



If you've been dreaming of writing that novel, now is the time to put your dream into action.

Hi,

I'm Joan Hall Hovey. I've written short stories, articles, novels, been a creative writing instructor for over 30 years, and the reason I decided to create this ebook, (also an audio book available on my site) is to help you with the writing of your novel. Not that anyone can really know as much about your novel as you, but maybe I can help you stay confident and even avoid some of the pitfalls that can await the new novelist at every turn. In **WRITE YOUR NOVEL** I talk about everything from getting the idea for a novel to getting your novel published. My own hope is that one day I'll be holding **YOUR** autographed novel in my hands.

I decided not to spend too much time dealing with grammar and punctuation here, because you can get that in any good grammar instruction book. Or just through reading novels. If you're an aspiring novelist, and I know that you are, my guess is you probably already know a good deal about sentence and paragraph construction. However, I'll just briefly give a couple of examples of common confusions among writers and nonwriters alike:

GRAMMAR

A lot, meaning a great deal, or a whole bunch, is two (2) words. I have a lot to do today.

The other 'allot', which is one word spelled with 2 'ls' means to distribute a portion as in: Allot 3 weeks for vacation. Allot 1/4th of the funds to each charity.

The apostrophe in it's means it's is a contraction for 'it is'. The its in "Its fur was madly matted," doesn't have an apostrophe because in this instance, to show property - its fur - 'its' is already a possessive pronoun. Just to get those out of the way.

What I really want to share with you is what I have learned about writing and publishing novels over the years. So if you've been dreaming of writing that novel, it's time to make that dream a reality.

The problem most aspiring novelists have is just sitting down and getting to work on the novel they were meant to write.

The very thought, while exhilarating, can also be overwhelming. One writer described it aptly as skating with an octopus - which arm (or leg) do you reach for first.

It's been over 20 years since I wrote my first novel *LISTEN TO THE SHADOWS*. I wrote it while expecting my youngest son, who is now grown and married, and typed the final version on an old Underwood typewriter.

TOOLS - LONGHAND VS COMPUTER

There's a lot to be said for the old methods, less distractions than when you're at the computer, and perhaps there is a more natural flow from the heart to the hand that holds the pen. Many writers think so, and still write their novels in longhand, or on a typewriter, needing to hear the click of the keys to tap into their

creativity. But most of us have moved on to the computer, and with the delete button more convenient than crossing out a sentence or phrase you don't want, and the ability to move sentences and paragraphs around, it definitely makes the actual physical act of writing faster and easier.

I still like to pick up a pen for making notes, working out a scene or a plot problem. I like a 3-ring binder for this purpose. That way I can shift things around, move a scene I'd written to a different chapter because it works better in chapter 8 than in chapter 2. But it's not important what tools or methods you use, only that they work best for you. John Steinbeck insisted pencils must be round. Hexagonal pencils cut his fingers after a long day. Agatha Christie needed only a steady table and a typewriter. "a marble-topped bedroom washstand table made a good place, the dining-room table between meals was also suitable. There are as many approaches to writing a novel as there are novelists. And every novel has its own particular set of challenges.

WRITING TRUE/YOUR VOICE

Write your novel your way, out of yourself. It's much too hard to write a novel and not write the novel you really want to write.

Trying to follow publishing trends is always a mistake. Anyway, by the time you finish your novel that trend may be over. Better to start your own trend.

Don't try to write like a 'Writer', by which I mean the way you think a good writer would write. That approach leads to pretentious, self-conscious writing. Don't try to effect a style. Your style is you. Hemingway wrote like Hemingway, Faulkner like Faulkner. Steinbeck wrote like Steinbeck. Each of these writers had their own distinctive voice. Write like yourself, write true. Stephen King wrote as Richard Bachman because his publisher thought they were putting too much of his work on the market. One, or probably more than one of his fans, recognized King's 'Voice'. Stephen King's voice is distinctly recognizable - a powerful engine that pushes the story forward, and keeps his readers turning those pages, book after book.

