part of this **BBC Maestro** course.

KF: Margarette, you saved me. Tell us first of all what the answer to my question was.

ML: The answer is that the wife would not have known what happened to her husband. Her husband would have disappeared, and maybe weeks or months later, he might have gotten some paper and a pen and been able to write to her, and maybe the letter would have been posted and maybe it would have reached her. Most of the time, these women heard nothing at all.

KF: This made that part of the book even more dramatic, because it wasn't that her husband had gone into the Navy unwillingly – he had actually vanished.

ML: Well, they did. I recall some men vanished intentionally. If they were in an unhappy relationship it was very convenient to join the Navy.

KF: You said something that came in useful to me later – that in the eighteenth century people couldn't really make lists.

ML: It was beyond the administrative capability of the Navy to come up with a published list. I consulted a Naval historian of fifty years standing, Roger Knight, to check this point, because there's nothing about Naval administration that he doesn't know. He was adamant that communication was much slower than the action of the seaman being conveyed to another ship, and therefore the reluctant sailor would have been gone to sea long, long before anybody knew what had happened to him.

KF: Tell us how you came to write a book called *Naval Wives and Mistresses*.

ML: I've always been interested in women's history and I worked in the Maritime Museum in Greenwich. One lunchtime, I found a whole cache of letters that wives had written to their husbands and husbands had written to their wives. These were mostly letters that women had preserved, because seamen were supposed to destroy any letters before battle in case they fell into enemy hands. But the wives would cherish these letters and read them to their family, so it was terribly moving. You could get a whole domestic history out of this correspondence. Some of them even had locks of hair folded in between the leaves.

KF: *What you've described is exactly how I picture historians: finding some documents and then working through them carefully, taking note of what they reveal about the lives of the people at the time.*

ML: I needed spectacles afterwards. Some of the writing was awful.

KF: *You sent me a report after you had read the first draft. It's nine pages and very detailed. I'll just pick out one or two examples of things you set me right on. I had a woman who had washed her hair in scented soap, and apparently that wasn't very realistic.*

ML: People very rarely washed their hair. Lots of people thought it was a dangerous thing to do because foreign bodies might enter into the open skin pores and attack your organs. The poor certainly thought dirt was a protective layer. But women also had a lot of hair. It took three or more bowls of hot water to wash and rinse it, so they just didn't bother. They wore bonnets and used scented pomade to smell better, rather than scented soap on their hair.

KF: *I wanted to give that particular woman an aroma and and I didn't fancy the layer of protective dirt. So I took your advice and made her somebody who used scented pomade. People often ask about hygiene in the Middle Ages and I usually say that the cleanest people were the monks, because twice a year – at Easter and Michaelmas – they had to have a haircut and a shave, and if necessary, a bath.*

Another line you picked out was: 'Jane Midwinter was there.' You wrote: 'It's unlikely that a single woman and daughter of a clergyman would be alone with an unmarried man, especially at breakfast time.'

ML: It's 'breakfast time' that's the clincher, because it wasn't the regular hour for social visits. I don't think a woman would have gone visiting an unmarried man at breakfast time unless she was really racy.

KF: *Well, in fact, what I did with that comment was make it clear in the second draft that Jane was the kind of girl who broke the rules. So that really worked.*

It's always difficult to find out the prices of things. I had a woman saying: 'The children shall have sixpence for liquorice.' I think liquorice was the main sweet for kids in the eighteenth century. Am I right about that?

ML: You are, but later on in the novel you have peppermint drops too. At first you had peppermint sticks, but actually they only had drops.

KF: *Who other than a historian would know that The Proceedings of the Old Bailey would be your source for finding out how much liquorice cost in the eighteenth century!*

ML: That and the Burney Newspapers, a list of the eighteenth-century newspapers that are online. Which is how I got the price of porter and beer, which you had queried because you thought porter was stronger and so should have been more expensive. But there was something about the malt tax which meant porter was cheaper at that point in time.

KF: *I just want to run through how I use such comments from you and others. This 118-page document is the rewrite plan for what was then called A Well of Bitter Water, now The Armour of Light. It's a hefty document and this was a big rewrite job. I've chosen one page for us to look at, which covers nineteen pages of the first draft.*

I had somebody in Kingsbridge say ‘town councils such as ours’, and you picked up on this phrase as being misleading.

ML: In those days they would have had corporations. When we say ‘town council’ we think of rubbish collection, and it would have been a completely different thing. That’s the interesting thing about how language has changed. On the one hand you have terms that aren’t current anymore, like ‘a roving’, which I think you use somewhere and means a strand of wool, which no reader would understand unless they were a specialist in weaving. And on the other you’ve got terms which are still current but have a slightly different meaning.

KF: *It’s one of the most awkward things about writing historical novels. Emma Griffin, who wrote Liberty’s Dawn, picked me up for using the word ‘redundant’ in reference to a labour dispute between mill workers and mill owners. Her note read: ‘Redundant: this word and associated concepts don’t yet exist.’ I had to say simply ‘out of work’.*

ML: It’s interesting. You’ve got to make it sound authentic, but you can’t possibly use authentic language – the language they used – because nobody would understand it.

KF: *Exactly. It’s a balancing act. Emma also corrected me on ‘a minimum wage of eight shillings a week’. She wrote: ‘Wages: mill hands were not paid by the hours they spent in the mill, they were paid by how much they produced of either yarn or cloth.’*

ML: It’s similar to the dockyards, when they turned to piecework and were paid by how much work they churned out.

KF: *They didn’t want to stop the machines working, because every time they did, they would lose some money. They didn’t even stop the machines when they had little children going underneath them to mend a broken thread. It was a very dangerous place for children to work. In fact, the way children were used is one of the most shocking things about the eighteenth century.*

Going back to town councils, you pointed out a very important fact to me, which was that modern councils didn’t come in until the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. My novel stops at 1824. So I realised that I could not treat town council bodies as they are today.

ML: It was obvious to me that you had done masses of research already. It’s just having a kind of historian’s sense that something could be wrong and might need checking.

KF: *My two experts on the Battle of Waterloo, Tim Clayton and James Cowan, both picked me up for using the word ‘Conservative’ with a capital ‘C’, because there was no Conservative Party. They were called the Tories. I could call them ‘conservative’ with a small ‘c’ if I wanted to, but even that was slightly misleading.*

ML: The trouble with a battle like Waterloo is that the sources are so contradictory. Wellington had different views of how many men were in the French Army at different points in time, so depending on what you read you come up with different figures.

KF: *I suppose that was partly because the numbers declined due to casualties. Anyway, they can’t have known for sure. They were all guessing at how many soldiers Napoleon had.*

ML: The trouble is, you'll have some reader who is a battle buff who will write and say: 'Oh no, you know, it was this many soldiers at this point in time.' So it's very difficult to be convincing and truthful at the same time. They're different concepts, perhaps.

