



LEE CHILD

WRITING POPULAR FICTION

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One great thing about writing a book is that you can live a different life for as long as it takes you to write it.

B B C
MAESTRO

COURSE NOTES 3.2

The Lessons

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My Course

Here's what this course felt like for me. As you will see, I'm sitting in a comfy armchair. And I imagine you sitting in another comfy armchair right across from me. I'm not talking to a hall full of students taking notes for an exam. I'm talking to you. We're talking about books and our shared love of reading. Maybe you're even a Reacher fan. I'm telling you about my experience as a writer, about things I got wrong and things I got right, about what I've learned along the way, about what matters to me and what doesn't. I'm telling you how I see the job that I do. Maybe one day I'll chance upon your book, and read it, and recognise in your work someone who lives for story just as I do. I look forward to that day. Until then, thanks for your company. Thanks for being there in that armchair and not changing the channel.

HOW TO USE THESE COURSE NOTES

There are no rules for using these notes, just as there are no rules for writing popular fiction. Use them however you want to. Read them from cover to cover, or dip into them as you go along. Read them before or after each lesson, or both. They are yours now, so it's your call. They are written to complement the online material: to join a few dots and fill in a few gaps – not merely to reproduce the lessons but to develop them too. They are anecdotal and often personal, as well as instructional. At the end of each lesson there are tips and hints for things to try, from thought experiments and analytical exercises to writing and editing tasks. These don't have to be done in order. They don't have to be done at all. There's no requirement to master one thing before beginning to explore the next. Again, it's up to you. But print out the tasks if you can, and maybe keep them to hand in a folder. That way you can pick them up and ponder them whenever the fancy takes you.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- A serious reading habit
 - A strong work ethic
 - A willingness to put the reader first
 - An ear that is attuned to the sounds and rhythms of language
 - If you're anything like me, a bottomless pot of hot black coffee
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01. Introduction

HELLO, I'M LEE CHILD...

...and I have been a reader all my life. Books have essentially enabled everything that I've done. In many ways, books have created me. I started reading when I was about three years old, and I haven't stopped yet.

My first job was in the theatre. Then I worked a long, long time in broadcast television, in a role that I loved amongst people who were great company, making programmes that were really good. I would probably still be in that job, except that one day my boss said something that made it impossible for me to continue. He said: 'You're fired.' Not because of any felony or misdemeanour on my part, but simply because of the type of corporate restructuring that was so common in the 1990s.

So the question was: what to do next? Which is when it occurred to me that after a lifetime of reading, maybe I should try writing. Flippantly, I like to explain my thought process like this: 'I know, I'll write a book. I've read some – how hard can it be?' Well, I decided to find out. So I wrote the first Jack Reacher book, on paper in pencil. That first manuscript is still around somewhere. Now there are twenty-seven Jack Reacher books, plus stories and spinoffs, as well as two Hollywood movies and an Amazon streaming series, with plenty more to come. I even have my own coffee brand, based on Jack Reacher's predilection for strong, hot, black coffee.

Over the past quarter-century the series has grown into a massive franchise. Sales are nearing two hundred million and the value of the franchise is about three billion dollars. It has been a wonderful, wild ride. Now **BBC Maestro** have asked me to teach a course about writing popular fiction, which is what you are presumably here to learn about.

If there is one overriding thing that I want you to get out of this course, it is this: you can be a writer if you have already been a reader. You must have your own relationship with books. You must have read a lot of books, and you must have enjoyed some of them, been indifferent to some of them, and hated a few. If you have done that, then you will have absorbed everything that you really need to know. The thing is, maybe you don't yet know that you know.

Deep down, you already know what works and what doesn't. We are going to try and bring that knowledge to the surface and help you organise it and put it into practice, bypassing what might otherwise be a slower process of finding these things out for yourself. If I can give you a five-year start, then that's five years ahead of the game.

I'm not sure that writing can be taught. But I do think it can be learned. The purpose of my **BBC Maestro** course is for us to figure out what you as a reader needed, therefore what every other reader needs too. Together, we are going to find out how books supply that need, and how that makes the reader respond. You will learn to think back, analyse your own response to books, and understand the kind of thing you need to do to get that same response from your own readers.

So what is popular fiction? Well, 'popular' means 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. In other words, it's what a lot of people like, which is great, because that means if you write a decent book, there's a big market. You are writing for a huge audience of readers who are really just like you. And if you are going into writing with the idea of making a living, which I did, then popular fiction is the genre where that is most likely to be possible.

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Together we are going to explore the nature of popular fiction from many different angles, and I hope you get something out of it. Use what I say as guidelines. There are no rules. There is no prescription. There is no proscription*. Feel free to be sceptical. Feel free to ignore certain things if you feel differently. This is about you. There is only one real way to write a book and that is to write it from the heart, from your own imagination.

I was forty when I started writing. Writing is one of the very few jobs in the world where it is not only possible to start when you're older, but better to start when you're older. So don't be disheartened if this is a second career for you. It was for me too.

It isn't easy to write a book. But it's not all that hard either. So let's get right to it.



*GLOSSARY

Proscription

noun

The action of forbidding something; banning

02. Where Story Comes From and What It's For

What is the purpose of fiction? I think it can be summed up in a simple phrase: To give people what they don't get in real life.

The Hero, 2019



We just discussed what 'popular' means. But what about 'fiction'? What is fiction and where did it come from?

To answer this question we have to go back seven million years, when human beings first started evolving on their own. For most of those seven million years we were weak, we were slow, we were slender, we were often sick, and often injured – much more likely to be prey than predator. We were really not very successful as animals.

Then something extraordinary happened. About half a million years ago, a random mutation in our line produced a huge brain relative to what we'd had before. And that huge brain was instantly colonised by language. Lots of animals have language. Prairie dogs are my favourite: tiny little mammals that live underground and stretch up on tiptoe and peer at the horizon looking for danger. They set sentries out and have two words for a predator approaching. The first word means an airborne predator and the second a ground-based predator. Language exists all over the place, including among plants. But what we suddenly got was a big brain pan and sophisticated, syntactical language*, where we could speculate and make plans.

These weak, slender, slow, rather pathetic animals were now able to band together, maybe twenty at a time, maybe fifty, maybe a hundred. And a hundred humans coordinated with a plan was suddenly the most powerful animal on earth, all because we were able to say: *If this happens we'll do that, but if this other thing happens, we'll do something different.* We had a plan A, a plan B, even a plan C if we needed it. Hunting was much easier, and living was much easier too. We owe our success as a species to sophisticated, syntactical language. Language was our salvation.

I think it's fair to speculate that in order to produce a positive evolutionary result, in those days we told each other the truth. There was no point in saying 'the woolly mammoth is beyond the next hill,' if it wasn't, because to all rush over there to hunt it and find it not there would have been meaningless. Unless it was tied to truth and reality, language was no use.

I think that for a hundred thousand years, or two hundred thousand, or maybe even three, we were rooted exclusively in a non-fiction world, describing things as they were: things we needed to know and things we needed to coordinate about. The recounting of past experience, and future planning – all of it was based on real things.

Then something extraordinary happened. We don't know when, because spoken language is not left in the ground. As soon as the last echo dies away, no archaeological trace of our words remains. But at some point in the last two hundred thousand years we made a mental jump, to talking about things that hadn't happened to people that didn't exist. We started making up stories.

The burning question is, why? Because there had to be a purpose. It was still deep in our prehistory. There was no concept of leisure. Everything was a desperate struggle for survival. We did nothing unless it gave us a better chance of still being alive in the morning. So what was the evolutionary advantage in mutating from non-fiction to fiction? I think it's fair to speculate that it was about inspiration and teaching – education, in a way. There were things that needed to be pre-discussed rather than just discussed afterwards, as the result of something.

At the time we were hunter-gatherers. It was vital that we left the security of our cave, that we went out, that we hunted our food and we gathered our food and that we brought it back and ate it in order to live. But it was a dangerous world out there. So maybe the first stories were simple parables*. Maybe one was about a young boy who went out and successfully hunted an animal and brought it back to be eaten. In other words, its purpose was to empower and encourage future generations to do exactly that. And maybe these stories acknowledged danger. Maybe one was about a little girl who went out and was confronted by a sabre-toothed tiger who sprang out at her from behind a bush, and the little girl turned around and ran as fast as she could and made it back to the cave safe and sound. In other words, its purpose was to console: to say, everything is going to be okay, you can walk up to the edge of the cliff but you don't have to fall off. Maybe this story made us feel a little bolder, a little more secure.

And then maybe thousands of years later the story mutated again. Maybe the little girl went out and a sabre-toothed tiger jumped out at her from behind a bush and she had her stone axe with her and she swung the axe and she killed the tiger and then walked home and told her story. Giving people strength, and courage, and reassurance.

I believe that is the origin and purpose of fiction. I believe the thriller is the first and fundamental form, and that how we react to story is based on those primitive parts of our brain.

Anthropologists like to conduct a thought experiment that goes something like this: Suppose you had a time machine and could go back and find an orphan baby and bring her home to the current day – how far back could you go and still have that kid grow up normal? How far back can you go and have her grow up indistinguishable from anybody else, with an iPhone at the age of five and going on TikTok aged ten? The estimate right now is about 35,000 years. Which means that if we've been modern for 35,000 years, and ancient for seven million years, for every one year that we've been modern, we were ancient for two hundred. Even though we're totally modern and live in the modern world very easily, we still carry around in the back of our brains a lot of influence from much earlier in our evolution.

Why do we read a made-up story or watch one on television? It must be because we are still getting the evolutionary advantages we used to get way back when we first started doing it. Real life tends to be frustrating. If your house gets burgled, they're never going to catch the guys who did it, they're never going to get your stuff back, the police probably won't even come and investigate. If your car gets stolen, same thing, you'll never see it again. You're left with this buzz of frustration: nothing is resolved and there's no finality about anything. Whereas in a book, you bet they'll find the guys who broke into your house, you bet you'll get your stuff back, and with a bit of luck, the bad guys will be punished in some way that you find satisfying and you will get closure and you will get happiness.

So we turn to story for what we're not getting in real life, based on ancient rules established way back in evolution. We need to be empowered, encouraged, emboldened, which is why we invented fiction, and why we still read fiction.

I want you to think about that seven million year diversion. Because when you're writing fiction, you've got to have a pretty acute sense of what people want from it. What must you give people in order for them to be satisfied? If you think about it long enough, if you look back over your own reading, you'll see that you've got books that have satisfied you or not satisfied you, books that leave you with a wry smile, with a sense of completion and closure, books that end in a great way and you feel really happy about it. You've got to analyse how you feel about those things, and how that relates to those deep-down, ancient instincts that you have in the back of your brain. And the more you think about it, the simpler it becomes. You have got to give your reader those same things, those same opportunities, those same satisfactions. That is how fiction works. Fiction exists to give us what we do not get in real life.

You have probably, at some point, been in danger or discomfort and glad to get out of it – you're connecting there with a very ancient feeling. I learned it from my daughter when she was six months old. I would bathe her, and when she was all slick and soapy with water, I would pick her up out of the bath and hold her up and pretend to drop her – and then catch her as she fell. And as I pretended to drop and then caught her, she would shriek with delight. There was something clearly atavistic* about experiencing that sense of peril when secretly you know it will turn out all right in the end. That catharsis is what you get from thriller fiction. It's a dire situation and the hero is about to be snuffed out completely, but he escapes, and deep down inside you know that he's going to: that's the implicit bargain, and that's what is so empowering. Even though 99 percent of your thoughts in the moment are that everything is awful, you know you can trust the author, and you're somehow immensely relieved and immensely delighted,

just like my daughter shrieking with laughter at bath time. You're delighted in proportion to your fear: terror and chaos are dispelled, order is restored and our safety re-established.

We can build that kind of thinking and feeling into our characters. For instance, this is what I wrote about Jack Reacher in *Blue Moon* (2019):

He considered himself a modern man, born in the twentieth century, living in the twenty-first, but he also knew he had some kind of a wide-open portal in his head, a wormhole to humanity's primitive past, where for millions of years every living thing could be a predator, or a rival, and therefore had to be assessed, and judged, instantly, and accurately. Who was the superior animal? Who would submit?

If fiction is about giving people what they don't get in real life, then popular fiction means giving lots of people what they don't get in real life. What this course does is look at the mechanisms for achieving that.

TAKEAWAY

So go back over those seven million years. Get in touch with the back of your brain. Figure out those elemental reactions that you have to life and to story and how the two things intersect. What is it about story that relates to those ancient feelings? You have to answer that question for yourself. You've read a lot of books, you've loved a lot of books – why? What did you love about them? And in what way did that connect to some ancient important tradition?

EXERCISE

A thought experiment... If seven million years ago seems out of reach, then think back to what you have observed in newborn babies. What makes a baby cry, and what makes a baby laugh? Those are the primordial*, pre-verbal responses you want to provoke in readers with your words.

Syntactical

adjective

Relating to the grammatical order of words in a sentence

Parable

noun

A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson

Atavistic

adjective

Relating to or characterised by reversion to something ancient or ancestral

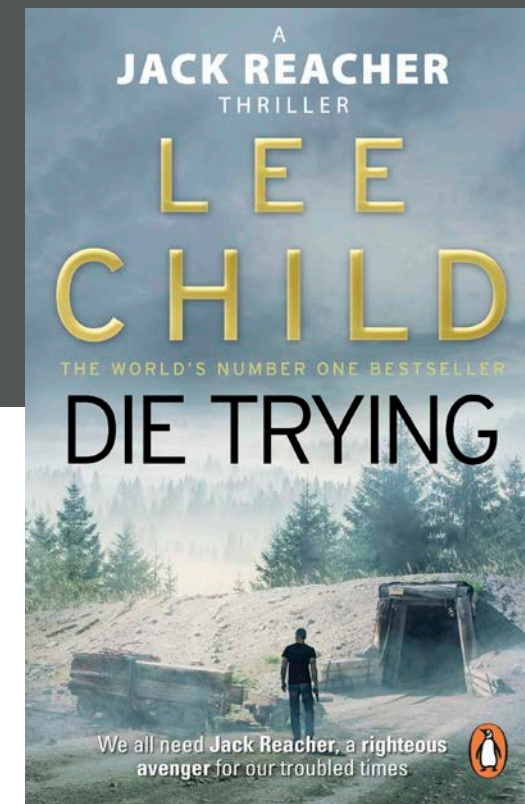
Primordial

adjective

Existing at or from the beginning of time; primeval

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To have a beating heart,
a book must be the product
of a single imagination.”



03. If You Want To Be A Writer, You Have To Be A Reader First

Reacher looked at the books on the tables. He read when he could, mostly through the vast national library of lost and forgotten volumes. Battered paperbacks mostly, all curled and furry, found in waiting rooms or on buses, or on the porches of out-of-the-way motels, read and enjoyed and left somewhere else for the next guy.

Make Me, 2015



There's a lot of good news when it comes to deciding to write a book. You don't need to go to college or university. You don't need a master's degree. You don't need to be young. In fact, it's often better not to be. Writing is one of the few things that you not only can, but really should, do when you're older, when you've seen some life, when the gas tank is full, when you've got something to say, when you've puzzled things out. Start as late as you like.

There's no problem with age. There's no problem with education. I would say only two things matter.

First, can you tell a joke or a story? If you're sitting around the table with friends or family, can you describe what happened at work that day and hold their attention? If so, you're already halfway there. And if you can tell that kind of story, then just tell it. Too many people think they've got to transition from their normal way of talking,

their normal way of thinking, to a degree of formality, like they're giving a speech at a wedding. They think they have to put on a metaphorical suit and tie and be somehow stiff and formal about it. That is absolutely the wrong way to do it. What you must do is be yourself.

Second, are you a reader? Because that's the bad news. The reality check. If you are not a reader you will never be a writer. That is the fundamental, and really the only qualification. If you're a reader, then it's plain sailing. If you're not, then writing is not for you.

If you're a reader, you've already built up a database of what works and what doesn't. Think back to the books you didn't enjoy. What was it that didn't satisfy you? What was it that irritated you? What was off? What rang hollow? Think hard about that, because then you can avoid making those same errors yourself. Bad books – books you didn't enjoy – teach you what is a waste of time. They alert you to the blind alleys that particular author was taking that you are not going to take. All writers are your teachers, and all books – good and bad – are your textbooks. Books contain everything that you need for future success.

I'm often asked for advice for intending writers. My short-form answer is to ignore all advice, because for a book to work it has to have a beating heart of its own. It has to have some kind of vitality that can only come if it is one hundred percent the product of one imagination: your imagination, not mine – yours. If you passionately want to write a chapter one way, do it. Don't worry if it's not how I would do it. Don't worry if it's not how any other writer on earth would do it, because what makes the book individual, organic and alive, is that it's your work. By all means listen to me. By all means listen

to other writers. Listen to and reflect on and evaluate our advice, but do not think that you have to obey it. A committee decision is never going to work. It's far more important to be guided by instinct.

What I'm not saying is do this, do that and then do the other thing. I'm encouraging you to explore the big meaningful concepts, and to understand the unbreakable rules. The purpose of this course is to establish the boundaries inside which you can work, but you can work however you want, as long as you're inside those boundaries. Together, maybe we can save you a few years' thinking.

As social beings we are immersed in story. Even if you are passing on factual information, you are subconsciously editing it. You smooth it out. You simplify. You say 'There was this guy', not 'There was this guy's cousin's best friend's brother.' You stick to the point, you maintain the flow, you tell the story. You turn on the television and the lead news story is true (we hope), but it's structured in a way that's engaging, that has a narrative, with a beginning, middle and end. Then the commercial comes on, and a commercial is a story too, a thirty-second story about these people who got this mortgage and it made their life wonderful, or this person who bought this thing and it was terrific. Not only is your brain already hardwired for story from way back in prehistory, you are being subliminally schooled in the rules of storytelling every second of every day.

On top of that, you have your entire life. You're seeing things. You're hearing things. You're meeting people. Nice people, and weird people. Every single day is packed with incident and experience that you can draw on. The longer you've lived, the more incident and experience.

But beware. Do not 'write what you know'. Do not follow that dreadful advice. There are very few people in the world who know enough to make a story genuinely exciting. You've got to invent. It's never enough to write what you know.

What you must do is write what you feel. Analyse your feelings. Then take those feelings and blow them up huge. For example, I'm a parent, and I've had that experience I know a lot of parents have had. You take your toddler to the shopping mall and you get distracted by something and then you look back and the kid is gone. The kid is not there. You feel a split-second jolt of absolute terror and panic. And then you look again, and there she is, six feet away looking in a shop window, and it's all good and the relief floods through you. What you must do is take that split second of terror and panic and use it. Remember that rush of relief. Remember that intense dread that you felt and expand it. It's not just one second. It's a day and then it's two days and then it's a week. Keep building on it. Keep building until it's huge. Write what you feel. Don't write what you know.

I was forty when I started writing. It was the second half of my working life. And practically every successful writer I know is in the same boat. They all did something else first, often for many years. Mostly what they did involved having an audience. Michael Connelly, who writes the Harry Bosch books, was a newspaper journalist. John Grisham was a courtroom lawyer. They had an audience, just like I did in television. And whether the audience is reading the newspaper or sitting in the jury box, the proposition is the same. You have to tell an engaging story. You have to get them to believe what you're saying.

But don't give up if you haven't been a journalist or a lawyer. Maybe you've worked in advertising or sales. Maybe you've had to convince someone of something in the boardroom, or at a staff meeting, or on the shop floor. If you've ever had to present

something, sway people's opinions, have them believe you and then vote in favour of whatever proposal you're making, then you are a communicator and you are a storyteller.

Remember, write what you feel, not what you know. Because you're not in a courtroom anymore, you're not writing for a newspaper. You're doing something completely different, where only the bare bones are the same.

A lot of people assume it was an easy transition for me from television into writing popular fiction. Not really. Nothing really translated except for that fundamental proposition: this is not about you, it's about the audience. It is about the audience first, second, third and fourth. Your sole function as a writer is to give the reader a good time. It's not about you. It's not about buying a black polo neck sweater and a black leather jacket and smoking Gauloises while wearing a beret in a café in Paris. The writer should be invisible.

Before television, I worked backstage in the theatre. So I've always seen my role as that of the backstage guy. And generally speaking, it works. Almost nobody goes into a bookstore and asks for the new Lee Child. Almost nobody asks for a specific title. They all go into the bookstore and say, 'Do you have the new Reacher?' The book is about the character and the character's relationship with the reader and the reader's hunger to know more. Somebody who worked for my agent was once in an airport bookstore and the old lady in front of him was buying my new book. This guy couldn't help himself. He nudged her in the shoulder and said, 'I work for the agent who represents that author.' And the old lady said, 'What do you mean?' And he said, 'You know, Lee Child, I work for his agent.' And she said, 'Who's Lee Child?' And he said, 'He's the guy that writes those books.' And she said, 'No he doesn't, Jack Reacher writes these books.' 'No,' the guy said, 'Lee Child writes about Jack Reacher.' And she

said, 'What, you mean Reacher tells him the story and he writes it all down?' For her the proposition was perfect. The author does not exist. It's just her and the character.

So what qualifications do you need to be a writer? Zero, other than to have been a reader your whole life, and to know the difference between a book you've enjoyed and a book that you haven't enjoyed. That distinction will be all the more clear the more books you've read, so again, the older you are the better, which is a wonderful thing.

TAKEAWAYS

If you are a reader, you can be a writer.

To have a beating heart, your book must be the product of a single imagination.

Don't write what you know. Write what you feel.

EXERCISE

Think back to a time in your life when you experienced a fleeting moment of intense fear or shock. Try to remember precisely what it felt like, the exact nature of your physical and emotional response. Try to break this response down into discrete sensations and describe each with maximum attention to detail, as though amplified in your imagination. Write from your own point of view, for maximum authenticity. If the experience lasted a couple of seconds, try writing a minute's worth of description (approximately 150 words), then two minutes, then five. Read your words aloud and feel the moment expand.



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If you're reading in your comfort zone, you're skating along based on your own expectation and your own experience.

04. Why I Love Series Fiction

The story proceeds based on the teller's aims and the listener's needs.

The Hero, 2019



I taught myself to read when I was three. My elder brother had just started primary school and I was hysterically jealous that he was doing something that I could not do yet, so when my mother would go over his lessons with him I would eavesdrop and peer over his shoulder, and over a period of six or nine months I figured out what he was doing and I taught myself to read. Since that moment I have read every single day, on average a book a day. I have read every possible thing, and I have loved every genre and every type of literature.

But when it comes to fiction, I particularly love series. Why is that, and why is it that series fiction is what makes so many of us first fall in love with reading? I think it's because if we randomly find a book we enjoy and then find out there are ten or fifteen more featuring the same character and likely to give us the same satisfaction, that is just a great feeling. The books are pre-approved: you know you're going to like them even before you start reading. The Travis McGee series by John D. MacDonald – about a boat bum without a job who steps up to the plate when people need him – is a perfect example, with not a single weak book among the twenty-one instalments.

I didn't discover John D. MacDonald until I was in my late thirties. But I was already a lifelong addict of series. When I was starting out reading, I loved Enid Blyton – I read *The Famous Five*, and *The Secret Seven*, and the *Adventure* series, which all featured

groups of kids off doing things on their own. Then I went on to *Biggles*, like every boy my age, and then Alistair MacLean. I'm not going to pretend I was reading Dostoevsky at the age of seven, because I wasn't. Nor does it matter. You never have to read Dostoevsky if you don't want to. There are no set texts. We're here to talk about popular fiction, not unpopular fiction, so what matters is that you read the mainstream stuff that everybody reads and everybody enjoys, even if later on they pretend it's beneath them. If you've read what the mass audience reads, you will be ready to supply that audience with the kind of stories they like. By the time I started thinking about writing, I'd served a thirty-year apprenticeship in popular fiction.

There's another sort of author that writes what I call quasi-series. Dick Francis for instance, who wrote horse-racing thrillers. The plot was always connected to horse-racing and ostensibly*, each book had a different hero, but really it was just the same character with a different name. Likewise with another of my favourites, John Grisham. The hero is always a young lawyer who comes up against a giant corporation doing evil things, so it's a kind of David versus Goliath quasi-series where the specific identity of the adversaries changes each time, but the basic proposition stays the same: a lone, brave, young, inexperienced individual takes on the might of the corporate world, and happily wins. That pre-approved, replicable format, that solid reliability, is what for me is so valuable about series. So if you have enjoyed series too, then write one, because it's taking out one little speed bump in the reader's feeling about acquiring that book.

Take another hugely popular author, Stephen King. His stories are all beautifully written and are all likely to include an element of horror or the supernatural, but they're all different from each other, often wildly different. Now think about that as a reader. You can read one book that weekend, so which book do you choose? You are tempted to choose the one that you already know you're going to like. You like Stephen King, but

you're not quite sure what kind of story it's going to be – is it time travel, is it ghosts, is it this, is it that? Is that a little speed bump in your choosing process? Is it easier to say, I know I'm going to love the series, so that's what I'm going to read? That was my feeling starting out. I understood series as a reader, I knew what the appeal was, and I was very into that appeal – I had experienced the commercial attraction first hand.

If you've loved something all your life then it makes sense to do your own work in that lane. But don't get narrow in your reading. When it comes to reading, you should step out of your lane. Read as much as you can in every genre – non-fiction, poetry, plays, Shakespeare – because when it comes to storytelling there is no single way of doing it, and if you get too specialised, too narrowly into techno-thrillers* or political thrillers or international intrigue, you risk missing out on what is happening elsewhere. If you don't know where to start, read randomly.

When I grew up there were no fanzines, there was no Internet, there was no recommendation network; you couldn't walk into a place and say, I've loved this book so what should I read next? It was a free-for-all where effectively every book you found was a random discovery. And randomness is a wonderful thing. So maybe once out of every five or ten times, choose a book with your eyes closed. These days I'm so steeped in the business that randomness is hard to come by. So at least once a year I go to the paperback rack in a big supermarket and choose books based just on their title, or how they look, or what picture is on the front, or how they feel in my hand. Randomness broadens your horizons. Some of those books you're going to hate, but you will discover some gems as well, and it might kick you off on a whole new strand of reading that will help your writing. Maybe years later there will be one fact or one image or one occurrence in one of those books that you can use to build an entire novel around. Reading widely is not a luxury – it's essential.

I read anything and everything. I'm one of those guys that reads the back of the cereal packet. I need to consume words all the time, and it leads to some wild discoveries. I once read a book called *Geometric Patterns in Medieval English Brickwork*, and before that I read two books about the history of air-conditioning, which were part of a non-fiction series on the biography of stuff. One book was about salt, and why it's important to us, and another was about rust, which attacks iron and steel and is a big deal in industry and construction. All these books have a purpose. They explain things and explore things and train us to think. They show us how things connect, and how a affects b, and c affects d. They tell us a story. They teach us about style. They help us to see what works and what doesn't. If you're reading in your comfort zone, you're skating along based on your own expectation and your own experience. If you're reading something unfamiliar, without such emotional investment, perhaps the successes and failures will stand out more clearly.

So far as I recall I have not incorporated anything about medieval English brickwork or air-conditioning into a Reacher book, but that kind of random information is exactly the sort of thing you need in your mental database. Your character might be thinking about such things, or be affected by such things, or a clue might be hidden in one of those connections. There is no reading that does not pay off eventually. I've read books where, five years later, ten years later, there is some little nugget that has been just right for a Reacher book and I've used it with great enthusiasm.

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TAKEAWAY

You will always be more of a reader than a writer. For every Reacher book I've written, I have read three hundred others. So write the kind of book you most love reading. But read every kind of book. Read widely, read randomly, read a lot. The more you read, the better you will write.

EXERCISE

Think back to series you have enjoyed, both as a child and as an adult. What was it that captivated you? What was it you were responding to? It was only in retrospect that I realised it was the orphan fantasy that spoke to me in *The Famous Five*. It was only in retrospect that I realised the appeal of *The Secret Seven* lay in the way they followed clues and figured things out, an ingenuity I later rediscovered in Sherlock Holmes. I built both these irresistible tropes into the character of Jack Reacher. So think about it and make a note. What is the implicit promise the author is making to you? What need of yours does the author promise to fulfil?

Ostensibly

adverb

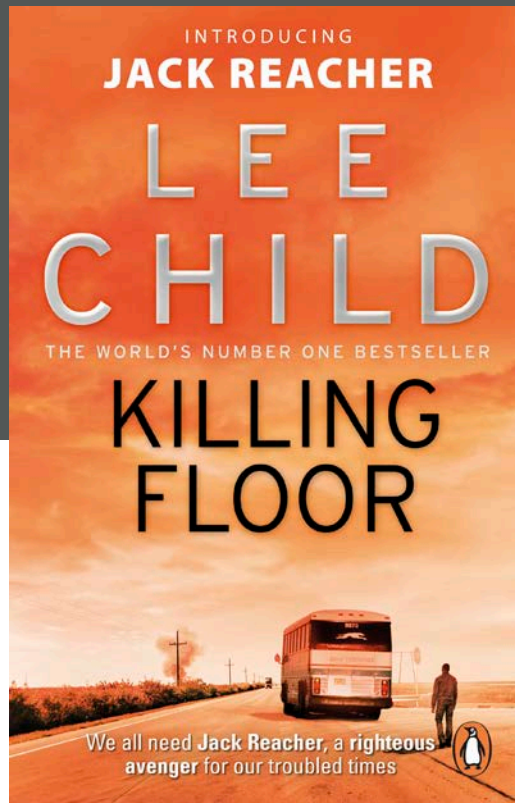
As appears or is stated to be true, though not necessarily so; apparently

Techno-thriller

noun

A hybrid genre drawing from science fiction, thrillers, spy fiction, action, and war novels

“
Write for yourself,
you are the audience.”



05. How I Wrote My First Book ~ Part 1

‘Very good, Reacher,’ he said. ‘Elementary deduction, right?’

Killing Floor, 1997



We all come to writing via different routes. Mine was that I lost my job. I had a great job in television that I was good at and that I really enjoyed. But in the 1990s I lost that job through corporate restructuring. Like corporations everywhere, the company decided they could fire the expensive veterans and replace them with much cheaper people working with technology, to keep costs down and push profits up.

That’s why I became a writer. Writing was not a hobby. It was not something that I wished to do or thought I might do at some point. It was absolutely a survival mechanism. Which meant I had to get it done fast. I had maybe seven months’ worth of savings before I ran out of cash and could no longer pay the bills. So I had seven months to get the book written. And I was acutely aware that I was going to have to combine two very different things, without letting one interfere with the other.

In brief, I had to combine the pure outpouring of story with the commercial realities. We’re talking popular fiction, remember, which a lot of people like. Which means that if your book works, a lot of people are going to buy it, and you might be able to make a living. And I needed to make a living. So I did two types of specific analysis.

One was, ‘What does a book actually look like?’ It’s a weird thing. I had consumed books joyously all my life. But I was so hungry for the story that I had no real sense of the book as a physical object. It was like I’d never seen a book before. You can pick

up any book and open it and it's got chapter headings and it's got a certain number of words to the line and a certain number of lines to the page. I knew nothing about how this was done. I didn't even know how exactly they did the punctuation for dialogue.

So I analysed lots of contemporary bestsellers on a very literal basis: how many lines to the page do they do, how many words to the line do they do, how many chapters in the book do they do? That first type of analysis was purely technical. The second was about the elemental things that I wanted to put into the story. Which meant thinking deeply about those basic questions: what have I enjoyed in the books that I've read, what gets me going, what thrills me?

One great thing about writing a book is that you can live a different life for as long as it takes you to write it. You can have strengths where in real life you have weaknesses. You can get things right instead of wrong. You can go back and fix things. Like when you're in a meeting and you're having an argument with somebody and then an hour later, on your way home, you suddenly realise what you should have said. The line you should have used. The perfect answer or the perfect putdown. When you're writing the book, you can have that argument over again and use that perfect line. You can live your idealised life. So another working principle was that I had to blend what I had found really exciting about other stories with my own personal story.

All that analysis was important. But it had to stay in the background. Once done, I had to ignore it. Because a book must be written organically. You can't do it like a laundry list. You can't let analysis interfere with the natural flow.

I knew I wanted to build in some Sherlock Holmes-type deductions. I remember being directly inspired by a detail in *Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris. Clarice Starling is begging Hannibal Lecter for some insight into Buffalo Bill, who is apparently

kidnapping women for some unknown purpose. 'Tell me something about him,' she says. And Lecter says, 'He lives in a two-storey house.' I love the promise that the reasoning behind that statement is going to be revealed later. So quite nakedly, I imported the same device into my first book. Early on, Reacher is criticising the police detective, who is making assumptions that he shouldn't. And the detective gets cross about it and says, 'You know nothing about me.' And Reacher says, 'I know you left your job six months ago, moved from Boston, and quit smoking.' The exchange propels the chapter, characterises Reacher, and does all the things it should do, but I wrote it simply for the joy of putting in the kind of line I loved so much myself.

I was also thinking about what turns me off. And there were several things I was bored by in my genre. One was the dysfunctional hero. There's a great writer called James Lee Burke, who was probably the first to really explore this trope, which was new and illuminating and fresh. Then people started to copy it and it quickly became a trend. The detective was no longer just an alcoholic struggling to be a cop; he was a divorced alcoholic. Then he was a divorced alcoholic with a teenage daughter that hated him. Then he was a divorced alcoholic with a teenage daughter that hated him who had accidentally shot a fleeing suspect that turned out to be a fourteen-year-old boy. So he was devastated, and he had to go and live in a cabin in the woods all by himself for the rest of his life. Or he had a metaphorical or literal bullet lodged close to his heart. All that misery inflated to the point where I was fed up with it. I was bored with it. And I fundamentally believed that readers don't want to read about miserable, dysfunctional people. Readers prefer, given a choice, to read about people that are getting it together. They want to be emboldened and encouraged and empowered. So in the background I was thinking, what do I want from my character?

I was very attracted to the figure of the noble loner, who has appeared in stories across the millennia. You've got a community of people in peril and it's going south

fast and then a mysterious stranger shows up and solves the problem and rides off into the sunset. It's a storyline that's familiar to us from the American Western. Take Zane Grey, for instance, probably the greatest of the Western writers. There's a cluster of log cabins and a band of people, usually all women and children because the men are absent on a cattle drive, and they're in desperate peril and it's about to get really bad. Then a mysterious rider comes in off the range, and in exchange for a woman-cooked meal he'll unsheathe* his rifle and he'll take care of the problem. And then he'll tip his hat and be on his way. It's essential that the hero is both enigmatic and transient. The leaving is just as important as the arriving.

But this character was not invented by the Westerns. He existed in medieval Europe, when the Black Forest in Germany was a genuinely empty, dangerous environment. A travelling band of pilgrims, maybe on their way to Jerusalem, would be wandering alone in this vast forest. Something really bad would be happening. It was about to get terminal. And then all of a sudden, a mysterious knight rides out of the forest on his horse, takes care of the problem, and rides on. But the character wasn't invented in medieval Europe either. He shows up in Scandinavian sagas, in Anglo-Saxon battle poems, and in religious saviour myths. This character has been around for as long as we have written records. He has proved popular for literally three thousand years. That's some serious market testing.

So that was the timeless template I adopted. But when it came to adding layers of detail, I took a distinct commercial decision to not do the same type of thing that other successful authors were doing. Because why do that? Why not carve out your own lane?



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TAKEAWAYS

Business is not incompatible with art.

Build on what has worked before. But don't just jump on a bandwagon. Favour the timeless over the trendy. If you can spot a bandwagon, it's already too late to jump on it.

EXERCISE

Consider the last three books you read. For each, make a list of the three things you liked most. But also, make a list of the three things you liked least. Try to account for your reactions. Be analytical. Understanding what you don't like as a reader is as important as understanding what you do.

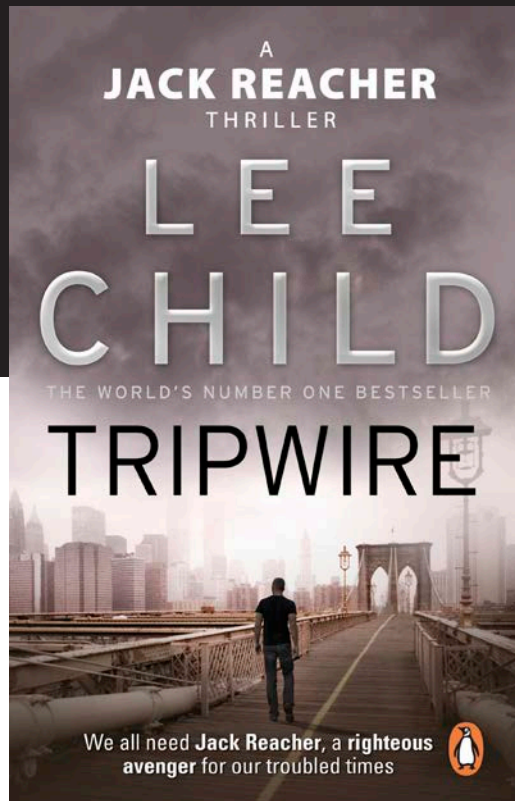
Unsheathe

verb

To draw or pull out (a knife, sword, or similar weapon) from its sheath or covering

“

If you write a book that you are a hundred per cent happy with, then somebody else will be as well.



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06. How I Wrote My First Book ~ Part 2

Two years ago, everything had turned upside down. He had gone from being a big fish in a small pond to being nobody. From being a senior and valued member of a highly structured community to being just one of two hundred and seventy million anonymous civilians. From being necessary and wanted to being one person too many. From being where someone told him to be every minute of every day to being confronted with three million square miles and maybe forty more years and no map and no schedule.

Tripwire, 1999

• • • • •

I had recently started reading Michael Connelly, who was a few books ahead of me. As is common in detective fiction, his hero, Harry Bosch, was employed as a cop. Therefore, he had a workplace. He had colleagues. He had subordinates. He had superiors. He had a structure in which to work. He had a house. He had an ex-wife. He had a daughter. Essentially it was a soap opera. And there is nothing wrong with soap operas. Soap operas, as my television career taught me, are incredibly powerful narrative forms. They can keep an audience spellbound year after year. But why go head-to-head with somebody who was already doing it so well? Why risk being second best?

Instead, everything that Michael did, I deliberately did the opposite. The full first name of Bosch is Hieronymus, a cute reference back to Renaissance art, and a complicated

name that in itself is noteworthy. So my guy would have a simple name. Bosch was part of a hierarchy, so my guy wouldn't be. My guy would have no job and no official standing. He would not be part of anything. He would be homeless and he would be rootless. The entire process was both instinctive and calculated.

And that's how it's got to be. You've got to do that thinking, but the thinking must not show in the story. The story has got to be free of any obvious commercial calculation. It's got to flow, it's got to be organic, it's got to be its own thing. So once I'd finished with the calculations, I decided just to start, and see what happened. And at the end, I thought it was organic. It was absolutely natural. I didn't compromise at all. It was all what I wanted to do. And I was a little worried. Reacher was a filthy, dirty barbarian. He never changes his clothes. He doesn't shower. He's always on the bus. He's always walking or hitchhiking. He is not particularly honourable or noble in his actions. I think his heart is in the right place. He's got a well-defined moral compass. But to achieve his goals he will do what it takes. He shoots people in the back. He'll steal their money for his next bus ride. I wrote organically and honestly. And what came out was *Killing Floor*.

I thought, 'Are people going to like this?' And the only consolation I could give myself is that I did. If you write a book that you are one hundred percent happy with, then somebody else will be as well. We are all, of course, individuals. We are all different from one another. But not that different. If I like something, there's going to be at least thousands of people in the world that will like that thing too.

G. K. Chesterton, creator of priest-detective Father Brown, makes this point in his book on Charles Dickens. Dickens was a very popular author. Probably the world's most popular in his day. But towards the end of the nineteenth century a reaction set in, and in that revisionist history, Dickens was dismissed as a mere hack who was

trying to please the people and earn a living. As if that were an ignoble thing to do. Then eventually it swung back the original way again, and Dickens was elevated to the status of classic. But Chesterton made the revolutionary point: that Dickens did not write for the audience – Dickens *was* the audience.