It's fine to emulate your favorite writers in the beginning, it's how we learn. But we must eventually find our own voice. That is where the originality lies. Because each of us is an original human being. There has never been another you in the world, nor will

there be. No one sees things quite the way you do, or responds to life's experiences in quite the same way that you do. And that's the gift you have to share with the world. Your perceptions, your heart and mind, your voice.

TALKING ABOUT YOUR NOVEL

If you've been talking about your novel, now is the time to stop, and save your narrative for the blank page or screen.... I agree with Norman Mailer when he says: "I just think it's bad to talk about one's present work, for it spoils something at the root of the creative act. It discharges the tension. Once you have told your story aloud, there really isn't much reason for writing it.

RULES

Somerset Maugham said there are three rules to writing a novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are. Actually, other than general rules about writing, there are no rules to writing a novel. The second you present one, a new and gifted novelist is sure to break it. The one exception is that you must not bore the reader. That's it. I believe if you create a novel that has deep meaning for you, it will be meaningful to others.

PREMATURE WORRIES ABOUT GETTING PUBLISHED

We all want our work to be read, but sometimes we think far too much, or at least prematurely, about publishers, agents, book signings and so on, but our fullest attention belongs to the writing itself. The actual writing is really the only thing we have any direct control over. Not that there is anything wrong with visualizing yourself autographing copies of your book for your readers, in fact it's a good thing, a worthy daydream that gives you that 'shiny' goal to work towards, but focus on the task at hand. The writing.

When your novel is written, or at least the first draft is written, is the time to research getting it published. In fact, by the time you write the last page of your book, the publisher you had in mind when you began may have gone out of business, been swallowed by a larger house, or is no longer publishing in the genre in which you are writing.

AGENT OR SANS AGENT

I sold my first book on my own, without an agent. A rare happening then. And it happens even less today. If I were starting over today, I'd concentrate my efforts on finding a good agent. Not only will your novel get a better initial reception when it's submitted by a good agent, that same agent can negotiate better terms for you than you would negotiate for yourself. Most of us, when we're starting out, are just so thrilled to be published, we're often willing to accept less than we're worth. And writers, like most artists, are notoriously, not so great at the business end of things. But more on getting that novel published later.

WHAT KIND OF NOVEL DO YOU WANT TO WRITE?

What sort of novel do you want to write? Mainstream? Romance? Thriller? Science Fiction? Western? Maybe a combination of romance and paranormal. Ideally, it will be the sort of book you enjoy reading.

I started out as a story listener. My parents were great storytellers, and I needed only to hear the words: 'I remember the time when ...' to feel that rare and exquisite pleasure in the anticipation of a new story.

The dark, scary ones were best -- my father told of a man with the cloven foot who showed up at a card game...a young girl's body found in the woods behind the school... (murder was not so common then) the town drunk found dead in the cemetery, his face as granite-white with frost as the tombstones surrounding him. Word was that something had scared him to death.

My mother had a ouija board she and her friends took quite seriously. And we had a neighbor who visited us--a fortune teller named Mrs. Fortune. It's true. Everyone was poor in money, but not in the abundance of inner life. Not so surprising then that my background should influence the kind of stuff I find delicious to write about. Just as your own background and leanings will dictate the sort of novel you will write.

Although it's good to read many types of novels, if you want to write a mystery and haven't read many, then start reading them now -- both good novels and those not so good - you can learn from both. Maybe more by those not so good; at least you will feel confident that you can do better.

You're reading those books not as a reader now, but as a writer, learning from them. They are your homework, your textbooks. You will pay particular attention to the author's techniques, his way of describing a thing. How he builds suspense. How the author handles love scenes, fight scenes. Pacing, transitions, (moving smoothly from scene to scene) and dialogue.

READ! READ! READ!

If you want to write romance, read books by the best romantic novelists - both living and dead. Read *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and *The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough. Try a romance novel by Janet Evanovitch; Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County*. Do a google search for more romantic novelists - those who have won awards, gotten great reviews from major reviewers, and add them to your 'books to read' list.

As for the classics, for powerful, lean writing, you can't do better than Hemingway. Steinbeck is a fine storyteller and his description is wonderful. Ruth Rendell is one of the finest suspense novelists I've ever read. Patrick McGrath's *Asylum* is brilliant, and Peter Gadol's *The Long Rain* is a gripping read, and flawlessly plotted. Discover your own favorite novelists.