KF: *When I sent you my thousand-page manuscript, I asked you first to look out for mistakes, but also how you would suggest I might correct them. Sometimes it's a simple change of wording, but there are times when changing what I've said might upset the plot. In those cases I asked if you could think of a way of making the change with minimum damage to the storyline.*

ML: You were absolutely clear about what you wanted me to do. So I just began reading very carefully through the manuscript and when anything struck a slightly false note, like 'snob', for instance, I would check it. In the eighteenth century, 'snob' meant 'cobbler's apprentice'. Most readers wouldn't know this, so it might not matter. But as a point of information, so you could consider your options, I would alert you to the fact that it wasn't a contemporary word in the way you were using it.

There were very few instances where what you'd written would necessitate a change in the plot. There was a point where I thought that if Sal was banished from her parish, the squire who banished her might find that she made her way back, because she would not get poor relief in any other parish so would be passed back to her own by the sheriff and turn up like a bad penny. But you got round that very neatly by having Sal say, 'Tsk, I can't get poor relief. I'll have to work.'

KF: *You also read the second draft to check for any new errors that might have crept in.*

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ML: That was much easier. It was interesting to see the process of what had been changed and what you'd managed to just manipulate a bit so as not to make a big intervention.

I remember that you sometimes came back to me with queries about what I'd written. For example, you wrote that when they were moving field guns around on the battlefield they attached them to something called a limber, a two-wheeled axle thing, for stability. I couldn't visualise this, so I looked it up, and it turns out that you couldn't move the gun at all without a limber. It wasn't really for stability; it had to be there – the gun was hooked on like a caravan and towed back to front. That's an example of something where you came back to me for greater clarity.

KF: *That puzzled me for a long time. They've got a horse and wheels on the gun – why do they also need the limber? But we worked it out eventually. What resources did you use for that kind of checking?*

ML: So much is online these days, and if you're lucky enough to belong to an academic library these resources might come with your subscription. Otherwise, you would have to go to a library and physically get out the book and look it up. For words that I thought might be too modern, like 'pal', which was common during World War One, I would use the Oxford English Dictionary, which in this instance confirmed that the eighteenth-century equivalent was 'chum'.

Sometimes you still have to get a book out of the library and pore over the image. But the internet has made a palpable difference to what you can get done in a day, so even though your manuscript was long it wasn't so very daunting.

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It's very different to be
convincing and truthful
at the same time.

TAKEAWAYS

- If you possibly can, ask an expert. But don't skimp on research. Readers care about accuracy.
- Realistic detail will help ground your story, in both the telling and the reading.

EXERCISES

Next time you read a historical novel, take a step back. Be on the lookout for words and phrases that don't seem to ring true. Try to find out if they are historically correct or if their meaning has changed over time. Don't disdain use of the dictionary: it contains untold riches.

Read through your own recent writing and consider your own word choices. If there is more than one way of saying the same thing in English, do you think you have chosen the most powerful, the most heightened with emotion or drama?

16. My Process

I'm often asked whether I write in the morning or afternoon, to which I am inclined to reply: 'Don't make me laugh. I write all day.'

I get up early. I sit down to work at about five o'clock and begin to wind down at about four in the afternoon, at which point I start thinking about a glass of Champagne.

I have three screens on my desk, which is particularly helpful for rewriting. On the left, I have the first draft. On the right, I have the rewrite plan, containing all the comments people have made about my first draft. And in the middle is what I'm writing – the second draft of the book.

Of course, I used to do it with just one screen and paper to left and right. This more modern set-up suits me well, but everybody has to find their own formula.

Near the beginning of a draft, I think about how many pages a day I'm going to write and try to calculate how long it ought to take me to write it. So in one notebook, for example, right at the front, I've written that on the sixth of August I should be on scene five and page twenty-five. In fact where I actually got to was scene eleven and page thirty-seven. On the thirteenth of August, I should have been on scene ten; in fact, I was on scene twenty-three. A little later I slowed down. There's a note saying that the week beginning 27th of August I had a holiday.

Every week I'm able to look at my notebook and see whether I'm ahead of or behind my schedule. If I'm behind, I work Saturdays and Sundays until I catch up. I find it reassuring to know how many pages and scenes I've got left to do. I would feel lost if I had no idea how much longer it was going to take me, especially as I set delivery deadlines with my publishers.

This kind of certainty is not everybody's cup of tea.

I never have writer's block. I think it's partly down to my methodical approach, which means I'm almost never looking at an empty screen. Like everybody, I do sometimes hit a roadblock and it may take a couple of hours to solve the problem, during which I'm told I walk around the house with a face like thunder. It's not the pacing that solves the problem, just me wracking my brains.

I don't want to go far from my chair. When I was starting out, an older successful novelist and television writer called Ted Willis – he invented *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z-Cars* – told me always to remember that the art of writing is 'the application of the seat of the trousers to the seat of the chair'. That was a funny way of putting it, but the truth is that it's only by sitting in your chair that you get the job done.

I always write, even on a bad day. I fear that if I don't, then tomorrow will be just as bad, and that way a whole two months could go by. You can get some work done even when you're not writing well. You can move people in and out of rooms, you can draft conversations. You can come back and fix it the next morning, but you've got it going, so even the bad day's work isn't wasted.

I like to be surrounded by books, especially reference books. I've got history books and biographies. I've got a very big atlas, several dictionaries, and the authorised version of the Bible along with several other translations. I also have family photos and pictures of authors I admire: Stephen King, Philip Roth, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Erica Jong. I may not be able to write as well as those people, but I like their company.

But it's not essential to me to write in my study at home. I sometimes write in the airport lounge or even on the plane. That doesn't bother me because I started off as a reporter, and in the newsroom people are shouting, making phone calls, coming in and out, and you can't say: 'Would everybody please be quiet because I'm trying to write.'

Ultimately you have to find your own way. You have to find the environment that suits you and your own rhythm of work. The only thing that I would say applies to all of us is that the novel does not accept excuses. You've just got to keep writing. If you stop, you might never start again.

The way I feel about it, if I haven't written, I haven't justified my existence.

.....

TAKEAWAY

- Keep writing, on good days and bad.

EXERCISE

Consider your own strategies for guarding against finding yourself in front of a blank screen. Try ending each working day by writing down a question that will get you going the next morning. It's the very same strategy you will use on your reader to keep them hooked on the story too.

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17. The Rewrite

If you want to write a bestselling novel, you need to adopt the Japanese attitude of 'kaizen', which denotes continuous improvement. Whatever you've written, you have to think: how can I make this better?

I rewrite a lot. Every morning I begin by reading what I wrote the day before and I always change it. Sometimes I completely rewrite it. When I get to the end of the first draft I show it to editors, agents, fact-checkers, friends and family, all of whom are very important.

Then I make a rewrite plan, collating everybody's comments. This is a long process, but you have to be a perfectionist.

The rewrite plan for *The Armour of Light* is a hundred and eighteen pages, the biggest I've ever done. Largely, this is because I find the process so productive. On each page are the comments from readers. I used to collect all the pages in a ring binder, but now I use three screens – one each for the first draft, the rewrite plan and the new draft – which is a method that has served me extraordinarily well. I then work systematically to fix each issue as it arises. Most issues are easy to fix. For major issues, I will usually have resolved ahead of time how I am going to address them.