That insight is the touchstone of my aesthetic. I'm a reader. I know what I like. If I like what I write, then others will too. The same holds for you. Write for yourself as a reader. Then if you like it, you will find that other people like it too. That is the marvel, that is the magic. You are not completely individual. You're the same as a lot of other people. If you have really loved something, other people will as well.

The main character has to carry the book. And if you intend to write a series, he's got to carry the weight through subsequent publications as well. So it's really important to get that character right at the beginning. And the simplest way to nail that authenticity is to base him on yourself.

My hero was an archetypal character. He was larger than life, with a hint of the superhero. He was a fantasy figure. But my hero was also me, an ordinary guy with a job, then an ordinary guy with no job. I had been downsized by Granada, so Reacher would be downsized by the army. I had worked as part of a close-knit, hierarchical team, to a regimented routine, and so too had Reacher. Like me, Reacher had been cast adrift. Like me, he was aimless and alienated. Like me, he would be triggered by injustice. He would not tolerate bullies and he would not back down from a fight.

Nobody was going to want to read a book about a television director who just lost his job and was trying to figure out what to do next. I wasn't going to write what I knew. But I was feeling plenty. I'd been earning a good living. Suddenly I was dumped out. I was feeling fear and anger. I was feeling a desire for revenge. The question was, how

do I fictionalise that in an interesting way? Around that time the Soviet Union had recently collapsed. The conflict between East and West was over and the US Army was downsizing. Hence Reacher was thrown out in the same way I had been thrown out, and like me, he was learning how to live on the outside.

To be honest, I was worried. I had a mortgage. I had a fifteen-year-old daughter. I had a car loan, I had credit cards. But then I thought, suppose I wasn't worried? And I put that thought straight into Reacher. Reacher would take the rough with the smooth. He would wander through life unafraid. That was catharsis for me, but it also helped make him a popular character. Because it wasn't just me. In the 1990s, thousands of people were getting thrown out of work. From my company alone, there were three hundred. I wanted to show Reacher dealing with it in a way that was brave, courageous, unworried.

The lone hero belongs in a dangerous frontier environment. That was a big component in making Reacher American, because there is no dangerous frontier in Britain. Not anymore. In America there are people who drive five hours each way just to buy a pint of milk. That emptiness is inspiring. The second of my books starts out with Reacher getting swept up in a kidnap in Chicago. He's thrown in a van and driven two thousand miles to a secret Rocky Mountain hideout. Which is self-evidently possible in America. Not in Britain. If I'd been kidnapped where I lived and driven two thousand miles, I'd be in the Sahara Desert. I needed the expanse, the sense of 'Here be dragons'.

So making Reacher American was an honest aesthetic decision. It was also an emotional decision. I'd just been fired, because of UK politics affecting UK industries, and I wanted to get out of the UK. I wanted escape. To write a character in America was like being in America. But it was a commercial decision too. I wanted my book

to appear American because I wanted to be in the biggest market that I could find. This was not a hobby, remember. I had to make it work.

Perhaps none of this analysis would have been possible had it not been for a random find. I was in a bookstall in Miami airport. I was changing planes and grabbed the first good-looking thing I saw. It turned out to be *The Lonely Silver Rain*, by John D. MacDonald, the first Travis McGee book and the first one I'd read. I loved it, and that cemented the idea of doing a series. But that book also looked like a blueprint to me. I could see what MacDonald was doing, and why, and why he was choosing to do what, when. Maybe it was a subliminal thing. Maybe I was just ready to take on board the structure of a book. Whatever the reason, that was the first seed of changing from a reader to a writer. Or from being just a reader to being a writer as well.

Writing my first book was a balancing act between calculation and instinct. I made three conscious decisions. One, to draw on my reading. Two, to draw on my life. And three, to position myself in the American market. I would write the kind of character I most enjoyed reading about, and build in some favourite features from the thousands of books I'd read. I would write a fantasy version of myself, fuelled by authentic emotional experience. And I would carve out my own lane by doing the opposite of my rivals. Once those fundamental decisions were made, I pushed them to the back of my mind and just let the story flow.

There's a line in *Killing Floor* that sums up how I, as a person, was informing the character: 'I tried it their way. Now I'm going to try it my way.' That was Reacher talking about being let go from the army. It was me talking about being let go from television. I had been a good employee. And I was angry at being fired. That line fuelled the character's purpose and the character's energy. If you write what you feel, sometimes a single line – even a single word – can power an entire book.



“
I aim to like Reacher
just a little less than you
like him. That’s what keeps
him honest. That’s what keeps
him real. I stay critical of him.”

TAKEAWAYS

Never forget: you are an individual, but not that individual. If you like something, a lot of other people will too.

As well as being a writer now, you’re still a reader. You might have to sharpen the focus of your knowledge or go to a deeper technical level of understanding. But it’s not that difficult. You’re both the creator and the market for what you’re creating.

EXERCISE

Think back to a time when you were treated unfairly and dig deep into how that made you feel. Write a succinct, fact-based account of what happened and how you dealt with it, perhaps in the manner of a report. Now think again. How might you respond if there were no real-world consequences to your actions? Recount your fictional revenge in meticulous detail, without inhibition. Live it. Breathe it. Don’t sanitise your feelings, or try to second-guess how you might be perceived, or make yourself out to be nicer than you are. Push the boundaries. Plumb the depths. Discover both the hero and the villain within yourself.

07. Book 2 & Beyond

‘She reads books,’ the driver said. ‘She thinks about things.’

The Midnight Line, 2017



It’s often said that writing the second book is difficult, like the difficult second album in music. And to some extent it’s true. You’ve done it once, so the odds are that you can do it again. But I do remember it being difficult in terms of the intense emotional satisfaction and triumph and joy of completing that first book. I’d written a book that I loved one hundred percent, and it was a wrench to finish it. I remember feeling genuinely bereft that I would not see those characters again, because Reacher was moving on. So you’ve got to manage the deflation of having finished that book, and then crank yourself up to do it all over again.

The second book has to be as good, if not better, than the first. So there is pressure. I made that pressure worse by incorporating yet more analysis. In my dreams – like in your dreams – this thing was going to run forever and sell a lot of copies. Foolish, because you can’t guarantee that you’re going to get ten or twenty books out of a series, but still you have to consider the possibility that you might. Therefore you start making decisions about the second and subsequent books directly after the first. And what I felt was that for any performer – and a writer is a performer of a kind – there’s a danger in becoming typecast.

Everybody talks about actors being typecast, how if you do two or three similar roles then you’re stuck with that for the rest of your career. The same applies to writing. If your second book is similar to your first, and especially if the third book is too, then you’re locked into that, and there is really no escape. As a series writer you are constantly managing expectations. I wanted my second book to be as different as I could possibly make it while having it still recognisably a series book.

The biggest decision I took was to use third-person narration. In the first book, Reacher spoke for himself – he said ‘I did this... I did that... I went here... I went there...’. The third person – ‘Reacher went here... Reacher went there... Reacher did this... Reacher did that...’ – gave me a different kind of narrative freedom, which we’ll explore in greater detail when we talk specifically about point of view. With the first person you can’t know anything that the character is not seeing through his own eyes. With the third person you can know what is happening elsewhere, as in the classic phrase, ‘Meanwhile, back at the ranch...’ I could move freely from Reacher to the bad guys and back again. Which means you have all kinds of disparate elements going on simultaneously, like a movie cutting from this location to that location while the clock is ticking, so it was a little more difficult to manage structurally than straightforward first-person narration.

I also changed the context. Whereas the first book had been set in a dusty little no-account town in the middle of nowhere, the second book was more high-concept, involving the White House and the Hoover Building and the FBI and satellite cameras and spy planes. I was thinking in baseball terms: the first book would represent the left field and the second book would represent the right field, and I would have claimed all the territory in between as mine forever afterward, and I could put a book anywhere in that territory and it would work.

It has become a mantra of mine that each book in a series should be the same but different. I got it from my Irish father. Long before I became a writer I once asked him what basis he was using to select his books at the library. 'I want something the same but different,' he said. I took that on board the same way I took on board my daughter's bath time game. That unguarded comment conveyed something he truly believed and has guided me ever since.

As always, I based my decisions on two entirely complementary things: my needs as a reader, and commercial strategy. For example, I didn't want my series to impose any kind of reading order. Let's say a reader gets a recommendation from a friend, so that person then wants to go and try one of the Reacher books. I did not want that person to have to find the first book and then work their way through in chronological order. Don't forget, this was the middle 1990s, way before any concept of online shopping. To buy a book you physically had to go to a physical bookstore and buy the physical item. And it was completely possible, especially with a new and unknown author, that they wouldn't have my first book in stock. So if I had set up a series that required you to read it in order, I felt that would be a major obstacle in the reader's way. You know what human nature is like. If they had to search out that first book and couldn't find it, I would have lost that reader forever. So I made a decision that you wouldn't need to know anything at all from the first book in order to completely enjoy the second book, which, happily, was perfectly consonant with Reacher's character.

Reacher is a drifter, a wanderer. He's not interested in what happened yesterday, and he's not particularly interested in what's going to happen tomorrow. It was part of his character that he would never refer to a past case. I hate it in books where the characters chat to each other and say, 'Hey, do you remember that case where we worked with the BBC and we had to do this and we had to do that?' I hate that kind of self-referential thing. Reacher would never do that. That was part of his character,

which fit very nicely with the removal of another obstacle from the reader. Even more than twenty books later, a new reader can start anywhere: you enjoy the book for what it is, because Reacher is dealing with the situation as it is – he's not looking back, he's not looking ahead, he's purely in the moment.

There's also something unique about books one and two in the Reacher series, which is that every single line of dialogue is attributed – in other words, every time someone speaks, it's punctuated with 'he said... she said... I said... Finlay said', or whoever said. Again I did that to remove an obstacle from the reader. I hate it when you lose track of who's speaking and you have to find the most recent attribution and then work through pairs of lines to understand, 'Is it him or is it her that's speaking?' But in subsequent books I relaxed that a bit. I learned that you don't have to do every line, just enough that the reader is not confused about who is saying what.

Another way I tried to smooth the reader's path through the book was by keeping the cast of characters small and defined. I hate it when you're on page 47 and a character comes back into the room and says something, and you're scratching your head and thinking, 'Wait, who is this guy?' So even with my small cast of characters, I would choose to say '...said the guy from the pawn shop,' instead of '...said Mr Smith' and have my readers thinking, 'Wait a minute, who is Mr Smith?' and then leafing back thirty pages and finding, 'Oh yeah, Mr Smith owns the pawn shop.' Using 'the pawn shop guy' instead of the character's name allows the reader to glide through the narrative. It's up to the writer to do the work, not the reader. Any grain of sand in the gears, you should find an imaginative way to remove it.

Similarly, my natural mode is to write in a completely linear and chronological fashion – I start at the beginning and I keep on going, and I can't ever stop and leave a blank and go back to it. Which again produces a secondary benefit for the reader: that the

story likewise powers its way through to the end in a completely linear and chronological fashion. There are rarely any complexities over timelines in my plots. I know some people like that kind of thing, but I tend to get confused by it. I'm so eager for the story that I tend to overlook those little pointers at the top of the chapter that locate you back and forth in time. If I'm reading a page-turner, I just want to turn the pages, without getting stopped in my tracks by a bunch of road signs.

From the outset I have been consciously attentive to the comfort of the reader. I remember Michael Jordan, the basketball player, being criticised for not being outspoken on political issues, and his now famous response: 'Yeah, but Republicans buy sneakers too.' He was saying, 'I can't afford to offend people.' I felt that as a writer too. I didn't want a book that was filled with political commentary because that would alienate half my readership. Therefore I resolved to include politics only if strictly germane*. I did not mind offending certain people. I have written books that are sympathetic to gay people, to illegal immigrants, to AWOL soldiers, all kinds of things, but only as justified by the story.

I also drew the line at obscenities and certain types of crime. I did not want gratuitous cruelty to animals, or salacious crimes against women and children. Because as we've said all along, this is about popular fiction, which means commercial fiction, which means being able to earn a living. Of course you should be honest, you should be authentic, you should be upright, but it's counter-productive to alienate the buying public without getting a definite narrative advantage out of it.

Writing books is not like building cars. If you design a great car, then every subsequent car has got to be exactly identical to that prototype. That's the whole point of an industrial process. But writing is not an industrial process. You've got to do all that thinking and all that analysis over again every time. Writing the next book is not an exercise in mechanical repetition: it's an expansion, an improvement, a diversion. You're going to do something the same but different, and the different is just as important as the same.

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TAKEAWAYS

Easy reading is hard writing. Don't put unnecessary obstacles in the way of the reader, whether at the point of purchase or the point of consumption.

With popular fiction, reading pleasure and commercial strategy tend to go hand in hand.

Be subtle about your beliefs and convictions: your book is not a soap box or a lecture hall.

EXERCISES

Look back over a passage of your own work. On the basis of your reading of it now, what do you think was uppermost in your mind while writing – the writer's or the reader's pleasure? Is there potential for confusion on the part of the reader? Is there a risk of frustration? Is there anything you as writer can do to smooth the path for you as reader? Pay attention to these questions in rereading other books, too. In popular fiction, the writer and the writer's thinking should both be invisible.

I used the word 'hate' quite a lot in this lesson. Which is okay, because to be a writer of popular fiction, you need to know what you like and what you don't like in a book. So now choose a book that you hated. Or perhaps more likely, since you may not have finished the book that you truly hated, a book in which there was a particular thing or moment that you hated. Analyse that thing or that moment. Evaluate the reasons for your strong reaction. What do you learn about the book, the writing, and yourself as a reader?

Germane

adjective

Relevant to the subject under consideration



“

There are not many qualifications you need to become a writer.

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o8. How Not To Make Your Reader Seasick

I looked at the whole thing from the kid's point of view. Then I looked at it again, from his father's point of view.

Persuader, 2003

• • • • •

We've talked about how there are not many qualifications you need to become a writer. We've said that in some fundamental ways it's easier than you think. And we're finding out that a lot of the so-called rules of writing are over-thought, not very sensible and sometimes just plain wrong. But some of those rules are essential, and the more I've read, the more I've written, and the more I've thought about it, among the most important of all is what we call point of view.

What is point of view in a written book? What it means is you're reading a book and somebody is telling you that story. You've got to imagine that, like me, you are sitting in a comfy armchair, and right opposite you there is a person sitting in another armchair, telling you a story. What you need to know is, who is telling you that story? Not necessarily their specific identity, but their point of view in relation to the events they are narrating.

There's a number of options, obviously. It could be somebody that knew what had happened because he'd heard it from a friend or read it in a history book or possibly even observed it happening from a distance. He is detached from the action and has an overview. 'This happened, then that happened, then the other thing happened.' You would call that the omniscient third person, like the voice of God telling you a story.

More than sitting in an armchair, he tends to be looking down on the world from on high. Or in the other armchair it could be the exact person it happened to. She could be sitting there saying, 'I went here, and I went to the newsagent, and then I was on my way to the supermarket when a car hit a tree.' That is first-person narration. You are listening to someone who was present at the scene and intimately involved in the action. But if for some reason that person was unwilling to admit they had been there, but wanted to tell the same story, they might use 'she' or 'he' as a displacement device. They might say, 'She came out of the newsagent and was on her way to the supermarket when a car hit a tree.' That is what is referred to as close third person. In other words, it's like first person, except it doesn't use the words 'I' and 'me'. It uses the words 'she' and 'her'. Secretly, it really did happen to her, but she's dressing it up as if it happened to somebody neutral.

But forget those technical terms. The issue is that the person sitting opposite you in the armchair must be absolutely consistent. If it starts out one way, with an omniscient narrator telling you something he knows from history or from a relative or by legend or reputation, that point of view has to be unwavering throughout. If it fluctuates, if that person zooms in close and then backs off, has the eagle's eye view one moment and the guy on the street's view the next, then without understanding why, you as the listener or reader will begin to feel seasick. To have the narrator constantly moving in and out of focus is deeply unsettling to the consumer at a subconscious, subliminal level.

Choose whichever point of view you feel comfortable with. But once the choice is made, you have to maintain strict control over delivery. Along with dialogue, which we'll come to later, point of view is a potential dealbreaker.

Take the example of a phone call. A first-person narrator who makes a phone call knows every single detail about what she herself is experiencing at the time. But because it's a phone call, she has no way of knowing what the other person is doing or how the other person is looking or feeling. All she ever knows is the words coming down the phone line. But what happens with faulty point of view is that the writer presents both sides of the conversation with exactly the same type and level of description. And immediately the story has gone wrong. The first-person narrator has no idea whether Mr Smith at the other end of the line is sweating or shaking – she can't see him. She might detect a slight tremor in his voice, and it's fine to report that, but she has no idea about his manner or his demeanour or his appearance. She has no idea if he is covered in blood unless he says so. To claim such knowledge is what lawyers object to as assuming facts not in evidence.

With first-person narration you can only know what you know. If viewpoint is controlled, you know your end of the phone conversation, but you don't really know much about the other end. If viewpoint control slips, so that you get references to Mr Smith biting his fingernails or looking nervous, the reader will start to feel seasick. Where are we exactly? Am I in this house or am I in that house? I can't be in both houses at once.

Controlling point of view is essential to providing a smooth, coherent, satisfying story. Whoever they may be, the person in the armchair knee-to-knee with you must stay the same throughout the whole book. And it can absolutely be a person in an armchair. There's a great book from the 1950s called *Pied Piper*, by Nevil Shute, and that's how it starts. A guy goes to his London club and sits down next to another guy he hasn't seen for a year. He gets his scotch and soda and proceeds to tell his old friend what he's been up to for the last twelve months. It is literally that: a man sitting in an armchair telling someone – you – a story. Don't worry about the technical terminology. It doesn't really matter. Just picture the person telling you the story, understand who they are in relation to what is happening, and never let them change throughout the course of the narrative.

So what influences your choice of point of view at the outset? Well, sometimes your choice is dictated. If your favourite type of story involves what the movies call the A-roll and the B-roll; in other words, over here are the good guys going about their business and over there are the bad guys going about their business, and the implicit transaction is that sooner or later those two things are going to collide with spectacular action and outcome, then you need third person. You can't do that in first person. If the hero is written in first person, you can have no knowledge of what's waiting for him around the corner.

But if you don't need that structure of story, then it's your choice. I like the first-person point of view. It's fast. It's an intimate connection with the reader. It's how we relate to each other as human beings. We go home and we say to our families, 'I did this, I did that'. You don't refer to yourself by name unless you're seriously weird. It's all first person. That's normal life. So first person is the natural mode of storytelling and very attractive. But it brings its own burdens. You can't know anything the hero doesn't know. You get a bit fatigued and feel a bit show-offy. I, I, I, me, me, me – all through the book. At the same time, despite that essential egotism, there are certain things you can't feasibly say. You can't praise yourself, or say how great you are, or how much the other characters admire you. All that stuff just sounds awful.

Close third person, where the 'I' is replaced with 'he' or 'she', is a kind of compromise. Functionally it is the same as first person, with the same limitations as regards knowing what other people are doing, but it allows you to drift closer to whichever lot of people you're talking about at any given time. The nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert was the pioneer of this slightly looser approach, which he referred to as free indirect style (often translated as free indirect speech). You kind of lean in, so that your narrative, which technically speaking is omniscient third person, sympathetically adopts the mannerisms and habits and personality of whichever character you are talking about in a way that is adaptive and malleable. That subtle shift in point of view is fine, so long as it is tightly controlled and you never forget that implicit promise you made at the beginning, that you know what you know and you don't know what you don't know.

There are other options. In my fourth book, *The Visitor* in the UK and *Running Blind* in the US, I used the second person – 'you' – for small segments narrated from the bad guy's point of view. Essentially this involves a character talking about themselves – or to themselves – using 'you' instead of 'I'. It can be useful for conveying alienation. I chose it not for the sake of literary merit, if it has any, but as a helpful plot device, because in that book the baddie was a woman and I did not want to reveal that prematurely by using the pronoun 'she', which would have cut the suspense in half, or possibly more than half, given that readers are predisposed to assume that the bad guy is a man. It worked for those short sections. It felt breathily intimate and gave us a very close connection with the villain. Here's the opening of that book – see if you agree.

People say that knowledge is power. The more knowledge, the more power. Suppose you knew the winning numbers for the lottery? All of them? Not guessed them, not dreamed them, but really knew them? What would you do? You would run to the store. You would mark those numbers on the play card. And you would win.

Same for the stock market. Suppose you really knew what was going to go way up? You're not talking about a hunch or a gut feeling. You're not talking about a trend or a percentage game or a whisper or a tip. You're talking about knowledge. Real, hard knowledge. Suppose you had it? What would you do? You would call your broker. You would buy. Then later you'd sell, and you'd be rich.

Same for basketball, same for the horses, whatever. Football, hockey, next year's World Series, any kind of sports at all, if you could predict the future, you'd be home and dry. No question. Same for the Oscars, same for the Nobel prize, same for the first snowfall of winter. Same for anything.

Same for killing people.

This is the only Reacher book that switches point of view, from third to second, each strictly controlled. I did it to keep the identity of the bad guy secret for as long as possible. The second person is attractive if you use it sparingly. I wouldn't like to see a whole novel done that way, but it can work in limited doses.

A lot of Hollywood screenwriters write novels. Sometimes they're turning unsold screenplays into books; sometimes it's a genuine attempt. And if there's a consistent weakness with screenwriter-novelists it's that they are so used to writing for the camera, which is a dumb eye that can go anywhere and see anything, that they are liable to fall into the phone conversation trap. Because that is exactly what they could do on screen – show both ends of the conversation. But on the page, it is fundamentally wrong and fundamentally upsetting and the reader gets a little bewildered and seasick without necessarily knowing why.

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TAKEAWAY

Point of view is a dealbreaker. You've got to decide which point of view you want to use and why and then stick to it. The person sitting opposite you in the armchair must not change. If control slips, the reader will be upset and dissatisfied.

EXERCISE

As human beings we are constantly encouraged to look at things from someone else's point of view. It's the same for characters in books. For detectives, it's part and parcel of the profession. The purpose of fiction is frequently defined as enabling us to see the world through the eyes of others. So point of view is fundamental, to empathy and to storytelling.

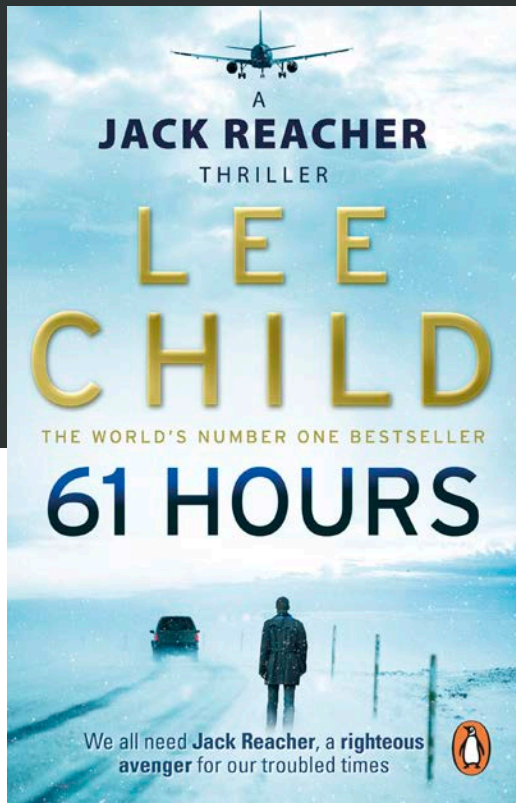
Think of a story you know well enough that you don't need to go back and read it. It could be a fable, a parable* or a myth, a family anecdote, something that happened to you, or a news story. Tell that story from as many different points of view as you can, all the while thinking carefully about what your narrator can legitimately know. How many different people can you get into that armchair? Remember that if your narrator can't see, she can still hear, she can still speculate, she can still imagine. When you are done, try and decide which point of view suits that story best. Which did you most enjoy writing? Which was most fun to read?

Parable

noun

A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson

“
The writer does the work.
The reader has the fun.”



09. Voice Is Not A Metaphor

Right then Reacher wanted her to say plenty, because she had a great voice. It was warm, slightly husky, a little breathy, a little intimate. He liked the way it whispered in his ear. He liked it a lot.

61 Hours, 2010



As you get closer to actual writing, when you're ready to start assembling words on the page and assembling pages into scenes and scenes into chapters, you become aware of what theorists call 'style' and 'voice' and all those words that seem to mean some kind of appeal in your writing. I would suggest that you analyse those. Forget style for the moment. It's a pretty meaningless word, hard to pin down with precision. Let's look at voice. What does that mean? Most critics refer to it in a rather vague manner, as an aspect of style or some kind of quality marker to judge you by.

But I want you to think of voice as something very specific. Let's go back seven million years again. During most of that time we were completely inarticulate, apart from grunting, then maybe a half a million years ago we developed sophisticated language, then at some point we made the jump from non-fiction reportage to fictional storytelling. We don't know when that was. We can guess. We know, for instance, that music is possibly sixty or seventy thousand years old. That's when the first primitive instruments were found: drums, and hollow bones with finger stops drilled through them. We know that pictorial representative art is possibly fifty or sixty thousand years old, because the results are preserved on cave walls. And we have to consider

that music and art were technological media, even back then. Music required those instruments to be invented and made. Painting required some kind of pigment, some kind of twig to apply the pigment to the wall.

Storytelling, which requires no tools, is possibly an older form of entertainment, going back maybe one hundred thousand years. You and I still consume the same type of story now, for the same reasons and the same purposes we discussed. But we tend to consume those stories by reading printed words on paper, which is relatively recent, for ordinary folk. Let's be generous and forestall any pedantic argument. Let's say that people reading off paper is three hundred years old.

So on the one hand our method of consuming story is three hundred years old. On the other hand the original form of storytelling developed possibly one hundred thousand years ago. That's a huge ratio. Which means we have got to bear in mind that storytelling was exclusively oral for almost all of its history. People sat and listened to somebody telling them a story for hundreds of generations before we even conceived of the idea of writing, and well before we conceived of the idea of being able to print written language on paper for later consumption.

Therefore voice, I suggest, means precisely that: a specific voice – the storyteller's voice. The number one bestseller of the day one hundred thousand years ago was the woman who could sit on her fur stool with a rapt* audience of maybe twenty or thirty listeners arrayed in front of her. Spellbound by her voice, spellbound by the progress of her story. The guy that was not doing so well in the bestseller list was in the next cave along, stumbling through his narrative. He's got three listeners. All of them are fed up and restless. Back then, voice had to be utterly compelling. It had to be attractive. It had to be somehow warm and intimate. It had to draw in the listener, and keep them waiting for the next word, the next twist.

If you accept that for almost all of our history storytelling has been an oral medium, then you begin to see the printed word as a kind of very crude audio recording. When you read off paper, what is happening in your brain? Are you directly processing words into meaning, or do we first subliminally process words into sound, and then into meaning, as if the printed words on the page somehow conjure up the spectacle, the imaginary ghost of an actual voice talking to us, telling us the story?

I can't prove it either way, but I think that's how it works. Skimming your eyes over the page awakens a voice in your head. Even though you're not aware of it, I think that is what's happening. You are listening to a story, and your brain is connecting back to that one hundred thousand year tradition. So make no mistake: the 'voice' that issues from your text is real. It's a real voice, a physical thing, that issues from the body and comes from within.

You need to know what your voice sounds like. And the best way of finding out is by reading your work out loud. You don't have to project loudly across the room, like an actor. I probably mumble a bit, possibly even imagine some of it, hearing it in my head. But if you read what you've written out loud, you very quickly identify the bumps and the gaps, the bad rhythms and the bad word order, the words that don't fit. Reading out loud connects you to that ancient tradition of oral storytelling. It exposes the problems in your sentences and makes them much easier to fix.

One way of exploring voice is to listen to audiobooks, which are somebody telling you a story in much the same way as when you were sitting in the cave. With one slight difference: the text that the actor is reading was written for print. Which means there will be other subtle differences too, such as in the attribution of dialogue. Generally speaking, the oral tradition doesn't rely on attribution so much because the storyteller can modulate her voice to suggest this or that character. Therefore the 'he said/she

said' convention becomes somewhat redundant. But because publishing contracts stipulate that the edition should be unabridged, the actor is obliged to reproduce the written text word for word. Therefore you can get something of a feel for how voice works in terms of flow and pace and suspense and intrigue and compulsion, but remember that the audiobook is a hybrid medium that can't fully commit one way or the other.

There's another thing to think about with the oral tradition. Put yourself in the place of a listener. You're sitting on a sandy floor of a cave and there is a fire burning somewhere and the storyteller is speaking and you're listening in rapt attention, captivated by her voice. The story could last for twenty minutes, it could last for an hour, it could last for two hours. But you have no ability to go back and check anything. You can't leaf back and figure out who was that, where was it, and what is this about. You can't raise your hand and say, what was the relevance of that? The protocol is to sit in silence and listen. And the storyteller knows that.

The storyteller knows she has to help her audience, and therefore structures her story in such a way that there is constant repetition, constant confirmation of who's who and what's what and where we have been and where we are going. She structures her story to keep you on board, to carry you along, to reassure you that should there be a moment of confusion, in the next moment it will be resolved. This is a skill you can learn from in writing for print. You do not want your readers to have to flip back ten pages just to keep track of the story. You too can use repetition to confirm their understanding and to carry your readers along. The trick is to remember that the story is happening live in your head.

This is of burning importance. It may be obvious to you who is talking and what is going on, but you have to look at it from a third-party point of view. Are you sure that you're being clear and explicit? Instead of saying something once and expecting readers to remember it forever, or saying it twice or even three times, build in a wrinkle in your voice that makes repetition attractive and reassuring and part of the benefit of

your narration. Be willing to say 'the guy from the corner shop' over and over again, because that's who he is and you can't expect a reader to remember that for pages and pages. Make repetition part of your voice, a sign that you are in league with the reader. You are helping the reader, and the reader is lapping it up, and together you are powering forward through the story without speed bumps due to confusion or forgetting or misunderstanding.

This ties in with what I'm going to say about many aspects of writing. The writer does the work. The reader has the fun. The writer anticipates any speed bumps and guarantees the reader an easy ride. It's like a car. The reader gets into the comfy seat in the back and is driven from A to B and has no idea about the engine thrashing away under the hood and the wheels turning and the suspension working. The reader should know nothing about all of that. That's your job as the writer. Any way of lessening stress or uncertainty for the reader is worth pursuing. So don't be afraid of repetition. It will help build a structure that is two steps forward and one step backward, where even though you are heading inexorably from A to B, you are also announcing that you're leaving A and you are circling B before you get there, and the reader is carried along, cradled by the luxury of a well-told story.

Sometimes people ask how they can find their voice. Well, that's one of those trick questions. You've already got a voice. We said earlier that one of the markers of being a potential writer is if you're the sort of person who can have three or four other people sitting at your table listening to what you have to say. You must know if that happens or not. If it does, you already have a voice. Then it becomes about how to develop it, and how not to ruin it, how not to be intimidated into putting on that metaphorical suit and tie and adopting some phoney formality. It's not about finding your voice. It's about guarding it and keeping it real and authentic. It's about keeping it yours.

Telling comes before writing. We are a storytelling species first, a writing species second. Voice is therefore of primal importance. Voice is what speaks to us and what moves us. Voice is what gives your book its DNA.

TAKEAWAYS

Voice is a human concept. You're sitting on the floor of the cave listening to the storyteller. Are you restless? Do you want to go and do something else, or are you starstruck and loving the story?

If you can tell a bedtime story or a joke, you already have a voice. So long as you don't hobble it, or try to use someone else's voice, everything will be fine.

Repetition is like suspension in a car. Use it for buoyancy, to give your reader an easy ride.

EXERCISE

This is a simple one. But of the utmost importance. It's vital that you should take it seriously. Pick up a book that you love and read it out loud. Then read it again silently, but hearing the voice in your head. Do this over and over. Do the same with your own writing. Practise until it becomes second nature. That way you will learn to write like a storyteller, at the pace that story is told, at the pace that story unfolds, so that the reader, seduced by your voice, no longer sees you but only hears you, gripped by the spectacle taking place in their mind.

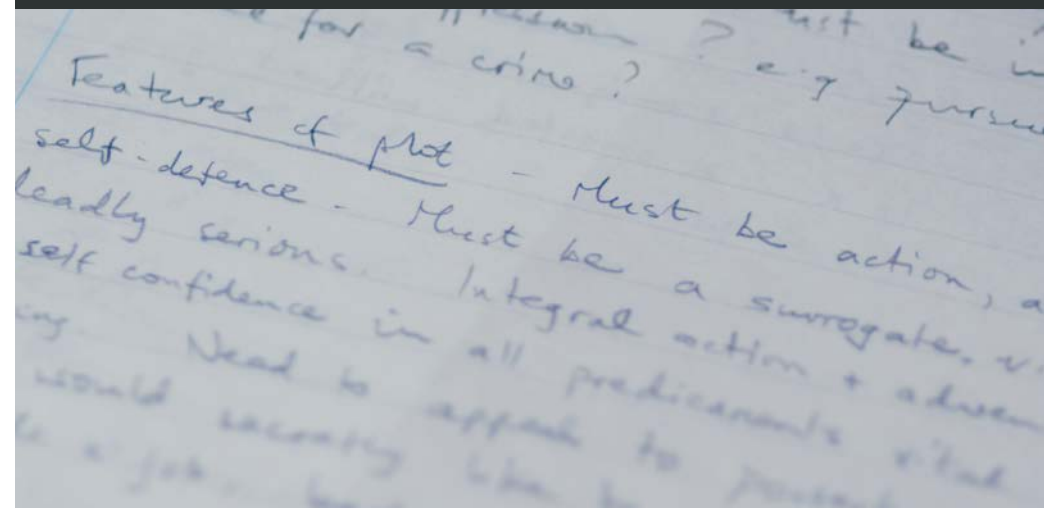
Rapt

adjective

Completely fascinated or absorbed by what one is seeing or hearing

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“
Ideas are like atoms.
Two or three will combine
to make a stable molecule.”



10. Big Words & Big Themes

There was nothing she had neglected to tell him, nothing he had neglected to tell her. People live, and then they die, and as long as they do both things properly, there's nothing much to regret.

Tripwire, 1999



We're going to talk a lot about pace, and the energy that propels the reader from the beginning to the end of the book. But we're also going to investigate the truth that pace has to be modulated. If you have a relentless high pace, then that's really the same thing as having no pace at all. There has to be contrast in order for pace, when it presents itself, to be recognised. It's the same with the emotion that you put into the story.

As with pace and narrative drive, there will be a through line of emotion: maybe fear and terror followed by salvation and resolution. But that through line has to be modulated. And the way to modulate it is to use your power as a writer to introduce emotion elsewhere, perhaps exploring different parts of characters' lives, creating a level of emotion that is private and personal rather than generated by plot. This can work very effectively. It humanises you as a writer. It humanises the character that you're writing about, and it cleaves back to what we said about writing what you feel. It can also give you a chance to express your own feelings on paper.

When I wrote my eighth book, *The Enemy*, I had in mind a scene where Reacher and his brother are informed that their mother is very sick and likely to die. I had that scene in mind because there was something I wanted to say to my own daughter that

I couldn't necessarily say face to face, and it would allow me to explore a depth of human emotion that was completely separate and distinct from the plot-driven terror and fear. It was a digression from the main through line, but would help strengthen the emotional footing for my not overtly emotional hero. This is how it turned out.

Joe and I ate lunch. My mother didn't. I waited for Joe to ask the next obvious question. It was just hanging there. Eventually, he got to it. Joe Reacher, thirty-two years of age, six feet six inches tall, two hundred and twenty pounds, a West Point graduate, some kind of a Treasury Department bigshot, placed his palms flat on the table and looked into his mother's eyes.

'Won't you miss us, Mom?' he said.

'Wrong question,' she said. 'I'll be dead. I won't be missing anything. It's you that will be missing me. Like you miss your father. Like I miss him. Like I miss my father, and my mother, and my grandparents. It's a part of life, missing the dead.'

We said nothing.

'You're really asking me a different question,' she said. 'You're asking, how can I abandon you? You're asking, aren't I concerned with your affairs anymore? Don't I want to see what happens with your lives? Have I lost interest in you?'

We said nothing.

'I understand,' she said. 'Truly, I do. I asked myself the same questions. It's like walking out of a movie. Being made to walk out of a movie that you're really enjoying. That's what worried me about it. I would never know how it turned out. I would never know what happened to you boys in the end, with your lives. I hated that part.'

But then I realized, obviously I'll walk out of the movie sooner or later. I mean, nobody lives forever. I'll never know how it turns out for you. I'll never know what happens with your lives. Not in the end. Not even under the best of circumstances. I realized that. Then it didn't seem to matter so much. It will always be an arbitrary date. It will always leave me wanting more.'

We sat quiet for a spell.

'How long?' Joe asked.

'Not long,' she said.

We said nothing.

'You don't need me anymore,' she said. 'You're all grown up. My job is done. That's natural, and that's good. That's life. So let me go.'

That was my message to my daughter dressed up as Reacher's mother's message to him. Fiction can work that way. You can mine your own life. You can mine your own experience. You can mine your own fear and pain and joy.

About ten years after I wrote *The Enemy*, when we were celebrating the various centenaries of World War One, there was a commemorative project inspired by the statue of the unknown soldier at Paddington railway station in London. The soldier is standing on the platform, ready to set off for the coast and the trenches in France. While he waits for the train to arrive, he is reading a letter. The project was for various writers to put down in words what he is reading. I decided to think of that soldier as my own grandfather, who once stood on that platform or a similar platform about to get on that train or a similar train and go off to that same war. I decided to write a letter to my grandfather from the future. This is what I wrote.

You don't know me yet, but I have things to tell you. You're about to go back, and I'm sorry to say it's going to be worse than ever this time. You're going to be wounded, I'm afraid. Very badly. But you'll survive. You'll make it home. You have to, you see. Forty years from now you'll become my grandfather.

Not that home will be a bed of roses. Wages will be down, and three men will fight for every job. At times you'll be cold, and at times you'll be hungry. And if you say anything, they'll come at you with truncheons.

And then it will get worse. There are some lean years coming. And I'm sorry, but along the way you'll realise: the war didn't end. It was just a lull. You'll have to do it all again. This time your son will have to go, not you. You don't know him yet, but you will. But don't worry. He'll get back too. He has to. You're my grandfather, remember?

And I'll be born in a different world. There will be jobs for everyone. They'll be building houses. You'll go to the doctor whenever you want. I'll go to school. I'll get free orange juice. You'll get free walking sticks. But most of all we'll get peace. Finally, year after year. I will never go to war, you know. I will never have to. The first time I go to France will be a trip with my school.

So go back now, and play your tiny part in the great drama, and sustain yourself by knowing: it comes out well in the end. I promise.

That letter is like a book in compressed form. I know how it ends for my grandfather, which he didn't, so I am able to reassure him that all that pain and suffering resolves into something resembling a happy ending. Which is crucial to the cathartic function of emotion in story. You are going to put the reader through the wringer, but like my daughter at bath time, she has to be able to sense that things will turn out all right: that disaster will be averted and order be restored.

There is emotional gravity in both these examples. But you'll notice it's all done with simple language. Nothing fancy in terms of vocabulary or structure, but plenty of repetition. In this case the repetition works in a musical way. It imparts rhythm to the prose and through insistent variation on a theme – 'it's like walking out of a movie... being made to walk out of a movie... I would never know how it turned out... I would never know what happened...' – it propels the reader through the passage and helps build emotional intensity. That instinctive use of poetic language once again reconnects us to the oral tradition. Notice the similarity of the sentence starts in the letter, and the liberal use of alliteration and internal rhyme. Such special effects are only rarely deliberately sought out. Often the groundwork has been done earlier in the text. Sometimes they can be enhanced through editing. Mostly they are the product of an acute sensitivity to voice.