To sum up- read, read, read! We also learn through osmosis, overtime developing a sense of when a thing works and when it doesn't just through reading. And we learn by doing. It might surprise you to know that a number of aspiring writers have told me they didn't have time to read. Or that they didn't read novels because they didn't want to be influenced by other writers; they wanted their work to be totally original. Sadly, I don't expect to read much of their work in published form.

From the time I could find my way to the library, I was a constant visitor. For me, the Saint John Regional Library was a magical place - a hushed, warm haven where, through the pages of a book I could travel to far off exotic places in my imagination. I could experience vicariously all the joy, romance, terror, tragedy and triumph of the characters in the story. What a great joy.

Among my many favorite authors were Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, especially *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Charlotte Bronte, Shirley Jackson and Phyllis Whitney. Far too many to list. I am forever grateful to them all. It was through reading that, in me, the seed to be a writer was planted. And no doubt for you, too. For I've never known a writer

who wasn't, first and foremost, a voracious reader. Like you, I wanted to join the ranks of those authors who had given me so much pleasure, and in turn entertain my own dear readers.

Books have been my friends and my salvation. In fact, I've never met a writer who was not, first and foremost, a voracious reader. The desire to write begins with reading. But you knew that. You are a writer, after all.

TO OUTLINE OR NOT TO OUTLINE

Some writers work out the entire plot of their novel before writing page 1, chapter 1, and this method works well for them. Judith Krantz outlines her novels in detail, but I would find that too much like painting by number, but that's a wholly personal opinion. Or maybe I'm just too lazy to do the work. Because it does seem to me to be a lot more work than actually writing the novel. And not near as much fun. But I do know vaguely, at least, what my novel will be about. I do a lot of cerebral outlining. And though I don't outline fully, I do make notes in that 3-ring binder. And I outline loosely, as far as I can see, to paraphrase Stephen King, like driving at night. This method allows me to discover things about my characters as I go along.

Writing a novel is a journey, and half the fun of any journey is getting there - stopping at those little towns along the way. Making discoveries, being surprised. Getting great ideas we wouldn't have gotten if we'd outlined that novel in detail, chapter by chapter. But again, it's my own personal way of working. You'll find the method that works best for you. Maybe you'll find your best method somewhere in the middle - jotting down the highlights of your novel, sketching out the main scenes. Or you may find outlining in detail the way to go. You'll definitely avoid those blind alleys that often plagues authors who fly by the seat of their pants.

Once you know what your book is about, live with your characters awhile, letting thoughts and ideas simmer in your mind. If the idea sticks through those initial days or weeks, it's probably worth pursuing. Soon the characters will become real, like new friends. They will urge you to tell their stories. If that isn't happening, scrap the idea, or set it on a back burner, and invite other ideas to present them. Grab the one that refuses to leave.

Then is the time to put pen to paper, or bring up that blank screen on your computer. At this stage, your creative self is like a tree

heavily laden with apples, begging to be picked and made into a delicious pie. Or at at least, an edible pie, to press a metaphor.

POINT OF VIEW

Which of your characters will tell the story. Who will be its narrator?

I write from more than one viewpoint in a novel because it's interesting and fun to get into the skin of both the hero and the villain, and yes, and even the landlord, much as an actor does. But this technique doesn't work well with every story. For one thing, the technique is challenging because you want everything to fit together into a flowing pattern, seamlessly. Otherwise, your novel can become jerky, and the shifting of viewpoint, distracting to the reader. Because my novels are in the suspense genre, I can also use multiple viewpoint to increase the suspense. Each of the characters can know only a portion of the story. For example, the killer may have targeted his next victim, but he may not know that the supposed victim is really an undercover cop. But the reader may know, and think, 'Oh, no, don't let him check you for that wire.'

But it's also true that some books work best written from the main character's point of view throughout. The single point of view. Nothing is seen except through the eyes of your main character *JANE EYRE*, one of my favorite books, is written from the point of view of Jane.

From chapter 3: "The next thing I remember is, waking up with a feeling as if I had had a frightful nightmare, and seeing before me a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars."