In this particular rewrite plan I have included lines from a biography by nearly-but-not-quite Prime Minister William Hague about Prime Minister William Pitt. For each chapter, I've made a note of things I learned from Hague's book that might turn out to be crucial or should perhaps be mentioned in passing, such as when the Bank of England first started issuing pound notes back in 1797. I don't think that information made it into *The Armour of Light*, but if somebody had actually to put his hand in his pocket and pay for something, it would have been very useful to know – and that could easily have caught me out and interrupted the flow.

I also included a newspaper cutting from an eighteenth-century newspaper – specifically, the *Hereford Journal* of the 21st of December 1792. This is the 'Loyal Declaration of the Citizens of Gloucester', a bunch of people who decided to speak out against mill workers (and others) demanding reform and the end to the war between England and France that had been going on for so long. This was a very useful addition that told me a lot about the terrible divisions in England during this period of history. We still get moments like that – an example in my lifetime would be the terrible divisions over Brexit.

I have always found editors to be cooperative rather than combative. I have never felt they were interfering with my conception of the book or trying to dictate to me. The best editors make very valuable suggestions, but their attitude is generally one of recommendation rather than enforcement: 'If you like this idea, do it – and if you hate the idea, that's OK.'

A typical comment might be, 'I want to like this character more than I do.' That's extremely valuable, because how the reader feels about a character is critical. If I've written a character who is supposed to be attractive and it hasn't come off, then I have a lot of work to do in the rewrite.

It's also important to pay close attention when an editor says they don't believe a character would make a certain decision or behave in a certain way. Because if one person didn't believe it, there will be others who don't believe it either and you simply cannot afford to lose credibility. Once people start to think, 'that probably wouldn't have happened', you've lost them. You must avoid this at all costs.

If somebody has made a decision that seems unlikely then you must find a way to increase the pressure on that character, making it clear that these are exceptional circumstances. An alternative solution is to fine-tune the character to fit with the necessary action, but the more dramatic scenario is always to have the character instinctively not want to make this decision, but feel pushed into it by other forces.

Bear in mind that character is not fixed. A character doesn't have to stay the same from page one to page 1000. It's interesting when characters change over the course of the novel. A person who's stiff-necked and judgemental can develop into somebody who heroically campaigns for the disadvantaged. Or a sweet little boy might turn into a selfish rotter as he goes through adolescence.

Another typical comment from an editor might be: 'I want to know more about how he made the bomb.' I choose that example because in *The Man from St Petersburg* there's an anarchist who makes a homemade bomb and in writing it I discovered the entire process by which you go to the chemist, buy certain chemicals and then go home and mix them in the sink, which is terribly dangerous, because if you get the proportions slightly wrong it will all blow up.

This was a very tense scene and a lot of research had gone into it. But when I read back over it, I thought: 'This scene can't be in the book, because it tells kids how to make a bomb and blow themselves up.' In that case my research was wasted effort. But as a general rule, if somebody does something physically complicated in the story, you should aim to find out exactly how it's done. Otherwise, there is a risk of the scene being skimpy and the reader sceptical. A knowing reader might even say: this writer hasn't got a clue what he's talking about. But remember that it's not enough just to put the recipe in or shove in your research half-baked. As always, you must introduce this information as a by-product of the drama.

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“ Comments by your editor are gold dust. They warn you of weaknesses that you can fix before the book is printed.

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Such comments by your editor are gold dust, because they warn you of weaknesses that you can fix before the book is printed.

Conversely, not all comments should be taken equally seriously. Watch out for a grudge or prejudice, or vested interests. A man who has been divorced, for example, might comment that everything is always stacked against the husband – you can easily tell that that is not an objective comment. Which doesn't mean you can't think about it. You might even pinch those words and have a character say them in the story.

You might get someone else saying that you've completely ignored the exploitation of the working class. That comment clearly comes from somebody with a strong point of view who is likely to say the same about most novels he reads. Worse still is the person who wants you to write an entirely different book, who says, for example, 'I thought this was going to be a serious demolition of wokeism', which you had no intention of ever writing.

In short, you must learn to discriminate between comments that are truly helpful and others you can readily dismiss.

As you already know, for fact-checking I like to consult professionals where possible, especially historians, but also police officers and scientists. The rewrite plan for *The Armour of Light* incorporates my entire correspondence with both Emma Griffin, who wrote *Liberty's Dawn*, and Tim Clayton, the author of the definitive book on the Battle of Waterloo.

Emma Griffin had told me that I was representing industrial conflicts as if they were modern-day conflicts. I wrote her a long email committing to presenting worker resistance in a more nuanced way while also asking for answers to a number of questions. She had said, for instance, that people opposed machinery for superstitious reasons, that people thought machines did not do as good a job as hand-workers, but when I pressed her for more detail she admitted that we don't actually know that much about what eighteenth-century workers did and thought. My challenge made her back down a little, but also prompted her to clarify that the resistance as I presented it was an overly consistent and coherent world view that dates from a later period. This was a very perceptive observation that required me not just to tweak a few incidental details, but to make quite a subtle change throughout the whole book.

Tim Clayton commented on a pub scene, saying that there wouldn't have been a bar in the pub – as in a counter that divides the room so that people can't get at the beer without paying – so I shouldn't really use the word 'barmaid'. He also said that the price of porter for most of the eighteenth century was three pence a quart, and that it was a quart, not a pint. That kind of detail can be very difficult to find when you're looking for it and I was very grateful to be told it. There is also a long discussion about flogging. Flogging was a routine punishment at the time for things like drunkenness and petty theft. It wasn't reserved for slaves. Women could be flogged as well as men. In the military it was unspeakably brutal – there was an official limit of 1200 lashes in the army, which is so

sadistic and sickening that it hardly bears thinking about. Some historians argued that such official limits were never reached, but I'm always cautious when a historian tries to make something absolutely evil seem less so. Emma, in contrast, agreed that it would be unusual for a petty criminal to die from their whipping but was careful to distinguish this from a military flogging. I had to use my own judgement to steer my way through this discussion.

The key thing during the rewrite is to raise the stakes. Heighten the drama wherever you can. Make people care more about things. Make them more devastated when they suffer a reverse and more joyful when they have a triumph. All of that is very worth doing.

You can also tie knots, by which I mean make connections between things that happen in different parts of the story, that you might not have thought of making first time round. For example, you might notice that in the middle of the book you have introduced a new character for just one scene. Perhaps this happens more than once. Perhaps you will find that you don't need two separate characters for these two separate scenes but can amalgamate them into one, more interesting character with two walk-on parts instead of one. This may seem trivial, but the fact that you return to somebody the reader has met earlier helps promote the feeling of a fully realised world.

Rewriting can be arduous and I'm sometimes asked how I feel about it and whether it's painful to find fault with my own creative work. Not for me. I like the rewrite, because everything I do is only making the book better. That gives me a kick, and maybe that's what makes me a writer.

