

WRITING A NOVEL

A Few Thoughts

Peter Murphy

Introduction

These notes contain a few thoughts on the subject of writing a novel, and getting it published. Every writer has his or her own experience, and every writer has his or her own ideas about writing, so what any one writer may think can only go so far. But there are some basic principles that seem to hold good in the vast majority of cases, and I have tried to bring some of them together.

Why do you want to write a Novel?

Writing a novel is a massive undertaking, which calls for a high degree of commitment. It is a complex, intricate task which consumes vast amounts of time and energy and can, at times, take over your life. It is not something to be undertaken without good reason, and there is only one good reason to do it. We'll get to that in a moment. But first, there are a number of bad reasons for wanting to write a novel. Here are three bad reasons, and three really bad reasons.

Bad reasons –

My friend John/Joan did it, so why shouldn't I? (How hard can it be?)

I've written a lot of stuff at work, so why shouldn't I write a novel too?

In a book I could get away with writing outrageous things that I wouldn't dare to say out loud to another person.

Really bad reasons –

I want to impress my partner, siblings, parents, or whoever, with how clever I am.

I want to be a published author.

I want to be rich and famous.

Why are these Bad Reasons?

Mostly because they are fallacies, for example: while technical writing does have something to teach writers – particularly in the areas of organisational and research skills – it has little relationship to the ability to write a novel. Why does the fact that John or Joan wrote a novel mean that you can? But most importantly: if your motivation, on any level, is to impress or show off to someone else, it's not going to work, which brings us to the really bad reasons.

If you write with the goal of pleasing or impressing others you will not write a good book, because your writing will be self-conscious and driven by the need to pander to their supposed tastes. In particular, don't consciously try to write a book with publication as a goal. This is just a special case of the general principle. It's still a form of trying to impress: you will be consumed by trying to tailor a book to what you think publishers would like, and again, it's going to come across as self-conscious and lacking in conviction.

It's even more unrealistic to write with the goal of becoming rich and famous. There are very few authors who achieve that goal by writing novels, and those who do owe their success as much to good fortune as to good writing. Indeed, it's not obvious that success on that scale – including lucrative film and television deals – is always related to the ability of the writer. Often, it's about the appeal of a story and being in the right place at the right time. It's not something you can control, and if you try to write with that goal, you won't produce anything of value.

What is the Good Reason?

The only good reason to write a novel is that you have a good novel inside you and you want to write it – for your own sake, not anyone else's.

With that in mind, let's talk about the mechanics of doing it.

The Importance of Preparation

It is impossible to overstate the importance of preparing before you sit down to write. Preparation involves a number of steps, which will include –

Deciding on the idea(s) for your book;

Doing the research; and

Creating an Outline or Structure for your Book.

Don't start to write until you've completed your preparation, or at least substantially completed it. If you do, your writing won't go well, and you will inevitably have to go back over it. The phenomenon commonly known as 'writer's block' is almost always simply a failure of preparation. The silly stereotype of the poor author sitting at his typewriter, waiting for the 'muse' to descend, is just that – a silly stereotype. If you're sitting 'waiting for the muse to descend', then you haven't prepared and you're not ready to write your book. If you've prepared, you will know exactly what is happening in the scene you are about to write, and your only task is the technical one of writing it as well as you can. Yes, there are some scenes that prove more difficult to write than others, but that's not because you are lacking 'inspiration'. It's just because writing isn't always easy.

Let's think about each step in turn

Deciding on the Idea(s) for the Book.

Most people, if pressed, will tell you that they have an idea for a novel, and they probably do. If you're naturally creative, you probably have ideas passing through your mind the whole time. But for a novel, you need an idea strong enough to carry the reader through 300-400 pages, and most ideas aren't that strong. You can combine more than one idea to produce multiple story-lines, and some authors have been very successful doing that, but the sum total has to be strong enough. Test your idea aggressively. How long would it take me to tell this story, and what kind of depth do I need from my characters to tell it?

A good way to develop a feel for ideas is to read other authors. Writers should be avid readers – both in and outside their own genre – and if you regularly read novels, paying professional attention to what works – and doesn't work – in the book you're reading, you will soon get the feel for the sort of idea you can work with.

Doing the Research

The amount of research you need to do depends on the kind of book you're writing, of course, and many writers begin with areas they are familiar with, for example if they have a background in the law (as in my case) or criminal investigation, or a particular field of science. But it's the idea behind the book that will determine how much research you need to do. You may need to read some specialist books, or discuss your book with an expert; or it may be as simple as checking out a pub or two as possible venues for a kidnapping. The varieties are infinite, so I will just mention one or two staples.

The most important point is that, unless you're writing pure science fiction about a world that doesn't currently exist, or is speculative (such as another planet): don't try to write about places you haven't visited and become familiar with. That, of course, is why many writers choose a particular city or area they know well in which to set their books. It's virtually impossible to write convincingly about a place you don't know well, and even with the electronic tools available today, there's no substitute for visiting your scenes. You can get away with the odd short scene somewhere you don't know, if it's a fleeting encounter in a hotel or something like that. But you can't set any significant part of your book in a place you don't know and hope to make your writing about it realistic.