FIRST OR THIRD PERSON (Or second)

Which leads to the question of do I write my novel in the first person (I) or the third person. (She/he.) Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is written in the first person. (I). You could also write it in the second person, (you) as Jay McInerney did so skillfully in *BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY*. Here is an example: "Here you go again. All messed up and no place to go." But I would suggest you stay with first or third person, at least for your first novel. Your challenges will be formidable enough, without added complications.

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is written in the third person: "He was not the Model Boy of the village. He knew the model boy very well though – and loathed him." (This is also a wonderful example of great characterization.) From that quote, we have a good good idea who Tom is, and we like him.

If you haven't yet decided on first or third person for your novel, write a few paragraphs in first person, then try a few in the third person. Which feels right, flows better. Seems a more natural way to tell your story. Go with your best instincts.

THEME

Theme is simply the reason for the novel's being written. The author's statement on the human condition illustrated through the novel. Your novel doesn't have to have a moral, exactly, but you do want it to have significance. In *Chill Waters*, my main character, Rachael, learns that safety is mainly an illusion, that the only real safety comes from within. Also, that it is possible to learn to trust again, even after a devastating betrayal such as Rachael experienced at the hands of her husband. But I must say

here and now that I really didn't know what the theme of my novel was until I was well into it.

There are three universal themes: Man against man (or woman), Man against himself, and man against nature. And sometimes they overlap.

Man against man – Most Sherlock Holmes and other detective stories.

Man against himself – – *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Man against himself – (**and** nature) *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Theme is not tied like a ribbon around your story, but is integral to it. Just as you can't separate character from plot. All these elements are interwoven, like strands of thread that form a pattern in a fine wall hanging.

GETTING STARTED

The character comes to me first as I approach the writing of a book. A character in crisis. An image. The plot grows out of that,

In *Chill Waters*, for example, Rachael, after learning that her husband is having an affair, is devastated. In my imagination, I saw her in her car, driving, grim, determined. She is escaping to the old beachhouse at Jenny's Cove, where she once lived with her grandmother, the one place where she'd always felt safe. Because this is a suspense novel, that won't be the end of her problems. In fact, they've just begun. Rachel also has some personal issues she needs to deal with. The crisis itself will ultimately reveal to her the answers. They are two parallel lines that unfold as the story progresses.

CONFLICT

One of the teachers at the school where I worked as a writing instructor used to tell his students: "Get your main character up a tree, then throw rocks at him." Simplistic, but I think it's a useful analogy. We want our stories to end, not necessarily on a happy note, but at least a hopeful one. But we don't want our protagonist/main character to get there too easily. Another teacher used the analogy of two dogs and one bone. The bone is the source of conflict, which is essential to any good novel. Pick any of your favorite novels and you'll see that the conflict begins very close to the beginning.

Writing is a magical process in many ways, not always easily explainable how we get from here to there. And that's because a novel is a work of the imagination. You are attempting to bring into creation something that's never been before; that's no small feat, and you must be patient with yourself. But there are some techniques that will help inspire the magic.

START YOUR NOVEL OFF WITH A BANG

As I've mentioned, introduce conflict, or at least a sense of the conflict to come, in those first paragraphs. Many publishers or agents don't read further than that. Their desks are stacked with manuscripts and there just isn't the time, and probably the energy, to give your manuscript fifteen or twenty-five pages before the real story starts. In fact, better still to draw your reader into your story right from that first sentence.

Here are a few first lines from bestselling novels:

***Daddy's Little Girl* by Mary Higgins Clark** – “When Ellie awoke that morning, it was with the sense that something terrible was wrong.”

The Cat Who Walked Through Walls by Robert A. Heinlein – “I need to kill a man.”

The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon by Stephen King – “The world had teeth it could bite you with any time it wanted.”

These beginning sentences grab the reader at once. Some successful authors choose to lead the reader more gently, subtly into their story, and their high skills allow them leeway in this regard. We know the author and trust that we are going to get a great story, so we go along. You will find that is often true of authors no longer among us such as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Melville and many more. But too, that was before television and computers, to distract us. Here are other examples:

Not As A Stranger by Morton Thompson is one of the finest books I have ever read. It was written in 1954.