Sometimes there are parts of a novel that I'm very attached to, but for some reason I've got to get rid of them. For me that's not a difficult decision. If it isn't working, throw it in the bin. I am focused solely on writing a book that the reader will love and won't want to put down.

TAKEAWAY

- Use the rewrite to test the persuasiveness of your story. Use it to correct mistakes, iron out inconsistencies, strengthen credibility, raise the stakes, make connections and improve foreshadowing. And don't forget to be on the look-out for the wow factor.

EXERCISE

Find a dull scene in a mediocre novel and think of five ways you could raise the stakes. Then consider if any of your own scenes need the same treatment.

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I like the rewrite because
everything I do is making
the book better.

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18. Publishing & Promotion

A young editor at a publishing house longs to find a completely unknown writer who has written a wonderful book, and the editor will publish it with enormous enthusiasm in order to make her reputation in the field.

That young editor will help you through the publishing process. The first thing that will happen is that your typescript will be given to a copy editor who will find a thousand things wrong with it. Copy editors are irritating. They are also invaluable and save you from terrible errors. So grit your teeth and be patient.

It's always best for the author to review the copy-edited typescript before it goes to the printer, because there are sometimes things that the copy editor will get wrong – a comma wrongly inserted or deleted, perhaps. It's perfectly permissible to disagree with the copy editor, in which case you will make a note using the tracking software and explaining why – always respectfully, because these people are doing you a lot of good.

The next stage is that you'll read the proofs. This is when the book has been printed but not yet bound and you're drinking in the Last Chance Saloon. After this you can't make changes, so read carefully, because you may find tiny details that both you and the copy editor missed.

This is not the time to rewrite the book. You will rightly get hell from the publisher if you try to cross a paragraph out or put a new paragraph in. That will not be appreciated. It doesn't look professional and I advise you not to do it unless it really matters. The option exists, but you should reserve it only for essential matters of serious fact rather than personal preference or style.

You should aim to have a meeting with the publisher about how they are going to promote your book. They may not suggest this, because they will feel that they already know what they're doing, but they may want to talk about potential interviews or social media and this is your chance. There are things you are entitled to ask which they should be able to answer. How many copies of the book will they print? What price will it be? Will there be a poster for booksellers to display? Will there be dump bins? A dump bin is a colourful cardboard bookcase, usually about waist high, that holds something like sixty copies of your book and is freestanding in the shop. It's a great sales aid, but they cost money and publishers don't do them very often.

One question I advise you to ask is: 'For you, what number of copies sold would count as a success?' The answer to that question will help you know where you stand.

The publisher should show you the cover. You may hate it. This has happened to me many times, and whenever I've said that I don't think it's good enough the response has always been, 'but it's right for our market'. Nonsense. It's just a bad cover but they don't want to admit it. They've settled for it and want you to do the same without any fuss.

The best way of avoiding this unpleasant scenario is to be like Jack Reacher and get your retaliation in early. Be pro active, and before the question of the cover even comes up, say something like: 'I'm really hoping we can have a cover that will appeal to young people, because I think my book will appeal to young people.' A publisher will often accept that kind of steer – what they find hard to take is when you denounce their finished product.

In my experience the cover is a difficult thing to control. Most authors seem unhappy with their covers and, unless they are bestselling authors, will usually be told, 'publisher knows best'.

I have sometimes felt that a book was not very well published. A good example is *The Pillars of the Earth*, which was published in the US by an American publisher called William Morrow. The long-time president of the company had retired while I was writing the book and the person who took over was not a great success. As a result *The Pillars of the Earth*, which I thought was much better than anything I'd written before, sold about the same number of copies as my previous book, *Lie Down With Lions*, which was a thriller set in Afghanistan. I was really disappointed about that.

At the time it threw me. I thought maybe I was wrong about switching to the historical novel. But that wasn't the case. The book simply took a long time to find its audience. In the end, it was the readers who turned it into a cult.

One of the early signs was when my Italian publisher took out an ad in the newspapers thanking the booksellers of Italy for selling a hundred thousand copies of *I Pilastri della Terra*. I thought, how did I sell a hundred thousand in Italy? My normal sales figures at the time were around forty thousand. Then I noticed that when I was doing personal appearances in bookstores, there would always be somebody who would say: 'I love all your books, but the one I really liked best was *The Pillars of the Earth*. When are you going to write another one like that?'

The Pillars of the Earth stayed on the German bestseller list for six years.

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Copy editors are irritating,
and they drive you mad,
and they are also invaluable,
and they save you from many
terrible errors. So, grit your
teeth. Be patient. Be tolerant.

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All of this made me feel that the book deserved a bigger publication campaign in the States, which it didn't get it because the company wasn't operating in top gear. Luckily for me, readers promoted it through word of mouth until it became my all-time most popular book.

Over the course of my long career, I have learned to try to manage my publishers. If this is your first book, or even your second or third, this is not the approach you should take. But in the long term, there come to be things that you know, and know that you know, not only because they are your books, but also perhaps because you have been in the book world longer than many of those working at your publisher.

Publicity was the first thing I took control of. When I started out, publicity was often done by the most junior person in the office and was considered both easy and relatively unimportant. Nowadays almost the opposite is the case: publicity and marketing are senior roles of critical importance to both author and company.

The first thing I did was to insist on better information. I said: 'Before I leave home, I want a full itinerary of what you're going to want me to do on this book tour. If there are things that are not yet confirmed, you can put them in and say "unconfirmed". But you must give me the itinerary.' Things have changed now, and publishers are more professional, but that was the first instance of me taking control.

More recently I have also taken some control of covers. I have a talented designer of my own, Daren Cook, who produces a cover for me. The publishers are not obliged to use these covers but most do, because they're so good.

These are just some of the ways I try to set high standards for my work. Generally, my publishers appreciate the enthusiasm – and even more so the results. With detailed oversight, book tours go smoothly, audiences and interviewers are happy, and I feel that I'm doing the best possible job for my readers.

This is a brief look at my own experience. But as somebody who has been writing for fifty years, and writing bestsellers for forty-five, I am admittedly not in the position of many of you, who will mostly be just starting out. That's why I have also had a conversation with a young author three books into her career, to find out what it has been like for her. You can follow that conversation in the next lesson.

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Before the book comes out,
if you can, you should have
a meeting with the publishers
about how you should
promote it...

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TAKEAWAYS

- **Be painstaking at the editorial stage. Take responsibility for the finished manuscript.**
- **Appreciate your publishing team. Be scrupulously polite in your dealings with them. They are on your side.**
- **Be prepared to stand up for yourself and set high standards for your book. Try to anticipate and defuse any potential issues before they can become a problem.**

EXERCISE

Put yourself in the shoes of an editor. Offer to read a friend's work and make constructive suggestions for possible revision and improvement.

19. Promoting Your Book

This discussion with **Alexandra Overy** is focused on how to promote your book if you're a beginning author and the publisher hasn't given you a world tour.