The scene from *The Enemy* between Reacher and Joe and their mother lasts little more than a page. But both structurally and emotionally, it's a big scene. And when you get to a big scene, my advice is that you must take it on. Do not build toward a big scene and then downplay it when you get there. Do not dream big and then write small. When you get to a big scene, give the reader their money's worth. Make it as big as you dare.

There's nothing worse than a big scene that misfires. I read a book not long ago where somebody was being chased by a helicopter. Then the helicopter landed. And that's basically all the author said. The helicopter landed. It should have been a huge moment, a climax in the action. He should have had the blinding dust and the thrashing rotor and the deafening noise, and the helicopter spinning and swirling and the car trying to get away from it. If a scene is big in terms of the story's development, you've got to meet that head on. You've got to take responsibility. And you have got to make it big.

People think that thrillers have to be full of action and pace. And they do. But not chock full, not one hundred percent full, not full to overflowing. A book like *The Enemy* works on two axes. On the horizontal axis there's the main through line of the plot, which is driven forward to the resolution by action and suspense. Then on the vertical axis you can take time out to explore other strands of emotion, digging deeper, or lingering more over human detail.

Readers will remember the thrills and spills. But they are even more likely to remember a book for the way it makes them feel.

The walking out of the movie speech from *The Enemy* is one of my personal favourites in my own writing. This passage from *Tripwire* was one that my first editor especially loved:

What to tell the old folks? The only humane thing to do would be to go up there and tell them nothing at all. Just tell them he had drawn a blank. Just leave it completely vague. It would be a kindness. Just go up there, hold their hands, break the news of Rutter's deception, refund their money, and then describe a long and fruitless search backward through history which ended up absolutely nowhere. Then plead with them to accept he must be long dead, and beg them to understand nobody would ever be able to tell them where or when or how. Then disappear and leave them to live out the short balance of their lives with whatever dignity they could find in being just two out of the tens of millions of parents who gave up their children to the night and the fog swirling through a ghastly century.

TAKEAWAYS

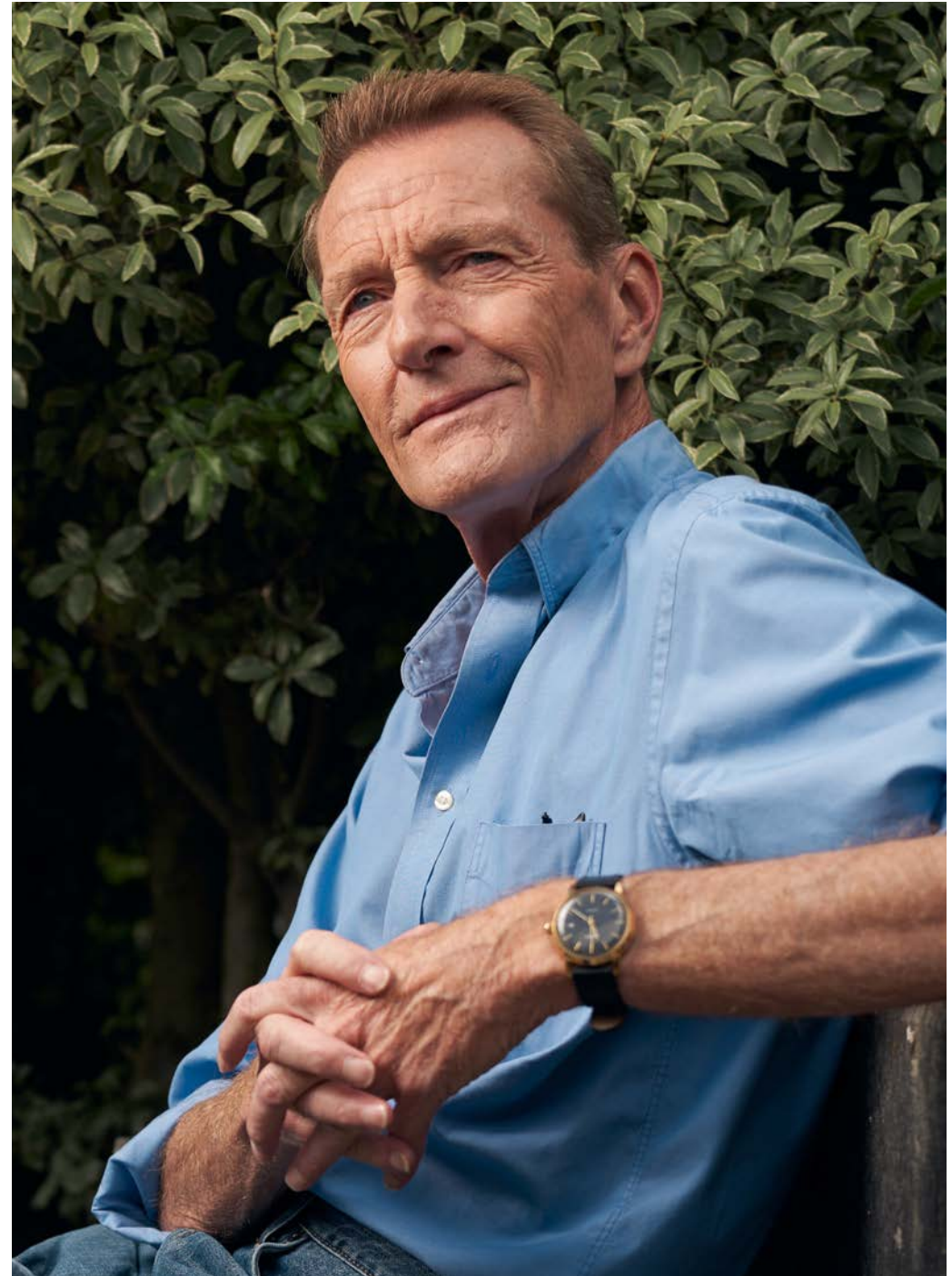
Readers want action, but they want emotion too. You can do one without compromising the other, and without compromising the ease of the read. Don't stuff your book so full of helter-skelter action that there is no room left for feeling.

Don't fluff your big lines.

EXERCISE

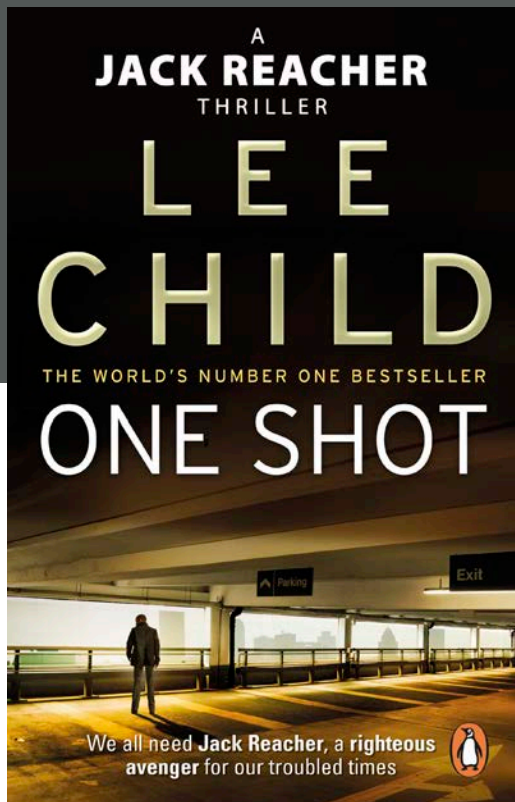
Writing emotion out of context can be difficult. Emotional intensity is often most effectively achieved through cumulative techniques such as poetic repetition. Perhaps the most accessible short-form exercise is therefore the letter. Imagine you are writing to someone you love deeply. But that person is shy of the direct expression of emotion. You want to communicate your feelings without stating them explicitly. Try doing it two ways: in electronic form and by hand. You may feel more at home with the freedom of digital technology. That may loosen you up. But using pen and paper will slow you down. It will force you to reflect. It will make you choose your words more carefully. That concision might be beneficial. Perhaps it will allow for greater resonance between the lines.

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Every single story has been told numerous times over the millennia. There are no new plots.



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11. Plot Is A Rental Car

You use what knowledge you've got, and you invent a new way.

The Visitor/Running Blind, 2000

I think ninety-nine of us grow up to love the campfire, and one grows up to hate it. Ninety-nine of us grow up to fear the howling wolf, and one grows up to envy it. And I'm that guy.

Never Go Back, 2013

A story needs the guy to be still out there. A story needs the guy roaming, sullen, hidden, shadowy, dangerous. It needs fear.

One Shot, 2005

• • • • •

New or intending writers tend to think plot is more important than it actually is. They see plot as the essence of the book, the thing that defines it. They feel compelled to look for something new and original that nobody has ever seen before, and believe that if they find that new and original thing, it will carry the book through. But the truth is you're very unlikely to find a plot that nobody has ever thought of before. Every single story has been told numerous times over the millennia. There are no new plots.

I first realised this when I was just starting high school.

I was educated at a school that is two hundred and twenty-four years older than the United States, one of those old English schools where you got what is called a classical education. We learned Latin and Greek. In the first year, we were reading Ovid's translation of 'Theseus and the Minotaur' in *Plutarch's Lives*. But as well as reading that story in school, on the bus home I was reading *Dr. No* by Ian Fleming, the James Bond novel. Both very successful stories that you may already know. And naturally it occurred to me, because it was inescapable, that those two stories are completely identical in every detail.

So when, many years later, the organisation of International Thriller Writers invited one hundred authors to write about a book or story they considered seminal in the development of the thriller for a volume called *Thrillers: 100 Must-Reads*, I naturally thought back to that moment of epiphany in high school. I'm not going to suggest any required reading for this course, because as I've said, your goal is to read everything. Read all the time, as widely as you can. But if you're looking for something in the field, then this volume, edited by David Morrell and Hank Wagner, is a great introduction, with experienced, practised writers analysing their choice of the most influential examples of the genre.

The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is about three thousand five hundred years old. Theseus is a prince, the son of the king of Athens, a wild child. As the story opens, he is down on the coast burning enemy ships. Then he gets back to the palace and is told that the ongoing standoff with the island of Crete has reached a new phase. He is told that the ruler of Crete is demanding that Athens send young people for sacrifice. And Theseus says, 'I'll take the place of one of them.' So he sails to Crete with the other intended victims. He then quickly seduces a member of the royal household, Ariadne, who provides him with a ball of string that he uses to mark his way back out of the labyrinth where the Minotaur lives. He descends into this underground, hostile environment. He meets this grotesque animal, half man and half horse. He fights it,

kills it, uses the string to find his way out, ignores Ariadne completely, jumps back on a ship and returns to Athens, where he is met by a welcome that is part grateful, part scandalised.

That is the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. It is also the story of any James Bond novel. Like Theseus, James Bond is also a person of rank, in this case a commander in the Royal Navy. His story always opens, in the movies especially, with some kind of action that is dramatic but unrelated to the main plot. Bond then sets out solo to solve a problem. He is provided by Q with gadgets that are the exact equivalent of the ball of string. He always seduces an Ariadne on the other side. There is very often an underground lair where some kind of submarine or some kind of atom bomb is located. He descends into the underground lair. He fights everybody, triumphs and goes home to a welcome that is part grateful, part scandalised.

It was immediately obvious to me that Theseus and *Dr. No* were the same plot.

That's just one illustration of the fact that every plot is the same as some other plot. There are really no new plots left to be discovered, and any attempt at forcing originality is likely to come out contrived. But this is good news, not bad news. For one thing, you can relax – you're free of that particular burden of expectation. Second, it means plot is already established in the reader's mind. And since the writer is also first and foremost a reader, it means plot is already established in your mind too. Half the work in this transaction is already done. The sense of drawing on a deep well of tradition is empowering.

There are plenty of theories in Hollywood about how many plots there are. Some say seven, others three. Really, there are only two, going right back to when we still banded together in caves. Either you huddle in your community, scared of what lies in wait outside. Or you leave your community to go and find out what lies on the other side of the hill. You can think of these complementary strands as two inexhaustible

streams flowing down to us direct from prehistory. Both are equally potent. The fearful intuition that 'there's something out there' goes back to our origins as sentient animals. The appetite for adventure is key to our survival as a species.

Plot is really a vehicle for the characters that you write. That vehicle will already have been used by somebody else, and now it's your turn. It's your responsibility to ensure that your characters invest it with enough difference that it stands out. It isn't new, but it must feel fresh.

I think of plot as a rental car. It doesn't belong to you – you just get to use it for a while. It has to work. It has to run for a week, while the reader is reading the book. If you rent a Rolls Royce instead of a Ford, that's great. But it's not crucial. What matters is what the characters do inside it. If I tell my friends that I've got a weekend date in the Caribbean with a supermodel and three days later I get back and walk into the bar where my friends are, no one is going to ask, 'What car did you rent?' They're all going to ask, 'What was she like?' Stories are about people. Plot is a vehicle that carries them along.

Don't beat yourself up worrying over whether your plot is new or original. Because right now I can guarantee you that at the level of deep structure it won't be. It's how you handle it and how you populate it and how you develop it that matters.

Very few books are remembered primarily for their plot. Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* would be one of them. Likewise Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *The A.B.C. Murders*, in which the brilliance of the intrigue upstages even the legendary Hercule Poirot. My ninth book, *One Shot*, could be seen as a take on *The A.B.C. Murders*, as could my fourth, *The Visitor/Running Blind*, which is a blend

of both story archetypes, and as previously discussed, is unique in the Reacher canon in switching between two points of view. So let me say it again: plot doesn't belong to you. The archetypal forms are in permanent circulation, always ready to be recycled and refurbished and refreshed.

So pull something off the shelf, do it again, and do it better.

A question I am often asked is: 'Where do you get your ideas from?' This question is prompted by anxiety around plot and in my view exposes a fundamental split between writers and non-writers. To a writer, ideas are easy. Read the news online. Listen to what your friends are saying about what's happening at work. Think back to all those books you've read. You'll get ten ideas every day. They'll bombard you constantly. The skill lies in knowing which to choose. Not just which one, but which two or three, because a great story usually involves two or three ideas that lock together in some mutually supportive way. Ideas are like atoms. Two or three will combine to make a stable molecule. And you choose based on which ones turn you on. Which are fascinating to you? Which are going to be fascinating next year when the book comes out? Which ideas have got legs?

Since plot is already established in the reader's mind, there will be certain expectations that you have to meet. One of those is 'the twist'. The reader is expecting the plot to zigzag in some unusual or unexpected way as it approaches a conclusion. Therefore the twist is important. You can't disappoint the reader by having a purely flat, linear progress to the conclusion. The definitive measure of a good twist, like a good ending, is that it should be both surprising and inevitable. Nobody sees it coming. Nobody can predict it. But no sooner has it happened than people say, 'Oh yeah,' as if it were obvious.

The reader is gratified by both the surprise and the inevitability, satisfied that the story absolutely had to twist and end in that way, which feels necessary and natural rather than fabricated and phoney. But here's the thing. Even if the reader spots the twist coming, even if the reader predicts the end, they're still happy. Because then they are gratified by the feeling of being right. So don't worry too much about plot. Don't worry too much about the twist. Instead, let your own reading guide you.

If you've read thousands of books, you've read thousands of plots. You build up an internal database of expectation. You'll know what to do and when to do it. Like all habitual readers, you have a finely tuned sense of an ending. So just go with the flow. You know what gratifies you. Therefore as a writer, you will instinctively reproduce that to gratify yourself. And as I said before, if you are gratifying yourself, then you are also gratifying thousands and thousands and thousands of readers. Because yes, you are a unique individual. But not that unique. Therefore if you like it, plenty of other people will like it too.

In short – and I explore this distinction explicitly in my eighteenth novel, *Never Go Back* – there are basically two archetypal plots.

Type one: you are huddled with your community, fearing some danger that lurks beyond and ready to defend your home. Perhaps a serial killer is on the prowl outside. Or the mob knows where you live. This structure is perfectly adapted to any genre that benefits from a tight physical location. Think of the small, closed worlds of Barbara Vine, the Ruth Rendell alter ego, with her dramas set in a couple of streets in north London, or Ian Rankin, working within a square mile in the heart of Edinburgh, or the modern wave of domestic and psychological suspense, mostly written by women, often confined to the inside of a single house, maybe extending as far as the neighbours.

Type two: you're the person that leaves your community and is willing to confront danger head on. This structure gives us the quest narrative and spy fiction and the action thriller, along with Reacher and his myriad of precursors and descendants.

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Both story types can be intensely suspenseful. Both are tried and tested. Both work. It's up to you to choose which one you are drawn to. Then write the hell out of it.

Plot has got to work for the week that the reader is reading the book. If it's a pretty good plot, all the better. But it's the character and the predicament that the reader will remember, not the mechanics. There are probably six books from the last hundred years that people remember for an ingenious plot. There are probably sixty million books that people remember for the delight of the characters, and for how they make them feel.

TAKEAWAYS

As a habitual reader, your brain is already wired for plot.

Plot is always a variation on a theme. What the story is about matters less than how you tell it.

It's never too late to read the Greek myths...

EXERCISES

Make a list of your ten favourite books. Then analyse the bare bones of their structure. Which of the two story types do they belong to? Is there a common pattern? Is it clear which story type you prefer, and therefore which you are best prepared to write?

Take half a dozen examples of the same story type. Then analyse the ways in which the author has populated these old forms with new material to make them feel fresh. Can you identify the cluster of ideas around which the story coheres?



“
You must write exactly
what you want to write:
it’s your project, your book,
your story.”

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12. Robin Hood & The Writers’ Room

‘I’m not worried about it,’ Reacher said again. ‘I’ll beat it in a second. I stopped it, remember? I didn’t start it. Jury of Tribeca merchants, I’ll look like Robin Hood.’

The Visitor/Running Blind, 2000



We’ve said that Jack Reacher is an archetypal character: the mysterious stranger, the knight-errant, always ready to come to the aid of others before then continuing on his lonely way.

So where does a character like that come from? Do such characters spring fully formed into our culture? No they don’t. The best example is probably Robin Hood. I wrote about his development in a short work of non-fiction published in 2019, called *The Hero*.

Back when Robin Hood was being formed, ruling was still relatively new. For most of our prehistory we had been nomadic hunter-gatherers, finding food where we could and maybe staying for a few months before moving on somewhere else. There was no real need for anything beyond self-organisation within the band or the tribe. But with the advent of agriculture, the population became sedentary. We started farming in fixed locations. The concept of land ownership was invented and the concept of territory. We began to say ‘This is my land not your land,’ and suddenly we had rulers. And rulers, as you know, are not always good, not always attractive. Very often you’re fed up with them. Very often you’re chafing under their rules and their demands, especially for taxes.

Perhaps you feel impoverished. Perhaps you feel exploited by the ruling class, and get really angry about it. And when human beings get angry, it seems we are temperamentally inclined to invent the antidote we wish we could have. You're in your little village working like crazy on the farm, and you've got to give away half of your harvest to the king, and you wistfully daydream: 'Wouldn't it be great if some tough guy came along and pushed back against the king and represented us? Wouldn't that be great?'

As soon as there's a mood like that in a population, it is detected by people who see that population as an audience. In this case, storytellers and balladeers picked up on this desire for a protector and like working entertainers everywhere, immediately invented a character to suit. They threw together this tough farmer figure who was prepared to fight back, and they called him Robin Hood.

Robin Hood became very popular. For that very reason, in a fascinating process that took literally hundreds of years, those working pros went through a slow-motion version of what we would now call a story conference. If you're writing a movie, you go to endless meetings and talk endlessly about the main character. People say, 'You know, he's really great, but he really needs this and he really needs that.' They say, 'Maybe he should have a dog. Maybe there should be a love interest. And you know what? This part is great too, but we need some comic relief.'

In movie world that story conference might last a week. In the real world, in the days of oral storytelling, it was a centuries-long dialogue between the storytellers and their audience. In the beginning, Robin Hood was just another yeoman farmer. Not a serf, not indentured to anybody else – maybe he had a couple of fields of his own – but generally speaking, just a regular working guy. But the storyteller is very sensitive to disquiet. He's got people sitting there listening and he can sense which bits are going down well and which bits need working on.

First of all, the storytellers realise that Robin Hood needs a love interest. That was pretty obvious within about a hundred years. 'A guy like that? We've got to introduce a woman that can take part of the load and be an attractive feature of the story in her own right.' So in comes Maid Marian. Then they think: 'A hero like that? Is he really just an ordinary farmer? Surely such a strong noble Englishman must be a little bit up the social scale.' So they inch him upwards, and he becomes a knight. Then they say: 'You know, this part is fantastic, but we need some comic relief.' So they bring in Friar Tuck, who is a bumbling sort of guy who provides the laughs. Then hundreds of years later, they decide: 'Sure Robin is great, but he needs a partner. He's got Maid Marian for the romantic interest and the protective interest, but he needs a knock-about companion to do the daring deeds with.' So they invent Little John.

Meanwhile Robin is getting bigger and bigger as a character, more and more competent, more and more attractive. Somewhere along the line he acquires a superpower, which is something Hollywood always looks for in a character. It wasn't there at the beginning, but suddenly Robin is an expert archer. He can shoot a bow and arrow better than anybody ever. Now they're saying: 'Surely a guy that good has got to be more than a knight.' Thus at some point in the fourteen hundreds, hundreds of years after the myth originated, Robin morphs into the Earl of Loxley. He has a terrific motive for being opposed to the sheriff of Nottingham and a terrific motive for being opposed to Prince John. That is all worked out and all settled and that structure is there. The comic relief is there, the romance is there, the big tough companion is there. Finally, after hundreds of years of development, it's a finished story.

All that development has come from audience demand. The storytellers sensed what was working and what was lacking, and they filled in the lacks and preserved what worked. Clearly we need to take such archetypal characters seriously. They are the product of hundreds of years of answering the audience's need. Not just one person's whim, but the persistent need of thousands and thousands. In Jungian* terms, they are the product of the collective unconscious.

Now we live in the digital age, and writers are beginning to explore new forms of participatory culture that in some ways hark back to the oral tradition. But most of us won't get real-time feedback from our readers. And maybe we should be wary of it when we do. The beauty of that long, slow character development is precisely the time that it took, and the size and the scale of the audience. If an archetypal character has a certain characteristic, you can be confident there's a good reason for it, and you can be confident in incorporating similar things into your own character too.

Whether Jack Reacher will prove to have the durability of Robin Hood, only time will tell. Common sense and a natural caution tell me the odds are against. But he has certainly escaped the original books that I wrote, into the lives of readers, and thence into film and television. Sometimes he takes even me by surprise, when he shows up unexpectedly as a pop culture reference.

I know I said before that you must write exactly what you want to write, that it's your project, your book, your story. I know I said that the book must be authentic and organic, and that the only way to ensure that is for it to be the product of a single mind. Yet here I am lauding the virtues of story conferences and telling you to follow a bunch of old archetypes.

But the two things are not incompatible. If there's one thing I'm trying to say to you, it's this: you already know how to write. You've heard of Robin Hood. Robin Hood is part of your cultural formation. That groundwork has been done. What you need to do is analyse the character carefully, with fresh eyes, and then say: 'These are the components of Robin Hood. I already know that, but I'm seeing it now with greater clarity and can bring it into my own work.' You've already learned from what's already been done. You need to become aware of your knowledge and then use it.

You will have noticed that I defined the two basic plot choices in terms of differing human responses to the promise of discovery and the threat of danger. In fact plot is largely determined by character. And as with plot, the hero figure does not belong to you. The hero is the collective product of human experience and human endeavour. Your character will always be a version of something that already exists. But as with plot, this is good news. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are universal archetypes to adapt and there is a universal tradition to draw on, and the reader will be gratified by the combination of familiarity and freshness, recognition and surprise, by what is the same and by what is different.

If Robin Hood did something completely out of character, it would blow the whole thing. We pick up a work of popular fiction with a certain expectation of what should happen, and as in so many aspects of writing, the key rule is: the reader has needs, and the writer must supply them.

TAKEAWAY

Storytelling is what makes us human. The elemental stories are baked in. If you want to reach the biggest audience, you should strive to tap into the age-old traditions. Write the stories that human beings have always needed about the characters they have always loved.

EXERCISE

Write a new Robin Hood adventure. You can locate it in the Middle Ages if you want, or alternatively, transport the character to a modern setting. In the latter case, you would also rename the characters, just as Stephen Sondheim (*West Side Story*) and Baz Luhrmann did in adapting Shakespeare (*Romeo + Juliet*) for stage and screen.

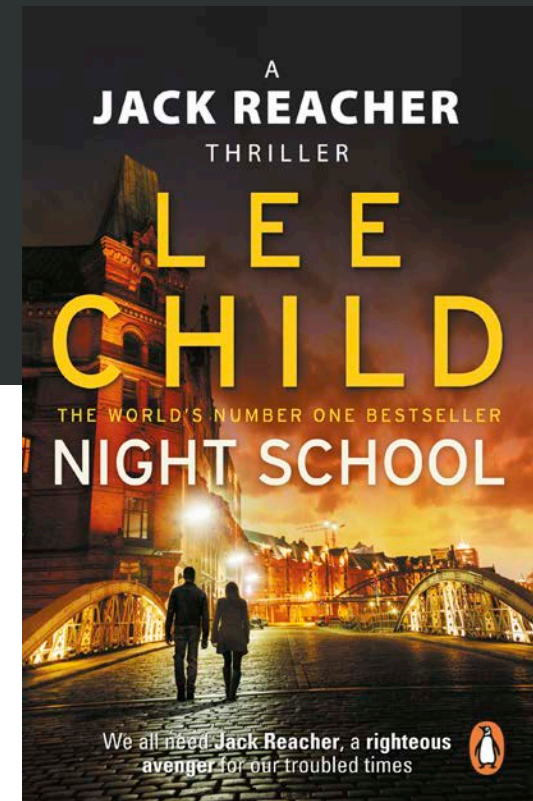
Jungian

adjective

Relating to the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, in particular his theories of archetypes and the collective unconscious

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“
A series depends entirely
on character. Even if you are
writing standalone novels,
character is absolutely
supreme.”



13. Character Is King

Stories became synonymous with the type of main character in them. The brave girl, the artful dodger, the wise old woman.

The Hero, 2019



So how important is character in series fiction? I would go so far as to say that by comparison, nothing else really matters. A series depends entirely on character. Even if you are writing standalone novels, character is absolutely supreme. You could have the most ingenious plot ever written, but nobody will ever know unless your characters are compelling, because readers will have given up on your book before they even get to that amazing twist you invented.

Here is a simple example from my childhood. Everybody my age knows who the Lone Ranger is – what he does and how he acts. Not one of us could tell you an actual story line or plot from one of the Lone Ranger episodes. Another great example is Sherlock Holmes. Practically everybody in the world knows who Sherlock Holmes is – what he does and how he thinks. Very few of those people will be able to remember exactly what happened in any of the stories. They will have a jumble of images in their mind – ‘Was there one about a dog or a hound or something? Was there one with a snake?’ – but front and centre will be the character of Sherlock himself.

It’s always about character. Character is always supreme.

I knew that for my character to carry the weight of a series for years to come, I had to get him right from the outset. And I believed that the best way of getting him right was to lean on what I already knew from having been a reader, from having thought deeply about the characters that show up in stories all the time, all the way back to the most basic and ancient of our myths. Even so – like you, perhaps – I was a little nervous about starting. I was like the guy who balances on the edge of a swimming pool before jumping in. I was balancing there for a day or two, and what I did to prepare myself, or to put off the moment, was to make a few notes.

Here’s the twist. More than twenty years later, the University of East Anglia in Norwich, in the United Kingdom, asked me to give them all the papers that related to my writing, for students and scholars at the British Archive for Contemporary Writing to use as a resource. Naturally I was flattered. So I assembled everything and shipped it off to them and they catalogued it, and one thing that showed up in those boxes was that piece of paper where I’d jotted down what I needed from my character. It was my biographer who dug it up and studied it, and if you want, you can read more about what she discovered in *The Reacher Guy*.

This is what I wrote:

Character of H. This is vitally important. It will be make-or-break. Must be such that it arouses envy in male readers. They must admire him & want to be him. Women readers must be fascinated by him. They must want to be with him. Must be some moral base albeit probably bleak and cynical to a degree. Needs to be alienated, outsider, loner, tough, resourceful. There must be a very subtle portrayal of superman powers. Must be unfeasibly tough & strong & invulnerable, to provide escapist identification. Gets away with things, possibly unrealistic but serious & convincing. Always knows better. Things turn out OK.

Looking back, there are two things I would pick out from this procrastination ritual. First, it was not a case of me inventing anything in the moment. Rather it was me reminding myself of what I already knew, reassuring myself that I could rely on those archetypes. Second, that I didn't yet have a name for my character and was instead using 'H' for hero. Which indicates that his heroic status mattered more than his specific identity. The fact that he was to be an archetypal hero literally took precedence over everything else.

I still didn't have a name when I finally jumped in and started writing. Which was fine, because for that first book I had chosen the first person as the most natural storytelling voice. So my hero had been arrested, hauled to the police station, fingerprinted and thrown into a cell, and I still had no idea what he was called. I knew the name had to be enduring. I knew it had to be something simple, not weird or complicated or cutesy. Beyond that I had nothing.

Then one day I went with my wife on a trip to the supermarket. And every single time that I'm in a supermarket, there's always a little old lady who comes up to me and says: 'You're a nice, tall gentleman. Could you reach me that box?' After which, on this occasion, my wife said: 'You know what? If this writing gig doesn't work out you could always be a reacher in a supermarket.' And immediately I thought, 'Wow, that's a great name.'

I got home and sat down at my desk. I was about a third of the way into chapter two. I had the detective sit down at his desk too, and H sit opposite him. It was a big moment. The detective looks at his prisoner and says: 'We'll start with your name, your address and your date of birth.' To which H answers: 'My name is Jack Reacher. No middle name. No address.'

All thanks to an off-the-cuff dig from my wife.

Later everybody assumed that the name was intended to suggest some kind of forward movement, somebody reaching for something, maybe always out of touch but always pressing ahead. They assumed it was chosen for a specific literary purpose. And maybe it was, subconsciously. Maybe that's why I reacted so positively to what my wife said at the supermarket, because I intuitively grasped those connotations. Maybe it's the perfect illustration of what I keep talking about: something I already knew, without realising it, until something summoned it from the back to the front of my mind.

Put everything you've got into your main character. He or she will carry the story, and then bring the reader back for the next instalment, and the next, and the next. Because what a great character does is hold out the promise of spending more time with them, like an old friend: somebody you see once a year and you really want to catch up with them and it's an absolute pleasure, but at the same time you're getting the excitement of a new story. That is the appeal of a series.

So how important is character? The question is flawed. Character is not a matter of relative importance. Character is of supreme importance.

Character is king.

TAKEAWAYS

Remember, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Readers get a sense of warmth from recognising character types they already know and love, and from returning characters within a series.

Hang on to those bits of paper!

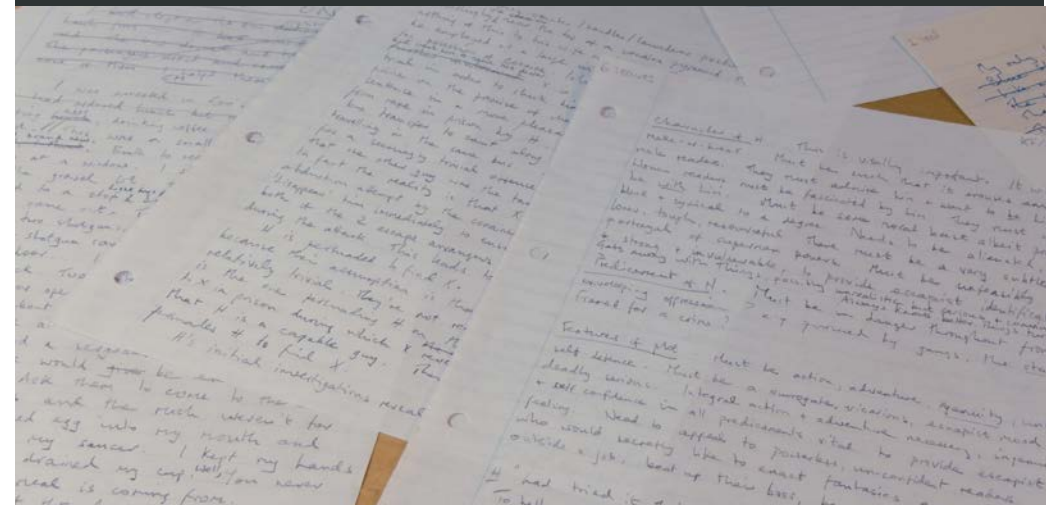
EXERCISES

Create a character based largely on yourself. Create another that is a composite of two or three of your all-time favourite characters from well-known popular stories. Maybe a third that is a composite of yourself and two others. Then put those characters in the same situation and write the same scene two or three different ways.

Describe yourself in detail, as accurately and dispassionately as possible, both appearance and character. Then describe yourself in detail again, in an enhanced or altered form. Make yourself a hero. Make yourself a villain. It should still be you at the core of the character.

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“
When somebody says
a character must want
something on every page,
that is simply a fancy way
of saying the reader needs
something on every page.”



14. Ditch The Bad Advice

Of course, it's important to remember that none of those people actually existed. They were all made up. There are only two real people in fiction – the storyteller and the listener.

The Hero, 2019



So we just talked about character. And that leads us to a question. Should the character go on a metaphorical journey within the novel? Should the character change and develop? Should he end up knowing something different to what he knew at the beginning? That's the sort of thing you hear from theorists. And that glib orthodoxy leads us to all the other rules that are laid down for intending writers.

To be honest, most of those so-called rules are over-thought, over-elaborated, or just plain wrong. We need to dig down deeper, analyse more acutely, and figure out if there are rules at all, and if there are, which are important and which aren't, and which may actually lead you astray.

Rules tend to take on a life of their own. There was a famous mystery and thriller writer called Elmore Leonard who published a bullet-point list of advice for writers in *The Guardian*. The list starts with 'Never start with the weather,' and continues with 'Never use an adverb,' overlooking the fact that 'never' is an adverb that he uses in the very sentence where he's saying not to. Leonard's rules are famous and lots of people refer to them. Check them out by all means, but don't take them as dogma.

Another hackneyed piece of advice is 'Show, don't tell'. Almost every article you read in a writer's magazine will ram that point home: don't just *say* this was an angry, bad-tempered man – *show* him being angry and bad-tempered. But that's not a rule. That's just plain common sense. You've got a story to tell. Obviously you are going to show people doing things and you are going to show them doing things in a way that's unique to them, which might be bad-tempered or might be good-tempered or might be super-sweet or might be bitterly cynical. You don't need a rule for that.

When a statement coalesces* into a rule, people start doing bizarre things in order to obey that rule. Think of all the books you've read where the main character is introduced something like this: he gets up, he goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth, he looks in the mirror, he sees chestnut-coloured hair flopping over his forehead, he sees narrow, blue eyes, he sees an aquiline nose, a little scar on his cheek, and so on and so forth. Nobody in all of human history has ever done that. Nobody has ever stood in front of a mirror narrating their own features. That is taking 'show, don't tell' to an absurd level. It's perfectly all right to introduce your main character and tell us he's got chestnut hair and blue eyes narrowed in intensity and a scar on his cheek. Whatever he or she is, tell us. You don't have to elaborately back yourself into some way of obeying some notional rule. Storytelling involves showing people doing things. But there's a clue in the word. You're telling the story with words, not showing it with pictures and diagrams.

That's a perfect example of something that is taken too far and ties the writer up in knots. So feel free to ignore that rule. In fact, feel free to ignore all rules, or at least question them.

Does the reader have a genuine need to have a book full of likeable characters? That is another rule that is trotted out regularly: make the characters likeable and readers will care about them. Again, basic common sense, but does it mean you are obliged to artificially populate your book with predictably likeable people? The answer to that is evidently no.

There's a great book by John Grisham called *The Runaway Jury*. I would suggest you read a lot of John Grisham. He's a much more experimental writer than people think, who tries new things all the time. The question he asked himself in this book was: Will an unstoppable narrative locomotive be enough? And by extension, do I really need all those likeable characters? Evidently he concluded that he didn't, because *The Runaway Jury* is a book about bad guys and worse guys – we don't like any of them and we want all of them to lose. But still the reader has an insatiable hunger to know what the jury's verdict is going to be. All Grisham needs in order to keep us turning the pages is an unstoppable engine. The basic proposition – what is going to happen to this character? – is more important than their exact nature.

Here's another popular pronouncement. A character must want something on every page, if only a glass of water. This too should be examined carefully. A character in a book is completely made up. He does not exist. You just invented him. He is not capable of wanting or not wanting anything. He's imaginary. There are only two real human beings in this equation: you – the writer – and your reader. So when somebody says a character must want something on every page, that is simply a fancy way of saying the reader needs something on every page. The reader needs surprise, delight, progress, intrigue, advancement – it's the reader who wants something, not the character.

Don't get confused about characters having a life of their own. Many writers write imaginary biographies of their characters, even the minor characters. They don't necessarily use that information in the narrative, but they know where the guy went to primary school and whether he is twice- or three-times divorced, as if that informs the current-day portrayal they're attempting. I think that is pointless. It's not how real life is lived.

If you meet somebody for the first time, maybe you go on a first date, or you meet a new friend and hang out for a pint, that person is not going to lay out her entire biography for you. She is not going to tell you where she went to primary school. She's not going to tell you any of that stuff. If the relationship endures you might find out in future years, but equally you might never find out. In the real world we never really know anybody a hundred percent, even family. You might have been with your partner for decades, but there are still things you do not know about that person, that may eventually be revealed but probably not. So feel confident if this is also true of your characters. You don't need to know everything about them, and nor does your reader.

Character is king. But is character development necessary? I would say the exact opposite is true in popular fiction, especially in a series. People buy the next instalment in a series because they already like the character. They do it for a sense of familiarity. It's like seeing an old friend. It's like putting on your favourite old sweater. It brings a feeling of reassurance and comfort. If you were to find out that in next year's instalment that character has undergone some kind of transformation and is not the guy you thought he was, you've not got what you paid for. This is why I have worked so hard to keep Reacher the same over more than twenty books. If the character is your unique selling point, then why mess with it?

Of course, I am more than twenty years older than when I wrote my first Reacher book, and as I change, so Reacher changes too. But naturally, organically, as the product of my imagination. You don't have to force things. If you're writing a series, try and keep your main character the same, because that's what readers want. A little bit of change is built in, as you yourself change. And that little bit is quite enough.

Remember, the purpose of fiction is to give us what we don't get in real life, and that includes solid, reliable characters. The series hero is idealised and carries weight on behalf of the reader. We don't necessarily want him to be ignorant at the beginning and learning things as he goes along, but rather take consolation in knowing that here's a guy who already knows what to do. The hero is like the strong friend who guides us through the story, the person we secretly would like to be.

So when it comes to writing rules, don't fall into the trap of taking them at face value. Are they really important, or is it just a way of filling space in a magazine article?

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TAKEAWAY

The overriding rule – the only rule – is that if the reader has a genuine need, it's up to the writer to supply it.

EXERCISE

One thing you are working on constantly is attuning your ear to the voice of other writers. At those points in your reading where voice doesn't seem to ring true, could it be that the writer was straining too hard to follow a rule?

Coalesce

verb

Come together to form a single mass or whole



“
It’s the reader who decides
whether a character is cool,
not the writer.”

15. Don’t Fall In Love With Your Hero

‘I’m not interested in being popular,’ Reacher said.
Without Fail, 2002



Those of us who love and read series may have noticed something that happens all too often: you’re into a series, you’re loving it, you’re on the sixth, seventh, eighth book; you get the ninth and it’s not quite as good, the tenth is worse, and then on the eleventh, you give up. Why does that happen?