“The doctor came out of the house and he closed the door gently behind him. He looked up and there was a little boy.” Although it is subtle, there is something about that line that makes you want to read more.

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane – “The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting.”

Again, pick up some of your own favorite books and take special note of those beginning sentences. Which are your favorites? Which sentence grabbed you and drew you into the story at once.

How will you begin your own story? Gently? Or will you grab the reader by the shoulders. “Listen, I have a story to tell you?”

DIALOGUE

Believable dialogue will go a long way to making your novel successful. People do speak in different ways. Listen to the cab driver, the schoolteacher, your best friend. Each has his or her own unique way of expressing themselves. Then listen to your own characters, to what they say and how they say it. If you've created characters that are real to you, you will be able to hear

them speaking to one another. They will be alive to you in your imagination.

Here are a few lines of dialogue from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*:

The girls came out. Pecola with two drips of orange-pineapple. Maureen with black raspberry. You should have got some," she said. "They had all kinds. Don't eat down to the tip of the cone," she advised Pecola.

"Why?"

"Because there's a fly in there."

"How you know?"

"Oh, not really. A girl told me she found one in the bottom of hers once, and ever since then she throws that part away."

"Oh."

We passed Dreamland Theatre, and Betty Grable smiled down at us.

"Don't you just love her?" Maureen asked.

This is good dialogue interwoven with sense of time and place. Good dialogue gives the reader insight into the personalities of the characters. It also moves the story forward. The sounds of their

voices in the reader's mind help bring the story to life. Like turning the audio up in a movie.

Here are a few lines of dialogue and description from *The Long Rain*," by Peter Gadol.

I greeted Will Clark. He owned the store.

"Good morning, Jason," he said. "Except it's not a good morning is it?"

He was sitting on a stool next to a rack of blank keys. He always kept a pot of coffee going for anyone who stopped by, but the pot was empty. He was a big-bellied man with long arms that he had a habit of flapping while he spoke, as if he were trying to take flight but was too heavy to lift off his stool.

The Long Rain is a gripping tale, filled with suspense and atmosphere. It is also an artistic achievement. I don't think you can plan art, but you can plan a well-crafted story, much as a man builds a house. You first have to frame it, give it structure. If you take care of the craft of writing - and write the best story of which you are capable, you have the possibility of creating art. But if

you set out to create great art, what generally results is pretentious and self-conscious. To quote Shakespeare, "The Play's the Thing."

Here is another example of excellent dialogue from my favorite novel of all time. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

"Is it all over?" she said, looking down at my face. "Have you cried your grief away?"

"I'm afraid I never shall do that."

"Why?"

"Because I have been wrongly accused, and you, ma'am, and everybody else will now think me wicked."

"We shall think what you prove yourself to be, my child. Continue to act as a good girl, and you will satisfy me."

"Shall I, Miss Temple?"

Believable dialogue goes a long way to making your novel work, to making it come alive on the page. And while we're on the subject, avoid adverbs that end in 'ly', especially in dialogue.

Example:

"Go home now," his brother growled.

"Go home now," his brother growled angrily.

The first is better. That he *growled*, along with his words tells us he was angry.

Write active, vigorous sentences. Example: My first boyfriend will always be remembered by me is an example of the passive 'will always be'. Better to write: I will always remember my first boyfriend. Write with nouns and verbs, and avoid overuse of adverbs.

A book I can't recommend strongly enough is *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE* by Strunk and White. It's a thin little volume, but in my opinion, no writer should be without a copy. Mine is dog-eared; it has served me well. That, a good dictionary, and a thesaurus are really the only books you really need. Though you may ultimately accumulate a shelf full of writers' books over time, as I have. They are like old friends, always within easy reach when I need to spend time with those who do what I do, who inspire me, and from whom I never cease to learn.

MOTIVATION

Motivation is simply 'what happened to your characters to make them behave as they do.' What motivates *your* characters? That's important to understanding them. And empathy comes from understanding. It's how we create three- dimensional characters, Characters readers will believe in, and root for. Or not. You want your reader to identify with your character, at least to some degree. Even the worst villain has human qualities. Hitler had a love for animals, and an appreciation of art.