AO: Most new authors are not going to start with a tour of any kind, and although the publisher will support the launch, you may find a lot of the promotion falls to you.

Fortunately there are many wonderful opportunities to reach readers through social media, which is something you have the ability to control yourself – which in turn has the downside that you can easily get a little obsessive over it. My advice is to find a platform you enjoy and stick with it. It can feel like a daunting task at times and you don't want it to become monotonous or something you're forcing yourself to do, because that is likely to come across in the content. Ultimately you have to find a balance between promotion on social media and your own mental wellbeing.

KF: *You did a lot with other authors too.*

AO: It's vital to find your community. Some will be going through the same things as you and others will have experience you can draw on. Being able to do collaborative cross-promotion takes away some of the drudgery and makes it a fun thing to do with your friends.

KF: *There's a lot of talk these days about driving pre-orders.*

AO: Pre-orders are exactly that: orders for the book that are placed before it comes out. They're important because they show the publisher that there's interest in the book, which can affect the first print-run as well as investment in promotion.

People come up with lots of creative ways to boost pre-orders, like offering gifts – a bookmark or phone background, a deleted or bonus scene, maybe even a guaranteed signed copy. For my first book, *These Feathered Flames*, I did a bookmark and some character art in the form of cards to collect. It's worth doing if you find pleasure in it, because it connects you to readers and thanks them for supporting you, but also gives you something tangible to do in those strange, in-between months before your book is released.

Another practical thing you can do is to produce quote graphics with a snippet from your book or endorsements from early readers. The online programme *Canva* is great for this, and even with the free option you can make lovely graphics quickly and easily. Short videos go down well too.

KF: *All this takes work, but can be done without spending much money.*

AO: Yes, and sometimes the publisher will chip in – perhaps printing the bookmarks for you.

KF: *Then along comes publication day and you want to do something to celebrate.*

AO: I think it's important to celebrate the milestones along the way and all the victories, big or small. Celebrate the cover reveal. Celebrate the first time you see your book in a bookshop. The more visible your book is the better, and celebrating online with friends and book bloggers only fuels promotion. Join in the celebrations for other authors too.

KF: As an unknown author, what is it like visiting bookshops?

AO: It's intimidating at first, partly because a lot of authors are slightly introverted. But everyone I've come across has been really supportive. Sometimes, if I see my book in a shop, I'll introduce myself as the author and they'll invite me to sign it and share pictures on their own social media. Booksellers are generally people who love books, so there's usually an immediate connection.

It's worth getting to know local booksellers, especially at independent bookshops in your area, because then you can collaborate on exclusive promotions that are mutually beneficial. Sometimes you can arrange a conversation with another author in a bookshop, which attracts double the crowd, but over Zoom works well too, because you can reach a larger number of people. Connection and partnership: that's the name of the game.

KF: When Triple came out, which was only my second successful book, they sent me to a department store in Chicago and nobody came. Nobody. It was a terrible experience.

AO: Unfortunately, I think that's fairly common at the start of an author's career. I had my first in-person launch event last year and rallied all my friends to turn up so it would look like I had a fan base! But I think it's encouraging for everyone to hear that someone who has ended up a very successful author has also dealt with that experience.

KF: I got three bits of good advice when I started doing radio interviews. First, don't talk too fast, even if you're desperate to get all your thoughts across; second, lower your voice, because it tends to go up when you're excited; and third, and most importantly, smile – the warmth and friendliness come across in the tone of your voice.

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AO: What about television?

KF: I always dress up as a sign of respect for my readers, but you have to think carefully about your choice of clothes. The colour blue is great on television, but red is not so good, and never wear stripes because sometimes they strobe. The most important thing for live television is to get there an hour early. You don't want to miss out because they're sitting around wondering where you are.

Satellite interviews are good value for money, but difficult. What happens is you sit in a small room looking at a camera but there's nobody there; you simply connect to a series of television shows all over the States and do a three-minute interview every five minutes. All you see is a bit of paper saying that it's Jim and Debbie in Dallas, for example, and then you have Jim and Debbie in your ears and have to respond as if they were there. Saying 'Hi Jim and Debbie' to nobody is tiring, especially after a few hours, but it saves you about two weeks on the road.

I play a mental trick on myself for television interviews by imagining that the interviewer is an old friend that I'm really pleased to see again. That little fantasy can help you appear relaxed, as though you're having a good time, when in fact you're talking to a total stranger who is asking quite intimate questions about your work and ideas.

In foreign countries they sometimes use simultaneous translation. The interviewer might ask a question in German, for example, but I would hear the translator's voice through an earpiece asking the question in English, and the same in reverse for the answer. Mostly it works fine, but I once had an embarrassing experience where it turned out that the translator wasn't up to the job and had fled as soon as the interview started. Only it took us a while to figure this out live on air, with the interviewer posing increasingly anxious questions that I was simply failing to answer. It's an incredibly difficult skill, pretty much a miracle if you can do it, because you're listening and speaking at the same time in two different languages.

AO: How do you handle questions you don't really want to answer, such as about the next book, which you're not yet ready to talk about?

KF: *My policy is to be terribly apologetic and then blame the publishers. 'I'm really sorry – I can't tell you about my next book because my publishers have told me that I've got to keep it secret until they make the big announcement.' Journalists tend to accept that.*

Once you're well known, the publisher will send out a press-pack to hundreds of media all over the country, including a list of questions journalists might like to ask. I have frequently been interviewed by someone with that list on a clipboard in front of them and even though it's obvious they haven't read the book it still works, because those are all questions to which I have answers. After a while you become very familiar with the common questions and have a funny story ready to go – like Stephen King, who when asked where he gets his ideas always answers, 'K-Mart'.

AO: Do you favour online or in-person events?

KF: *Online is better. You might talk to a hundred people in a bookshop, or a thousand in a theatre if you're lucky, but the first time I did a Facebook Live event 96,000 people tuned in to watch. Sometimes you have to prepare a short speech or a reading from the book, which should be a couple of pages that hook the listener straight into the story.*

Ideally you shouldn't speak for longer than twenty minutes, because the thing audiences like best is when they get to ask you questions. I always try to allow half an hour for that and it can be enjoyable for me, too, because I don't necessarily know what's coming. Sometimes you need a couple of plants in the audience to get things going, then everyone wants to chip in. If I'm picking the questioner, I always alternate between men and women.

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Audiences are always interested in the research. When I was writing Never, I couldn't find out where the presidential palace was in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad in North Africa. Which was awkward, because in my story some characters go to the palace, where there's an attempt on the president's life. I searched in vain, until at last on the internet a woman travelling through Africa posted some photographs of a sculpture park in N'Djamena, explaining how the police made her turn her back on the presidential palace while she was taking them. Eureka, I thought – now I know where the palace is! That sculpture park was on all the maps.

Now everybody who reads Never knows exactly where the president lives. I blew their secret. That's the kind of story that goes down well in a personal appearance.