Second, if it matters, be precise about the time in which the action takes place and be aware of what is or was going on at that time. This, of course, is vitally important for historical novelists, but it's important for any writer. For example, my Ben Schroeder series started in the early 1960s and is moving forward. I always have a calendar for years I am writing about, so that I know what day of the week any particular date was. I collect other information that may be useful, such as who won the League or the FA cup – Ben is a West Ham fan – or whether it snowed over Christmas, or whether some especially scandalous or momentous event occurred during the year. Even if you're writing about some unspecified future year, it's good to have a feel for how far in the future you are, because current or past events may affect it.

Creating an Outline or Structure for your Book

At some point when you have your ideas and have completed some – not necessarily all – of your research, begin work on an outline, a structure for the book, so that you know the general parameters of your book. The outline will be an invaluable document, because if you refer to it often, you will never forget where you are, where you are going, and what remains to be done. But allow the structure to be flexible. The book may develop in ways you don't expect as you write it – see below.

Actually writing the Book

If you've done your preparation, and you have your outline, what remains is what should be the mainly technical process of writing your book as well as you can. You shouldn't be worrying about the core or structure of the book, or 'waiting for the muse to descend'. This doesn't mean, of course, that it's all plain sailing. Like everyone else, writers have good days and bad days. Some days, your writing flows beautifully. On other days, it's all you can do to write a good sentence. Some scenes write themselves; some fight you all the way. On such days, don't sit there waiting for the 'muse'; keep writing, even if you have to go back over it several times.

Writing is a matter of discipline, too. It's physically and energetically draining. If you have a day job and a family, it's difficult to make time to write. First novels often take a long time to complete. Try not to worry. The good news is: there is no deadline, and if there ever is in future, it will be for the good reason that a publisher has given you a contract! Even if you have all the time you need, we all have limits to the amount of productive work we can do in a day. For me, four or five hours is the most I can usually do without risking a decline in accuracy and quality. Don't worry. If it's going well, you can get a lot done in four hours. If you need to quit for the day, quit. If you need to take a break, take a break.

Here are a few suggestions, which I have found invaluable.

A few Suggestions about Writing

Back up your work, obsessively, in more than one place.

You don't have to start at the beginning of the book and work your way stolidly through to the end. If you have your outline, you can work on any section at any given time. For example, I sometimes begin with sections that don't need any further research and defer others until I've read a book or been somewhere I need to see.

An outline is an outline, not a straightjacket. You don't need to know *everything* that's going to happen in the book when you start. You don't necessarily even have to know how the book ends. The characters may make suggestions to you as the book goes along. Be flexible. I was about three quarters of the way through my first published novel, *Removal*, before my heroine, FBI Agent Kelly Smith, told me one day how she was going to break through the seemingly impossible deadlock I had created and bring about a resolution. (No, I'm not psychotic: I don't hear voices; but if you have well-drawn characters they will in a sense speak to you. Listen to them.) I wrote the ending Kelly proposed, and it worked beautifully. So don't panic if some developments come to you as the book is being written. A book in progress should be an organic thing. If it changes, and as long as you feel good about the changes, rewrite your outline a bit and go with the flow.

However, unless you decide to change the book radically (in which case you should prepare a revised outline before writing any more): don't go back and start making changes until you're well over half way through, and I would say, closer to three quarters. If you do, you'll probably have to keep going back and make more changes, and perhaps reverse some of the changes you have made. This is because you're undermining your outline or structure, and without that, you don't have a book. But when you are most of the way through the book, you will easily see any adjustments you have to make to deal with internal inconsistencies, or to correct errors, and it won't be a big deal. Hold off until then.

Never show your work to anyone until it's finished. I made the mistake of showing a very partial draft of the first novel I completed, *A Higher Duty*, to a number of people and asking for comments and suggestions. I got what I asked for: comments and suggestions, some helpful, some not, some mutually inconsistent. I then tried to make use of them. Of course, I had soon shredded my own outline in favour of the views of people who didn't even understand what the book was supposed to be about, with predictable results. Eventually, I had to start again. Now, no one sees my work until I have a full, finished draft of the novel. Then my wife Chris reads it, I make final changes, and when we are both happy with it, and only then, I submit it.

Getting Published

Earlier, we established that writing *with the goal of being published* is a bad thing. Your task is to write a good book for your own sake. But *having done so*, getting it published is obviously a desirable and consistent goal – as long as you do it in that order: write first, then work on publication.

Getting published is a notoriously difficult and elusive goal. Agents and publishers receive thousands of submissions on a regular basis, only a very few of which will be published. There are only two reliable steps you can take to give your novel a decent chance of being one of them, namely –

Write a really good book; and

Believe in your work, don't get discouraged by rejection, and keep selling it.