I rarely know everything I need to know about my characters when I begin my novel. I need to live with them awhile, getting to know them a little at a time, much in the way we get to know real people. But I do know enough. And so do you. So to summarize: you identify your genre, ask yourself what your book will be about. You might want to give your book a working title (if you're so inclined) you can always change it later - and begin chapter One. Personally, I can't begin the actual writing until I have a title, even if I change it later on. This gives me something to hang the book on, makes the book, which I haven't yet written, seem more real and concrete to me. A promise I make to myself, and to my reader. But that's a personal quirk. Some writers don't bother with a title until the book is written. You'll know what works best for you as you as you proceed.

If you do have a good handle on your story, that's good. Write a loose synopsis, a sort of road map. You can always take a different fork in the road if you get a better idea of the direction your novel should go. Stay open to that new plot twist, or perhaps the introduction of a new character you hadn't considered.

Although we must never let that new character drop into our story out of nowhere to solve a difficult plot problem. That's cheating, and the reader will not likely read the rest of our book.

But we first need to get that book started, and keep it going.

Which bring me to the issue of discipline.

DISCIPLINE

It is in the execution of a novel that separates the writers from the would-be writers. It is not easy, or everyone would be doing it.

Staying with your story through 300 or more pages of manuscript is the true test. To do that, you have to show up for work, ideally, every day. There are no shortcuts. There is only the work.

Set aside at least a couple of hours a day to work on your novel.

No matter what your schedule, you CAN find the time if you make

writing a priority. Acquire the habit, much like brushing your teeth. Many writers hold down full time jobs while writing their novels. I am among them. John Grisham rose at 4:30 a.m. every morning to get in that stint of writing before he went to work at his law practice. I, too, like to write in the early mornings, while the house is still asleep, and you're in that gray zone between sleep and waking, and the day has not yet interrupted the muses. Some people like to write late at night.

Whatever your preference, choose the same time every day if possible. Set yourself a goal - two or three pages are good. More if you can. Just think: if you write two pages a day for six months, you will have written the first draft of your novel. But we must put 'seat to chair' every day, for that to happen. Otherwise, your dream will remain just that - a dream. Having said that, if, on occasion you miss a day, don't beat up on yourself. But do try to keep to schedule. After awhile, you'll find you're unhappy or anxious if you've missed your writing time.

Turn off your phone, and tell your friends and family you will not be available for anything less than an emergency, such as a house fire, during your writing time. Others will come to respect your writing time. But only if you do. I remember when I first began

writing and a friend would phone, and ask, "What are you doing?" "Writing," I'd say, and my friend would say, "oh," and just keep on talking. But my family and friends did come to respect my writing time, when I made it clear that *I* was serious about my writing. Although I've suggested you turn off your phone, personally, I've never been able to do that. I'm always afraid I'll miss an important call. I don't think I ever have. If it's important, they'll call back.

WRITERS' GROUPS

Writing can be a lonely business, and you have to decide if the lifestyle fits with your nature. When I was at the beginning of my writing career, I joined a writer's group in our city, and found it to be invaluable. Especially in terms of support and encouragement. But the truth is, none of us wanted criticism, we only wanted praise for our work, even if I didn't want to admit it at the time. But after awhile, at least for me, I needed to face my old Smith-Corona without the props, and find my own way. Writing is a solitary occupation. Just you and the blank page or screen. And that's the fun, and the challenge, of being a writer. Writing is the best career in the world. You get to play 'god' albeit with a small 'g'.

You are the actors, the director, the sound man, and of course, producer. What could be more exciting? After awhile, you won't feel a bit lonely; you'll have your characters for company, as they become more and more real to you, and you even resent being pulled away from them. That's when you know you're on the right track.

IDEAS FOR A NOVEL

Maybe you don't have an idea for a novel, yet. Some of my students think they haven't lived long enough to write a novel, got enough schooling, travelled to exotic lands, and so have nothing to write about that others would want to read. And of course that's not the case. According to author Willa Cather, "Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen." I believe that's true.

Hemingway thought a most valuable tool for a writer was an unhappy childhood.