Well, for a number of reasons. The writer could have got lazy. He could have become a drunk and a wastrel*. He could be running out of gas. But one of the key reasons, and one of the worst mistakes you can make as a series writer, is falling in love with your character.

There are numerous examples of series where the main character starts out as a plausible, authentic, well-rounded person and stays that way for book after book, and then mystically becomes a god among men. Take the Peter Wimsey books by Dorothy L. Sayers. Lord Peter Wimsey is an aristocrat, so there are many things about his life that are strange to us, but he has an internal consistency. He has weaknesses. He has faults. Then later in the series you realise he’s just the greatest thing ever. The author fell in love with her character and ruined it for the reader, because Wimsey is now too good, too saccharine*, too perfect – no longer real, no longer plausible or authentic.

The same happened with Hannibal Lecter. *Red Dragon* was a fabulous book, so too *Silence of the Lambs*, and Lecter was a perfectly realised character. Sure he was a cannibal and a psychopath, but that's the conceit of the book, and we see that he is otherwise an extremely normal person. He's a middle-class doctor from a small provincial city. He's on the board of the local symphony. He holds benefit dinners for them. He does exactly what upper-middle-class professionals do, apart from his predilection for eating liver with fava beans and a nice Chianti.

But then, in the decade before the third book came out, Hannibal Lecter has somehow become the best at everything. He's the world's greatest wine expert. He speaks Renaissance Italian better than the scholars speak it. He's a psychiatrist, which means he has an M.D. degree from possibly twenty years earlier, but now he's performing brain surgery on live patients. In other words, all perspective was lost, all critical distance was lost, and the character comes out cartoonish.

I aim to like Reacher just a little less than you like him. That's what keeps him honest. That's what keeps him real. I stay critical of him. Sometimes I include a third-party view, just to make clear that I can see the bad things about him as well as the good things.

Here is a passage from the opening of my fourteenth book, *61 Hours*. It starts with the weather. Not just the weather – there's an unnamed lawyer and the clock is already ticking. But it's a very wintry book. Reacher makes his appearance toward the end of chapter one. He's the odd one out on a bus that has been hired to take a bunch of senior citizens to Mount Rushmore on a trip. If the reader is new to the Reacher series, this would be her first introduction to the character, through close third-person narration.

The odd passenger out was a man at least thirty years younger than the youngest of the others. He was sitting alone three rows behind the last of the seniors. They thought of him as a kind of stowaway. He had joined the bus that same day, at a rest stop just east of a town called Cavour. After the Little Town on the Prairie, before the Dakotaland Museum. There had been no explanation. He had just gotten on the bus. Some had seen him in prior conversation with the driver. Some said money had changed hands. No one was sure what to think. If he had paid for his passage, then he was more like a steerage passenger than a stowaway. Like a hitchhiker, but not quite.

But in any case he was considered a nice enough fellow. He was quiet and polite. He was a foot taller than any of the other passengers and evidently very strong. Not handsome like a movie star, but not ugly, either. Like a just-retired athlete, maybe. Perhaps a football player. Not the best dressed of individuals. He was wearing a creased untucked shirt under a padded canvas jacket. He had no bag, which was strange. But overall it was vaguely reassuring to have such a man on board, especially after he had proved himself civilized and not in any way threatening. Threatening behaviour from a man that size would have been unseemly. Good manners from a man that size were charming. Some of the bolder widowed ladies had thought about striking up a conversation. But the man himself seemed to discourage any such attempt. He slept through most of the drive time and all his responses to conversational gambits had so far been entirely courteous but brief, and completely devoid of substance.

But at least they knew his name. One of the men had introduced himself, on his way back down the aisle from the toilet. The tall stranger had looked up from his seat and paused, just a beat, as if assessing the costs and benefits of a response. Then he had taken the proffered hand and said, 'Jack Reacher.'

What I tried to do here was to show how others perceive the character as a proxy for how I feel about him. Reacher is kind to children, old people and animals. He always tips the waitress, helps with the clearing up if he happens to be visiting, and thanks his driver for the ride. He also lies, cheats, steals, shoots people in the back and kicks them when they're down. Overall I like him well enough. But I'm never going to fall in love with him.

There is an additional, associated risk. Don't try too hard to make the reader fall in love with your hero either. It's the reader who decides whether a character is cool, not the writer. You've got to keep a firm grip on that fact. The reader will rebel if she's told what to think.

There's a very interesting book by screenwriter and critic David Mamet, called *Bambi vs. Godzilla*. His argument is in reference to movie characters, but translates to book characters just as well. Fundamentally, Mamet says, it's a transaction. The character steps onto the page and says: 'Hi, I'm the main character.' And the reader says: 'Oh, are we going to like you?' And the worst possible answer to that question is: 'Yes, you are. And I'll tell you why.' The best possible answer is: 'You might, you might not, and I really don't care either way.' That kind of insouciance*, that kind of self-confidence is what makes someone like a person. So play it cool, don't force it. Make your main character inadvertently loveable, in a way that's not heralded or advertised, and let the reader make her own discovery.

Keep your main character at arm's length. Don't let him take over your brain, and don't start making excuses for him. Creating a character that readers are drawn to is about writing honestly and authentically. It's not about courting popularity. Let your readers decide what they think.

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TAKEAWAY

Maintain critical distance between yourself and your character.

EXERCISE

Go back to that dispassionate description you wrote of yourself a few lessons back. Was it truly unflinching? Or did you draw a slight veil over your less loveable traits? Try again. The vices are as important – and sometimes as loveable – as the virtues.

Wastrel

noun

A good-for-nothing person

Saccharine

adjective

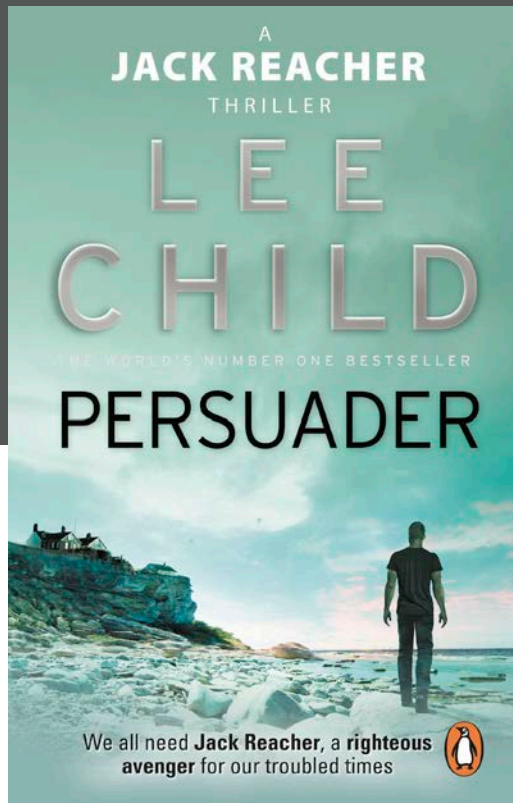
Excessively sweet or sentimental

Insouciance

noun

A carefree lack of concern

“
You shouldn't fall in love
with your hero, nor should
you simply hate your villain.”



16. Why Hook Hobie Is Like My Grandfather

'Beck's a bad guy for sure, but he's been taken over by a worse guy.'

Persuader, 2003



Another question writers get asked is: How much of yourself did you put into the main character? Which is a very pleasant question because generally speaking, your main character is the good guy. And though you shouldn't get too close to him, that is set against the fact that you will draw on your own experience in creating him. So you're liable to answer: 'All of it.' Why not take the credit? My stock answer is: 'Reacher is me. I just toned down the sex and violence to make it plausible.'

Thinking of yourself as the good guy is a warm, comfortable feeling. But there's a flip side: How much of yourself did you put into the bad guys? Not such a pleasant question, and harder to answer, but the honest response is: quite a lot. Because how else can you do it? You have to inject that human reality into all your characters, and it comes direct from you. You are the bad guys just as much as you are the good guys.

The bad guy is doing all kinds of terrible things. He's a killer or a thief or a murderer. Yet he still has to be a rounded, human person. He's got to be plausible, he's got to be authentic, he's got to feel real. And the only way to achieve that is to use your own experience, your own thoughts, your own personality. If the good guy is you, raised up a couple of notches through wish-fulfilment and the needs of story, then the bad guy is also you, dropped down a couple of notches in depravity and nastiness. It's perfectly symmetrical.

It therefore follows that just as you shouldn't fall in love with your hero, nor should you simply hate your villain. Don't treat him too badly, just as you won't treat your hero too well. Find something that gives a little confusion to the character, a little complexity. Yes he's awful, but there are certain touching vulnerabilities about him, possibly.

Hook Hobie is the antagonist from my third book, *Tripwire*. He has a steel hook for a hand and a grotesquely burned face from a helicopter crash in the Vietnam War. He is the most rapacious*, evil character you could possibly want to meet – by collective assent the worst of my villains.

I based him partly on my grandfather.

This is an episode from the book where Hobie has taken a prisoner.

She moved her feet. He answered with matching pressure on the gun. The metal was pressing hard into the softness of her flesh. It was crushing her breast. The silk was yielding into a deep crater. It was pulling her nipple sideways. It was hurting her. The man raised his right arm. The hook. He held it up in front of her eyes. It was a plain steel curve, rubbed and polished until it shone. He rotated it slowly, with an awkward movement of his forearm. She heard leather inside his sleeve. The tip of the hook was machined to a point. He rotated the tip away and laid the flat of the curve against her forehead. She flinched. It was cold. He scraped it down her forehead and traced the curve of her nose. In under her nose. He pressed it against her top lip. Brought it down and in and pressed until her mouth opened. He tapped it gently against her teeth. It caught on her bottom lip, because her lip was dry. He dragged her lip down with the steel until the soft rubbery flesh pulled free. He traced over the curve of her chin. Down under her chin to her throat. Up again an inch, and back, under the shelf of her jaw, until he was forcing her head up with the strength in his shoulder. He stared into her eyes.

'My name is Hobie,' he said.

She was up on tiptoes, trying to take the weight off her throat. She was starting to gag. She couldn't remember taking a breath since before she had opened the door.

That's Hook Hobie. He's a really bad guy. But not monotone. Relying purely on hate and dread is not enough – the reader's revulsion needs to be heightened by a fleeting grace note of sympathy. Which is where 'Write what you feel' comes in. I used a childhood feeling.

Remember that letter I wrote to the statue on Paddington Station? I imagined that unknown soldier was my Irish grandfather going back to war, where he was gruesomely wounded. He lost a leg at Gallipoli and wore a prosthetic device for the rest of his life. I was completely aware of it. But I never saw how it worked. In the inhibited way of that generation, he never talked about it; he never put it on or took it off in my presence. This big, powerful man at the head of our family had self-evidently been a hero, yet he had this equally self-evident vulnerability.

I brought an element of that pathos to Hook Hobie, for a hint of light and shade. Here is an extract from a much longer passage that examines the stark realities of his disability.

He wore a thin sock on the stump of his right forearm. It was there to stop the leather chafing the skin. It was not a specialist medical device. It was a child's sock. Just tubular, no heel, the sort of thing mothers choose before their babies can walk. He bought them a dozen pairs at a time from department stores. He always bought white ones. They were cheaper. He eased the sock off the stump and shook it out and laid it next to the box of tissues on the nightstand.

The stump itself was shrivelled. There was some muscle left, but with no work to do it had atrophied away to nothing. The bones were filed smooth on the cut ends, and the skin had been sewn down tight over them. The skin was white, and the stitches were red. They looked like Chinese writing. There was black hair growing on the bottom of the stump, because the skin there had been stretched down from the outside of his forearm.

He stood up again and walked to the bathroom. A previous owner had installed a wall of mirror above the sink. He looked at himself in it, and hated what he saw. His arm didn't bother him. It was just missing. It was his face he hated. The burns. The arm was a wound, but the face was a disfigurement. He turned half-sideways so he didn't have to look at it. He cleaned his teeth and carried a bottle of lotion back to the bed. Squeezed a drop onto the skin of the stump and worked it in with his fingers. Then he placed the lotion next to the baby's sock on the nightstand and rolled under the covers and clicked the light off.

This passage of description allows the reader to see that even Hobie is not one-dimensional, that there is something else there.

Hook Hobie raises another issue, which is the need to guard against endless inflation. If the bad guy is this bad by book three, what is he going to be like a further twenty books down the road? It can't be all about the villain becoming worse and worse and worse, to the point of absurdity. Which is why I've always had an ambition to write a very ordinary, even nondescript, antagonist.

I finally got around to it in my twenty-first book, *Night School*, where the bad guy is not physically vicious or cruel, not a hands-on bad guy at the personal level, but a small-time opportunist. Other than selling nuclear weapons to the enemy, which is a bad thing to do, he was a hapless individual, and relatively sympathetic.

In this passage, someone is looking at a photograph.

The face as described went with the hair and the build. Deep-set blue eyes, tight skin on the forehead, prominent cheek bones, a thin nose, white teeth, an unsmiling mouth, a firm chin. No visible damage. No major scars, no tattoos. An old tan, and some lines around the eyes. More likely squint lines than laugh lines or frown lines. A groove down one cheek. From the clamp of the jaw, and maybe a missing tooth. But all of a piece. Narrow, but all horizontal. The brows, the eyes, the high cheekbones, the thin slash of the mouth, the clamped and working grimace. His age was more likely thirty-something than twenty-something.

I am describing myself. I wanted something that was relatable, not some huge cartoon monster. There's a league table of bad guys in *Night School*. Some are way up at the top; others are functionaries somewhere in the middle.

For a complex antagonist and a deeply satisfying read, I strongly recommend *Daddy*, by Loup Durand.

TAKEAWAY

The counterpoint to 'Don't fall in love with your hero' is 'Don't fall in hate with your bad guy'. Bad guys are human too.

EXERCISES

Check out Paulie from *Persuader* and Little Joey from *Personal* (my seventh and nineteenth books). Neither is very likeable. But what humanising touches can you find?

Make a league table of your top ten antagonists from books you have loved. Rank them according to their humanity and how powerfully they engage your sympathy.

Rapacious

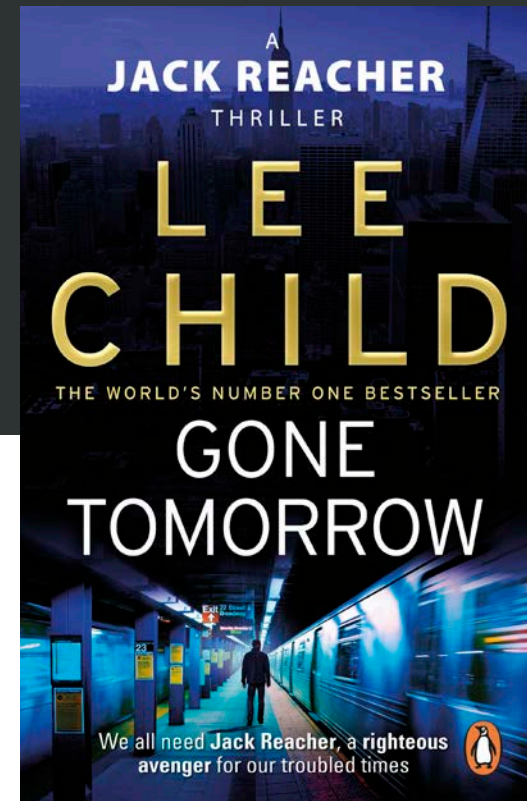
adjective

Aggressively greedy or grasping

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“

Write your character honestly and authentically, then leave it alone. Just stop.



17. Reacher, And Why He Isn't Boring

Reacher was spending no time on regret or recrimination. No time at all.

Worth Dying For, 2010



Suppose you are writing what you hope will be a long-running series. The character you create has to return year after year. Hopefully, he'll become well-loved amongst the public. Hopefully, he'll enter the culture in some way, become a reference outside of the book world.

How do you keep that character interesting? A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that the way to do it is to give him lots of interesting characteristics. Let's give him a hobby. Let's give him an esoteric knowledge of fine wine or old whiskey. Maybe if he collects old cars then that will make him fascinating for years to come. The problem is, it won't. The reader immediately understands that these add-ons are not authentic, that they are not integral. They are somehow stapled on to the guy in a nervous attempt to make him interesting.

It's a test of your confidence. Remember it's the reader, not the writer, who says a character is cool. You can set it up. You can hope for the best. But you cannot make it happen and the more you try, the worse it gets. It's exactly like moving to a new job or moving to a new apartment building. You've got new workmates, you've got new neighbours. How do you make them like you? You can't, is the answer. You can't make them like you. All you can do is be yourself. And that's all you can do as a writer too.

Write your character honestly and authentically, then leave it alone. Just stop. Do not bolt on all kinds of allegedly interesting characteristics or hobbies or activities or thoughts.

The more you leave space for the imagination, the more the reader will like the guy. You can help by not describing the character too narrowly. Reacher has survived for more books than Travis McGee, and in the entire series there are just a handful of references to what he looks like. His hair colour is mentioned maybe two or three times, his eye colour maybe four or five. The exact shape of his face is unknown. Detail is sparing. He's just this very big guy who gets things done.

It's a fundamental principle of fiction that the reader invents the character just as much as the writer does. In fact, it's really the reader who creates the story. Think about it. You write a book, and it sits on the shelf, and then maybe ten years later, or maybe twenty years later, somebody picks up a copy and reads it. At that moment it is the reader's mental energy that is involved. The reader is burning his or her own calories. The reader is doing the work. The story is happening inside the reader's head. The transaction is finally complete.

The book is written, then it is read, then it exists. And in microcosm, character is created in the exact same way. The writer provides an outline, with enough description but not too much, leaving scope to fill in the blanks. It's the reader's version of the character that exists inside the reader's head. It's the reader who bestows the charisma. The process is neat, it's efficient, and crucially it gratifies the reader, who at that point, unbeknownst to them, has taken over the job of creation.

The less-is-more principle is also built into Reacher's psyche. He travels light, literally and metaphorically. He doesn't make promises he can't keep. He doesn't speak when he has nothing to say. He doesn't confide. He doesn't outstay his welcome. This is in keeping with his archetypal status, but I was also reacting against the modern trend for fretful, introspective and conflicted characters. For better or for worse, I decided to ditch all that neurotic navel-gazing. I was sick of books where the character is always worrying about what to do, regretful about what he's done, and wishing he'd done things differently. I wanted to go back to a simpler kind of hero, who would take action against evil as the need presents itself and not beat himself up about it afterward – a guy with a strong moral compass who makes a split-second decision, executes it, moves on, and never gives it another thought.

Like I've said, that choice was made as an antidote to what I hadn't liked in series fiction. I soon realised why I didn't like it and why I preferred doing it my way, because as I've also said, I believe fiction exists to give readers what they don't get in real life. For most people, most of the time, real life is a series of difficult, anxious, agonising decisions: should I do this, should I do that, which is better, which is worse? You're not sure and you end up compromising and are left feeling frustrated. The reader loves a book that provides respite from that wearisome cycle, where the character shows them a different way.

Going light on biographical and psychological detail not only gives space and time for the reader to inhabit the character, but it also removes a whole bunch of stuff that the reader already has to deal with in everyday life. Why write fiction in order to reproduce the conditions of reality?

Popular fiction is not only part of the entertainment business but in competition with every other part of the entertainment business. You've got to picture your reader getting home on a Friday evening after a long week of work, and you've got to give him a good reason to pick up your book rather than turn on the television or fire up a video game or whatever else he might fancy doing. You've got to give him a reason to choose your entertainment product over any other entertainment product. And one way of doing that is to provide a character that the reader himself can inhabit, that the reader himself can control and enjoy inside his own head.

I said earlier that the writer should do the work and let the reader enjoy the ride. But part of the writer's work is to invite the reader's creative collaboration, and part of the reader's enjoyment is to respond. It's a sophisticated relationship, but also an intimate one. The book is an inert, inanimate object that sits stolidly* on the shelf. Only when the reader comes along, and the reader and the writer interact, do the story and the characters come to life.

TAKEAWAY

Don't lumber your character with unnecessary baggage. Don't dictate every detail or tell your reader what to think. Once you have enticed the reader into picking up your book and once you have propelled her from the first sentence to the second, from the first paragraph to the next, from the first chapter to the one after and the one after that, your job is done. It's over to the reader now. Let your reader complete the story. It's her book now, not yours anymore.

EXERCISE

Look back at a selection of books you have enjoyed and a selection of books you haven't enjoyed. How is the main character presented? Has the writer tried to tell you everything at the outset? Do your eyes start to glaze over? Are you tempted to skip the detail? How much room has been left for you? Does the writer invite you in?

Stolid

adjective

Calm, not showing emotion or excitement

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“
The more you leave
space for the imagination,
the more the reader will like
the character.”



18. To Plot Or Not To Plot ~ Part 1

So the only plan was no plan.

Killing Floor, 1997

A thing like that, sure, it's in the plan as written, but who's to say it actually gets done, you know, in real life, in a situation like that, right when the shit is hitting the fan?'

61 Hours, 2010



Is it important to plot the whole book in advance? That's a hard question. It depends so much on the individual writer. For me, the answer is no.

For my first book, *Killing Floor*, I had the vaguest sense of what the plot must contain. There was absolutely no detail in my original thoughts at all. There was no 'this happens, then that happens, then this other thing happens and because of that, this final thing happens'. I just made a few brief notes that have to do with overall flavour or colour. And those notes, discussed in detail in *The Reacher Guy*, are still around in the University of East Anglia's archives.

This is what I wrote before launching into the book.

Features of plot –

*Must be action, adventure, **ingenuity**, unbeatable self-defence. Must be a surrogate, vicarious, escapist mood but deadly serious. Integral action & adventure*

necessary, ingenuity & self-confidence in all predicaments vital to provide escapist feeling. Need to appeal to powerless, unconfident readers who would secretly like to enact fantasies e.g. survive outside a job, beat up their boss, be unafraid etc etc.

That's all I had. I think you'll agree it's not an outline. It doesn't give me any guideposts, just a feel for how I wanted the book to come out.

What I did have lodged in my head was an image. It came from a non-fiction book about illegal narcotics and money laundering. Back then, you did not go down to a shady corner of Union Square and buy your dope with a credit card. Dealing was done in cash, which gave the drug sellers an enormous industrial problem. They had a vast amount of money to deal with. How much? This book said it was more than is spent annually on groceries or food. It was twice the amount of cash in circulation, which means that all that money had to go offshore to a bank to be laundered and then come back to the US to be reused. Which means that every single piece of money was recycled twice a year.

At one point, the Drug Enforcement Agency invented a machine that could sample a bank note and detect whether there was cocaine on it, the idea being that if you found one with cocaine on it, maybe you could trace that note back to the source and find who was buying and selling. They abandoned that experiment because every single bank note they tried had traces of cocaine on it. I calculated that possibly four thousand tonnes of money was constantly being trucked around the country to be sent offshore and brought back again.

So in my mind, I had this image of a way station where all this money was waiting to be shipped out. That was the only specific plot point I had for *Killing Floor*. I imagined this big pile of cash in a warehouse, and somehow I needed to get there. And in the end I did.

Here is the beginning of the climactic scene.

It was a big space. Must have been a hundred feet long, maybe eighty deep. Maybe sixty feet high. And it was full of dollar bills. A gigantic dune of money filled the whole shed. It was piled maybe fifty feet high into the back far corner. It sloped down to the floor like a mountainside. It was a mountain of cash. It reared up like a gigantic green iceberg. It was huge.

A little later the description picks up again.

I was transfixed. It was an utterly unbelievable sight. [...] It was a fantastic scene from a fairy tale. Like a huge underground cavern in an emerald mine from some glittering fable. All brightly lit by the hundred arc lights. [...] Hubble had said a million dollars in singles was a hell of a sight. I was looking at forty million. It was the height of the drift that did it to me. It towered way up. Ten times higher than the two tiny figures working at floor level. Higher than a house. Higher than two houses. It was incredible. It was a huge warehouse. And it was full of a solid mass of money. Full of forty million genuine one-dollar bills.

Two things strike me on reading this back. The references to ‘a fairy tale’ and ‘some glittering fable’ reveal that I’m thinking of this as a classic mythic scene – looping back to Aladdin’s cave, to the subterranean labyrinth in which the Minotaur lurks, to Dr No’s underground laboratory. And the piling up of imagery underscores what I said

about not pulling your punches when you’re coming up to a big scene. If you’re aiming for big, you have to deliver big.

The scene is set at night. So the warehouse is lit up with artificial light. Glittering metal walls, a huge dune of cash: this potent visual image was the only thing I had to aim at in this whole book. I used it like the north star, to guide me from the beginning right through to the end.

How I got there was improvised as I went along, and subsequently, I’ve relied on that method more or less exclusively. Start somewhere good and see what happens. Sometimes with a target in mind, like that money scene. In *Tripwire*, I had a line of dialogue I was aiming for. As it happens I got there about a third of the way in, where the parents of a Vietnam vet say they would give their lives for one more day with their missing son, but everything that led up to it, and everything that followed, was contained within, and driven by, that single thought, a ‘write what you feel’ transposition of a moment of fright involving my young teenage daughter. It was just a question of starting somewhere and hitting that line and then letting the dénouement* sort itself out.

Here is that moment – a short extract from another very big scene.

‘And what happened?’ Reacher asked.

There was a long moment of silence.

‘He didn’t come back,’ Hobie said.

The silence was like a weight in the room. Somewhere a clock was ticking. It grew louder and louder until it was filling the air like blows from a hammer.

'It destroyed me,' Hobie said quietly.

The oxygen wheezed in and out, in and out, through a constricted throat.

'It just destroyed me. I used to say: I'll exchange the whole rest of my life, just for one more day with him.'

'The rest of my life,' his wife echoed. 'For just one more day with him.'

'And I meant it,' Hobie said. 'And I still would. I still would, Major. Looking at me now, that's not much of a bargain, is it? I haven't got much life left in me. But I said it then, and I said it every day for thirty years, and as God is my witness, I meant it every single time I said it. The whole rest of my life, for one more day with him.'

People often don't believe me when I say I don't plot. They say I'm making a myth out of my own process. That it's impossible to write a book without a detailed outline. But it's true. You can scour that archive and you will find no outline. No sequences of scenes or anything like that.

But the more I'm asked, the more I'm required to think about it. And I realise that I do have an outline, and whether or not you plan in advance, so too do you. In fact, you have a pretty detailed outline. There aren't many plots, which means there aren't many sequences that can be plausible as you navigate through a book. You've read thousands of books and have a thousand variations of how authors tackle it. You've got a consensus in your head about when you need cliff-hangers, when you need peaks of action, when you need lulls. The rhythms, the plot points, all those important things are baked deep into the back of your brain from your previous reading.

All of which reinforces the central theme of this course: that you already know how to do it. You've just got to let yourself realise that. Take a leap of faith, and trust that somehow your subconscious will tell you what you need and when you need it. Because other authors have already provided you with a host of solutions. When you've read enough books, you develop an acute subliminal sense of what you need, where.

The problem with relying on a detailed outline is that your book can become a little wooden, because you are shutting yourself off from the unexpected discoveries that you might otherwise make. Early on in *Killing Floor*, Reacher is involved in a fight in his jail cell. He wins. He takes a pair of sunglasses from one of the victims as a trophy. That was simply a piece of the action. I wanted to convey that it was somehow a formalised combat situation where the victor extracts spoils, and giving up the spoils is a symbolic admission of defeat. That was all. Then a couple of chapters later, I realised: wait a minute, I can use the fact that Reacher now has these glasses as a significant plot point. And that's what I did.

If I'd had fifty bullet points or fifty pages of notes to work through in order, I might have missed that little detour. And hundreds of others. So be ready to abandon your notes. Abandon them early maybe. Abandon them late if necessary. Your brain will tell you if there's a better way to go. If you are ever in the situation of thinking 'I really want to do this now, but it doesn't fit the outline', then trust the 'I really want to do this' part and abandon the outline. The outcome could well be better than for the writer who persists with a schedule of scenes he has to cover.

TAKEAWAY

Always trust your instinct over your outline.

EXERCISE

Try writing a chapter of your work-in-progress, or a short story, with only a single potent image or a single intriguing concept to guide you. That image or concept is both the point you set out from, and also the point that you reach. But your end point will not be the same as your starting point. It will have been modified, modulated, inflected by everything that has gone between. The start will be suggestive and full of promise. The end will be resonant, and full of echoes.

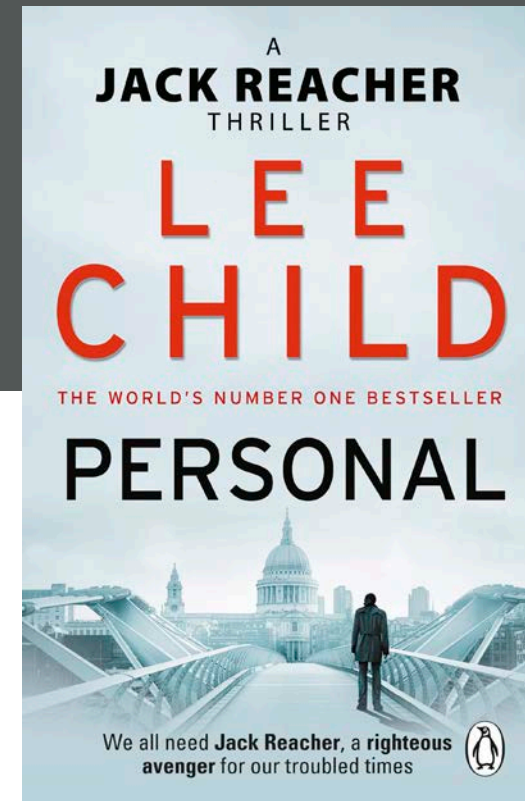
Dénouement

noun

The end of a story, in which everything is explained and resolved

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Remember, the writer
serves the reader.
But equally, the writer
is the reader.”



19. To Plot Or Not To Plot ~ Part 2

Which was when the plan went wrong. When the so-far easy execution ran off the rails. Although, afterward, in periods of honest reflection, Reacher found he thought of it as the moment when the plan went right.

Blue Moon, 2019



Remember, the writer serves the reader. But equally, the writer *is* the reader. Both are tapping into that same consensus structure. Both sides of your brain are in play. The reader half of your brain is subliminally demanding things and the writer half of your brain supplies them. That is a perfectly closed loop and it works fine. Trust yourself as a reader. Trust yourself as a writer. And if you're happy with what you've written, then lots of other people will be too. That's the perpetual message. You are writing for people exactly like you. Allow yourself to listen to the reader half of your brain. If the reader half is getting restless, pay attention to it, satisfy that need, and carry on.

It's because I'm a reader first that I write with no overt plan. Because there is nothing better than being hypnotised by a book. I remember one Christmas Day when my daughter was manager of a movie theatre and our family Christmas was going to start when she got up to our house in the evening. That afternoon I picked up a book. I really got into it. I was so reluctant to put it down that I caught myself hoping my daughter would be delayed by a snowstorm so I could get to the end before she arrived.

That is the greatest feeling as a reader. And it's what I want to feel as a writer. Story is so important to me that if I were to make an outline that basically told me the story, then I would know that story already and would need to move on to the next one. If I had to sit there and type out a story I already knew, I would be bored, and that boredom would show up in the writing. What I want is to start each day's work with the same feeling of excitement that I hope the reader will have. I want to sit down at my desk and think: what's going to happen today? I have no idea what's coming next, so I'm looking forward to it with great anticipation. Not knowing ahead of time preserves the purity of that excitement. It's my personal guarantee to the reader: I'm consuming the story just like you are – I know what it feels like to actually read this book.

The fact that every scene has to be invented on the spot means my word count per day is not high compared to a lot of writers. But they have spent months plotting and planning and devising their big outline. I haven't done those hours. So although on the surface it seems slow, my process is probably as quick as anybody else's from beginning to end.

People also want to know how I deal with plot problems. What if you get a hundred pages in and realise that something you wrote a few days ago is going to be like a ball and chain around the progress of your plot? That's a complex question that in my case plunges us deep into theory and psychology. For the most part I feel like I'm a completely normal, rational, sane individual, but when I'm doing this, when I'm writing the story, it's like it's real. It's like this is really happening and I just happen to be present and my role is to write it down. I'm like that old lady buying my book at the airport bookstore, who thought Jack Reacher himself was telling her the story. For me, as for her, the proposition is perfect.

Many times my editors have said, wouldn't it be better if this happened after that? And I say, yeah, probably. But it didn't. What I have produced is a true and accurate record and it would be dishonest to go back and change it.

So if you have given yourself a ball and chain earlier in the story, that is too bad. You've got to work it out. But not by going back. Do not go back and change it. This is reality. These are problems that the character is presented with. These are problems that the character has to solve.

A friend of mine had a protagonist who was an assassin but made the deaths look accidental or like the result of natural causes. There was plenty of ingenuity in his plots. One time he had described the security system at the main door of an apartment building. It was a fancy system, pretty much impenetrable. Later he realised his assassin had to get into that building and he was tempted to delete what he'd written. But he, like me, thought 'No, this is the reality of that apartment building. My character has to deal with that reality.' So then we got another ingenious scene in which the assassin beat the sophisticated security – much better than it would have been had the writer gone back and cheated.

If you have created a problem, the character has to sort it out. The more difficulty the character has, the more authentic, because life isn't necessarily easy and you can't turn back the clock. What happened, happened. Leave it alone and make the rest of the story fit.

The way I see it, storytelling is like a funnel that gets narrower and narrower. At the beginning, the story can go in any direction whatsoever. As soon as you make your first decision, that three-sixty landscape is narrowed into a quadrant. Then you make your next decision. It narrows again. You just have to keep going down that track.

And if something has happened that causes you inconvenience, so be it. Resolve that inconvenience in the present moment through the character's own ingenuity.

My approach is influenced by an old gameshow we had when I worked in television, which appealed to my taste for the random. Back then cooking shows were still rare. We would build two working kitchens in the studio and the researcher would fill the refrigerators with identical but random selections of ingredients. There could be a pork chop. There could be a bunch of grapes. There could be an avocado. Maybe an olive. Then the two celebrity chefs would cook a meal with whatever was in the refrigerators. Points were awarded first on how delicious it was, and second on whether they were able to use all the ingredients. Was there a leftover grape in the refrigerator? They would get a deduction for that.

That's my process for writing too. In the first half of the book, I let it unfold. This happens, that happens. This guy is dead. That guy is dead. Then I get to the midpoint and think, what have I got? What is in my refrigerator? Those are all the things I've got so far. Then the second half of the book is about making sense of them and moving toward a conclusion that is both surprising and inevitable.

Here's another analogy. Imagine you've dropped some ink on the page and it makes an ugly, meaningless blot. Then imagine you get a handbag mirror and put it at the edge of this blot, so that it's reflected. Now you have an entrancing symmetrical shape where one side relates meaningfully to the other side. It seems perfectly designed. That's how I want my book to come out. Whatever gets into the first half must be resolved in the second half.

A probably inevitable result of my kitchen-gameshow method is that you're going to end up with a couple of walnuts in the refrigerator that you were not able to use. You've got two options. One is that you go back and take them out and nobody will ever know they were there. The other, which I think is more natural, is to keep them in and allow them to be perceived as red herrings. They were there. They didn't amount to anything. That is very common in crime fiction, as it is in life. There are things that don't add up in the end. That doesn't mean you can go back and edit them out.

The archive also reveals that before I embarked on writing my first book I thought briefly about the classic Hollywood theory of 'the hero's journey', popularised by Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler – another one of those theories that tends to ossify into dogma.

Here is what I wrote – sketchy as my notes on plot, but more generic, less personal.

Ordinary World/Status Quo

Call to Adventure/description of problem

Refusal of the Call/reluctance

Meeting the Mentor/i.e. what is the motivator

Crossing the first threshold/i.e. precipitator

Tests, Allies, Enemies/initial alignment of characters

Approach to the Innermost Cave

Supreme Ordeal – climactic danger

Reward

The Road Back – not without difficulties

Resurrection – reaching the uplands

Return with elixir – happy & enriched ending

The hero is doing his thing when he is confronted with something bad. He is challenged to sort out that bad thing and needs to psych himself up. A mentor steps in and sends the hero off with his blessing. Crossing the first threshold precipitates the rest of the action. Secondary characters are divided into groups through stress. Is this person a friend or an enemy? We sort out who's on whose side. We map it out. We describe the landscape. The hero confronts the villain in his lair and is rewarded with success, but the home stretch is fraught with difficulty. Finally he returns safe, mission accomplished, undefeated.

That is how many would define the stages in a classic thriller plot. But how useful is it? Is there anything here that we don't already instinctively know? Hollywood didn't invent this stuff. Dante was deep into it in the fourteenth century, and he was riffing on Virgil. This is deep structure, not plot, and it's wired into the human brain.

TAKEAWAYS

Depend on yourself as a reader to inform yourself as a writer. You as a reader tells you as a writer exactly how to do it moment by moment. For a habitual reader, writing evolves as a learned instinct. Try writing without an outline. See what happens. Trust what you've already read. Trust what you already know.

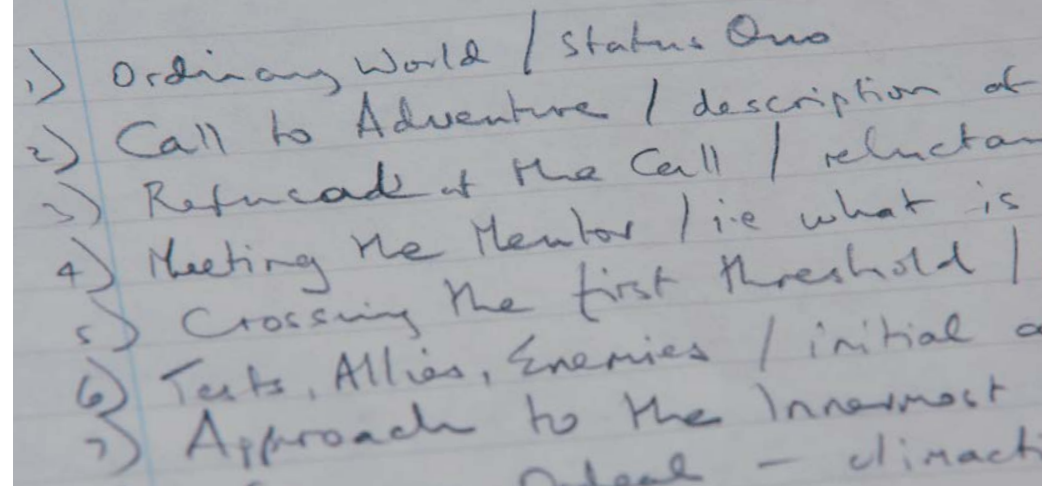
Life is littered with loose ends. So long as the deep structure of story is in place, it's okay to have a few in your book.

EXERCISE

Take note of the next image that arrests your imagination, or the next time you feel moved by someone's words, whether written or spoken. Take that single image, or those words, and set them as your target in writing a short story. The only rule is that you must set out without knowing how you will get there. Your first line may feel random. You may feel out of control. That might feel stressful, but it should also feel exciting. You may encounter problems along the way, but you and your character will find ingenious ways to solve them. You will learn to trust your storytelling instinct and your skills will be sharpened by the need to survive.

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**Absolutely everything can
have something in it that
will occur later as useful,
interesting, and important.**

- 
- 1) Ordinary World / Status Quo
 - 2) Call to Adventure / description of
 - 3) Refusal of the Call / reluctance
 - 4) Meeting the Mentor / i.e. what is
 - 5) Crossing the first threshold /
 - 6) Tests, Allies, Enemies / initial o
 - 7) Approach to the Innermost
- Ordeal - climax

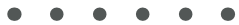
20. Research Is A Dish Best Served Cold

He read a report about new medical research. Maggots were being used in a revolutionary new treatment for gangrene. Their tireless eating consumed the gangrenous flesh before the rot could spread.

Tripwire, 1999

‘You’re doing wrong, but you’re doing wrong right.’