AO: What other talking points tend to come up?

KF: People often ask how I feel about the characters and whether I miss them when I finish writing. But the fact is that I don't really have feelings about the characters. What I care about is the reader. I'm thinking about how the reader will feel about the characters and whether the reader will believe in their actions. I don't have a relationship with the characters myself. My main feeling when the book is finished is: great, that's paid the rent for another couple of years. Another common question is about writer's block, but I don't have much to say about that because I've never experienced it.

AO: For me, the block is usually a symptom of something else. When the pandemic started, for instance, I found it hard to write because my brain was so caught up in what was going on in the world.

KF: I'll even write through a hangover.

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If somebody doesn't know
your book exists, they can't
buy it.

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TAKEAWAY

- Find your tribe. Writing is a solitary exercise, but promoting it and selling it are collaborative.

EXERCISES

Make a list of ten interview questions you would be happy to answer.

Get a friend to interview you and video you on their phone; then play it back and see how you perform. The more practice you get, the more confident you will feel.

20. Reading

Ever since I learned to read at the age of three, reading has been one of my greatest pleasures. But reading is a very special kind of pleasure.

Reading exercises our imaginations. Reading broadens our minds. Think of medieval times, when people rarely went more than twenty miles from where they were born and had no books to tell them about the lands they never saw. They had no idea that all over the world people lived in places that were completely different from an English village. They didn't understand that life in that English village was completely different from life a thousand years ago.

Reading teaches us to see the world from somebody else's point of view, which is a defining characteristic of humanity.

The psychologist Steven Pinker has a theory that the human race is becoming kinder. It's plausible. Most of us no longer execute people by burning them alive, which was commonplace for much of history. Most of us don't have floggings or public executions. Few of us tolerate spectacles which involve torturing animals, like bear-baiting and bull-fighting.

Pinker claims that this change in the human race dates from around the start of the eighteenth century, which he also notes is when people in large numbers started to read novels. So part of me dares to hope that in writing novels that people read and love, I will have helped increase the sum total of empathy in the world.

I have a bookshelf that contains all the books that I've written. I've kept one copy of every edition and every translation of each of them. The way I see it, there's a common theme that runs through this body of work – and that theme is freedom.

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Most importantly, reading
teaches us to see the world
from somebody else's
point of view.

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I get angry about bullies and dictators and war and racism and injustice. In particular, the five Kingsbridge books and the three in the Century Trilogy chronicle the last thousand years of Western civilisation. And what story does that chronicle tell?

The story of the invention of freedom.

A thousand years ago, just about everybody on the planet lived under some kind of tyranny. Thankfully, that has changed. Thomas Becket defied the authority of the English King. Wat Tyler led the Peasants' Revolt. People started to demand religious freedom and then the right to form trade unions and finally, democracy.

I've spent my life telling that story. I think it has been worthwhile. I hope you agree.

21. Conclusion

If you have stayed with me throughout this course: congratulations, and thank you.

But remember something. Somebody once said to me: 'There are a thousand people out there with an idea for a novel, and the difference between them and you is that you've written it.' To be a novelist, in addition to imagination and ability, you need a certain kind of mulish obstinacy.

There comes a moment in the writing of your first novel when you think: 'Is anybody ever going to read this? I could be down at the pub having a nice evening, or watching television or hanging out with my family. Yet here I am in this room on my own, writing something that nobody will ever read.'

My wish is that this **BBC Maestro** course might help you over that hump. Because everybody has that hump, and if you're going to get anywhere, you've got to get over it. You've got to have that mulish obstinacy. You have to say: 'I've started this thing. Now I'm going to finish it.'

Determination is essential.

I hope you now have renewed confidence to carry on and write a good novel. And I hope that providence has given you the mulish obstinacy that you will need to finish it.

Thank you again, and goodbye.



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Appendix: Ask Me Anything

Many readers have written to **BBC Maestro** with questions that you would like me to answer. This is great, because I have no idea what's coming up. So let's have the first question.

Q: What do you read in your spare time?

I read almost everything. I read popular novels and literary novels and classic novels, and I sometimes read novels in French if they're not too difficult. The only thing I don't like is fantasy like The Lord of the Rings, it's not jealousy, though. I like science fiction because there are clear rules, but I can't get on with a story where anything can happen.

A recent book I read is It Ends with Us, by Colleen Hoover, which is mainly read by young people. It's about adolescence and is written in an adolescent universe, so there are things that older people will feel are unsophisticated and immature. But look past that and this is a well-constructed novel. It's very gripping and deserves to be the huge bestseller that it now is, despite being ignored by most of book-world until it exploded on TikTok.

Q: Who are the authors that have helped perfect your style?

The author who has been the biggest influence on me is Ian Fleming, but not in the way you'd expect. When I was twelve, I read a James Bond book and was blown away. I thought it was the greatest thing in the universe. I went on to read them all and ten years later, when I started to write my own novels, I remembered the thrill of having the new James Bond book in my hand. I wanted my readers

to feel the same way. That thought was inspirational for me and encouraged me to be very ambitious for my books, and for each scene in my books, because that thrill, I believe, comes from the the belief that everything in this book is going to be completely terrific.

I don't write like Ian Fleming. He has a very particular style that perfectly suits his hero: slick, and modern for its day, with plenty of journalistic phrases and brand names. He invented a new way of writing which was perfect, but it's not my way.

Q: Is there a book of yours that you would recommend to everyone regardless of age or interests?

When people ask which book they should start with, I usually recommend Eye of the Needle. It's not a long book, so it's not intimidating, and although it's a very early book of mine, I still think it's pretty good. It's also easily available in most languages.

I once heard a radio interviewer ask Paul McCartney what he thought now of those early Beatles records. He said: 'I listen to those tracks and I think, "Clever boy".' I have a similar feeling when I pick up Eye of the Needle, which I wrote when I was just twenty-seven.

Then if readers love Eye of the Needle, they should have faith when they pick up The Pillars of the Earth, which is a much longer book, that they will never be bored.

Q: During your first steps as a writer, were there moments when you felt you couldn't complete a book or wondered if it was worth keeping going? If so, how did you deal with it?

I think there's a moment in the writing of every book of mine when I've looked at what I'm writing and thought, will anyone want to read this stuff? Most writers have the same experience – a sudden, almost predictable loss of faith in the whole process. You just have to bulldoze through it.

I've done that with one exception. I had an idea for a book, Country Risk, in which the Russians took over a Western bank with the intention of causing a crisis in Western capitalism. I spent more than a year on that book before bowing to pressure from readers for another edge-of-the-seat read like Eye of the Needle.

Q: I'd like to learn how to more effectively describe location. What methods can I use to elicit visuals inside the reader's head, so they can see the scene and feel as though they are there?

Two things. First, use vivid words and bright colours where possible and don't understate things: 'It looked like a disused cellar' is better than 'The room was a bit shabby'. Second, do more than paint a picture; evoke an atmosphere, by choosing words with emotional overtones. Use 'bleak' rather than 'bare' to describe a landscape if the mood is threatening, or 'warm red' rather than 'red' to describe a sofa if the mood is welcoming. It's subtle, but not only do you create a picture – you also create a feel.