It is easy to be deflected by the occasional story of the self-published author made good (*Fifty Shades of Grey*) or by the huge success of an author whose writing is semi-literate at best (I'm not going there, but I'm sure you can insert some names for yourself). It's important to remember that publishing is a form of show business, so success doesn't always follow ability. Sometimes books with no obvious merit are not only published, but are hugely successful; and sometimes works of genius, or very good books, fall by the wayside.

But those are the exceptional cases. The general rule is: if a novel is well written it is going to be published; the corollary of which is that it has to be well written to be published.

Write a good book and believe in your work. If you have written a good book, there is every chance that an agent or publisher will recognise that fact and want to acquire it. Don't be put off by rejection. Remember that agents and publishers are constantly being bombarded with thousands of submissions, many completely hopeless, and they are always working under pressure. Your book may get missed, or it may coincide with another good book arriving at the same time. Make allowances, and don't take it personally. Keep persevering. Here are a few things you can do to improve the odds.

Improving the Odds

Check out agents' and publishers' websites before submitting to them. Find out what kind of work they are looking for, whether they are actively looking for new authors, etc. Find out what the house rules are for making submissions, and follow them.

Appearances matter. Today, electronic submissions have more or less completely replaced the old paper submissions, but it should make no difference in terms of appearances. Your accompanying letter should be professional and literate. Have a well-prepared c.v. available in case it is requested.

Eliminate as many textual errors as possible. Always have someone else proof-read your work before submitting it. You will never eliminate all the errors, but you will eliminate a lot more if you don't rely on your own eyes. Writers know their work too well to proof-read it competently: we tend to speed-read and skip sections when checking for errors. A good proof-reader takes nothing for granted and scans every word.

Today, computers have all kinds of toys and gadgets for creating fancy textual effects – different fonts, different colours, boxes, and so on. Don't use them. Submit straight-forward double-spaced text, Times New Roman, size 12, aligned left, with no fancy gimmicks. Why? Because the publishers will inevitably have to remove them and substitute their own fancy gimmicks, which wastes their time and causes irritation. They like authors to stick to writing and leave the fancy stuff to them.

On the other hand, do be familiar with how the double-spaced, left-aligned text of a book should look. The textual details, such as which paragraphs are indented and which are followed by spaces, what kind of quotation marks are appropriate, when to use numerals and when to use words for numbers, and the treatment of inserted text, are subject to often arcane and counter-intuitive rules. To make it even more complicated, most publishing houses have their own house rules for all this, which may not correspond with general practice. Such rules should be available on their websites. Many authors are unfamiliar with these rules and submit text that requires a lot of editorial changes to be made in-house, which can be a source of some irritation for an agent or publisher. On the other hand, an author who knows the rules comes across as professional, and the occasional mistake will be cheerfully overlooked and corrected in-house.

The best way of learning the rules is to have your first novel edited by a reputable professional editor, or, even better, to ask the editor to prepare a full editorial report and let you do the editing yourself. It's not cheap – expect to pay £200 or more – but trust me, you will be amazed by how much you learn, and it will revolutionise your approach to your future work.

Grabbing the Reader on Page One

The art of writing has many facets, and this is not the place to go into them all. But there is one point that really does matter when you submit your work. The first sentence, the first paragraph the first page, must grab the reader. Why? Well, as noted above, agents and publishers receive many, many submissions. Most agents ask for the first three chapters of a book, perhaps with a synopsis, but you don't have three chapters to impress them with. You have to impress them on page one. Otherwise, these busy people may not read much further. They may pass you by and move on to the next submission.

There are many ways to make a strong start. Some authors like to have a very dramatic event on page one – a murder, perhaps – and that often works well. But it's not the only way. My personal favourite is the beginning of John Le Carré's *A Small Town in Germany*. Read the first three paragraphs some time. There's no murder; in fact nothing really happens at all. But it's an astonishing piece of atmospheric writing that somehow sets the scene for the whole book, and draws the reader in.

Sometimes a memorable phrase, one which sets the tone for the book as a whole, works just as well. Dickens often used that device, didn't he? 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' 'Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.' Well perhaps, but as a modern reader (or agent!) might see it, he then tends to spoil the effect by some very prolix writing immediately afterwards. What that goes to show is that the first page, like all the others, has to be well written. That's always the key. Go back over the first sentence, paragraph, page, time and time again. But also remember that your writing has to be good, or whatever you start with won't have much of an effect.

So good luck, and remember: write a good book, then believe in your work.

Peter Murphy spent a career in the law before turning to fiction. He has published two political thrillers about the American Presidency: *Removal* and *Test of Resolve*. He has published six legal dramas set in London in the 1960s and 1970s, the Ben Schroeder series: *A Higher Duty*, *A Matter for the Jury*, *And is there Honey still for Tea?*, *The Heirs of Owain Glyndŵr*, *Calling Down the Storm*, and *One Law for the Rest of Us*. He has also published two collections of humorous/satirical short stories, *Walden of Bermondsey*, and *Judge Walden: Back in Session*, set in a London Crown court and told through the eyes of the judge. He is available as a speaker for writer's workshops, literary festivals, etc.

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