A Wanted Man, 2012



The thriller, or any kind of socially realistic modern novel where things happen in real time in real space, has to be grounded in convincing plausible detail, something the nineteenth-century French novelist Flaubert and his contemporaries were acutely aware of. So long as it is integral to the story, readers love information. I have a theory that every book, whatever it is, should be educational with a small ‘e’. In other words, without beating people over the head with stuff or overloading them with unnecessary detail or showing off your erudition*, it should inform as well as entertain.

In *Killing Floor*, my first book, I was fascinated by the fact that out of all the countries in the world, America is unique in that its bank notes are all the same size. Everywhere else, the small denomination bills are small, with progressively bigger and bigger sheets of paper for the large denominations. In America, the one-dollar bill is exactly the same size and shape as the hundred-dollar bill, the five-hundred-dollar bill, and

the thousand-dollar bill, and technically also the million-dollar bill, not that I’ve ever seen one. They’re all the same size. And Americans, who live with it their whole life, obviously know that. But it’s so familiar, so common, that they haven’t really thought about it. They no longer see it.

Really the whole plot of *Killing Floor* turns on the fact that all American bank notes are identical in size, which I thought was educational with a small ‘e’. And it was true. Readers were retrospectively fascinated by it, just as I had been. They would say to me: ‘obviously I knew that, but I’d never thought about it.’

I love that sort of content in a book. So how do you get it?

There are two big difficulties with research. The first is purely practical. Suppose you want to set your book in a certain part of the country and have a certain type of activity going on. You go to that location or a similar characteristic location. You take a notebook, you take a camera. You look at things. You photograph things. You make notes. Then you go home and start writing the book. It’s almost guaranteed that the research that you put in that book won’t work. It will be too fresh. It will be too new. It will be too clunky. We’ve all read books where you can almost hear the author saying between the lines: ‘I did the research, so I’m going to put it in, dammit, whether I need to or not.’

Research is a process that requires passage of time, so that you can mentally sort out what is important and what isn’t. It should be something like an iceberg: ten percent visible and ninety percent hidden deep beneath the surface. Ninety percent of research you can dispense with. It will get in the way. Or worse, create the horror of the info-dump.

Research has got to be useful to you. It can't control you. Therefore it is generally much better done long ago. So when people ask how I do my research, I have two answers, depending on context. My flippant answer is, 'I don't do any research'.

And that is true. For each individual book, I never deliberately go and find things out. Except in the case of trivia, like how many bullets does this gun hold, or how many inches tall is this car. I will check basic facts. But I won't do what I would call research for the book I'm about to write. Because it will be too fresh, too new, too lumpy. My pretentious answer is, 'For a writer, your whole life is research'. And that is also true. Every book you've ever read, every person you've ever met, every movie you've ever seen, every television show you've ever watched: absolutely everything can have something in it that will occur later as useful, interesting, and important.

I'll give you an example. When side airbags had started to appear in cars, I was reading a car magazine. It had a feature citing medical research that the human brain is three times better at withstanding front-to-back displacement than side-to-side displacement. If you're slammed sideways on, T-boned at a junction, and your head goes sideways, you need an airbag there because your brain is much more vulnerable to side-to-side impact. I read that and thought, that's interesting. More than ten years later I put that knowledge into my fourth book, *The Visitor/Running Blind*. Not in the context of a car wreck, but in the context of how Reacher chooses to hit somebody. He can hit him in the face, or he can hit him on the side of the head, which is more dangerous, so naturally he hits him on the side of the head, and I have a little sentence saying the human brain is three times more vulnerable to side-to-side displacement than front-to-back. It sounded perfect, exactly the kind of nerdy but sinister detail that Reacher would know.

That detail had come from a completely unrelated article at a completely unrelated time. So pretentious or not, your whole life really is research. But that research has

got to be percolated. It's got to be aged. By definition, the important parts will be the parts you remember.

The other difficulty with research is the conflict between accuracy and plausibility. Which is more important? Suppose you are reading a book set in London. You don't live there, but based on everything you've seen, the details match your mental image of London. Maybe you've been there a couple of times. You've certainly seen plenty of television shows and movies that take place in London. You've read books that take place in London. If what you're reading now fits that prior image you think, 'This is a superbly researched book'. But maybe it isn't. Because as you know, if you do live in London or if you go there frequently, London is actually not like the world's image of it. Polite bobbies in pointed hats and red phone boxes and gentlemen with rolled-up umbrellas: it's not like that anymore. There are not that many phone boxes, because everybody has a cell phone. The police no longer walk about in traditional uniforms. They've often got flak jackets on. They're often carrying weapons. They're often in pairs. But if you put that new reality in a book and somebody far away reads it, they would think, 'This is a poorly researched book'. Because it doesn't match the received image of London. So you've got to tread very carefully between accuracy and plausibility, and in general, plausibility is better.

Here's another example. My fifth book, *Echo Burning*, takes place far in the west of Texas. It's a very isolated, empty region. There is no police department for each town. It could be that the nearest police department is hundreds of miles away. Therefore, people rely on what they call the highway patrol, a state-wide organisation that has jurisdiction everywhere. I think everybody in the world is familiar with this concept from movies and television. The problem was that in Texas, this state-wide organisation is actually called the Department of Public Safety. And I felt that that would not communicate. If somebody in another part of the world is reading that book and comes across the Department of Public Safety, will that mean what it should

to them? I felt people in foreign countries would be scratching their head. They'd be thinking, 'What is that? Restaurant inspectors or something?'

The accurate name is 'Department of Public Safety'. The plausible name is 'highway patrol'. So in order to be plausible, I got less accurate. The rest of the world was totally satisfied. It gave them what they needed. It mapped it out correctly for them. They were happy. People in Texas were writing to me saying, 'You know it's not called the highway patrol'. They were not happy. But for the majority of readers, I had to be wrong in order to be right.

That happens all the time. In another book of mine set in New York, where I was living, I have somebody driving from A to B, and quite naturally, I described it as you would in the real world. You go down here, you go down there, you can't turn left here because it's no entry and so on and so forth. Then I read it back and thought, this reads like a MapQuest page on acid. Nobody needs to know about the one-way system in Greenwich Village.

So I simplified it. People generally understand the shape of Manhattan. It's long and thin, so it's basically all up and down – the side-to-side journeys are very short. I simply had my guy drive down the West Side highway and make a left into Houston Street to arrive at his destination, because people get the overall geometry. As a matter of fact, that's impossible, but in order to be plausible I deliberately got it wrong.

Research, like revenge, is a dish best served cold. And remember, you're not writing a report for the Department of Public Safety. You're writing for the reader of popular fiction, and the needs of that reader should always take priority over mere matters of fact.

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TAKEAWAY

In writing any given book, it is better to rely on what you already know, on what you've already seen and read. Don't be afraid to abandon your research. Don't be afraid to stray away from the truth. It's far better to be plausible than accurate.

EXERCISES

Keep reading.

Join a pub quiz team.

Play Trivial Pursuit with your friends and family.

Erudition

noun

Extensive knowledge or learning; scholarship



“

I read it out loud, because as we've said, that is a fabulous way of detecting things that you're not detecting when you're reading or working in silence.

21. Churning, Smoothing & Combing

'Right,' I said. 'But think about the punctuation. If the apostrophe was before the final letter, it would mean the garage belonging to one person called Stoller. The singular possessive, they call it in school, right?'

Killing Floor, 1997

'I want to believe it,' he said. 'But you're basing everything on a hyphen.' 'Don't dismiss it,' Reacher said.

Without Fail, 2002

• • • • •

Editing is a complex and vital process. Every book you've ever read has been edited. So what does that mean exactly?

The usual definition of 'edit' that most people carry around with them is to shorten or clip or reduce in some way. That is certainly part of it, but equally, a book editor might ask for expansion. More of a thing rather than less of a thing. More of a scene. More of a through line. Fundamentally, editing is about change. Do we change what we've got at the end of draft one? The answer is always yes.

There are four levels of editing. The first, and by far the most important, is your own. When you've finished your manuscript, you'll go back and check it. You'll figure out what's working and what isn't, what you're happy with and what you're not. You will

make your own changes. Your definitive version will then pass through three more levels of editing by a third party. It's essentially a question of close focus or zooming in.

First, your manuscript goes through content editing, which is a broad view. What's in the book? Is what's in the book alright? Here's an extreme example. If you've got some gruesome murder of a child, the content editor will say: 'We can't do this. This is too horrible. Readers won't like it. Maybe bookstores won't even carry this title with that obscenity in it.' You then have the choice to change that thing or not. It's always your choice. This is your book. This is your work. Generally speaking, editors are very deferential to that.

Next, your manuscript will be subject to a line edit. That zooms in to where the editor is looking line by line at word choices, infelicitous words, words that stick out, phrases that are clichés, things that are repeated too often. Again, lots of changes will be suggested.

The final third-party stage of editing, the fourth stage overall, is copy editing. That zooms in even closer to pick up spelling mistakes, and details like a car that was blue on page fifty mysteriously turning red on page two hundred and fifty. Copy editors are formally educated in syntax and grammar. There are certain traditional touchstones they are taught to observe, regarding repetition and punctuation and whether a verb should be in the subjunctive, for instance. You do not have to adhere to those formal conventions so strictly yourself.

In this lesson and the next, we are zooming in on your edit, the most important one. How you approach it is up to you. A lot of people write the first draft in a rush. They say the real skill in writing is re-writing. They will go back and do a second draft, maybe a third, fourth and fifth, maybe many, many drafts. I don't do it that way.

Except maybe I do, depending on how you look at it.

What I do is I write all day. Then the first thing I do the next morning is read back what I wrote the day before. I read it out loud, because as we've said, that is a fabulous way of detecting things that you're not detecting when you're reading or working in silence.

Then I make all the necessary changes that I can think of. This daily ritual produces two really valuable results. First, I have brushed up that passage to the best of my ability. Second, and very importantly, I have reintroduced myself to the mood and pace and feel of the story, so that when I start writing again I'm already totally in the groove.

I call this two-steps-forward, one-step-back process 'churning'. I write all day. I check what I've written the next morning and amend as necessary. Then I go on to write the next new section, which I will check the following morning. Eventually I get to the end of my first draft. You could call it one draft, but effectively it's probably the hundredth draft. Because every day I've churned through it, combing it, smoothing it, perfecting it. The level of perfection you can achieve this way is deeply satisfying.

I remember very clearly writing the opening scene of my twentieth book, *Make Me*. It's completely unexplained. A man named Kever is being buried. He's clearly dead. We don't know who he is. We don't know why he's dead. We don't know anything about anything.

In the very first paragraph, without yet knowing why, I wrote that the presumed bad guys were burying him in a place that was not observable from the air. I had this sentence: 'And they would use the air for a guy like Kever.' Clearly they are anticipating an aerial search, which incidentally begins to characterise the victim by giving him some status.

The next morning, when I read it back, I wasn't happy with that sentence. I felt what it needed was a comma halfway through. I decided that it should go like this: 'And they would use the air, for a guy like Keever.' In other words, I introduced a pause. That did two things, in my opinion. It emphasised the air search. It gave the word 'air' its own gravity, because we weren't immediately rushing onto the next word, because there's a comma preventing us from doing that. And it made the bad guys' language feel a little slower. A little more ponderous. As if these guys were not the smartest, maybe. They talked in broken-up, halting fragments of a sentence. 'And they would use the air, for a guy like Keever.' I felt that was a better rhythm. It better expressed the situation. It better characterised the people doing it. All with one comma.

The next sentence was: 'They would use spotter planes, and helicopters, and maybe even drones.' The next morning, the word 'spotter' stuck out, for two reasons. It was spitty, and it was rhythmically awkward. 'Spotter planes' didn't work out loud. So I changed it to read: 'They would use search planes, and helicopters, and maybe even drones.' 'Search' did two things for me. It was a little more serious. 'Search' sounds more determined than 'spot'. 'Spot' could be an accidental discovery. 'Search' suggests a relentless, deliberate activity. But it was also much better rhythmically. It smoothed the sentence out. It took out a syllable, and it took out the spittiness of the consonants. 'They would use search planes' was a glide that did not kick the reader out of the groove.

Here is a third example, from the second paragraph. Looking at it from the bad guys' perspective, I'd written that the only man-made structure their side of the horizon was a railroad track they could see. And when I read that the next morning, the use of 'the' with 'horizon' worried me. The pedantic part of me thought: there are four horizons – which one are we referring to and what about the other three? I also felt that it did

not quite communicate the extreme emptiness of the landscape. So I changed it to read their side of 'any' horizon. That's swapping one three-letter word for another three-letter word, but it made the whole sentence much stronger. It emphasised their isolation. Not just one horizon was blank. Every horizon was blank.

Here's a case where I took out a word. They're worried about the grave site being visible from the air, so they choose a pen in which hogs are always rooting around. On day one I had written: 'The dirt was always freshly chewed up.' On day two I thought: is 'freshly' a distraction? Is it an interruption to that sentence? Is 'freshly' an unnecessary word in terms of rhythm? Is it an unnecessary word in terms of content? Is it unnecessary in terms of style? I cut that adverb. Not because of Elmore Leonard, because there are no rules, but perhaps alerted by his admonition. I changed the sentence to: 'The dirt was always chewed up.' It reads better, scans better, has a better rhythm and loses nothing as regards information. On the contrary, it throws emphasis on 'always', which already does the job of 'freshly', because if it's always chewed up, then it was chewed up months ago, it was chewed up yesterday, and it's chewed up today. Therefore at any one time it is freshly chewed up. So I decided that 'freshly' had to come out. That cut made for stronger communication.

Then I had a line that read: 'Only one thing went wrong, and it happened halfway through the job.' I reviewed it, as I review everything, and I thought: that's not working in terms of pace and punch and immediacy. It was too wordy, even for a bunch of slow thinkers and slow talkers who are all fingers and thumbs. So I changed it to: 'Only one thing went wrong, and it happened right then.' Which was better for conveying the urgency of the situation. If things go wrong 'right then', the reader gets a sense of the panic the bad guys were feeling.

These are some of the ways in which you stress-test the whole book, literally down to the last comma. The decisions you make will affect nuance of meaning, pace, rhythm and articulation, and the overall quality of the ride for both new and returning readers.

TAKEAWAY

The presence or absence of a comma can make a significant difference to how a paragraph reads, which makes a significant difference to how that page reads, to how the chapter reads and ultimately how the whole book reads. No detail is too small to matter.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE CLOSE-READING YOUR OWN WORK

Is it the right rhythm? How does it sound? What inferences may be drawn, what subliminal messages received? Is every word doing its job? Is every word necessary? Is there a word or phrase you can cut? Can you say why? What difference does it make?

EXERCISE

In a **BBC Maestro world exclusive**, here are the second and third paragraphs of *Killing Floor* as I originally wrote them and as they were eventually published. Clearly the published version is longer, which means I've added stuff in, and clearly I think that version is stronger. Your task is to analyse the effect of each change, however minor. To get the full benefit, this analysis should be articulated in essay form, with sufficient clarity to inform a third-party reader. It should be structured, with general observations by way of introduction and conclusion, and detailed commentary on each specific change. Enjoy!



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CHAPTER ONE ~ Draft 1, as written by hand on 5 September 1994

This was a small diner, but bright and clean. Looked brand new. Built to resemble a converted railroad car.

I was at a window. I saw the police cruisers pull into the gravel lot. They were moving fast and crunched to a stop. Light bars flashing and popping. Didn't park. Doors burst open, policemen came out. Two from each car, weapons out. Two revolvers, two shotguns. This was heavy stuff. One revolver, one shotgun ran to the back. One of each rushed the door.

CHAPTER ONE ~ Final draft, as published in the US on 17 March 1997

The diner was small, but bright and clean. Brand-new, built to resemble a converted railroad car. Narrow, with a long lunch counter on one side and a kitchen bumped out back. Booths lining the opposite wall. A doorway where the centre booth would be.

I was in a booth, at a window, reading somebody's abandoned newspaper about the campaign for a President I didn't vote for last time and wasn't going to vote for this time. Outside, the rain had stopped but the glass was still pebbled with bright drops. I saw the police cruisers pull into the gravel lot. They were moving fast and crunched to a stop. Light bars flashing and popping. Red and blue light in the raindrops on my window. Doors burst open, policemen jumped out. Two from each car, weapons ready. Two revolvers, two shotguns. This was heavy stuff. One revolver and one shotgun ran to the back. One of each rushed the door.



“
Editing isn't all about shedding
excess baggage. Sometimes
it's about maximising what
you already have.”

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22. Don't Forget You're Still A Reader

'I just wanted to fix what was wrong with it.'

61 Hours, 2010



Best practice is to edit as you go. That's what I call churning, or combing, or smoothing. But however skilled you become at that process, when you get to the end of the book and read it through, there will be more edits that you need and want to do.

In my experience, this mostly happens toward the end of the book. When you're in the groove, really loving it and racing through, full of energy and full of direction, you are prey to the danger of seeing things so vividly that what is obviously clear to you may not communicate through the words. You've made assumptions, or what you've written depends on a couple of unstated things that you are totally aware of because you are so totally into it. I often have to add something to the final scene or the final important scene, because I realise that when I'm writing that scene I am experiencing it with such intensity that I am skipping over things. It's obvious to me what the geographic context is or the emotional context is. I'm living it. But have I made it clear for the reader? Very often, I realise that I haven't. So I will add a little, sometimes a few hundred words, to delineate that scene a little better.

Here's an example from the last important scene of my eighteenth book, *Never Go Back*, where Reacher has been intensely involved with a woman named Turner. As always, he knows that she's probably not going to come with him. This is what I originally wrote.

Turner chose a booth at the front window, and they watched a bus go by, and Reacher said, 'I'm a detective, and I know what you're going to say.'

She said, 'Do you?'

'You have no obligation. This was my thing, not yours. I came here. You didn't come to South Dakota.'

On final read-through, I thought: it's clear to me what this is about, but is it laid out well enough for the reader? So I added a few things.

Turner chose a booth at the front window, and they watched a bus go by, and Reacher said, 'I'm a detective, and I know what you're going to say.'

She said, 'Do you?'

'It was always fifty-fifty. Like flipping a coin.'

'That easy?'

'You have no obligation even to think about it. This was my thing, not yours. I came here. You didn't come to South Dakota.'

The coin motif reprised a recurrent theme established earlier in the book. The progress through the case, and therefore through the book, was like an algorithm. You either went left or right, and if you went left, then you got another choice, left or right, and so on. I brought this motif back to emphasise the characters' shared history and the randomness of the emotion that is now so painful.

A little later in the scene I had written:

'I understand,' Reacher said. 'The 110th is better.'

'And I got it back. I can't just walk away.'

'I understand,' Reacher said again.

'The 110th was your creation. If that makes you feel better.'

'I wanted to meet you,' Reacher said. 'That was all. And I did. Mission accomplished.'

On re-reading, I wanted to clarify that this was a mutual decision in a relationship of equals. So I gave Reacher a bit more to say.

'I understand,' Reacher said. 'The 110th is better.'

'And I got it back. I can't just walk away.'

'I understand,' Reacher said again. 'And I can't stay. Not here. Not anywhere. So it's not just you. We're both saying no.'

'The 110th was your creation. If that makes you feel better.'

'I wanted to meet you,' Reacher said. 'That was all. And I did. Mission accomplished.'

It's in character for Reacher to admit that it's fifty percent his fault, so that she won't feel exclusively awkward about it. And it's a reminder to the reader that Reacher must always move on alone at the end of the story. I know Reacher intimately, but what if somebody picks up this book as their first in the series? You can't afford to be too concise.

Here's another example. In *Personal*, my nineteenth book, Reacher has been working with junior federal agent Casey Nice. Together they've solved the problem, the plot is averted, and finally Reacher is confronting the bad guy that lay behind the whole conspiracy – a general in the army. I wrote it like this:

'I'm sure you could crush Ms. Nice's career, but you'll never find me. I'll always be out there. Suppose the SVR found out it was you who got Khenkin killed? Some of those IOUs might get cancelled. And they might retaliate. Rumours might start, about poor old Tom O'Day, who got so desperate he came up with a cockamamie scheme. Think of all those rookies laughing up their sleeves. All around the world. The whole community. That could be your legacy. It's a possibility, anyway. You'll have to live with it, I'm afraid. Or not.'

At the time, I assumed that 'I'll always be out there' carried sufficient threat. But on re-reading, I felt that I needed to make that threat more explicit. So I inserted five short sentences near the beginning of the paragraph and three at the end.

'I'm sure you could crush Ms. Nice's career, but you'll never find me. I'll always be out there. And you know me, general. You've known me a long time. I don't forgive, and I don't forget. And I won't have to do much. Talking might be enough. Suppose the SVR found out it was you who got Khenkin killed? Some of those IOUs might get cancelled. And they might retaliate. Rumours might start, about poor old Tom O'Day, who got so desperate he came up with a cockamamie scheme. Think of all those rookies laughing up their sleeves. All around the world. The whole community. That could be your legacy. It's a possibility, anyway. You'll have to live with it, I'm afraid. Or not. But don't think about ignoring it. It's you and me now, general. This thing won't have a happy ending.'

I added this detail to punch up the threat Reacher carries and deliver full value for the reader. But it also has the added commercial value of restating Reacher's uncompromising motto – 'Never forgive, never forget' – and reaffirming how lethal he is. It was a natural opportunity to reinforce characterisation. Like the great popular writer Mickey Spillane once said, the first chapter sells a book, but the last chapter sells the next book.

At the end of the self-edit process you have a draft that is one hundred percent your work, that you're happy with, and that you're ready to feed into the next part of the process. Which means you're about to get very annoyed.

This is the hardest part for me. I am confident my draft is good. I've checked it every day. I've checked it at the end. I've avoided the pitfalls. I've polished it. I've taken out commas, put in commas. It's as good as I can possibly get it. And then the editor comes back with comments and suggestions. If you're anything like me, you'll be incandescent with rage. Then after about twenty-four hours you start thinking: maybe she was right about this; maybe she was right about that.

You have to respect that third-party point of view. You have to take it seriously, while also being very sure, very confident that this is your book. They're not going to make you change it. They're going to suggest it would be better if you did. But ultimately, the final decision rests with you. Will this other person's opinion make your book better or not?

The dynamic is also affected by where you are in your career. The purpose of publishing is to successfully market books, make money for the company and as a by-product, make money for you. And publishers are going to have insider feelings about what works and what doesn't, in terms of content and style, but also in terms of how much fun is it to work with this author. At the beginning, you are essentially bidding to be on the inside track. But every stage of publishing is a choice: this guy or that guy. You want to be this guy, who gets the extra attention, the extra promotion, all the good stuff, not that guy, who is a bit awkward, a bit difficult to get along with. Because subliminally, when it comes to that choice, this guy or that, the guy that is a pain is not going to get the yes vote as often as the guy who is pleasant to work with.

So partly you have to respect the fact that to a large extent publishers know what they're doing when it comes to editing. And especially early in your career, you've got to respect the down-and-dirty reality that at that point, you need them more than they need you.

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TAKEAWAY

Editing isn't all about shedding excess baggage. Sometimes it's about maximising what you already have: making sure that what is crystal clear to you as the writer is communicated in full to the reader.

MORE QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE CLOSE-READING YOUR OWN WORK

Are there words or phrases that jar, or might cause the reader to stumble? Is the reader being made to work too hard to remember things? Is there potential for (unintended) confusion? Are there missed opportunities to reinforce characterisation or subtly raise the emotional stakes?

EXERCISES

In *Make Me*, as discussed in the last lesson, I wrote this sentence: 'Only one thing went wrong, and it happened halfway through the job.' The next morning, in the interests of immediacy and urgency, I changed it to: 'Only one thing went wrong, and it happened right then.' But why have I chosen to use a comma in this sentence? What difference does it make? What is the effect if you delete it? Do you think it should be there?

Similarly, the comma in this sentence is not required by grammar. So what is the effect of using it? 'I don't forgive, and I don't forget.'



“
You learn with the editor,
the editor learns with you.”

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23. The *Killing Floor* Edit

The vibe was wrong. There was no heartbeat.

A Wanted Man, 2012



I had various theories about how my first book should be done, which are explored in detail in my authorised biography. One thing I wanted was an honest, real-time account from the main character that filled in twenty-four hours of the day. I would show him briefly – not lengthily or exaggeratedly – going to bed, sleeping, waking up, getting up, having breakfast. I thought that was an approach that would work, and be authentic.

The other thing I wanted was for people to understand that as well as being a physically very competent person, Reacher is also mentally very competent. From the start, I wanted the reader to be able to think along with Reacher. If Reacher had a task, he would think about it in advance and come up with a number of possibilities. He could do it this way, he could do it that way or he could do it this other way. He would debate each option before he chose one and executed it. I love that system, because it gives you three bites of the cherry. You can entertain the reader with option A, you can entertain them with option B, you can entertain them all over again with option C. The reader has triple the enjoyment.

I felt these were good ideas. But the editor had problems with both. He wasn't happy with me accounting for every moment of every day. He wanted the book to be shorter and more concise. There's an early letter from him in the archive – in those days we were faxing back and forth across the Atlantic – that expresses his concern with

pacing. He wanted to sell the book as a thriller not a mystery, which can be more contemplative. My chapters needed to be shorter, he said. Reacher needed to be more active. He needed to stop telling us his plan in advance of executing it. There was too much dialogue. If the total was now 625 pages and we were aiming to cut 150, he said, then most scenes would need to come down by about twenty-five percent.

Here is the editor's note on page 547.

R sits down to eat at Eno's with Picard guarding him. R figures out how he can beat the clock and Kliner. This is brilliant deduction on Reacher's part [...] but it's a step back from the action. Can he think about this in half the number of pages? While he's driving with Picard? Can he just think about one challenge at a time instead of ticking them all off in his mind over 10 pages? He doesn't leave Eno's for 10 pages. This has all been thinking. It's slowing it down.

This is crunch time for any writer. I was upset by his comments because I felt that two things that were close to my heart – two things that I thought set me apart from other writers – were going to be thrown away. But I knew that I had to accommodate his response, and after being incandescent with rage for twenty-four hours, I did eventually agree about the length. I still believe that accounting for every moment of the character's day is more honest, but now accept that it's also impossible. To give an exhaustive account of even a single day is impossible. In books there will always be plenty that we don't record. I had miscalculated and could admit I was wrong. The book doesn't have to be honest to the point of perfection. It is perfectly okay to concentrate on the big stuff and then skip to the next big stuff without filling in all the details in between. So I made the cuts, and looking back all these years later, I would say that absolutely, my editor was right. The published version of *Killing Floor* is a lot stronger than the original manuscript.

The idea of cutting the deduction bothered me more. I pushed back against that. I tightened it. I shortened it. I made it briefer and punchier, but I kept in as much as I could, and what I couldn't keep in I reused later, when Reacher had successfully completed the mission and the person he was rescuing said, 'How did you find me?' Then I was able to complete the rest of the thinking, which I think the reader liked. Reacher is smart. That has just as much appeal as his fighting, or any of his other skills.

I felt protective toward my own work, but also recognised that I had to be super cooperative. In fact, the biggest input editorially on that first book came very early, and it was massive. We'll go into this in more detail when we talk about the insider view of the industry, but editors calibrate their suggestions partly on aesthetic considerations and partly on their view of the market. My editor told me that when he goes to a marketing meeting and says he has a great new book, the first question is always: 'What's it about?' He would have to be able to answer in three words, and the first two words would always be: 'It's about...' Which effectively means your book is going to be summed up in a single word.

As you will remember from Lesson 18, I had read a book about money laundering based on the narcotics trade in America. I had the image of the gigantic pile of money in a warehouse, but in my original conception that money was generated by the drug trade. Then my editor said to me: "'It's about drugs,'" is not going to work. It's not going to stand out. Can you think of a different plot?' So I did. Because I was a new author, and I had to make this relationship work.

I wanted to keep the fixed points: Reacher, the location, the various bits of action, and I certainly wanted to keep the massive pile of money in the warehouse at the end – that was the image I was heading towards and it was crucial to me. So I thought,

what else could generate this massive amount of money? And I got lucky, really. That very summer, for the first time in decades, the United States introduced a new design for the hundred-dollar bill. The reason behind it was that the US dollar fuels the world economy, especially the world's underground economy, and therefore the temptation to counterfeit American money is huge. But it's very hard to do, except for this one method where they bleach off the ink from a one-dollar bill and reprint it as a hundred-dollar bill. Remember, all American bank notes are the same size, so that's feasible.

There was great coverage of this subject all that summer. So I went back to my editor and said: 'It's about counterfeiting.' He was happy, and so was I. The switch didn't mess up the plot too much. It kept all the major points I wanted to hit and led me inexorably to that warehouse.

If the first book goes well, that engenders a real sense of collaboration. Then, if you're lucky enough to continue working with the same editor, the relationship will evolve over time. You learn what your editor feels and wants and thinks. Equally, the editor learns what you are capable of and what is important to you. Those two things merge into a consensus, and the process becomes much less disruptive.

Here is an example of how my relationship with my editor shifted between book one and book two.

When I was still struggling with that jumping into the swimming pool moment, I made the briefest of false starts with *Killing Floor*. It was so brief that I quickly forgot about it, hence the myth that I sat down and got it right first time. In fact there was a little metaphorical throat-clearing first, which is something you should always avoid at the beginning of a book. But I realised it wasn't any good almost straightaway, after just four or five lines. So I crossed it out and started again.

The new first line was: 'I was arrested in Eno's diner.' I thought then that it was a good solid first line and I still think it is. It never changed again. Not only was it a solid opening to the book, it was strong enough to launch my whole career. And it was all mine. It had nothing to do with my editor.

So for the second book, *Die Trying*, I was confident of choosing a good first line. I wrote: 'Nathan Ruben died because he got brave.' That sentence was the subject of a big argument with my editor. He thought 'got' was the wrong word. He wanted 'became' instead. He wanted: 'Nathan Ruben died because he became brave.'

I remember the moment well. We were at an industry event together. We went out to dinner in Philadelphia and had a huge row about it. Yes, 'got' is an abrupt, ugly word in that sentence. Yes, it's a little crass, a little unsophisticated. But more importantly to me: it's vernacular, it's direct, it's to the point. And it's honest. It promises the type of story this is going to be and the type of writing this is going to be. It promises a direct, plain, simple narrative.

I won that fight and 'got' remains in that first sentence. I still think it's very important and I still think it's right. The word 'became' would have been too prissy, too weak, too anodyne*. It would not have been the same strong first sentence with that word in it. So as well as learning what the editor is good at, you learn what you are good at, and what you can and should be confident in.

If you and your editor stick together, you learn together and you grow together. You become dedicated to the same task, producing the best book in the series that you can. So don't despair if the first round of content editing is savage and upsetting. The second one will be easier, the third easier still and by the time you get up to book twenty, it'll be really smooth plain sailing.

When you write your first book, maybe your second, even your third, you're still on a learning curve, you're still new. You haven't done this before. You have no track record. You need the publisher. Later on, with a bit of luck, the publisher will need you.

TAKEAWAY

You can learn a lot from someone who interrogates your choices and requires you to defend them. But the aim is to fulfil the major part of that editorial function yourself. And ultimately, the problems are yours to solve and the decisions are yours to make.

EXERCISES

Try cutting three words from every sentence in your work-in-progress.

Try reformatting your entire manuscript in a different font before re-reading. Sometimes that is enough to jolt you out of the fatigue of over-familiarity and help you see what you have written with fresh eyes.

Anodyne

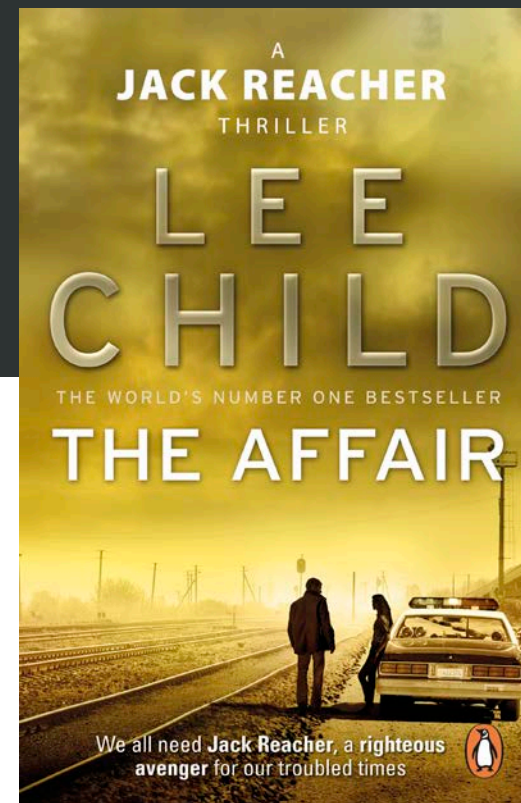
adjective

Not likely to cause offence or disagreement; somewhat dull

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If you try to write your book with one eye on the screenplay, you end up with a terrible book and a terrible screenplay.



24. The Book Is The Thing

‘You could sell the movie rights.’

Blue Moon, 2019



We’ve talked a lot about writers and readers being partners, co-conspirators in a reading-and-writing universe. But writers and readers are getting their entertainment from all kinds of different sources. There are very few people in the world who only read books. They may read lots and lots of books, but they also watch movies, they also watch television, they also listen to music. We are all swimming in the same river of cultural opportunity, with different currents exerting different influences. I rely freely on movies as a source of simile, knowing that the shared cultural reference points serve as a form of shorthand and a way of drawing the reader in.

When I started my first book, I was trying to characterise Reacher as a loner. How do you do that? Think about it. Here’s a guy who spends a lot of time by himself, which means he doesn’t talk very much, because who would he talk to? It’s not that he’s inarticulate, and he knows a lot about language. He’s just not with anybody. So how do you find the right voice for a person who is unaccustomed to talking out loud?

I found my answer in a movie. I had loved *Dances with Wolves*, where Kevin Costner plays a Civil War veteran who goes out west to the developing frontier. He’s out there on his own, surrounded by thousands of empty square miles. There’s nobody to talk to. But through the act of writing his diary, he provides a voiceover as a narrative device. His voice is halting – not inarticulate, but simply the voice of a man unaccustomed to talking out loud.

I also borrowed from the Terrence Malick movie, *Days of Heaven*. One of the characters is played by a young Linda Manz. She doesn’t have a big part, but any time there’s a new development, she introduces it as an offstage voice. It’s a brilliant voice in two ways. It’s raw and unpolished, again halting, and is characterised by a very natural choice of words. This is a normal person talking, but definitely somebody who is not used to providing a running commentary on what’s happening.

I was hypnotised by these voices, and drew on both to characterise Reacher.

We are instinctively at home with the idea that there is a link between books, films and television. In Lesson 19, for instance, we talked about Hollywood’s influence on received ideas of story structure. Certainly I remember dreaming that my first book would be a monster bestseller and be turned into a movie and I would never have to work again. That’s the nature of popular fiction. We all want that to happen. Because it’s fame and it’s money and it’s satisfaction. That’s all good.

But you can’t write a novel with one eye on the film treatment. Otherwise, you end up with a bad novel and a bad screenplay. It has got to be one thing or the other. There are technical reasons for this. In Lesson 8 we talked about control of viewpoint. We talked about knowing who is narrating the story in a book and respecting in a very disciplined way what they can and cannot know. In a movie, the narrator is the camera. And the camera lens can wander anywhere and do anything with complete neutrality. So there’s a vast difference between a novel and a film treatment. When you’re writing a novel, you’ve got to make it one hundred percent a novel. When it is bought by a studio and turned into a blockbuster, it becomes somebody else’s problem to adapt it. Don’t try and pre-adapt it. Don’t try and simultaneously adapt it so that you’ve got a dual-purpose manuscript. That won’t work. Do the novel one hundred percent. [Worry about the movie later.](#)

Killing Floor was the first Reacher book to be adapted by Amazon Prime. And at the genesis point we had two discussions. One, did I want to be involved in writing it? My answer was no. It's such a jump from a self-contained book to a television series that it is highly unlikely that one person is going to be expert in both. That's just a simple fact of life. It's unlikely that you're going to be world-class at tennis at the same time as you're world-class at football. It's much better if a third party with no emotional investment in the book comes along and reads it fresh, then rips it apart and puts it back together in the way that it needs to be for television. If I'd been involved, it would have been very difficult to remove or change anything. Because in my opinion, it's perfect already. Why would I want to waste any of it?

When you sell a book to the film industry, they often ask if you want to write the screenplay. As well as paying for rights to the property, they also give you a wage for doing this, which is essentially a bribe, because as soon as you've written that screenplay they're going to throw it away and write their own anyway. And if by some miracle your screenplay did survive and become a movie, that movie would be overlong, over-baggy, and unfocused. Simply because you're not brutal enough to rip your own work up and put it into the new form that it needs to be in.

The second discussion point was a variation on the problem I had faced back at the beginning: how do we represent a character who thinks more than he speaks? That has always been the problem for people who have bought the visual rights to the Reacher books, which first happened on the same day *Killing Floor* was published. They know it's a successful series that sells very well, has a lot of fans and a great central character. So naturally they're enthusiastic. They make an offer and they sign the deal. Then they think, what actually have we got here? And what they've got is a thing that is very internal. How does that work on the screen?

So with Amazon, one of the first questions that arose was: should there be a voiceover? Should Reacher provide a disconnected offstage voice to describe what he's thinking and feeling? And the decision we took was no: we would try to get the inside of Reacher's head out on screen through strategic use of point of view, without resorting to that particular artifice. In a funny way it was a contradictory loop, since as I've said, the tone and style of *Killing Floor* was rooted in two movies that made extensive use of voiceover.

Lots of writers are nervous about letting their books go to the movies. The money is great and the exposure is great, but they fear the compression – characters are combined, whole strands are missed out, timelines are changed. They worry, what are they going to do to my book? Lots of readers are nervous too, defensive on behalf of both writer and character. What are they going to do to this book?

To which the answer is, they don't do anything to the book. The book is still there, exactly where it was, on the shelf in the bookstore or the library. Nothing has changed. When the first couple of Reacher movies came out, people were saying, what have they done to your book? To which I was able to say: nothing. They didn't do anything to my book. In fact, the day after the first movie came out, I took *One Shot* down off the shelf and all the words were still there. The movie is someone else's interpretation of a great story, like the cover version of a hit single.

A book is not a chrysalis that is yearning to become something else. A book does not exist for the purpose of being made into a movie. A book exists to be read. A book is a book, the ultimate end product, sufficient unto itself. If you are a writer – and if you are truly a reader – then you will know that the book is the thing.

TAKEAWAY

If you try to write your book with one eye on the screenplay, you end up with a terrible book and a terrible screenplay. You've got to come down on one side or the other and commit one hundred percent.

EXERCISES

Take a random page from any Reacher book – or any other book for that matter. Make a list of all the things that resist translation into visual form.

Cliché has it that a picture is worth a thousand words. But is it possible that words can make us 'see' a thing more vividly? Explore this thought, giving reasons for your opinion.

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“

We're talking about popular fiction here and I hope that you write great books and I hope that they sell by the truckloads.



25. Why A Ford Is Better Than A Rolls Royce

The little Ford hummed along, bouncing now and then on eroded blacktop, pale wheat stalks strobing by on both sides. Overhead were thin clouds, and a new moon, and a dusting of distant stars.

Make Me, 2015

It was a Ford F150. Single cab, long bed. Dirty white paint. Close to a base specification, three or four model years old. A workingman's vehicle. A tool of a trade.

Past Tense, 2018



We're talking about popular fiction here and I hope that you write great books and I hope that they sell by the truckloads. I hope you become famous and make a fortune. But if you do, you're going to run into something that we all run into, which is the snobbery that exists around popular fiction versus literary fiction.

I want to talk about this briefly, not only because it's annoying and I'm indignant about it, but also because if you analyse the dispute, it will reveal some truths about what we are actually doing.