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Q: After completing initial research, do you ever feel constrained by historical events or details when writing a work of fiction?

You're always constrained by historical events. And if it's not an historical novel, you'll be constrained by other things, like geography. Wherever you've set this novel, it has to be true to that place – the weather of that place, the architecture of that place. Even if you invent a place, as I invented the fictional town of Kingsbridge, where and when you place it will put constraints on what you can do.

Constraints are a fact of writing a novel. Sometimes those constraints are a nuisance, but they can also be productive, suggesting new ideas and workarounds and storylines.

Let's say you want somebody to have to walk somewhere and it turns out to be fifty miles, so they can't possibly walk there in a day. That's not a problem; it's an opportunity. How about they have nowhere to stay overnight? Now you have a mini-drama that can last several pages.

Q: How closely do you stick to your outline? Is it plotted from beginning to end like a literary road map? One prominent writer once told me that while he tries to stay with an outline, inevitably what happens is what was once the book's beginning ends up in the middle.

My outlines have changed over time. Certainly when I began the practice of planning, it would happen that in transforming the outline into a novel I would have to change it radically. That doesn't happen so much now. I'm better at foreseeing roadblocks and dispatching them at the outline stage.

But you might as well reconcile yourself to the fact that there will be changes. There will be things that you decide have to be done differently. Again, that's part of the everyday business of writing a novel. You shouldn't be discouraged by it. It doesn't mean you've done a bad job. It just means that you have to imagine something in a different way.

Q: In a choral novel, do you write each narrative line of your different characters one by one, or do you write your scenes in chronological order? If the second, what is the most efficient way to jump from one character to another?

Right at the beginning of creating the outline I might have separate paragraphs for each of the intertwining storylines, but that would never last long, because as soon as possible you have to start thinking about how these characters interact and how they change one another's destiny by what they do. You need to tackle the tangle right from the start. I would never write the separate storylines in any detail and then try and weave them together, because that would lead me down all kinds of blind alleys.

At the beginning of the story, when you have introduced one character and then introduce a second, or a second group of characters, I think it's a very bad idea to jump to the second group as if it were a new novel. There should be a prior connection. Ideally, when you jump between different groups of characters, there should be a continuous storyline that links all those scenes.

If you can't do that, jump from one scene to another consistently, just to keep the tenor of the novel even.

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**An agent once said to me,
'All the best stories are family
stories. Look at Hamlet.'**

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Q: How do you start a book? Is it premise and time and then characters? You seem to have a formula regarding familial strife. How early in the process do you work on that?

I always start with a dramatic question. If there's a nuclear war, how will it begin? How were the cathedrals built? What would have happened if a German spy had discovered the deception plan for the D-Day Invasion? Then I build up from there – invent the characters, say what happened before, what happened afterwards, and so on. A strong dramatic question is a very good beginning.

I didn't know that I had a formula for familial strife, but it's probably true and it's probably because I use things from my own experience. An agent once said to me that all the best stories were family stories – 'Look at Hamlet.' I had never thought of Hamlet as a family story but it is, and so too is Macbeth. Family stories can be pretty bloodthirsty.

James Bond violates this rule, of course. But in my kind of story, I decided early on that it works much better if the main character is part of a family, because then you can have a member of that family worrying about the character, which is much more convincing than the author worrying. Any situation is heightened when several people in the story are anxious about it – that's what a family gives you.

Q: When writing books like yours in which each chapter focuses on one character's perspective, how do you balance the intertwining stories? I've always found it amazing how I feel completely invested in one plot line, but when it moves to another I am as interested as I was before.

It can be frustrating in a multi-person novel when you're really into one character's dilemma and suddenly the author cuts you off and you go to someone else, but sometimes you need to do that. So how do you make it easier for the reader? You just want the first line of the next scene to be a grabber. Given that, then the reader will switch at the click of your fingers. If you end a dramatic scene with one character on a cliffhanger and then the first few lines of the next scene with the new character are a bit dull, then the reader will carry on wishing they could go back to the first. If you move fast and keep up the tension, then before you know it the reader is absorbed in the next dramatic question.

Q: How do you build your characters so that they remain consistent throughout the whole book? Do you sometimes 'use' a real person you know well as a pattern and alter him/her a little bit?

I never use a real person because at some point that real person won't do what I want my character to do. So it doesn't work for me. I do use bits of people, distinctive traits that might turn out to be as memorable to the reader as they are to me – the way someone looks when he's about to say something funny, for instance.

Consistency is important and depends on me having a clear picture of the character. Any changes that happen in the course of the story must happen within a consistent pattern. If I do slip up, which is possible when you're as focused on the plot as I am, then my early readers will almost certainly pick up on it.

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Q: How do you find the motivation to keep going if your first novel keeps getting rejection after rejection? Is there ever a point when you should just throw in the towel?

Thousands of us start out writing a novel and we don't all ever write a novel that's good enough to be published. So I suppose I've got to say that some people are going to have to give it up some time. But I wouldn't encourage it too early.

Earlier in this course I interviewed my granddaughter, who told us how she wrote her second novel while her agent sent her first out on submission. The first was never published, but the second one was. You'll undoubtedly learn from the first attempt and be a more capable writer when it comes to the second. So give it a go – you might get lucky.

I have a friend who reads all my first drafts and gives me great notes. He's a skilled writer who knows a lot about literature and has written four or five novels. They all got 'good' rejections – 'Very well done, but not for our list', that sort of thing – and he has now given up.

So I'm not going to make like an American musical and say all your dreams really can come true. Follow your dreams so far, but there may come a moment when you say: 'I need a different dream, and that's good.'

Books Mentioned:

BY KEN FOLLETT:

KINGSBRIDGE NOVELS

The Pillars of the Earth

The Evening and the Morning

The Armour of Light

CENTURY TRILOGY

Fall of Giants

Edge of Eternity

OTHER

A Dangerous Fortune

Eye of the Needle

The Key to Rebecca

Lie Down With Lions

Never

Triple

BY OTHER AUTHORS:

Colonel Sun – Kingsley Amis as Robert Markham

Pride and Prejudice – Jane Austen

The Da Vinci Code – Dan Brown

The Thirty-Nine Steps – John Buchan

The Riddle of the Sands – Erskine Childers

Waterloo: Four Days That Changed Europe's Destiny

– Tim Clayton

The Secret Agent – Joseph Conrad

James and the Giant Peach – Roald Dahl

Great Expectations – Charles Dickens

The Old Curiosity Shop – Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist – Charles Dickens