First of all, to call something 'literary' fiction arouses the pedant in me. Because as I said earlier, I went to a school where we learned Latin and Greek, which gives you

a very clear idea of the origin of words. And 'literary' comes from the word for 'letter' and means 'writing made up out of letters'. That includes all fiction, and every type of book. Yet 'literary' has come to mean refined, with connotations of superior artistic merit, in contrast to popular fiction, which – in part to bolster the fragile status of the highbrow – is allegedly churned out like a sausage machine to a formula as if it were easy. That's the first assumption we've got to examine.

Why do people think it's easier to do something that has to satisfy a large amount of people as opposed to something that has to satisfy a very small amount of people? It would seem to me it's easier to do something that has to satisfy a small number of people than a large, and yet the public perception is completely reversed. There's a serious point behind this observation.

There are two things that we need to recognise about habitual, skilled readers, who read so-called literary fiction. First, they never really expect to enjoy a book one hundred percent. If they hit eighty-five or ninety percent, they think that is a great, great book. Second, if they're not enjoying the book they've started, they'll put it down and immediately pick up the next one from a tall to-be-read pile. These people are already committed readers. That's their hobby, that's their life.

Popular fiction has the power to appeal to a different demographic. If I write a book and somebody picks it up and doesn't like it, they may never read another book again. They are the sort of people that read one book a year, maybe two books a year, conceivably three. They are the occasional readers. If I let them down, they may give up on books altogether and stick to movies or television or video games. So the stakes are incredibly high with popular fiction.

In popular fiction we are dealing with a large audience of variably committed readers. The responsibility we take on is much greater than the responsibility assumed by so-called literary writers.

We also have to exercise greater skill than they do. We have to give the reader a tremendous time, an enjoyable few days on the beach while they read our books, and we have to do that while concealing from them all the moving parts underneath. It's exactly like the metaphor I used before, which is that the reader gets into the back of a car and expects to go from A to B in comfort and at speed without being jostled and without being upset. And that depends on an awful lot of moving parts. The engine under the hood, the wheels, the suspension, that whole panoply* of equipment has got to be working secretly, unobtrusively, simply giving the reader a great time. That is a lot harder to do than strutting your stuff like a peacock.

What we are talking about here is the difference between a discretionary purchase and a necessary purchase. I grew up in Birmingham, England, which is functionally like Detroit in America. For us it was a company town. Everything was about cars. Everybody knew about cars. Everybody was interested in the new model coming out. What are they doing, why are they doing it and how?

It became clear to me early on that to make a luxury car is easy. You can spend what you like on the design, you can invest as much as you want in the tooling, and you can charge whatever you want for the product because there are always a few thousand idiots that will pay anything for a Rolls Royce. On the other hand, if you are building a Morris or an Austin or a Ford, let's say the old Ford Cortina or the Ford Fiesta, that is a real-world product. It has got to sell not in the few thousands, but in the millions, at a price that people can afford, and it has got to work and be reliable and be attractive every day of its life. From an industrial point of view, to build the Ford Fiesta is a thousand times harder than to build a Rolls Royce.

As writers of popular fiction we are catering for the real world. We are catering for a large market. We have got to have a product in the market that works, that is accessible, and that is enjoyable for the greatest number of people. It's like the rings of Saturn. There are habitual, skilled readers at the centre who like my books. Then, as you move out from the centre, there are the people who quite like reading from time to time, until you reach the very edge of the universe, where there are those who read just one book a year, at most two. To satisfy that span of readers is a lot harder than to satisfy a tiny elite. So never let yourself be called formulaic. Don't think of yourself as churning anything out. This requires effort and skill and is worthy of a great deal of respect.

Here's another thing. If you are valuing so-called literary fiction higher than popular fiction on some kind of scale of merit, then what you are really doing is talking about the readers of that kind of fiction. You are saying that the people who read highbrow literary fiction are worth more than the people who read lowbrow popular fiction. And that is completely wrong. Everybody is worth the same. Every reader is equal. You simply have to respect their tastes.

If somebody likes highfalutin* stuff, then knock yourself out. But most people don't. Most people like popular fiction. That's what popular means: most people. Those readers are of equal value to anybody else, and their pleasure, their satisfaction, their enjoyment, is just as important as anybody else's. So if you write for those people, you are doing a good thing. You are acknowledging their worth, and you are giving them something they desperately need: escape. People talk about escapist fiction as if it were somehow bad. But I would argue that escape is the whole point of story, to get out of your humdrum life to a different life, any different life, but especially a life that is more exciting, more autonomous and self-directed, a life in which the reader feels they could have agency and affect the world.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with escapist fiction. At the extreme end, escape can be a matter of survival. If you write a book that enables somebody to escape from the drudgery of everyday experience, if you can help by taking their mind off their problems, by giving them relief for a few hours or a few days, that is a huge accomplishment that should never be diminished. To be a writer of escapist fiction should be a badge of honour.

In the end there are only two kinds of book: the one that makes you miss your stop on the subway and the one that doesn't, the one that you read for pleasure and the one that you read for approval, the one that sells and the one that doesn't. Books are written and then they go on sale and then the reader decides what to buy, and the reader is always right, because the only thing that matters is the reader's satisfaction. All other measures, such as 'writing for yourself' and 'art for art's sake', are narcissistic self-aggrandisement*.

Ideally, popular fiction should be so popular that the concept of a target market becomes irrelevant. You don't want to limit yourself to people that read a certain genre. You want to exceed genre. You want to get every reader you possibly can. To imagine a target market is defeatist. Why limit yourself from the outset?

Yes, there is personal satisfaction to be had from the personal achievement of writing a book, and seeing it on the bookshelf, and taking it down and looking at it, but there is even greater reward in having someone read it. It follows logically that the more readers the merrier. Why pretend otherwise? Don't you want a sell-out crowd?

A little way into my writing career, when it was starting to go quite well, I had a dream. In this dream, a journalist shoved a microphone at me and said with astonishment: 'You've sold three billion books! That's half the world population. How does that make you feel?' And in my dream I replied, as I probably would in real life: 'What's wrong with the other half?'

Don't have a target audience. That's too small. You're writing for the whole world.

Panoply*noun*

An extensive collection

Highfalutin*adjective*

Pompous or pretentious; arrogant

Self-aggrandisement*noun*

Action intended to enhance personal power and prestige

TAKEAWAYS

Whichever spot in the hierarchy you decide to occupy, your only obligation as a writer is to do the very best job you can with a view to making your readers happy. The reader spends their hard-earned money on buying your book and their irreplaceable brain cells on reading it. The reader is the paying customer and the customer is always right.

Fiction that sells is not 'dumbed down'. Writers of bestselling books are not less artistic than writers of worst-selling books. They simply make different aesthetic choices. Reading is an optional activity. No reader can read all the books. You want them to choose yours. So make them enjoyable. Irresistible. Addictive.

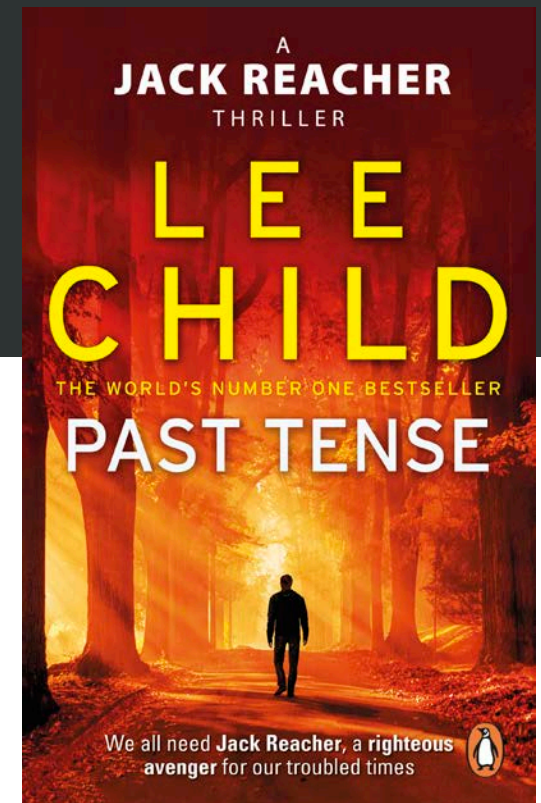
EXERCISES

Take a random page of any Reacher book – *Make Me*, for example – and analyse it. What is it about the prose that makes the book appeal to more skilled, habitual readers and book lovers as well as occasional holiday readers?

Choose a book you especially love. It could be for the most intimate or the most banal reason. Perhaps you found a character sexy. Perhaps there was a single line that blew you away, or a moment you will never forget. Perhaps the book made you laugh, or cry, or both. Whatever the reason, however intimate or however banal, try to come up with a truly real and personal answer to the question: Why do you love that book?

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“Remember, this is not about you. It’s about the book and the reader’s reaction to the book. That’s all that counts. You come third on that list.”



26. Ditch The Airs & Graces

The truck was a Ford. Nothing fancy.

A Wanted Man, 2012



The image of being a writer is a strange thing. It used to be an impoverished artist in a garret. Then it became a guy wearing a beret and a leather jacket and smoking a Gauloises cigarette, sitting at a café table for hours without really producing anything, just thinking. For me, writing is just something I do. I don't really think of myself as a writer, much less an author. I'm just a guy who tells stories on the page.

I remember Martin Amis once saying that writing a novel is like pulling your guts out through your nose with a button hook. Martin is a nice guy and we're friends, but I remember thinking: 'Really? Is that what writing is?'

Writing is not that at all. Writing is skilled labour like anything else. I think that almost all labour is skilled. There's really no such thing as an unskilled job. Everything requires some kind of expertise. And writing is no different. It's a job that requires talent and skill, but most of all it requires dedication, professionalism and application. You have to put your bum in the chair and get on with it.

Then you get related concepts, like writer's block. I'm not sure what that is. Why do people want that to be a thing? They want to make the craft of writing appear more difficult than it really is. Writing is a job like any other. Have you ever heard of a truck driver having truck driver's block? Have you ever heard of a nurse having nurse's block? Of course, there are days when the truck driver and the nurse do not want to go to work. They just fancy staying in bed and having the day off. We all get that.

But let's say you're a truck driver. You really want to stay home but you can't, because you have a job to do and a wage to earn. So you go to the depot and you get in your truck and you press the preheater button and you clip on your seatbelt and you check the mirrors and you start the engine and you put it in gear and you set off going. During that little period of re-familiarisation your muscle-memory kicks in. You get into it. You're doing the job.

The same applies as a writer. Some days you don't feel like doing it, but you have to. You've got a deadline; you've got readers waiting. You have to deliver. So you go in your room, you sit down in your chair and you boot up the computer. I used to have a computer with Minesweeper on it. And I had a ritual. I would have to do the expert level of Minesweeper in fewer than three hundred seconds, which usually took me two or three goes, and by that time the muscle-memory had kicked in, I had re-familiarised myself with the task ahead of me, and I would be off and running and do a decent day's work.

That's all writing is – skilled labour. You get the work, you do it well and you're proud of it afterwards. That's something I learned where I grew up. Birmingham was an artisan town back then. It was all about metalworking, some of it unbelievably sophisticated, some of it very down-and-dirty. The father of a friend of mine worked in a little three-man workshop with an earth floor. They had a lathe and a drill press and not much else. Yet those guys could make anything that you wanted.

I had a chance to see that close-up. When I was young and poor and we had just bought our first house and had no real money left over for furniture, the only thing we could afford was one of last year's flat-pack sofas on sale. This was when flat-pack furniture was new and people hadn't really seen it before. So we took the carton home and we opened it, and the carton had a hole in it and one of the bolts had fallen out. Which meant I couldn't put it together.

So I took the surviving bolt, went over to Birmingham, went to one of those little workshops and said to the guy: 'Can you copy this?' He said 'Sure, how many do you want?' 'Just one,' I said. And he said 'All right, come back in an hour.' So I came back in an hour and he held out his big oil-stained hand and in it were two identical bolts. And I thought 'Oh no, I only wanted one, I can't afford two.' But in fact one of them was the original, and one of them was the copy. The copy was perfect and it was all done by hand and by eye. I said 'Wow, that's great!' But the guy just laughed off the praise. He gave me the bolts and I gave him the money. That is the attitude I like more than anything: do the job, do it right, do it well, do it with a certain amount of pride, but don't go on about it, don't make a big deal out of it.

Remember, this is not about you. It's about the book and the reader's reaction to the book. That's all that counts. You come third on that list.

TAKEAWAY

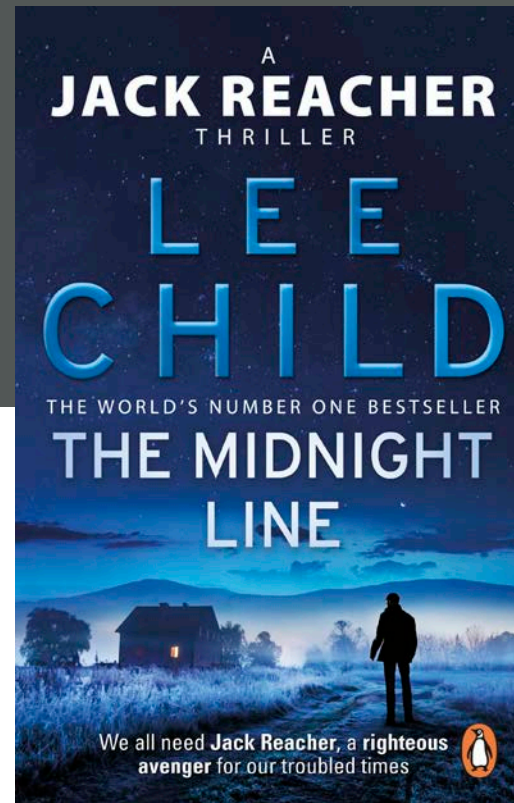
Keep the emphasis on the product, not the producer. It's the product that matters.

EXERCISE

Stick at it.

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“
So a word of caution:
go easy on the special effects.
Use them selectively, sparingly.”



27. How Not To Write Dialogue

And so began a completely typical hitchhiking conversation, with every party spinning yarns based on half truths and inflated experiences.

Never Go Back, 2013



I said earlier that there are two dealbreakers that separate the sheep from the goats when it comes to a finished manuscript. The first was point-of-view control. You have to be absolutely consistent about who is telling the story.

The second dealbreaker is dialogue. You have to make it sound like real people are talking to each other about real things. Years ago I won an award for natural dialogue from the *Fort Worth Evening Telegraph* in Texas. Which is a funny thought, because dialogue in a book is the furthest possible thing from natural. It bears no relation to how people actually talk to one another. You can easily prove this. Simply get your phone and leave it recording while you are sitting around with your family and friends, then review what you have recorded.

What you will find is a chaotic mess. These are people talking normally, unaware that they are being observed, but if you were to transcribe that conversation accurately it would look nothing like the dialogue you need in a book. In the real world, people stop and they stumble and they say 'you know' and 'mmm' and 'er'. They go back and they jump around. Natural conversation is never going to work for a book.

As a writer, you have to pull off a huge trick. You have to make it look on the page like these are real people talking normally, even though neither of those things is true and even though it won't actually be anything like real life. Somehow you have to find that perfect blend. What can you miss out? What must you preserve? At the end of the day, it is dialogue that will separate a book that works from a book that doesn't.

So how do you write dialogue? First of all, as always, rely on what you already know as a reader. You have read tens of thousands, possibly a million lines of dialogue in your life. And some of it just flows right by you and it's great and it's natural. So find that dialogue and study it. What is the writer doing?

Let's look at some examples together.

The first is from the book *Alibi*, by a good friend of mine and a great writer, Joseph Kanon. He writes recent historical fiction, thrillers mostly set just after World War Two. This example could not be simpler, yet is indicative of a whole personality. Having just revealed something a little difficult, the speaker says:

'Well. Enough of that. Do you have a cigarette?'

With just nine words and three punctuation marks, this captures both mood and character perfectly. We know it's a woman speaking. Nobody else would ask for a cigarette like that in 1945. Then the prim 'Well', backed up by the dismissive 'Enough of that', to sweep any embarrassment under the carpet, followed by the question, to divert attention away from that particular conversation and move on. It's possible that it's an accurate transliteration of how a person might have spoken in the period, but unlikely. What is certain is that there is nothing fancy. The words are plain and simple. There is no description getting in the way, no qualification, no commentary, no editorial. The line stands alone and means what it means, which is vastly more than the face value of those nine words. 'Well. Enough of that. Do you have a cigarette?'

Imagine an audiobook or a movie. The actor can exploit pitch and emphasis and tone, can raise or lower his voice, can mumble or inject a note of laughter, can allow his words to fade and die away. But you can't act when you are writing dialogue. There is no human presence. Words are all you have. Like Joseph Kanon, you've got to put them down on the page in a way that suggests that presence. It's really an instinct, but one you can bring to the forefront of your mind and hone and sharpen. If you can do it, you'll be able to do it forever. If you can't, your book is not going to work.

Here's an example from toward the start of my fifth book, *Echo Burning*. Reacher is hitchhiking and has been picked up by a Mexican woman who is heading to a place called Pecos.

'So is Pecan worth seeing?' Reacher asked, in the silence.

'Pecos,' she said.

'Right, Pecos.'

She shrugged.

'I like it,' she said. 'It's mostly Mexican, so I'm comfortable there.'

Her right hand tensed on the wheel. He saw tendons shifting under the skin.

'You like Mexican people?' she asked.

He shrugged back. 'As much as I like any people, I guess.'

'You don't like people?'

'It varies.'

'You like cantaloupe?'

'As much as I like any fruit.'

'Pecos grows the sweetest cantaloupe in the whole of Texas,' she said. 'And therefore, in their opinion, in the whole of the world. Also there's a rodeo there in July, but you've missed it for this year. And just north of Pecos is Loving County. You ever heard of Loving County?'

He shook his head. 'Never been here before.'

'It's the least-populated county in the whole of the United States,' she said. 'Well, if you leave out some of the places in Alaska, I guess. But also the richest, per capita. Population is a hundred and ten souls, but there are four hundred and twenty oil leases active.'

He nodded. 'So let me out in Pecos. It sounds like a fun place.'

'It was the real Wild West,' she said. 'A long time ago, of course. The Texas and Pacific Railroad put a stop there. So there were saloons and all. Used to be a bad place. It was a word, too, as well as a town. A verb, and also a place. To pecos somebody meant to shoot them and throw them in the Pecos River.'

'They still do that?'

She smiled again. A different smile. This smile traded some elegance for some mischief. It eased her tension. It made her appealing.

'No, they don't do that so much, now,' she said.

'Your family from Pecos?'

'No, California,' she said. 'I came to Texas when I got married.'

Keep talking, he thought. She saved your ass.

'Been married long?' he asked.

'Just under seven years.'

'Your family been in California long?'

She paused and smiled again.

'Longer than any Californian, that's for sure,' she said.

That was a getting to know you scene. I think it reads like a real conversation. But there are two key points to make.

First, it's nothing like a real conversation. A real conversation would be open-ended and choppy, full of place holders and false starts. Second, there's the subtlety around attribution, the verb that identifies the speaker for each line. You only half-read those words. You skim over the 'he said' and 'she said'. They are like tiny markers that are there to transmit information, almost subliminally, providing reassurance without demanding attention.

When you read the book out loud, as I said in Lesson 9, those dialogue tags can seem obtrusive. You might become overly conscious of them, and feel you need to get rid of them or vary them. But when you are reading silently off the page, it's as though they are barely there at all. So don't get fancy with your attributions. Don't have 'whispered', 'shrieked' and 'murmured'. Don't fall prey to that spurious* advice of not repeating words, of finding a cascade of alternatives for your attributions. Because those attributions are not really there. If you start drawing attention to them by showing off your vocabulary, you'll create a speed bump for the reader. The beauty of 'he said' and 'she said' is that precisely through repetition – 'said, said, said, said, said' – they become invisible, allowing us to focus on the words inside the quotation marks instead, which is what the characters are actually saying.

Let's look at another example. This is from the beginning of my twenty-second book, *The Midnight Line*. Reacher has seen a ring in a pawnbroker's window and wants to know where it came from. The pawnbroker is defensive.

'I'm not going to tell you my business. Why should I? It's all legal. It's all perfectly legitimate. The state says so. I have a license and I pass all kinds of inspections.'

'Then why be shy about it?'

'It's private information.'

Reacher said, 'Suppose I buy the ring?'

'It's fifty bucks.'

'Thirty.'

'Forty.'

'Deal,' Reacher said. 'So now I'm entitled to know its provenance.'

'This ain't Sotheby's auction house.'

'Even so.'

The guy paused a beat.

Then he said, 'It was from a guy who helps out with a charity. People donate things and take the deduction. Mostly old cars and boats. But other things too. The guy gives them an inflated receipt for their tax returns, and then he sells the things he gets wherever he can, for whatever he can, and then he cuts a check to the charity. I buy the small stuff from him. I get what I get, and I hope to turn a profit.'

'So you think someone donated this ring to a charity and took a deduction on their income taxes?'

'Makes sense, if the original person died. From 2005. Part of the estate.'

'I don't think so,' Reacher said. 'I think a relative would have kept it.'

'Depends if the relative was eating well.'

'You got tough times here?'

'I'm OK. But I own the pawn shop.'

'Yet people still donate to good causes.'

'In exchange for phoney receipts. In the end the government eats the tax relief. Welfare by another name.'

Reacher said, 'Who is the charity guy?'

'I won't tell you that.'

'Why not?'

'It's none of your business. I mean, who the hell are you?'

'Just a guy already having a pretty bad day. Not your fault, of course, but if asked to offer advice I would have to say it might prove a dumb idea to make my day worse. You might be the straw that breaks the camel's back.'

'You threatening me now?'

'More like the weather report. A public service. Like a tornado warning. Prepare to take cover.'

Again, I think that works well as a confrontation between Reacher and somebody who's reluctant to give him what he wants to know. But look at it closely. The sentences are all complete sentences, the statements are all neat and tidy. There's no stumbling. There are no false starts, no cut-offs, no interruptions. It's all perfectly grammatical and all absolutely unnatural. Yet it reads naturally and sounds like real people talking. It creates the impression of being natural. It creates the impression of an argument inside a pawnbroker's shop without transliterating it exactly. Remember: it's more important to be plausible than accurate.

Here is one final example from my fifteenth book, *Worth Dying For*. This is not an argument. It's more of a tender, heartfelt conversation, that would fit equally well with our discussion in Lesson 10. Reacher is looking at a picture of this woman's missing daughter.

'She was very beautiful.'

'Wasn't she?' Dorothy said, smiling, not with pride, because the kid's beauty was not her achievement, but with simple wonderment. She said, 'I still miss her. Which I think is strange, really, because the things I miss are the things I actually had, and they would be gone now anyway. The things I didn't get to see would have happened afterward. She would be thirty-three now. All grown up. And I don't miss those things, because I don't have a clear picture of what they might have been. I don't know what she might have become. I don't know if she would have been a mother herself, and stayed around here, or if she would have been a career girl, maybe a lawyer or a scientist, living faraway in a big city.'

'Did she do well in school?'

'Very well.'

'Any favourite subjects?'

'All of them.'

'Where was she going that day?'

'She loved flowers. I like to think she was going searching for some.'

'Did she roam around often?'

'Most days, when she wasn't in school. Sundays especially. She loved her bike. She was always going somewhere. Those were innocent times. She did the same things I did, when I was eight.'

Reacher paused a beat and said, 'I was a cop of sorts for a long time. So may I ask you a serious question?'

She said, 'Yes.'

'Do you really want to know what happened to her?'

'Can't be worse than what I imagine.'

Reacher said, 'I'm afraid it can. And it sometimes is. That's why I asked. Sometimes it's better not to know.'

She didn't speak for a long moment.

Then she said, 'My neighbour's son hears her ghost screaming.'

'I met him,' Reacher said. 'He smokes a lot of weed.'

'I hear it too, sometimes. Or I think I do. It makes me wonder.'

'I don't believe in ghosts.'

'Neither do I, really. I mean, look at me.'

Reacher did. A solid, capable woman, about sixty years old, blunt and square, worn down by work, worn down by hardship, fading slowly to grey.

She said, 'Yes, I really want to know what happened to her.'

Reacher said, 'OK.'

As always, there are the disappearing attributions and the unrealistic complete sentences. But I've chosen this dialogue because I think it succeeds well in doing something that is tricky on the page unless you use italics or underlining, which is to communicate emphasis. Readers are expert at injecting that missing human presence and figuring out which word is the most important, which one might be louder, but the writer has got to assist in that process by writing an implicitly rhythmic sentence that prompts the reader to instinctively fill in the pauses and hesitations and stress.

All the writer has to work with is the printed word. No facial expressions, no hand gestures, no tone of voice: just strange black marks on white paper. Yet if we put those literary marks down in the right order, we can convey the whole range of emotion, from sardonic detachment through anger and hostility to sadness and empathy.

You'll notice that in all those extracts there is only one notable example of the vernacular, when the pawnbroker said: 'This ain't Sotheby's Auction House.' One instance of 'ain't' is enough to indicate that this is a guy who speaks in a downmarket way. You don't need to labour the point. The reader will pick up that particular ball and run with it. The same applies to accent and dialect. If you transliterate all those unconventional pronunciations and word forms onto the page it gets in the way of understanding and wears the reader out. Like unnecessary variation of speech tags,

it becomes artificial and showy, drawing too much attention to the writer. So a word of caution: go easy on the special effects. Use them selectively, sparingly. All you need is the occasional subtle reminder: this is that guy and he speaks like this.

Another way of dealing with this aspect of dialogue is to recruit your narrator. I remember doing this in my sixth book, *Without Fail*. There was a guy with no front teeth who couldn't pronounce the 'l' in 'help'. In his lines of dialogue I wrote the word normally, but I had Reacher note and comment on it – 'He said it he'p.' The eccentricity is used to characterise the guy, is explained briefly in the narration and then never referred to again.

Dialogue can be one of the trickiest skills to master. You are taking real-life conversation, altering it beyond all recognition, putting it down on the page, and making it feel like real-life conversation. Like I said, it's a magic trick. And it's make or break.



TAKEAWAYS

Dialogue that reads naturally on the page will not be natural dialogue. You have to make the way your characters speak feel natural without allowing them to speak naturally.

Avoid showing off with your attributions. Let the line of dialogue count for everything.

EXERCISES

Record a real-life conversation. Transcribe it literally, down to the last incoherent detail. Then rewrite it in a way that works on the page. This will require both effort and art, but the end result should feel both effortless and artless.

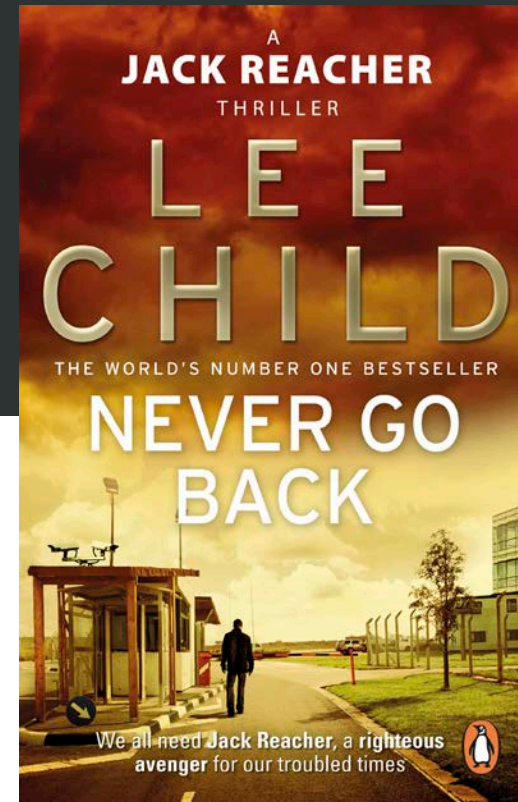
The original conversation may be quite banal. In a second iteration of the exercise, without fundamentally altering the basic scenario, see if you can subtly up the stakes in terms of emotion, tension or intrigue.

Spurious
adjective

Based on false reasoning or untruth and therefore not to be trusted

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“
You’ve got to create a situation
where the reader doesn’t want
to put the book down.”



28. A Prose That Trips Forward

Everyone's life needed an organising principle, and relentless forward motion was Reacher's.

Nothing to Lose, 2008



Your job as a writer is to hook the reader at the beginning of the book and deliver them to the end. That may sound obvious. It may sound easy. But it's a skill in itself. Hooking the reader at the beginning is one thing. Making sure they stay with the story to the end is a whole other thing, and in the case of some readers, elemental.

Some of the compliments I receive sound strange to a lot of people. Those people have had a certain amount of education and have a certain amount of experience with reading. It's something they do at least relatively often. It's something they enjoy. But some people are not natural readers. Perhaps they were alienated in school. Perhaps they didn't go to school at all. Perhaps they struggle to read. To those who are not habitual readers, finishing a book can be a source of intense gratification. Which is why I regularly have people say to me: 'I loved your book; I finished it.' It's an especially touching compliment.

Getting the reader from A to Z is your primary responsibility. It's a bit like when you drive into the carwash and your car gets hooked up to a chain that pulls you through. The way I think of it, I'm putting my arm around the reader, but my hand then migrates to the flat of their back and even though they don't realise it, I'm pushing them gently through the book.

There are plenty of distractions in the world, plenty of opportunities to put the book down. You've got to create a situation where the reader doesn't want to put the book down, where they can't put the book down. The reader doesn't necessarily understand how this is happening or what you are doing. All they are aware of is the sensation of feeling compelled to read on.

How do you do that? It is literally a syllable-by-syllable process from the very first word to the last. Each word, each sentence, each paragraph has to be designed, perhaps instinctively, but also knowingly, in such a way that the rhythm trips constantly forward, forward, forward, so that the reader is swept along by the prose. That internal rhythm, the rhythm of every clause and every sentence, is the chain that is pulling the reader irresistibly through the book.

Yet that forward movement still has to accommodate variation, diversion, digression, because relentlessness of any kind is ultimately deadening. Relentless pace is the same as having no pace at all. Relentless pathos is the same as having none at all. Everything is light and shade, everything is variation.

You can see this in any work of art. A favourite example of mine is the Chuck Berry song, 'Johnny B. Goode'. It's an amazing little capsule: barely two minutes long, and yet it tells a whole story, and tells it with both supreme economy of language, but also redundancy of language. There are very few words in total, yet some of those words are technically wasted, as in the line, 'There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood'. The second half of that sentence is evidently unnecessary. There was a log cabin. That's all we need to know. That sums it up perfectly. To also say that it's made of earth and wood is a wild indulgence, an extravagant luxury. In a tight, two-minute

song, Chuck is using redundancy to amplify the sense of space, to counter the fact that the form is so constrained. He creates a relaxed, expansive mood that contrasts with the urgency of the narrative.

That, in microcosm, is what you have to do with a book. Every single sentence must supply information, intrigue, humour, whatever it needs to do at that particular point, but every single sentence must also deliver you to the next sentence, which then needs to tumble you into the next, and so on and so on. If you can do this, then that is a book that is easy to read and feels shorter than it really is, just as 'Johnny B. Goode' feels longer.

There's plenty of wide-open space in a Reacher book, plenty of spare time. But whatever the pacing or mood in any given scene, the rhythm always trips forward. So how do you make the rhythm of your writing fall forward rather than falling flat or leaning backward?

Narrative drive is incredibly important, but it has to be modulated. Not everything needs to be one hundred miles an hour. Sometimes you have to hit the pause button, and briefly arrest that forward motion. Sometimes you want to take a side route, or even briefly loop back. The hundred-miles-an-hour parts will benefit from being set against slower, quieter parts. And you can combine those slower, quieter parts with something else. They're not wasted space. They're not taking a break for the sake of it. You can use them for a dual purpose.

In *Never Go Back*, for instance, I had a scene where Reacher had to guess whether or not something was going to happen. I could have done that in one line. I could have said, Reacher guessed that this was going to happen, so off he went to a certain location. But that's dry and it's dull and it doesn't show us anything about anybody.

It doesn't give us a chance to luxuriate in a quiet passage and it doesn't draw the reader in. Maybe they would keep on reading, maybe they wouldn't.

So here is Reacher making that guess – three paragraphs and twenty-five lines for something I could have said in a single sentence.

Reacher stayed in his chair, thinking hard, flipping an imaginary coin in his head. First time: heads or tails? Fifty-fifty, obviously. Because the coin was imaginary. A real coin flipped by a real human trended closer to 51-49 in favour of whichever side was uppermost at the outset. No one could explain exactly why, but the phenomenon was easily observed in experiments. Something to do with multiple axes of spin, and wobble, and aerodynamics, and the general difference between theory and practice.

But Reacher's coin was imaginary. So, second time: heads or tails? Exactly fifty-fifty again. And the third time, and the fourth time. Each flip was a separate event all its own, with identical odds, statistically independent of anything that came before. Always fifty-fifty, every single time. But that didn't mean the chances of flipping four heads in a row were fifty-fifty. Far from it. The chances of flipping four heads in a row were about ninety-four to six against. Much worse than fifty-fifty. Simple math.

And Reacher needed four heads in a row. As in: Would Susan Turner get a new lawyer that afternoon? Answer: either yes or no. Fifty-fifty. Like heads or tails, like flipping a coin. Then: Would that new lawyer be a white male? Answer: either yes or no. Fifty-fifty. And then: Would Major Sullivan or subsequently Captain Edmonds be in the building at the same time as Susan Turner's new lawyer? Assuming she got one? Answer: either yes or no. Fifty-fifty. And finally: Would all three lawyers have come in through the same gate as each other? Answer: either yes or no.

This moment in the action was an opportunity to do several things in one go. It inserts a contemplative interlude into what is a fairly breathless narrative. It introduces a motif that (as we saw in Lesson 10) will recur throughout the book, building emotional energy. It characterises Reacher, a person who sits and thinks out the next step. And it recounts his next steps without being banal and obvious. Because you can bet that when Reacher does spring into action it's going to be fast and furious again, and what lies ahead will be all the more effective for those few minutes sitting at the table flipping an imaginary coin.

This is a cerebral moment that plays on Reacher's love of numbers, a lull in the action. But even so, the narrative engine is still powering the prose. One simple observation to make off the back of it is that I am never afraid of repetition.

Take the phrase 'fifty-fifty'. The first use is purely functional, plot-driven, but then it is used again, and again, and then with increasing frequency, becoming more insistent, gathering momentum. It's like a drumbeat, articulating the rhythm, propelling you through.

Take the third use: 'Always fifty-fifty, every single time.' Do you feel the rhythm? The 'always' and the 'every' echo each other in emphasis, with a strong beat, and in meaning they also multiply the number of implied repetitions, whereas the 'fifty-fifty' and the 'single time' decline and decay in tone, falling away from the beat. These are not difficult or important words. They don't jump out at you or draw attention to themselves, but in each symmetrical clause you get a punch and then a fall, and what the fall does is tip the reader into the next sentence.

'Always fifty-fifty, every single time.'

Even in the quieter passage that follows, we are still being pushed, pushed, pushed by the way that the cadence of the sentence turns to either hold up the reader or let the reader drift forward.

That forward drift is what you're aiming for. You don't want the reader to know she's being pushed. You just want her to experience that gorgeous feeling of riding a bike where it looks like a flat but it's actually very slightly downhill. It's effortless, it's joyful, you're just barrelling along.

There's another thing that ties these two very different examples together. Notice the alliterative 'f' sound – 'fifty-fifty', 'flip', 'flipping' – that reverberates through the passage from *Never Go Back*, and the 'oo' assonance that punctuates the first verse of the Chuck Berry song: 'Way back up in the woods among the evergreens / There stood a log cabin made of earth and wood / Where lived a country boy named Johnny B. Goode.' Those internal rhymes and echoes at the level of individual syllables are like little motors that power the reader through the text.

Anecdotally, writers tend to be massive music fans. They either play an instrument, usually badly, or they're in a band, or they're obsessive collectors of LPs or obsessive fans of a certain group or genre. The correlation between writers and music is astonishing. Or maybe not, because they are similar disciplines requiring similar skills.

To me, music is integral to writing.

Whether a song or a symphony, a piece of music unfolds on a chronological basis, starting out somewhere and ending up somewhere else, always moving forward, but deviating now and then to explore the highways and byways. Music and language have comparable systems of notation, strange black marks on white paper that depend on the reader or performer to animate them. Music is a sequence of notes, instead of letters, but in English given letter names; notes and letters that are endlessly recycled across works, and within any given work, stated, varied, recycled, restated and resolved. The destination is somehow built into the time signature and the key, and as the tension builds through a series of inventive variations on a theme, and modulates through alternate registers, the yearning anticipation of returning to that tonic chord is so great that when you finally get there, the sense of joy and triumph is immense. Think of the 'da-da-da-dum' of Beethoven's Fifth, and the way that recurrent motif drives the symphony forward and propels the listener through to a satisfying conclusion.

Both music and language exploit rhythm and rhyme and resonance for meaning and emotional impact. They are very similar types of discourse.

I use music to help with the process of writing. Not while I'm writing – I need to be able to hear the music of my own story – but in the breaks in between.

When you're deep into a book and you've got a lot of moving parts to keep track of, it can sometimes be hard to see the way ahead. So when I finish writing for the day, I might put on some trance music or dance music and let those hypnotic beats just wipe my mind and relax me. I switch off, and drift downstream, and almost always, sooner or later, a solution to the problem will pop into my head. Listening to music is great for unknotting and untangling. If writing a novel is about getting from A to Z, then music helps me hop from B to C, and from C to D, and sometimes suggests how P could carry an echo of F, and H could prefigure an inevitable X.

I also use music as direct inspiration, especially when I'm building up to a big action scene. There are certain big set pieces that get my brain in the groove. A particular favourite is 'Money' by Pink Floyd, the first track on the second side of *The Dark Side of the Moon* album, which has a very odd time signature at the beginning and through the first several verses and chorus. Then suddenly it switches from that complex 7/4 to a straightforward 4/4 and you can just feel the whole thing accelerating and getting serious. Then the guitar solo starts. I try to replicate that exact same feeling. Maybe I've written a long and complicated introduction to a scenario, and I sense that it's all about to kick off. Then I hear that switch of time signature in my head and think – You want action? Try this.

People assume that momentum is all about action. It isn't. It's about your manipulation of language. Relentless action will actually deaden momentum. You need a mix of light and shade. You need a mix of fast and slow, a mix of short sentences and long sentences. You need variation, and modulation. Above all you need rhythm. These are musical qualities. Momentum in writing is created by meticulous attention to detail, from the very first syllable through to the very last.



TAKEAWAY

Momentum does not depend on the plot. It isn't bolted on by what your characters are doing. It's built into the way you write. It's integral to the words on the page.

EXERCISES

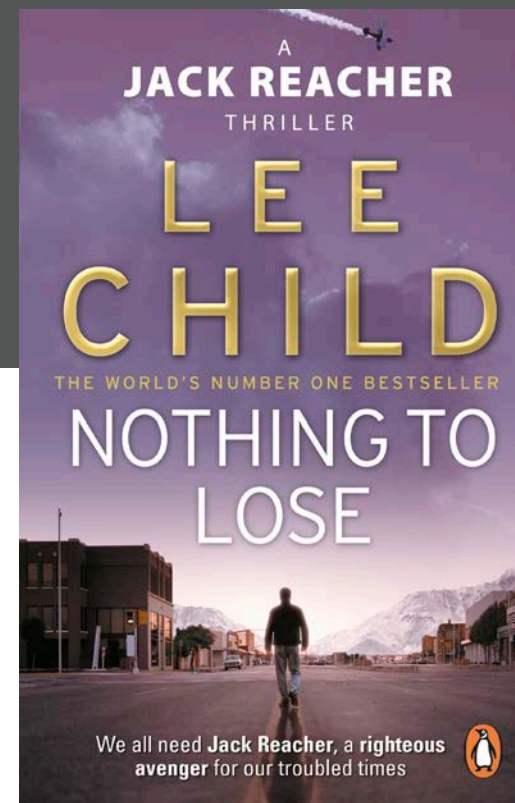
Think of a scene in which nothing much happens. It's an everyday sort of thing. There's a risk of it being dull. Can you write it in such a way that the words supply the energy the reader needs? Try it a couple of different ways. Which one gets you to the end more easily? Can you explain how and why?