Rebecca – Daphne du Maurier

The Garden of Evening Mist – Tan Twan Eng

Casino Royale – Ian Fleming

The Good Soldier – Ford Madox Ford

The Day of the Jackal – Frederick Forsyth

Liberty's Dawn – Emma Griffin

William Pitt the Younger – William Hague

The Silence of the Lambs – Thomas Harris

It Ends With Us – Colleen Hoover

Fear of Flying – Erica Jong

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Metamorphosis – Frank Kafka

The Naïve and Sentimental Lover – John le Carré

Naval Wives and Mistresses – Margarette Lincoln

Twilight – Stephanie Meyer

The Hostages – Naomi Mitchison

The Colour of Blood – Brian Moore

The Gingerbread Witch – Alexandra Overy

These Feathered Flames – Alexandra Overy

The Godfather – Mario Puzo

Exit Ghost – Philip Roth

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone – J.K. Rowling

Macbeth – Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet – Shakespeare

The Help – Kathryn Stockett

The Lord of the Rings – J. R. R. Tolkien

Anna Karenina – Leo Tolstoy

Orley Farm – Anthony Trollope

ANONYMOUS OR TRADITIONAL:

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Firebird

Goldilocks and the Three Bears

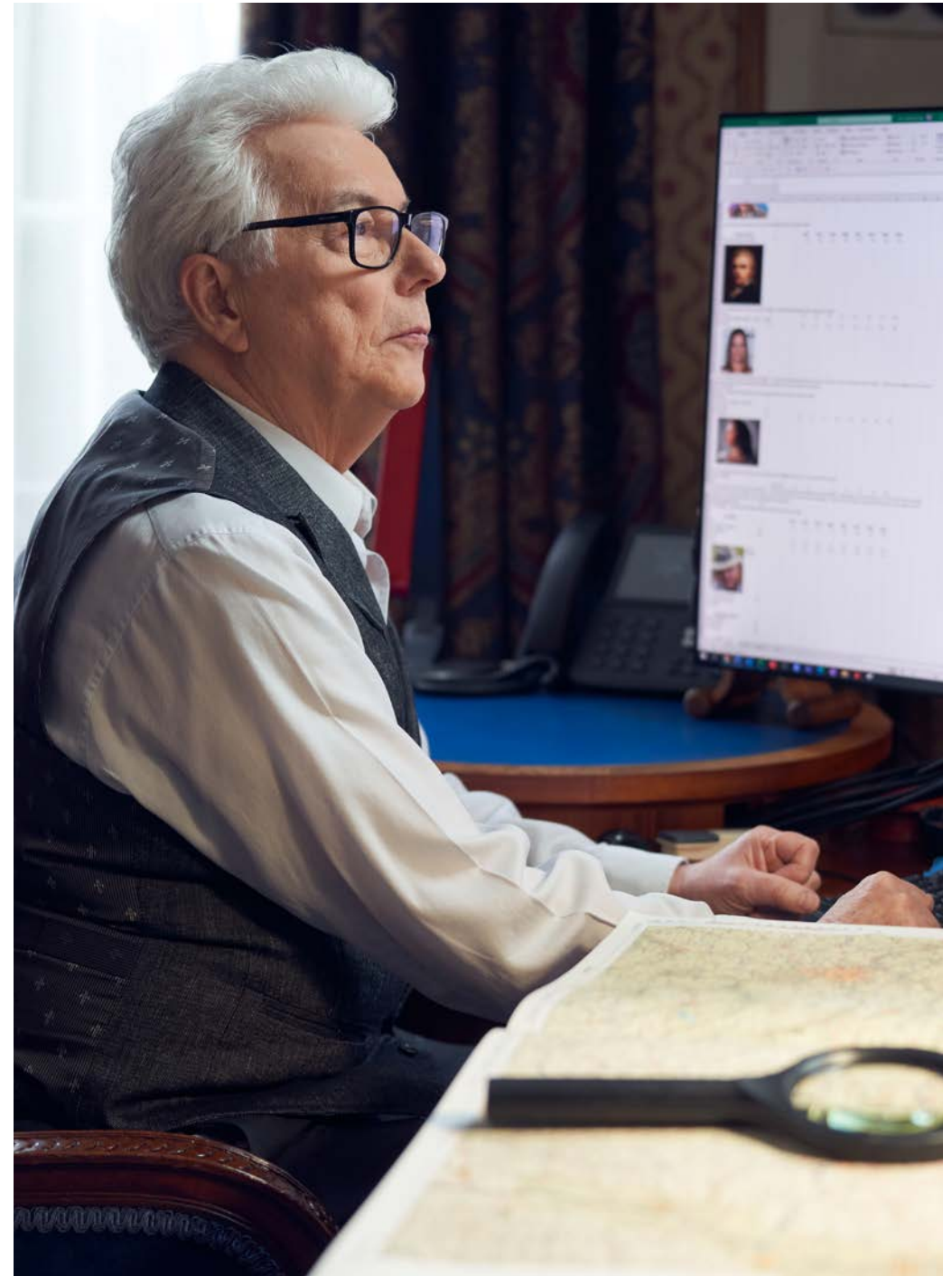
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AUTHORS MENTIONED:

Kingsley Amis
Jane Austen
Enid Blyton
Dan Brown
John Buchan
Raymond Chandler
Lee Child
Erskine Childers
Tim Clayton
Joseph Conrad
Roald Dahl
Charles Dickens
Daphne du Maurier
Tan Twan Eng
Gustave Flaubert
Ian Fleming
Ford Madox Ford
Frederick Forsyth
Elizabeth Gaskell
Graham Greene
Emma Griffin
William Hague
Dashiell Hammett

Colleen Hoover
Erica Jong
Franz Kafka
Stephen King
Karl Ove Knausgård
John le Carré
Margarette Lincoln
Ed McBain
Stephanie Meyer
Naomi Mitchison
Brian Moore
Alexandra Overy
Stephen Pinker
Mario Puzo
Philip Roth
J. K. Rowling
Sidney Sheldon
Danielle Steele
Kathryn Stockett
J. R. R. Tolkien
Leo Tolstoy
Anthony Trollope
P. G. Wodehouse

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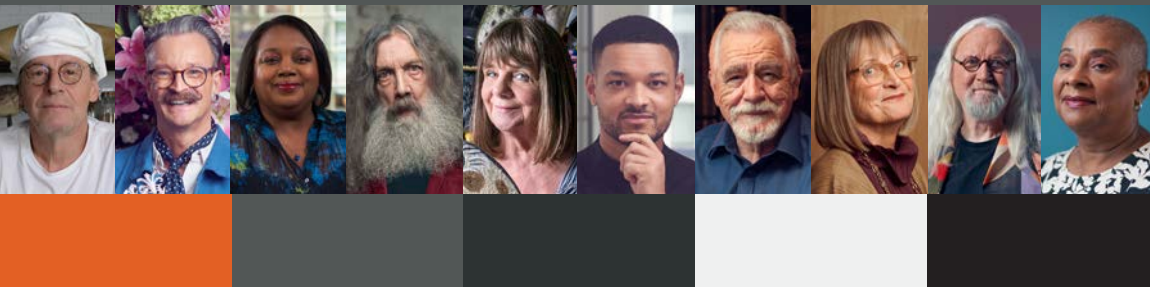
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