When you're not reading, listen to music. Think about how it develops, and how it gets from the first note to the last. There is probably a dominant mood. But is it all one speed, all one volume, all one key? How do the changes affect your attention and responses? What lessons can you carry over to your writing?

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“

People think that thrillers have to be full of action and pace. And they do. But not chock full, not one hundred percent full, not full to overflowing.



29. Suspense Is Not Like Baking A Cake

‘Got curious as to why and came in here to check.’

The Enemy, 2004



What keeps us turning the pages? We’ve just been talking about the attention to detail that nudges a reader from one word to the next, from one sentence to the next, and then onto the next paragraph and onto the end of the page and over that page to the next. But we also have to talk about the broader concept of suspense.

The notional category of ‘suspense fiction’ is pretty nonsensical in my opinion, because all fiction must have suspense it, otherwise why would anybody ever finish any book? There always has to be something that makes you keep on reading. I guess it simply refers to that sub-genre of popular fiction where suspense is emphasised.

But what exactly is suspense and how do you create it? This takes us back to those rules we were talking about, some of which are pretty bad and some of which are wrong and some of which are under-thought. There are hundreds of articles in how-to magazines about how to create suspense. And generally speaking, they run like this: first you’ve got to create some likeable characters that the reader is invested in, then you’ve got to put them in some kind of peril so that the reader is worried, then you’ve got to make it touch-and-go as to whether or not they are going to escape. All of which trades on the alleged sympathy between the reader and the character, which might well exist, but all of which also takes you down the wrong road by asking totally the wrong question. It’s like they are asking how you bake a cake.

We all vaguely know how you bake a cake. The implication is that you’ve got a bunch of ingredients and the better quality the ingredients are, and the more carefully they’re mixed together with a wooden spoon, and the more precisely baked in terms of time and temperature, the better the cake is likely to turn out. So it’s really a recipe-based question, which implies that it’s all a matter of how you assemble the ingredients, and how expertly you treat those ingredients, and that if you follow the instructions to the letter and get everything just right, then the suspense will be glorious.

How do you create suspense? How do you bake a cake?

But that’s totally the wrong way of asking the question. Suspense is not like baking a cake. The correct question is this: how do you make your family hungry? And the answer to that is, you don’t give them dinner until four hours later. That’s how you make your family hungry and that is also how you create suspense. You ask or imply a question at the beginning of the book and you do not answer it until the end. It’s as simple as that.

Sometimes you can feel a little weird about it. Sometimes it can seem like a cheap and meretricious* trick. Perhaps you’ve already figured everything out, and you are deliberately delaying, delaying, delaying, for hundreds of pages, until finally you reveal the answer. But this is absolutely the way to do it. Make your family hungry. Serve dinner four hours late.

Someone killed someone else: who? You’ll find out at the end of the book. Something strange is happening: what? You’ll find out at the end of the book. Something has to be stopped: how? You’ll find out at the end of the book.

My twenty-second book, *The Midnight Line*, illustrates this practice pretty well. It starts from a simple premise. Reacher is wandering, with no particular place to go. He happens to take a stroll while he's changing buses and he passes by a pawnbroker's window and in the pawnbroker's window he sees a class ring from West Point. Reacher is a West Point graduate. He doesn't have a ring, because to have one is optional. Not only is it optional, but you can also design your own.

Reacher sees this ring and he knows what that person went through to earn it: four years of gruelling effort where every day the instructors are effectively trying to make you fail. If you have survived four years, if you have graduated, you have earned that ring. Reacher cannot understand why a person who wanted the ring enough to order it and design it would choose to let it go. A huge part of their lives is represented by that ring. Why would they give it up? And the ring is tiny. It's very small. Clearly, it's a woman cadet who has earned that ring. That is the inciting question in the book. Whose was this ring? What happened to her?

Reacher doesn't catch that second bus. He sets out instead to find the owner of the ring. It's a long and complicated journey. Along the way, he is very often asked, 'Why do you care? Why are you doing this?' And his answer is always: 'I guess I want to know the story.'

In saying this, Reacher is a proxy for me and for the reader. Like Reacher, I was figuring it out as I went along. Like Reacher, I wanted to know the story. Who was this woman? Why did she give up her ring? What happened to her? I wanted the answers to those questions just like Reacher does, and just like the reader does too.

Plot is driven by unanswered questions. That fundamental principle is made explicit in *The Midnight Line*. But the same principle can and should be applied in miniature: at chapter level, at page level, even at sentence level. Ask a question, delay the answer. It chimes in with the cultivation of a prose that trips forward.

Take a banal sentence like this: 'The train was late and Ben was angry.' This is a fail in terms of suspense, because we are fed the answer before the question. We have zero interest in finding out why Ben is angry, because we already know. Now suppose you flip that around: 'Ben was angry because the train was late.' There, in miniature, you have a prime example of writing that integrates suspense into style, even in the shortest of compound sentences. You imply a question, and then you answer it.

'Ben was angry.' The reader's subliminal response is, why? 'Because the train was late.' Even at this level, where the delay is minimal and fleeting, this is a valuable technique. It habituates the reader. It trains the reader to always be looking ahead for the answer to something.

Curiosity is a powerful human emotion. I found this out when I worked in television. I started in television in the late 1970s, and had really got my feet under the table by about 1980. And there was something that nobody had in 1980 that everybody had by 1990 that revolutionised our business. It completely changed how we thought about what we did.

I can guarantee that right now you are wondering: what did people not have in 1980 that they did have in 1990? I've played that cheap and meretricious trick on you. I've implied a question and I'm deliberately not answering it. Which means that you are waiting for the answer. You want to know what it is.

Even if you do know what they didn't have in 1980 that they did have in 1990, even if you're completely sure, even if you're one hundred percent certain that you don't need to stick around to find out, you will still want to hear the answer because you are gratified to be proved right.

This is a presumption that is used routinely in sports broadcasting. Usually around the middle of a baseball game, for instance, there's a sense of how it's going and who's going to win. Interest can flag a little, and nobody is more aware of that than the broadcaster. So they developed a habit years ago that they still use today. In the middle of the fourth inning they ask a trivia question before they go into the commercial break. It can be any kind of trivia question, not necessarily sport related. It could be, who hit the most grand slams in their career? Or maybe, who was the first choice to play Dirty Harry in the movies?

Then you get the commercial break, and the viewers are hanging on for the answer. Even if they already know the answer, they still want the gratification. Even if they're not interested in either baseball or movies, there's something hardwired in us that we want to stick around and hear the answer to a question.

You'll notice that I still haven't answered any of these questions. So now I've got you good and hungry, here goes: the guy who hit the most grand slams was Lou Gehrig, and the first choice for Dirty Harry was not Clint Eastwood but Frank Sinatra. Can you imagine that?

I hear you... But what screwed up the television industry between 1980 and 1990?

The answer is: the remote control. To change the channel in 1980, you had to get up off the sofa and cross the room. By 1990, you could change the channel with just one finger. This made a gigantic difference to how we did business. Getting up off the

sofa and crossing the room is a big step for a viewer to take, which meant they were way more likely to stick with your channel at the end of a programme than try something else. Ten years later, everybody had a remote in their hand and they were changing channels constantly.

In *The Midnight Line*, Reacher does eventually get to know the story. He gets the answers to his questions. The reader has ridden along with him and gets the answers too. The woman who owned the ring is in serious trouble and Reacher tries to help her, which then leads into the final act of the story. The quality of the answers matters too, and there is a lot of deeply felt emotion in this woman's plight, which means empathy also comes into play. But the fact is that readers have stuck with that book for almost its whole length simply to find out the answers to those basic questions posed at the outset: whose ring was it, what happened to her, and what made her give it up?

It's the same with *The Runaway Jury* by John Grisham, the book with bad guys and worse guys, where the only real thing the reader wants and needs to know is: what is the verdict of the jury going to be? That question is sufficient to power them through hundreds of pages of unlikeable characters in search of the answer.

If your method is to plan your book in advance, then you already know the answers to those big questions, and you're going to feel a little more awkward holding out on the reader. Which is partly why I prefer not to plan, but simply to start with a question. I never know the answer at the start, but I always know it will come at the end. That may sound hazardous, like you're jumping off a tall building without a safety net, but I find it helps. I would say it's a strength. Because figuring out the answer to that question is just as urgent to me as it is to the character, just as urgent as it is to the reader. Reacher is puzzling out the answer and I am puzzling it out with him and the reader is puzzling it out with both of us. There is an almost perfect synchronicity. Then finally the answer arrives, and everybody is satisfied.

This method is also more true to life. There is a certain verisimilitude* about it. We don't know what is going to happen in the future. We don't know the answers to most questions. We have to figure things out as we go.

Asking a question at the beginning is the way to get your story rolling, the way to kick-start that forward motion. Not answering that question for as long as possible is the way to make your story last the length of a novel. Which is where all those other techniques that we've already discussed come into their own: the variations of pace and intensity, the mix of light and shade, of action and inaction, the twists and turns along the way, the enticing digressions and diversions, the micro question-and-answer structures, the tripping prose that can make even the most quotidian* events seem gripping and entrancing. Keep it all going as long as you can, because you cannot afford to finish too soon.

Fundamentally, creating suspense is a simple transaction. Ask a question, and delay the answer until the very end.

TAKEAWAY

The mechanism of suspense doesn't really depend on the plot. It depends on pacing, timing and the artful manipulation of language. Suspense should pervade every word on the page.

EXERCISE

First, take a close look at some random pages from a Reacher book. Try to identify the subtle ways in which suspense is wired into the prose. Then take a paragraph from your own work-in-progress, or a previously completed piece of writing. Rewrite it so that questions literally take priority over answers, and so that the answers to those questions, however trivial, are never squandered by being given away for nothing in advance. Push it as far as you can. Then do the same with a paragraph from another writer's work. Try it on one of my books, if you want.

Meretricious

adjective

Seemingly attractive but false or of no real value

Verisimilitude

noun

The appearance of being true or real

Quotidian

adjective

Relating to everyday life

30. Write The Slow Stuff Fast And The Fast Stuff Slow

‘So now we need a change of pace.’

Bad Luck and Trouble, 2007



We’ve talked in other contexts about the importance of variation. Now let’s turn our attention directly to the question of pace. Remember, if you do everything at one pace, then it’s the same as having no pace at all, no matter how fast you are charging along.

So how do we manage that modulation? I have a simple motto – not a rule – that says: Write the slow stuff fast and the fast stuff slow.

You can do the high-concept plots. You can do the elaborate action. You can do the staggering deductions. You can do all kinds of complicated things. Yet one of the hardest things to do in a novel is to get a character from one room to the next. It sounds simple, but it really isn’t.

That’s what I’m calling the slow stuff. You’ve got to find some quick and easy way of getting through that, moving the guy from one room to the next as economically and unobtrusively as you can. Conversely, you’ve got to write the fast stuff slow. This ties in with what I said before about delivering one hundred percent on your promise by writing the big scenes big. Which means respecting every exquisite detail, luxuriating in every second and syllable, and slowing the writing right down. The more fast and furious the action, the more forensic the observation.

My readers pick up my next book trusting in the promise of yet another great fight scene. Everybody knows that sooner or later, if there’s some annoying guy messing things up, Reacher is going to take him down. They look forward to that. The story progresses. Reacher is getting more and more confrontational with the guy. The reader knows that something is about to happen. So when the moment comes, you’ve got to deliver full value.

This showdown is from my twenty-fourth book, *Blue Moon*.

The guy launched off the head of the stairs, off powerful legs, shoulders up, head down, aiming to charge, aiming to plant a shoulder in Reacher’s chest, aiming to knock him backward off balance. But Reacher was at least fifty percent ready, and he twitched forward toward the guy and threw a vicious right uppercut, except not vertically, more out at a forty-five degree angle, so that the guy’s charging, ducking face met it exactly square on, his own onrushing two-twenty meeting Reacher’s opposite-direction two-fifty in a colossal rupture of kinetic energy, face against fist, enough to lift the guy up off his heels, and dump him down on his butt, except the floor wasn’t there, so the guy somersaulted backward down the stairs, one complete flailing rotation, wide and high, and then he crashed against the bottom wall in a spatter of limbs.

Like a train wreck.

From which he got up. More or less immediately. He blinked twice and staggered once and then stood up straight. Like in an afternoon movie. Like a monster taking an artillery shell to the chest, and swiping absentmindedly at a scorched patch of fur with a battered paw, all the while staring forward implacably.

Reacher started down the stairs. The hallway at the bottom was narrow. Barton and Hogan were backing away into the front parlour. Through the open door. The Albanian guy was standing still. Tall and proud and hard as a rock. Apparently resentful at his recent treatment. His nose was bleeding. Hard to tell if it was broken. Hard to tell if there was anything left to break. The guy was no spring chicken. He had lived a hard life. A police detective in Tirana.

The guy took a step forward.

Reacher matched it. They both knew. Sooner or later all you could do was slug it out. The guy feinted left and threw a snap right, low, aimed for Reacher's centre mass, the straightest path to the target, but Reacher saw it coming and twisted away and took it on a slab of muscle high on his side, which hurt, but not as much as it would have, where it was headed before. The twist away was a pure reflex action, a jammed-wide-open panic response from his automatic nervous system, a sudden breathtaking gasp of adrenalin, no finesse at all, no modulation, no precision, just maximum available torque, instantly applied, which was a lot, which meant there was a lot of stored energy just hanging there for a split second, like a giant spring tightly wound, ready to suddenly unwind in the opposite direction, with exactly the same violent speed and force, a perfect equal and opposite reaction, but this time controlled, and timed, and aimed, and crafted. This time with the returning elbow setting out on an arc of its own, like a guided missile, coming up, riding the background rotation of his centre mass, adding extra relative velocity of its own, then chopping down hard against the side of the guy's head, a fraction above and in front of his ear, a colossal blow, like getting hit with a baseball bat or an iron bar. It would have bust most skulls it met. It would have killed most guys. All it did to the Albanian was bounce him off the parlour doorframe and drop him to his knees.

From which he got up immediately. He rose vertically on straightening legs, hands out wide and moving, as if seeking extra leverage, or balance, as if swimming through a thick and viscous fluid. Reacher stepped in and hit him again, the same elbow, but from the other direction, on the forehand not the backhand, above the left eye, bone against bone, jarring, the guy falling back, eyes blank, but inevitably recovering, and blinking, and stepping up once more, this time not stopping, this time swinging straight into a snapping roundhouse right, aimed at the left side of Reacher's face, but not getting there, because Reacher hunched into it and let it glance off his shoulder. And this time Reacher didn't stop either. He spun out of the hunch, this time with his left elbow leading, unexpected, scything around, clubbing down, hitting the guy in the face, below the eye, to the side of the nose, where the roots of the front teeth run. Whatever that part was called.

The guy staggered back and clutched at the parlour doorframe, and then kind of fell around it into the room, like tripping over it, but vertically, whirling backward, helpless. Reacher followed, and saw the guy go down. He bounced off the immense eight-speaker cabinet and thumped on his back on the floor.

He put his hand under his suit coat.

Reacher stopped.

Don't do it, he thought. Reaction. Complications. I don't care what kind of accommodations you think you got. The law moved slow, as Mrs. Shevick knew. She had no time for slow.

Out loud he said, 'Don't do it.'

The guy paid no attention.

At which point, on an implied question, the chapter ends. But not the fight. The fight carries on. Overall it lasts four, five, maybe six pages. I'm writing the fast stuff slow. I've promised a big scene and I'm delivering a big scene: meticulously detailed, full of action, full of incident – because the reader needs that, the reader deserves that, the reader has waited a long time for this moment to arrive. And even though the scene is already expansive, I still have room for Chuck Berry-style redundancy, as in the superficially superfluous phrase: 'Whatever that part was called.'

Here's another example, from *Personal*. Not an action scene, but an important point in the development of the story. Apparently there has been an assassination attempt against the president of France. So the question that kicks off the book is: who did it, and why? The answers will be delayed, but we have to take that question seriously and figure things out as we go. This is actually the opposite of an action scene. Reacher is reading an official police report, and you can see – as described in discussing point of view – how the first-person voice is leaning into the bureaucratic style. Reacher is being supplied with information that he is interpreting as he reads, and this is inching both him and the reader bit by bit toward those eventual answers. At this early stage the details seem incidental, but many will accrue meaning as we progress through the story and start to use them, and to perceive them, as clues.

The range had been exceptional. An apartment balcony fourteen hundred yards away had been identified as the rifleman's hide. Fourteen hundred yards was more than three-quarters of a mile. The French president had been at an open-air podium behind wings of thick bulletproof glass. Some kind of a new improved material. No one had seen the shot except the president himself. He had seen an impossibly distant muzzle flash, small and high and far to his left, and then more than three whole perceptible seconds later a tiny white star had appeared on the glass, like

a pale insect alighting. A long, long shot. But the glass had held, and the sound of the bullet's impact against it had triggered an instant reaction, and the president had been buried under a scrum of security people. Later enough bullet fragments had been found to guess at a .50 caliber armour-piercing round.

The flight of a bullet is by definition a fast thing. Here I calculate the time it takes to travel to its target as 'three whole perceptible seconds'. Yet if you read the description out loud, from 'He had seen' through to 'a pale insect alighting', it takes around eighteen seconds – the real time is multiplied six-fold and the action decelerated by a factor of six. I've written it as carefully and analytically and accurately as I could. The pace is slowed by the repetition of 'fourteen hundred yards' and its translation into an alternative measurement, 'three-quarters of a mile', and at the micro level by the choice of 'and' in place of a comma – 'small and high and far'. The three seconds are further prolonged by the insertion of 'whole' and 'perceptible', and their slow-motion duration reinforced by the repetition of 'long', itself briefly arrested by a pause: 'A long, long shot.' And there is luxurious use of both prosaic and poetic redundancy: the bulletproof glass that is 'some kind of a new improved material' and the 'tiny white star', a metaphor that evolves into a simile, 'like a pale insect alighting'.

My final example is a counter example that seems to run against my motto, because there are no rules, and because variation matters in both writing and teaching. This is a slow part that I have also written slow. Perhaps because I wanted to convey an edge of anxiety on Reacher's part. This is from my twenty-third novel, *Past Tense*, and Reacher is on a quest. He needs some information to get him started, and there's a little lull before he can speak to the person who might be able to help. So rather than merely summarise that waiting period, dismissing it with a phrase like 'after a couple of seconds', I decided to use it to show that he's an observant guy, so he is noticing things, registering them, filing them away for future reference, just as I do myself.

The suite he was looking for turned out to be one of many small rooms opening off a grand mezzanine hallway. Like a corridor in an expensive hotel. Except the doors were half glass, which was reeded in an old-fashioned style, with the department name painted on it in gold. Over two lines, in the case of the records department. Inside the door was an empty room with four plastic chairs and a waist-high inquiry counter. Like a miniature version of any government office. There was an electric bell push screwed to the counter. It had a thin wire that ran away to a nearby crack, and a handwritten sign that said **If Unattended Ring For Service**. The message was carefully lettered and protected by many layers of clear tape, applied in strips of generous length, some of which were curled at the corners, and dirty, as if picked at by bored or anxious fingers.

Absolutely nothing happens in this paragraph. Reacher walks into a room and it's empty. There's nothing going on. But I wanted to emphasise that emptiness, and the wait, so that the reader would experience it too, and perhaps I sensed that we needed some local colour at this point. On review, I really like the hand-written sign protected by tape. At first, the description is strictly empirical: there's a sign, and this is what it says, and this is what it looks like – it's the sort of half-official thing you see in offices which are issued with government-standard equipment. But then it becomes more subjective, as the equipment itself is overlaid by human use. I also like the way it dares to slow down even further what is already a slow scene. It's exact, and patient in its detail, and it hints at the travails of those who have come before Reacher and will come after him.

The passage continues.

Reacher rang for service. A minute later a woman came through a door in the rear wall, looking back as she did so, with what Reacher thought was regret, as if she was leaving a space dramatically larger and more exciting. She was maybe thirty,

slim and neat, in a grey sweater and a grey skirt. She stepped up to the counter but she glanced back at the door. Either her boyfriend was waiting, or she hated her job. Maybe both. But she did her best. She cranked up a warm and welcoming manner. Not exactly like in a store, where the customer was always right, but more as an equal, as if she and the customer were just bound to have a good time together, puzzling through some ancient town business. There was enough light in her eyes Reacher figured she meant at least some of it. Maybe she didn't hate her job after all.

He said, 'I need to ask you about an old real estate record.'

All that happens is that a woman walks into the room and comes up to the counter and Reacher asks her a question. So this paragraph is mostly about characterisation. Reacher may be reticent, but he is sensitive to other human beings, and is inclined to extrapolate from the behaviour of individuals to reflect on human nature. I wanted to set this scene very carefully, because it's early in the book and foundational to the idea of a quest or a search.

Reacher is looking for something and we have to take that seriously. If something is important to Reacher, it is also important to the reader. We have to reflect that by making it important in the writing.

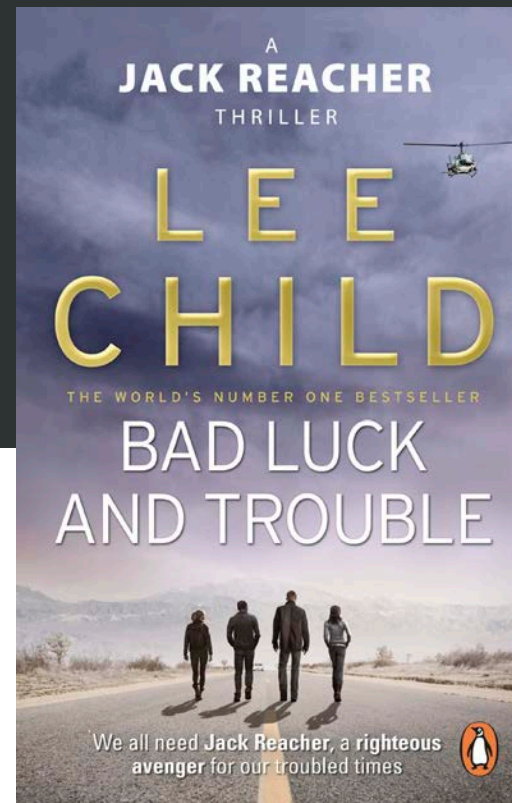
TAKEAWAY

If something big is happening, make the most of every detail. If something small is happening, skim over it with the minimum of fuss. But if something small is happening and that small thing serves some other purpose in the narrative, then mine it for every shimmer of meaning.

EXERCISE

Study the scene from *Past Tense*, set in an unremarkable waiting room. Nothing happens. It could be boring. What prevents it from being so? Can you identify those features of the prose that grip the reader despite the banality?

“
I was a little nervous
about starting.”



31. Hitching A Ride On A Strong First Sentence

Anywhere I end up, that's where I want to go.

Echo Burning, 2001



So how do you start your book? Simple: with the first line. For me, the first line is delicious and delightful. It's an absolutely gorgeous feeling to sit down at a blank screen, type the first line, and just like that, you're up and running.

The first line has a vital role to play, but it has to play it unobtrusively. What it is there for is to say hello to the reader. The reader picks up the book. They are probably kindly disposed towards it, otherwise they would have picked up another book. They open it, and are greeted by what is effectively a promise: what the book will be about, and how compelling it will be.

So the first line bears a lot of weight. But you can't over-react to that or get too self-important about it. What you do not want is a first line that begs or pleads for attention. Like your main character, it's got to be intriguing and somehow fascinating, but not desperate to be liked. It's got to tempt us to read on, but it can't be crass or obvious. It has to make that promise subtly, without waving too much of a flag about it.

It also has to do its work quickly. Way back when I was a much younger person there was a buzz around a book called *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Friends would say: 'That book is wonderful. But you have to give it fifty pages before you really get into it.' That's a very dated attitude now. Few readers give a book fifty pages before they decide whether they like it or not. They make their decision very early.

Let's talk about some examples from the Reacher books. It's never just about the first line, of course, because beyond that first, gorgeous moment no line stands in isolation; it's also about the first paragraph, or the first statement.

The first Lee Child line that anybody ever read was the first line of *Killing Floor*:

I was arrested in Eno's diner.

What does that first sentence do for the book? What does it do for the reader?

It's an exciting opener, because it drops us into the story *in medias res* – the action has already started. But it isn't flashy. It's a plain and unostentatious statement of fact: a record of what happened, 'I was arrested', and where it happened, 'in Eno's diner'. Eno's is not a national brand. The name implies an individual establishment, which suggests we're in a small place, possibly miles from anywhere else. The first half of the sentence poses two questions. Who are you, and why did you get arrested? A cascade of questions follows. Did you deserve to be arrested? Are you a bad person? Or were you arrested unjustly? Are you a good person who is going to have to try and clear his name?

Remember that when a reader picks up a thriller, they are reading it with the background knowledge of every other thriller they've read. Therefore, because the main character is introducing himself this way, and the main character is mostly more good than bad, and the reader expects to be on his side, they will probably assume that the arrest was unjust, and read on to find out exactly what happened.

I would assess 'I was arrested in Eno's diner' as a good, serviceable first line. It doesn't beg or plead for attention. It doesn't try too hard to be liked. It just stands there, and gives the reader the option of being interested or being not interested. But I would be very surprised if anybody reads that first line and doesn't go on to read at least the first chapter.

Here's the first line of my seventh book, *Persuader*. It's a little more sophisticated, but the promise of intrigue is essentially the same.

The cop climbed out of his car exactly four minutes before he got shot.

Right away this poses two questions. What is going to happen that ends up with a cop being shot? And how do we know what is going to happen in the future, precisely four minutes later? That is technically possible, with an omniscient narrator hovering god-like thirty thousand feet above the action, but such a narrative style is very unusual for a thriller. So the habitual thriller reader is immediately on the alert. Is this pre-planned, rehearsed, choreographed? Is it some kind of conspiracy or sting? That flood of questions is the strength of this sentence, and again I think it will power the reader through at least the first chapter.

The next example is from my thirteenth book, *Gone Tomorrow*, and is perhaps the most compelling first line I had written up to that point.

Suicide bombers are easy to spot.

Two things happen immediately in the reader's mind. First, we feel the adrenaline rush of fear. Is there a suicide bomber in the vicinity? Are we joining the action at a point of real tension? Are we in peril? Already the stakes are incredibly high. Second, we feel

curiosity. How come it's easy? How exactly do you spot a suicide bomber? The promise is that we are going to find out, which theoretically could be important information, which might make the difference between life and death.

This example shows how the first sentence carries weight in its own right, but also contributes power to the second and the third, because each sentence must deliver the reader on to the next sentence, and cumulatively they do a job of work.

Suicide bombers are easy to spot. They give out all kinds of tell-tale signs. Mostly because they're nervous. By definition they're all first-timers.

The slightly dismissive 'first-timers', which is the final word of the opening paragraph, introduces a sardonic, knowing perspective. The person speaking is familiar with such things and is unfazed, so the reader, having experienced that jolt of fear, is now somewhat reassured, feeling that they're in the capable hands of somebody who is ready to take charge of the situation.

By way of contrast, here is a very different first line from a much later book, *Past Tense*. This sentence does not offer immediate action. It does not offer immediate tension and peril. It actually indicates the end of something that has come before.

Jack Reacher caught the last of the summer sun in a small town on the coast of Maine, and then, like the birds in the sky above him, he began his long migration south.

It's the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. It's time to move on. Maine is a well-known summer destination, and at the end of the season people start to drift away. Reacher is taking part in that outward drift. The mood is relaxed, pleasant,

bucolic, with maybe a hint of nostalgia. It was quite a commitment to start with a line like that. It's not wham-bam. It doesn't plunge the reader directly into the story. Rather it eases them in gently, at a moment of poignant transition.

The truth is that the line came to me and I liked it. It sounded good. I wanted to use it. Then after I'd typed it out, and thereby committed to it, I stopped to think. Why did I put in the birds in the sky above Reacher? What was my motivation for doing that?

Ostensibly it was to populate the scene with nature, to help place the reader in the coastal landscape, with the birds just beginning to migrate. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered: is my subconscious helping me out by predicting the DNA of the story? Because long before, in an earlier book, I had mentioned that Reacher's father was a birdwatcher. I did that to humanise him, because Stan Reacher is a Marine officer and a stone-cold killer. But nobody really wants to think of their dad as a stone-cold killer, so Reacher chooses to remember his father for his hobby, and his love of innocent creatures.

I sat at my desk and asked myself: in writing that line, am I in fact dictating to myself what the story is going to be about? This is my twenty-third novel. Reacher is getting older and more reflective. He is not knowingly a father himself. Is he thinking about his own father? Is that what this book is about? Is that why I identified Reacher by his full name? So I listened to what my subconscious was telling me. This story was destined to be about Reacher's father. It would start out quiet, then build and build and build to a situation of tension.

The first line of any book is unique. It's the only line in the whole story that does not follow another line. You have infinite possibilities, but the job is always the same. You have to hook the reader somehow, but not with a noisy fanfare. Keep it restrained.

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Try an intriguing line that holds out a hint of promise, a hint of excitement, a slight indication of what the story might contain.

The first line is like a marker or signpost that directs both writer and reader down a path that by the last line should feel completely inevitable.

TAKEAWAYS

The first line should be strong and bold but not desperate. Make it intriguing enough to deliver the reader to the next line, the next paragraph and the next page, and give them a fair chance to make their own mind up about the book.

Pay attention to what the first line is telling you. Does it reveal the DNA of your story? At the very least it is a promise of what's to come, as regards style and pace and content.

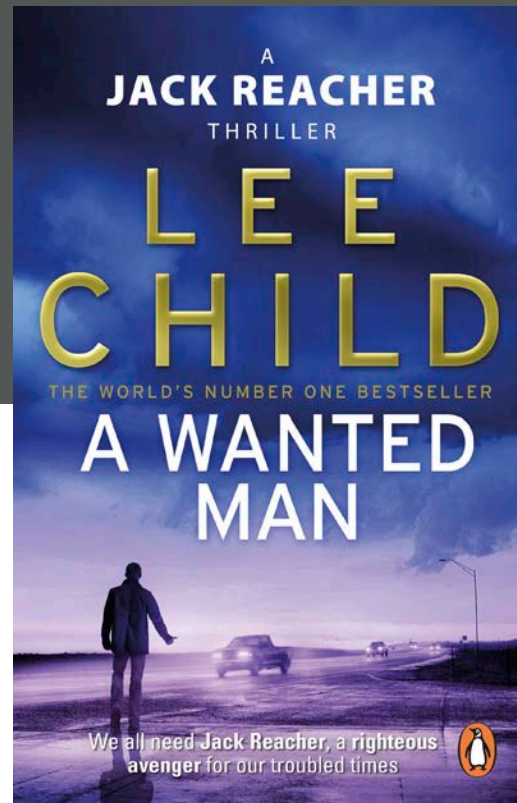
EXERCISES

Have a look at the first lines of any other Reacher books you have around. Do they work in similar ways to the examples we have discussed? What are they saying or suggesting? What questions do they pose? Do the same with other books you have loved. What was it about those first lines that hooked you? How did they tempt you to read on?

Here is the first line of one of my books: 'There were three watchers, two men and a boy.' Try hitching a ride on it. Where does it take you? What kind of story do you write?

“

Getting the reader from A to Z is your primary responsibility.



32. The Sun Also Rises

Tire smoke hung in the night air under the porte cochère, and it rolled slowly forward in a ghostly dissipating cloud, which followed the trajectory of the 180 turn, like a description, like an explanation, like proof, and then it disappeared completely, like it had never been there at all.

A Wanted Man, 2012

• • • • •

Now let's talk about the tricky subject of description. These days, thanks to online reviews, we have access like never before to how ordinary readers are reacting to our books. And the single most common complaint in an ordinary reader's review of popular fiction is: 'Too much description.'

Do they really mean that? In popular fiction, everything we do is to serve the reader's needs. So is it that they need no description?

In actual fact, whether they know it or not, readers need two kinds of description. The description that they are rejecting is a third kind. The third kind is superfluous description, and you can avoid that by concentrating on the first two kinds only.

The first type of description is mostly functional and locates the reader at the scene you are writing about. The reader needs to be there along with all the other characters. But they don't want a long geographical or architectural treatise on the surroundings.

What they need is a capsule description that chimes in with their own vision of how such a place might look.

Take this example from *The Enemy*. Reacher is shown back in the army, and he's got a report of a dead body in a motel. So we need to root the reader in that physical location.

The motel itself was directly across the street from the gas station. It was a run-down, swaybacked affair about twenty rooms long. It had a lot of peeling paint. It looked empty. There was an office at the left-hand end with a token vehicle porch and a buzzing Coke machine.

Whether in real life or on screen, most readers are familiar with this scene: a big gas station where the 18-wheelers roll in for diesel, a busy street, and across the street a faded old motel. I don't need to waste much time over the detail.

Then Reacher goes inside. Again, I rely on the reader's knowledge.

He led the way inside. Flicked a switch that lit up the interior hallway. Then another that lit up the whole room. I saw a standard motel layout. A yard-wide lobby with a closet on the left and a bathroom on the right. Then a twelve-by-twenty rectangle with a built-in counter the same depth as the closet, and a queen bed the same depth as the bathroom. Low ceiling. A wide window at the far end, draped, with an integrated heater-cooler unit built through the wall underneath it. Most of the things in the room were tired and shabby and coloured brown. The whole place looked dim and damp and miserable.

I've done what I need to do, which is to make the reader feel that they already know the sort of environment they're in, using the reader's lived experience. I'm including them. I'm nudging them in the ribs and saying: 'Hey, you've seen this kind of place a thousand times before.'

The second type of description links back to what I said in a previous lesson. If you've got a big scene to write, then you need big writing. This is often the case as you approach a climax, when descriptive writing can not only presage that big moment, like clouds gathering stealthily before a storm, but also delay it, so increasing the anticipation and dread and thereby maximising the pay-off.

Here is a passage from *A Wanted Man*.

A mile out the fire took on a shape, wide at the base, narrow above. Half a mile out Reacher saw strange jets and fans and lobes of flame, pale blue and roaring and almost invisible. He figured the fuel line was failing, maybe at the seams or where the metal was stressed by folds and turns. He figured the tank itself was holding, but vapour was cooking off and boiling out through tiny cracks and fissures, sideways, upward, downward, like random and violent blowtorches, the tongues of flame as strong and straight as metal bars, some of them twenty or thirty feet long. Inside the fireball the car itself was a vague cherry-red shape, jerking and wriggling and dancing in the boiling air.

I could have written: 'Up ahead there was a car on fire.' In which case the reader would feel nothing. The reader would feel none of the horror of the situation, none of the dread at the prospect of finding a person inside that car. Nor would they see anything. They wouldn't see the colour and shape and movement of the flames. They wouldn't see the resistance of the metal, or the eerie dehumanised dance. They would hear nothing, and they would smell nothing.

In this next example we are back in the barren emptiness of *Make Me*. We are approaching the end of the book, so the reader knows the endgame is coming. But for now, nothing is happening, beyond the rising of the sun above a giant grain silo. The purpose of this extended description is to calm things right down, to slow the pace of the narrative as close as I dare to a standstill, to postpone the set-piece dénouement as long as possible and thus magnify its impact. It also allows me to revel without inhibition in the sheer joy of writing.

From the metal walkway on top of the old concrete giant the dawn was vast, and remote, and infinitely slow. The eastern horizon was black as night, and it stayed that way, until at last a person with straining wide-open eyes might call it faintly grey, like the darkest charcoal, which lightened over long slow minutes, and spread, side to side and wafer-thin, and upward, like tentative fingers on some outer layer of the atmosphere, impossibly distant, the stratosphere perhaps, as if light traveled faster there, or got there sooner.

The edge of the world crept into view, at least to the straining wide-open eyes, limned and outlined in grey on grey, infinitely dim, infinitely subtle, hardly there at all, part imagination, and part hope. Then pale gold fingers probed the grey, moving, ethereal, as if deciding. And then spreading, igniting some thin and distant layer one molecule at a time, one lumen, lighting it up slowly, turning it luminous and transparent, the glass of the bowl, not white and cold, but tinted warmer.*

The light stayed wan, but reached further, every new minute, until the whole sky was gold, but pale, not enough to see by, too weak to cast the faintest shadow. Then warmer streaks bloomed, and lit the horizon, and finally the sun rose, unstoppable, for a second as red and angry as a sunset, then settling to a hot yellow blaze, half-clearing the horizon, and throwing immediate shadows, at first perfectly

horizontal, then merely miles long. The sky washed from pale gold to pale blue, down through all the layers, so the world above looked newly deep as well as infinitely high and infinitely wide. The night dew had settled the dust, and until it dried the air was crystal. The view was pure and clear in every direction.

How do I get away with this at such a critical stage in an action thriller? Well, if you have been working through this course lesson by lesson, by now you should have a pretty good idea. It's because the action and the thrills are continuing at the level of the prose. They are built right into the language. If you read this description out loud, you will detect those poetic features more easily: the personification and imagery, the delayed syntax, the deployment of commas, the abundant use of rhyme and repetition, the cumulative effect of rhythm. I can push these boundaries because I have very carefully cultivated the skill of writing a prose that trips forward.

Here is a much shorter example from *Echo Burning*.

His engine was running rich. Reacher could smell unburned gasoline in the air, and he could hear the muffler popping with tiny explosions. Then the car accelerated into the distance and he could hear nothing at all except the grasshoppers clicking and chattering.

The essential point to note here is that description is sensual. Sensual means 'of the senses', and you can and should use all five: what we see, what we hear, what we taste, what we touch, and what we smell. Not like a laundry list, where everything has got to be checked off against those five categories every time, but in variety. The almost imperceptible chattering of grasshoppers is a sound that is quieter than quiet, audible only when utter silence descends, but now the writer hears it, the character hears it, and the reader hears it too, all simultaneously experiencing that extreme isolation, that extreme desolation.

Not only does sensual description draw the reader intimately into the scene, it sharpens their attention generally, by heightening their awareness of detail.

In *Past Tense*, a young couple are stranded because their car has broken down. They think this rather sinister person they've met has called for a tow truck, and they are anxiously awaiting its arrival. If it comes, maybe they'll get some help. If it doesn't, then they know they're in serious trouble. Or maybe they're in serious trouble either way.

They felt it before they saw it. There was gradually a deep bass presence in the air, in the distance, like a shuddering, like a tense moment in a movie, as if huge volumes of air were being bludgeoned aside. Then it resolved into the hammer-heavy throb of a giant diesel engine, and the subsonic pulse of fat tires and tremendous weight. Then they saw it drive out of the trees. A tow truck. A huge one. Industrial size. Heavy duty. It was the kind of thing that could haul an eighteen-wheeler off the highway. It was bright red. Its engine was roaring and it was grinding along in low gear.

To say 'The truck showed up' creates no sense of menace. There is no incident. It adds nothing to the story. Nor is it enough to have the truck show up and then describe it. The arrival of the truck is what they're waiting for, and the arrival of the truck is what therefore needs to be described. It's not a simple visual experience. In fact, the sense of sight is the last to be engaged, because the truck is hidden in the forest. They feel and hear it first, sensing the fearsome immensity of its weight through noise and vibration, then they smell and taste the acrid, viscous fuel on the air, then finally the truck rears up through the trees like some kind of lumbering, fire-breathing monster.

Sometimes description doesn't look like description at all. Take this extract from the start of *Stardust* by Joseph Kanon. It's 1945, and the war is not quite over yet. This guy has been in Europe dealing with horrible things. Now he's back in the States and on his way to Hollywood. Back then, domestic air travel was not a frequent thing, so he's on the luxurious train known as the Super Chief, which took two or three days to cross from coast to coast.

But we don't know any of that yet. We know he's on a train, and we know that he is recalling a difficult phone conversation with his recently widowed sister-in-law.

'Look,' she'd said finally, 'you should know. You're his only family,' but then went quiet again. You mean he tried to take his life? 'Take his life?' she'd said, confusing him until he realised that it was a translation problem, an idiom she hadn't picked up. Hans Ostermann's daughter. Tried to kill himself, he said. 'Yes,' she said reluctantly, then drew a breath, moving past it. 'But they didn't want to say. You know what it's like here. Everything for the good name. Nothing bad ever happens. It's better if it's an accident, in the papers. So I said it too.' There was a snort of air, like a shrug over the phone. 'But his brother – you have a right.'

This recollected conversation informs, but how does it describe? Well, it does so subliminally, by engaging the senses, through the rhythm of the writing, which sounds like the clatter of wheels on a track. Try reading the passage out loud, perhaps several times, to get into it. Do you hear the train rolling? There is no overt description here at all. Nobody is going to write 'too much description' on a review of this book. But he is describing it, by making you feel as though you are on that train too.

Sometimes you can afford to be a little more contemplative, not only for variation of pace, but to set the events of your story in a broader human or historical context. This passage from *The Enemy* is one of my personal favourites in my own writing.

What is the twentieth century's signature sound? You could have a debate about it. Some might say the slow drone of an aero engine. Maybe from a lone fighter crawling across an azure 1940s sky. Or the scream of a fast jet passing low overhead, shaking the ground. Or the whup whup whup of a helicopter. Or the roar of a laden 747 lifting off. Or the crump of bombs falling on a city. All of those would qualify. They're all uniquely twentieth-century noises. They were never heard before. Never, in all of history. Some crazy optimists might lobby for a Beatles' song. A yeah, yeah, yeah chorus fading under the screams of their audience. I would have sympathy for that choice. But a song and screaming could never qualify. Music and desire have been around since the dawn of time. They weren't invented after 1900.

No, the twentieth century's signature sound is the squeal and clatter of tank tracks on a paved street. That sound was heard in Warsaw, and Rotterdam, and Stalingrad, and Berlin. Then it was heard again in Budapest and Prague, and Seoul and Saigon. It's a brutal sound. It's the sound of fear. It speaks of a massive overwhelming advantage in power. And it speaks of remote, impersonal indifference. Tank treads squeal and clatter and the very noise they make tells you they can't be stopped. It tells you you're weak and powerless against the machine. Then one track stops and the other keeps on going and the tank wheels around and lurches straight toward you, roaring and squealing. That's the real twentieth-century sound.

It would be too bland simply to write, a tank came around the corner – the waste of an opportunity. You've got to set it up in a way that inculcates mood and feel. You've got to bring the reader to the optimal emotional state. And when you have the reader just where you want them to be, you can let the big action rip.

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TAKEAWAYS

There are three forms of description. The first is typically economical and locates the reader at the scene. The second can be more expansive and is used for control of tension and variation of pace. Both should draw the reader in by engaging the senses. And then there's the third kind, which is everything else, that you should leave out – otherwise your readers are going to say, 'too much description'.

Description can heighten the pleasure factor for the reader, not least due to its inherent sensuality. It need not impede momentum.

EXERCISES

Close your eyes. Listen to the sounds around you. Imagine their source, which could be real or fantastic, probable or improbable. Describe that imaginary scene in detail. If the sound appears to have a natural origin, try describing it industrial terms, and vice versa. Feel free to travel far in your mind.

Observe closely and patiently a scene that involves one of the four elements: earth, fire, air, water. Zoom in tight. However still the scene, seek out the movement. Seek out the drama, the conflict, the struggle, the life. Describe what you see, lingering over the detail. Let your reader see a familiar world through new eyes.

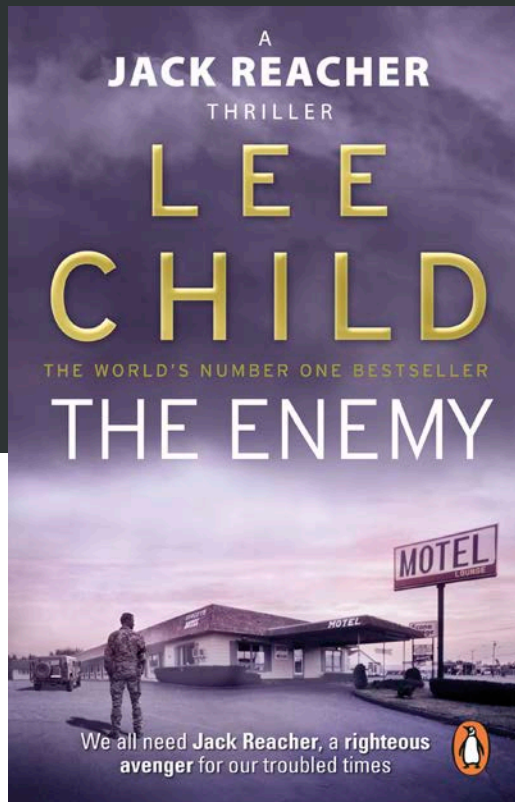
Limned

adjective

Delicately outlined, as in a pencil sketch

“

As always, your first thought is for the welfare of the reader.



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33. The Sense Of An Ending

It was about saying goodbye.

The Enemy, 2004



We've talked about beginnings. Now, as we approach the end of this course, it's time to talk about endings. There are two types of ending for us to focus on: chapter endings and book endings.

The first thing to say is that there are more chapter endings now than there used to be, because in popular fiction, chapters have become shorter and shorter. It was James Patterson who really accelerated this trend, writing books of a hundred or more chapters to enhance the reader's sense that they are powering through the book and thereby heighten their gratification. *Killing Floor* had thirty-four chapters. I maxed out on my sixteenth book, *The Affair*, with eighty-eight.

So what are the features of a good chapter ending? The most important thing to understand is that although it must round off the chapter in some satisfying way, it is not really an ending at all. It must satisfy but not satiate*, because with one key exception, the purpose of a chapter ending is to compel you to read the next chapter. Therefore it is usually a cliff-hanger of some kind, involving a twist or a revelation, that makes it harder for you to put the book down at precisely that point, which you might otherwise naturally be inclined to do. 'Just one more chapter,' you say, knowing that you have to get up for work in the morning, and then that one short chapter becomes another and another and another, until before you know it, you have stayed up all night.

The first chapter of *Killing Floor* ends like this:

I read on a low masonry sign: Margrave Police Headquarters. I thought: should I be worried? I was under arrest. In a town where I'd never been before. Apparently for murder. But I knew two things. First, they couldn't prove something had happened if it hadn't happened. And second, I hadn't killed anybody.

Not in their town, and not for a long time, anyway.

Remember, this is my first book. Nobody has ever met this character before. We don't know anything about him. We don't even know his name. All we know is that he was arrested in the diner, has been hauled to the police station, and is now telling us that he is, in fact, a killer. Maybe he is a bad person after all. Maybe we were wrong to side with him. On the other hand, that was an honest confession. Maybe we should stick with him. Obviously we have to read on to find out. The chapter raises all kinds of questions and nudges the reader neatly on to the beginning of chapter two.

This conversation is from *Without Fail*, also the end of the first chapter. Reacher has been contacted by somebody who knew his brother.

'I want to hire you for something,' she said. 'On a kind of posthumous recommendation from Joe. Because of what he used to say about you. He talked about you, time to time.'

Reacher nodded. 'Hire me for what?'

Froelich paused again and came up with a tentative smile.

'I've rehearsed this line,' she said. 'Couple of times.'

'So let me hear it.'

'I want to hire you to assassinate the Vice President of the United States.'

Now that is a chapter that ends with a bang. Froelich is a secret service agent from inside government. Reacher, as readers know by now, because this is the sixth book, is an honourable man who served many years in the military. So why is a secret service agent asking a decent military veteran to assassinate the vice president? I think we're going to read on to find out.

The next example is from chapter two of my seventh book, *Persuader*, which recounts a complex series of preparations Reacher and his allies have been making.

'Good luck,' she said. 'I don't think we've missed anything.'

But we had missed a lot of things. They were glaring errors in our thinking and they all came back to haunt me.

We've just spent a whole chapter dedicated to these meticulous preparations. Every angle has been thought through by very competent law enforcement agents, who need to trick some people into believing something that isn't true. And the woman says, in a relatively self-congratulatory way: 'I don't think we've missed anything.' Then the ending pulls the rug out from under her, and reveals that all the things they've missed are actually going to cause them big problems. So that's an immediate temptation to read on. Not only to experience the nature of the trouble they are going to face, but also out of sheer curiosity: what are all those things that these extremely competent law enforcement agents have missed?

The difference with this example is the contrast in tone. There's no big bang. There's no incident. If anything it's rather downbeat. But even a rueful and regretful reflection, so long as it is enticingly timed, is a way of getting people to read on.

Quite distinct from chapter endings is the ending of the book itself. The book ending is not immediately tempting you to read anything else. In fact, I would prefer it if somebody finishes my book and is so overwhelmed with passion and satisfaction that they don't read anything else for a week. That would be fine.

Just prior to the ending, almost certainly, you've got some kind of huge scene: this is where the climactic action happens, where everything is revealed and any remaining clues are solved, where the bad guy is finally captured and brought to justice. By the time you reach the end of the book, the story is already over. So what are you trying to do with those last lines? I would say two things.

First, you have a slight obligation to wrap up loose ends. I learned this the hard way, from two of my books in which I deliberately chose not to. I thought that if I didn't mention the precise fate of a character, then readers would take pleasure in imagining things for themselves and could make up their own ending. In one case, there had been a brave, sympathetic, tough character, a woman married to a guy who was in trouble, and she had been strong on his behalf, and in a minor way was a very well-liked character. I didn't supply her future life story, not even a few words to say she was okay, and readers were upset about that.

In the other case, the final scene was an apocalyptic underground explosion and I wasn't explicit about whether or not Reacher had survived. I thought readers would know by now that Reacher always survives. I had also put in enough information such that an alert reader could puzzle out the geometry and the physics of it and draw their

own speculative conclusion. The ending was a gigantic cliff-hanger, but I didn't see it that way, because I thought readers would have followed along attentively and would know what I might have otherwise revealed. But that didn't work. Readers were very upset, but also angry. They thought Reacher might be dead and they were panicked about it. They were in no mood to figure out the physics and the geometry and thought it was up to me to do that.

So it's part of your job to do a little housekeeping at the end and keep things neat and tidy as regards the fate of any characters your readers are likely to care about. But the main thing you have to do after the big dénouement is to provide a gentle glide path out of the book, something that calms the reader down and hints at further adventures to come. I learned the hard way to indicate that Reacher is fine, that Reacher has not changed, that Reacher will be back.

This is how *Persuader* ends.

I dressed in the hot weather stuff. Left the cold weather stuff right there in the room. I figured I could drive Beck's Cadillac out to I-95. To the Kennebunk rest area. I figured I could abandon it there. I figured I could catch a ride south without any problem. And I-95 goes to all kinds of places, all the way down to Miami.

Rhythmically, the dying fall of that last sentence – 'all the way down to Miami' – deflates the tension, relaxes the reader and eases them off the conveyor belt and out to the end of the story, whilst simultaneously containing both reassurance and promise: Reacher has survived, he has resumed his wandering, and there is every chance that he'll be back again next year. The tone is mildly elegiac*. The idea is to let the reader exhale. Don't dump them out too abruptly at the end of the climactic scene. Let them get their breath back. Let them down easy.

Take this example from *The Enemy*.

I never went back to Fort Bird. Never saw that sergeant again, the one with the baby son. I thought of her sometimes, when force reduction began to bite. I never saw Summer again, either. I heard she talked up Kramer's agenda so much that JAG Corps wanted the death penalty for treason, and then she finessed confessions out of Vassell and Coomer and Marshall on all the other stuff in exchange for life in prison. I heard she got promoted captain the day after they went to Leavenworth. So she and I ended up on the same pay grade. We met in the middle. But our paths never crossed again.

I never went back to Paris, either. I meant to. I thought I might go climb down under the Pont des Invalides, late at night, and just sniff the air. But it never happened. I was in the army, and I was always where someone else told me to be.

Again there is that dying cadence at the end of the last sentence, that lets the reader out feeling drained by the drama and emotion, but also satisfied, and safe. It's all over. Justice has been done and order has been restored. The reader needs to catch their breath while I wrap up those loose ends. I make sure the reader knows that the bad guys go to jail and the other detective gets promoted. Reacher is still in the army and still subject to the army's whims, but there is a subtle foreshadowing of his future demotion and his future freedom. And there is just a little room carved out for Reacher's own feelings. He's a loner, but he doesn't forget his old colleagues; he's a stone-cold killer just like his father was, but that doesn't mean he has a heart of stone.

Here is one last example, from my second book, *Die Trying*. The final scene involves a moving truck stuffed full of explosives. Reacher and a bunch of other people are in a helicopter. Reacher uses a rifle from the air, explodes the bomb and the truck blows

up on the highway. That is really the end of the story, but it's not the end of the book. We still need the breath-catching, the glide path, the reassurance. So the last paragraph goes like this.

Early Wednesday morning, after five hitched rides and four buses through seven states, Reacher was finally in Wisconsin. It was where he had aimed to be exactly a week before. He liked it there. It struck him as a fine place to be in July. He stayed until Friday afternoon.

As in *Persuader*, Reacher rides off into the sunset, just as we said earlier the mythic hero must always do. He gets to Wisconsin on Wednesday and thinks it's a fine place, so he stays from Wednesday until Friday, which is a long time for Reacher. There is just enough detail to remind the reader what they love about this character, how much they are going to miss him, and how much they are already looking forward to seeing him again.

In a series, book endings provide a natural opportunity to reinforce characterisation. It's another way of letting the reader go, like a wistful leave-taking, a light-touch but tender farewell. It's the same with references to time and place, redundant at this point in the story, but full of nostalgia and promise. All these things contribute to the gradual relaxation of pace, an easeful subsidence or falling away.

The end of a chapter is about tension and requires a strong command of suspense. The end of a book is about resolution and requires a healing, human touch. There's no need to take a big bow or go out with a writer-focused flourish. As always, your first thought is for the welfare of the reader.

TAKEAWAY

Chapter endings are not endings at all but designed to propel you relentlessly forward. Book endings are designed to release you and let you go, gently.

EXERCISES

Here is the last line of one of my chapters. 'Something else entirely.' Try writing a couple of paragraphs leading up to it, and at least the first paragraph of the next chapter. You will be jumping into the story *in medias res*.

Here is the last line of one of my books. 'Everybody watched them to the door, and then turned back to their quiet speculations.' Without plotting in advance, try writing a scene or story with this line as your target.

Satiate

verb

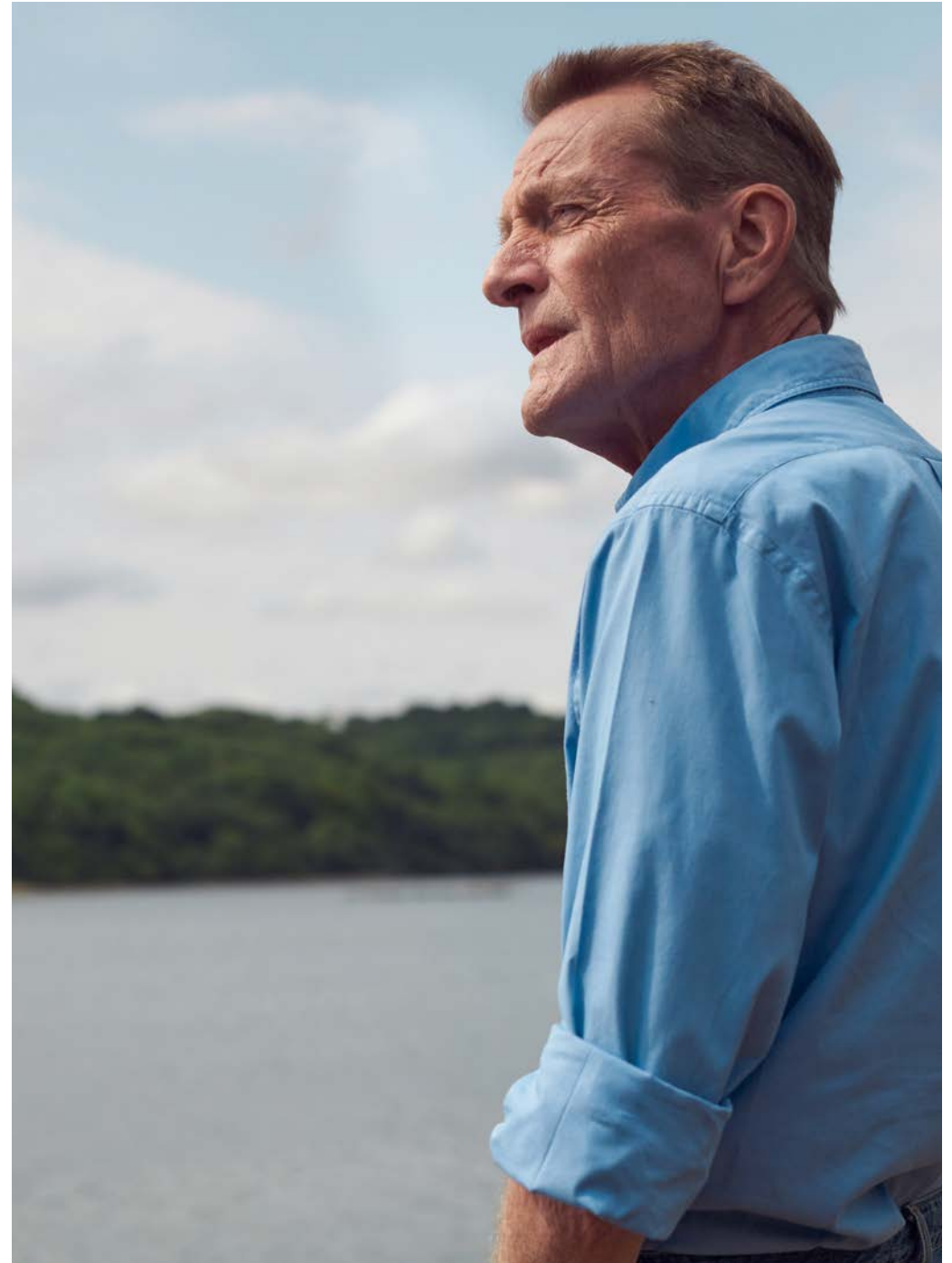
To satisfy to the full, relating especially to hunger and thirst; to sate

Elegiac

adjective

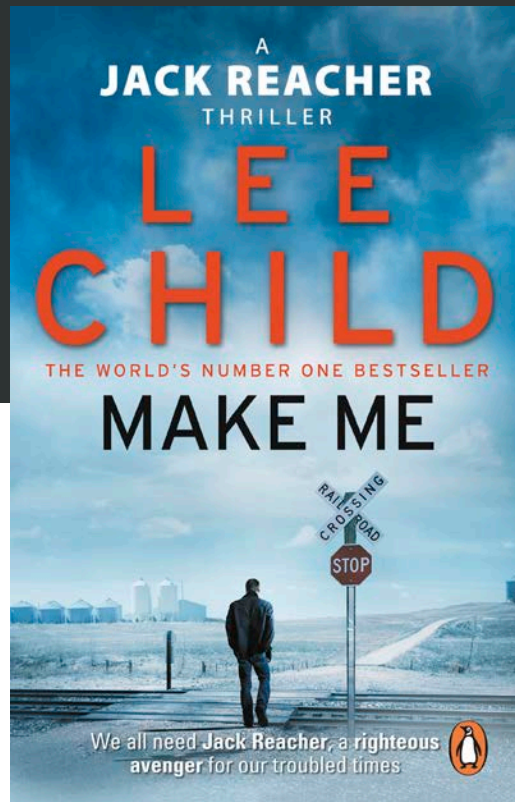
Relating to or characteristic of an elegy or lament

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Don't think of yourself as churning anything out. This requires effort and skill and is worthy of a great deal of respect.



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34. The Back End Of A Big Machine

'It's a teamwork thing.'

Make Me, 2015

• • • • •

So, your manuscript is complete. What happens now? Well, now you come face to face with the publishing industry, so we're going to talk about that a little bit and navigate our way through it.

The first point of contact you need to make is with an agent. Agents represent you, selling your books to all the different markets. My books are in more than a hundred countries in more than fifty languages, and each one of those deals is separate. That's hundreds of deals. When you've got over twenty books like I have, it adds up to a lot. The agent also monitors the performance of all those different publishers and generally boosts you, selling you as a great author to anybody who's in that market.

There is no greater distance in the entire known universe than the distance between a good agent and a bad agent. A good agent will create your career, will safeguard and shepherd it, and will always be on your side: always busy, always eager, always attentive to every little detail. So look at your favourite authors, at the people you think are in your lane, and find out who their agent is. It's easy enough to do. Very often authors thank their agent in the acknowledgements, or dedicate a book to them, or you can visit an agent's website and check out their list of clients. If there are big-name authors on that list then you know the agent is doing a fine job, so you submit to them, because it's not just about getting an agent, it's about getting the good agent.

The good agent will pitch your book to an editor, who is the person who acquires the book for the publisher and is usually personally authorised to bid up to a certain ceiling. The interested editor will read your book and ask: do I like this, do I think it's commercial, do I think it has legs, do I want it? And if the answer to those questions is yes, then the editor and the agent will do a deal, and the good agent will make sure it's the best possible deal for you.

The book is now sold and has been fed into the publishing machine. Then begins the editorial process, which we have already discussed, from content editing through line editing to copy editing. When you have a product that both you and the editor believe in one hundred percent, then the editor becomes a roving ambassador for your book within the publishing house. However small the publisher, it will have many, many titles that a limited workforce is having to split their time between, and if it's a large publisher, where the workforce is bigger, there will be even more titles. Because of these competing demands, it's very important for your book to stand out in-house.

The editor drums up support for your book with the marketing people, the promotion people and crucially, the sales people, and if the sales people are presented with something that is backed by tremendous enthusiasm from everybody else in the publishing house, then it stands that little bit better of a chance. You have a role to play too, because along the way they're going to meet you, and they're going to be very nice, but at the same time as giving you a cup of coffee they are going to be thinking: can we work with this person? Is this going to be an enjoyable relationship that might last? You have a responsibility, not to be obsequious but to be pleasant and professional, so that the message you put across is: yes, I'll be fine to work with, and you can send me out on the road and I won't let you down.

Some people find it difficult to adjust to the switch between writing and publishing. Writing is a lonely process: you spend months and months sitting by yourself with a keyboard. Publishing, in contrast, is collaborative: you become part of a team. If that team feels appreciated, and if you are willing to support their work by doing things you sometimes don't feel like doing or don't see the point of, then later, when it comes to that inevitable and almost subconscious choice we discussed earlier, between this guy and that guy, then they are more likely to choose you – to give you that little bit of extra budget, or send that extra special opportunity your way.

You are by definition a person of stature in this relationship, because publishers admire and respect authors. Nevertheless, to maximise your chances of measurable success, you must also enhance that natural position of power by being collegial, just as with any other job you've ever had.

At some point, probably fairly early on, the publisher will make a strategic decision about when to release your book, because there are several periods in the publishing year and they are all different. October to Christmas is for the big beasts of the publishing world, the industry bestsellers, whereas early summer, before Father's Day, when students are graduating, schools are breaking up, and holidays are being planned, is when the beach reads are promoted. These days the annual Reacher book is an autumn title, but for a while I was a 'dads and grads' author, and back at the beginning my books were released in early spring. The post-Christmas months are quieter but can be a great time for a first-time author, because you have a better chance of being noticed.

The publisher will also think carefully about how to package the book. The book is a physical product, and publishing is an industry because it is manufacturing physical objects. Initially you will have a print-run of a few thousand, or ten or twenty thousand if you are lucky, and when you combine that with all the other books being published that is literally thousands of tons, possibly tens of thousands of tons of physical product that is manufactured, then shipped around the world and trucked around countries to be unpacked in bookstores.

Once your book is in the store, the jacket plays a big part in selling it. Since I first started in this business I've been obsessed by how readers choose books. I hang around in shops or sit on a bench across from the airport book stall and watch what people do, and in my experience there is a pretty regular procedure they go through. First, if they pick your book up off the shelf and actually have it in their hands, that's score one. Score two if they look at the front, then look at the back, then flip to a random page in the middle to get a sense of how dense the prose is. If the book passes that test, then they start at the beginning and they try the first line, maybe the first paragraph. That's your big chance as the writer, which is why that first sentence can be make or break. Prior to that point, everything has been the publisher's remit, not yours. And publishers do occasionally make mistakes in designing the physical product.

I was extremely lucky with my first ever hardcover, which was the US edition of *Killing Floor*. The bloody red handprint smeared on a pure white cover picked up on the poster for Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and became instantly iconic. There's no doubt that really helped the book and in turn my whole career. More than twenty years later, the Folio Society produced an illustrated edition of *Killing Floor*, which is a premium product, and I'm very proud of that, but it would likely never have happened had it not been for the brilliance of that original design.

Even so we got a little lost along the way with jackets. Reacher is a rough, tough military veteran and there's a lot of fighting, so the publisher tended to conceive of the books as books for men and came up with a brutalist jacket brand with metallic block print. Then after a while they began to realise that a lot of women read the Reacher books too. Now the truth is that a lot of women read any kind of fiction, especially popular fiction. There are more women readers than men, and women buy more fiction than men, but even so they are likely to reject the more obvious men's fiction, and what happened early in my career is that the jacket design shoved my books into a category that women tended to assume at a glance was not for them. But when the data showed that women were getting very interested, the publisher changed the design to something softer and more neutral, and from that point on my sales really picked up. The fastest selling of my books was actually the UK edition of *61 Hours*, and none of us could understand why, so the publisher commissioned some research, which found that it was because of the cover: a luminous pale blue that seemed to glow against the backdrop of other books on the shelf. So the tiniest detail, the most subtle influence, can either help you or hurt you.

Once your book is published then you need to make a name for yourself. You will go on promotional tours and do readings in bookstores and sign up for conferences and conventions where readers and writers, sometimes thousands at a time, get together and participate in panel talks and book signings and things of that nature. Suddenly you are this once-lonely person cast adrift in a crowd and it becomes all about people skills. I would suggest you follow one counter-intuitive rule when it comes to promotion: don't talk too much about your book. Going on about how great your book is or how big of a deal it was to write it can turn people off. Whereas if they like you as a person, if you are friendly and pleasant, they will buy your book anyway. Sometimes at book signings I would ask readers which was the first of my books they had bought,

and if they could remember, which they usually do because the first book is their first love and therefore often their favourite, I would ask what made them buy it. One time a lady answered: 'I saw you open a door for somebody, and I thought – oh, what a polite gentleman! I'll buy his book.' Like I said, the slightest detail can make the world of difference.

I am talking largely about my own experience, which began in the 1990s. Thirty years later, in the 2020s, the publishing industry has changed, and as far as the author is concerned, in one particularly significant way. When I was getting going there was not the same pressure to be an overnight hit. There was a willingness to back you and invest in you over a period of five or six books to give you a decent chance to find some traction and get yourself established. Now that time frame has contracted and you might get two or three years if you're lucky. You'll need success a little faster, but that's not a problem if the book is good. Don't fall into the common trap of thinking that publishers are reluctant to take things on, that they're somehow innately hostile to your new manuscript. Nothing could be further from the truth. Publishers, editors and agents get up in the morning hoping that today is the day they get the great book across their desk. It could be yours.

The other massive change in the industry is the advent of digital publishing and by extension, self-publishing. There are now many platforms to choose from, both big and small. The odds in self-publishing are marginally longer because it's harder to get noticed without a big publicity machine behind you, but it is absolutely possible to make a living from it and there have been some spectacular successes. Digital books have not replaced physical books, but they do get a substantial percentage of the market thanks to the advantages of portability and personalisation. They have also had

a direct impact on design, because the jacket is no longer just a six-inch by nine-inch promotional poster that has to look good face-out in the bookstore, but has to work equally well as a tiny thumbnail on your phone screen. Overall it slightly diminishes the importance of the jacket and perhaps throws a little more emphasis on the title.

Do titles matter? I think most readers disregard the title, just as they skim over the 'he said' and 'she said' in dialogue. They say: 'I can't remember the title, but it was the one where such and such happened.' Think back over books you've read and loved. Do you remember them by name? Were any of them chosen for the title? Does the title mean something to you in the context of the book overall? In my view there is little correlation between titles and reader enjoyment. Some Reacher titles have been mine, some have been suggested by the editor or publisher, some even by fans. So don't worry if you haven't immediately got what you feel is a great title. First, there's a whole raft of experts out there to help you, and second, how certain is it that they matter?

Writing a book is a solitary pursuit. But you should always have your reader in mind. Never forget that the reader comes first, second, third and fourth. When you finally reach your reader, as we have already discussed, then the book is brought to life in a creative partnership between reader and writer. That is essentially a one-on-one relationship, multiplied by the number of readers, but never replicated, because each reader is unique. It is also a remarkably intimate relationship, short-term but uniquely intense. But for your book to even reach those readers, you need to get published. And as a published author you are just one of a team: the back end of a giant machine cooperating with dozens of different people in dozens of different roles. They respect you immensely, and you should respect every one of them, from the head honcho to the shipping clerk. These people are your allies, and together you can do great things.

TAKEAWAYS

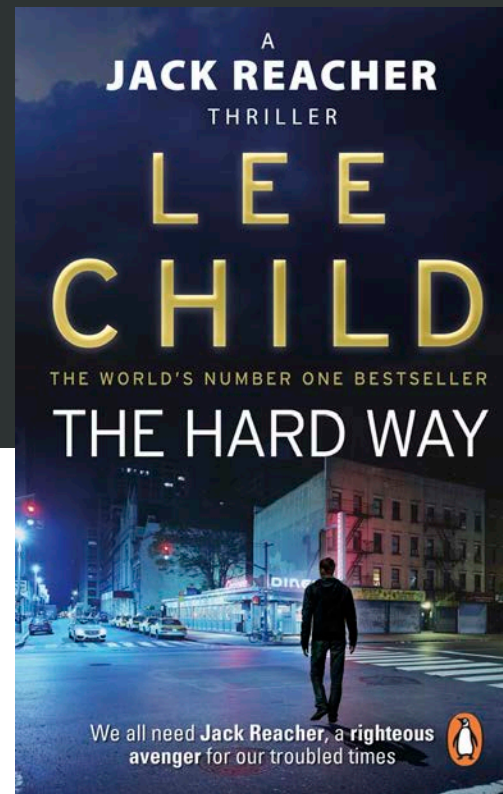
Writing a book may be an art, but publishing a book is a business. It is therefore not helpful to see these two things as incompatible. Rather, they go hand in hand.

Be ready to learn from others, but also to make your own decisions.

EXERCISE

As a final task in this course, consider a book that you yourself chose to buy, perhaps in a bookshop, possibly online. Why did you buy it? Analyse that choice in as much detail as you can, and answer the question with as much honesty as you can. There is no right answer. Or rather, the only right answer is an honest answer.

“
Let you as a writer be guided
by you as a reader.”



35. Conclusion

Well, we just looked at how to end a book, and now it's time to end this course on writing popular fiction. If there is anything to take away with you, it is this: you already know how to do it.

You are a reader, and you are about to enter a unique situation in the world of entertainment. This is the only medium where creator and consumer are locked together, one-on-one. Your brain and the reader's brain are hardwired together for as long as it takes them to read your book. So you have an emotional contract with the reader. They expect something and you must supply it. You know what they expect because you are a reader too.

All that remains for me is to say thank you very much for sticking with me, and thanks to **BBC Maestro** for making it possible. Now, it's up to you. Start writing, and I'll see you on the bestseller list.

Have fun. I wish you all the best, and a lot of success.



BBC Maestro, 2022

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Appendix: Reading List

Here is a selection of books mentioned in these pages, together with a few related works and some others with which I feel a strong connection. But remember, I'm not prescribing any set reading. My message is this: read anything and everything. Read randomly. Read as often as possible, as much as possible, and as widely as possible.

A writer is always a reader first.

Margaret Atwood ~ *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985

Samuel Beckett ~ *Waiting for Godot*, 1949

Peter Brook ~ *The Empty Space*, 1968

Raymond Chandler ~ *The Big Sleep*, 1939

Lee Child ~ *The Hero*, 2019

~ 'The Frightening Power of Fiction', *New Yorker*, 2016

~ 'No. 1 in America', *New York Times*, 2016

~ *How to Write a Mystery*, 2021

Agatha Christie ~ *The A.B.C. Murders*, 1936

~ *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, 1926

Patricia Cornwell ~ *Postmortem*, 1990

Martin Cruz Smith ~ *Gorky Park*, 1981

E.L. Doctorow ~ *Ragtime*, 1975

Loup Durand ~ *Daddy*, 1987

Ian Fleming ~ *Dr. No*, 1958

~ *Goldfinger*, 1959

Frederick Forsyth ~ *The Day of the Jackal*, 1967

John Grisham ~ *The Runaway Jury*, 1996

Alex Haley ~ *Roots*, 1976

Thomas Harris ~ *Red Dragon*, 1981

~ *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1988

Joseph Heller ~ *Catch-22*, 1961

Joseph Kanon ~ *Alibi*, 2005

~ *Los Alamos*, 1997

~ *Stardust*, 2009

Stephen King ~ *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, 1999

John Le Carré ~ *The Little Drummer Girl*, 1983

Harper Lee ~ *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960

Andrea Levy ~ *Small Island*, 2004

David Lodge ~ *Nice Work*, 1988

Ian MacDonald ~ *Revolution in the Head*, 1994

John D. MacDonald ~ *Darker Than Amber*, 1966

~ *The Deep Blue Good-By*, 1964

~ *The Lonely Silver Rain*, 1985

Alistair MacLean ~ *Fear is the Key*, 1961

~ *Night Without End*, 1959

~ *The Last Frontier*, 1959

David Mamet ~ *Bambi vs. Godzilla*, 2007

Heather Martin ~ *The Reacher Guy: The Authorised Biography of Lee Child*, 2020

Val McDermid ~ *A Place of Execution*, 1999

Daniel Mendelsohn ~ *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son and an Epic*, 2017

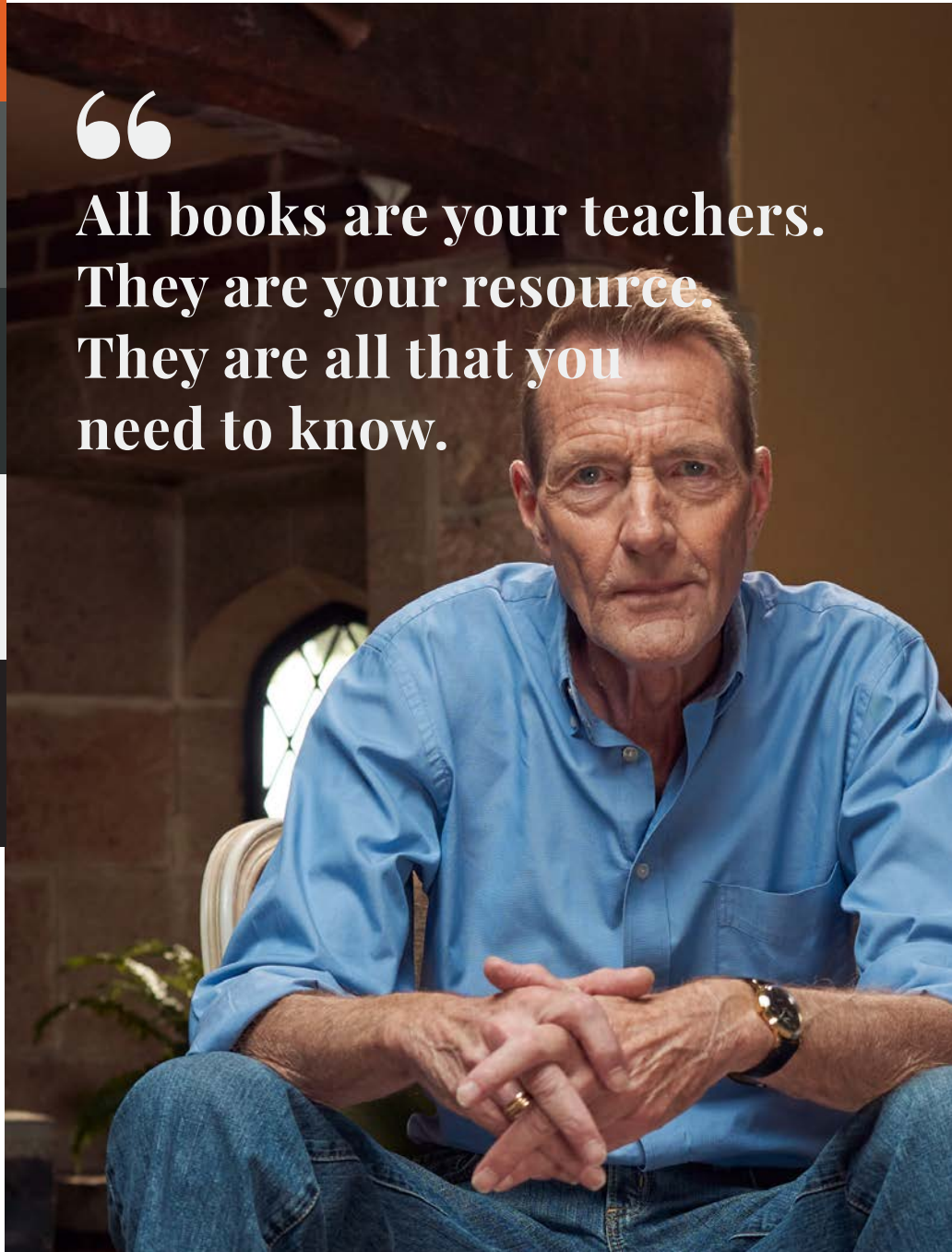
~ *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, 2006

David Morrell and Hank Wagner, eds. ~ *Thrillers: 100 Must-Reads*, 2010



“

All books are your teachers.
They are your resource.
They are all that you
need to know.



George Orwell ~ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937

Plutarch ~ *Plutarch's Lives*

Dorothy L. Sayers ~ *Have His Carcase*, 1932

William Shakespeare ~ *Romeo and Juliet*

Nevil Shute ~ *On the Beach*, 1957

~ *Pied Piper*, 1942

John Steinbeck ~ *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939

William Styron ~ *Sophie's Choice*, 1979

Barbara Vine ~ *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, 1986

Herman Wouk ~ *The Winds of War*, 1971

~ *War and Remembrance*, 1978

Evelyn Waugh ~ *Brideshead Revisited*, 1945

Tim Willocks ~ *Green River Rising*, 1994

John Wyndham ~ *The Day of the Triffids*, 1951



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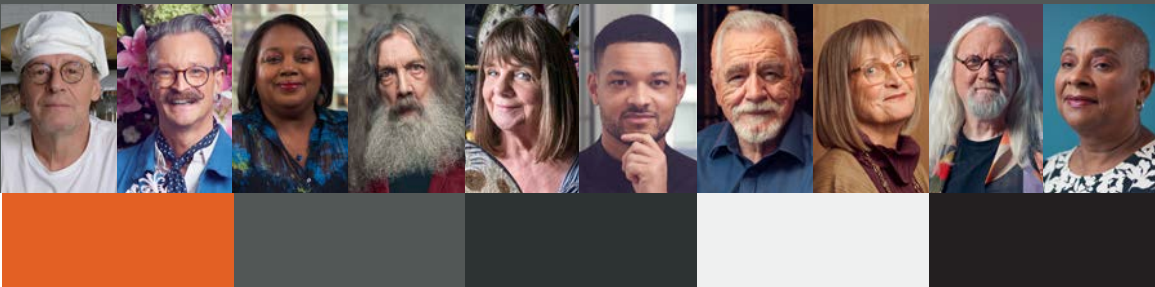
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