Delve into your past. Go where the pain, the passion is. Pull out a particular vivid memory of something you experienced in your life that touched you deeply in some way, wounded you, maybe

changed you, write it down. Ask yourself: what if? What if I had married that boy with the curly hair and cute grin, (who ended up behind bars) how would my life have been different.

Truman Capote believed one writes and rewrites the same book. "I lead a character from book to book," he said. "I continue along with the same ideas. Only the angle of the vision, the method, the lighting, change."

My own books deal with betrayal and loss. I didn't really recognize that until I was well into the third novel. I think all good books can't help but tell you something about their author. So don't censor yourself. Write what is in you to write. I don't advocate the popular advice of 'writing about what you know', but maybe 'writing about what you know, emotionally. We're all, men and women, though differently wired in some ways, very similar in others. We all want the same things from life - love, understanding, recognition, appreciation, challenge, a sense of accomplishment. So don't be afraid to write about anything you want to.

In *Nowhere to Hide*, I write about a man who is a serial killer. I myself am neither a man nor a serial killer, but I have felt jealousy, anger, hate, pride, uncertainty and so on. And I dare say, so have

you. It's all a matter of degree. Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* and he had never been to war. Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of *Tarzan*, wasn't raised in a jungle. It didn't stop them, and it shouldn't stop you.

In my novel, *Chill Waters*, I used memories of my grandmother, who meant the world to me and who was there for me at a very difficult time in my young life; but I didn't write about that time, although I did incorporate her 'essence' into my book. My memory 'served' the book. Everything must serve the story. Again, as Shakespeare said: "The Play's the Thing." The only fact I used was that my grandmother was an artist in life, as was Rachel's grandmother in the novel.

Some of my students have been disappointed in my response to something they have written, because their story wasn't really a story - but an incident. "But it's true," they'll say. "It really happened." The reader doesn't care if it's true. As long as it *feels* true. That true thing that happened to you, is an incident. It needs to be molded to fit your novel. A novel is a work of the imagination, but you can definitely base on personal experience. Change what you need to change.

Unless you're writing an autobiography, that incident that happened to you is just that - an incident. It is not, in its present form, a story. But it can inspire a story, and set your novel off on the right track. Because in the course of your novel, your main character will change in some way. She will at least have learned some important lesson. Give your imagination full rein. Again, ask yourself, "What If"?

Never let the facts get in the way of a good story, or a deeper truth.

When Novelist Helen Van Slyke was asked if she drew on real people and experiences, she said... "of course, but only in the sense of having lived long enough to have known a great many people, heard so many stranger-than-fiction real-life stories, read about daily problems and joys, soaked up the feelings of others, combined them with philosophy of my own and overlaid the whole with vivid imagination and a love of yarn-spinning."

If you still haven't an idea for a novel, read the headlines in your newspaper. Mary Higgins Clark likes to use something that's in the news, and did for her first novel. "For the first time children were starting to be picked up," the author said in an interview. "It used to be that a kidnapped child was a wealthy child. The average person could let their kids run in the street. "Be home by five, and

not a minute later." Today, you're driving your kids everywhere, even in the suburbs - and that was just starting at the time." She was touching on the disappearance of children; that was what intrigued her. And so was planted the seed for her first bestseller, *Where are the Children?*

MORE INSPIRATION FOR IDEAS

Another great way to get your imagination going is to be a people watcher. Set in a crowded bus terminal, or airport, and make up stories about the lives of strangers. What about that elderly woman in the feathered hat, with the limp. What's her story? Where is she going with such purpose?

What about that young blond woman holding the child by the hand. Why does she look angry? Is she angry with the child? Or has her husband just filed for divorce? She's put him through law school, and now he's throwing her over for his much younger assistant. I'm sure you can come up with something a lot more original.

Create an imaginary conversation between the two men sitting together. Think of Patricia Highsmith's story *Strangers on a*

Train. Ideas for stories are everywhere - they are in the air, pluck one that grabs you.

WHEN YOU'RE STUCK

There is no forcing the novel; that way lies madness. And stilted writing. Open yourself up. Listen to your characters interact with one another, see them in their setting. See what they're up to. Give them a chance to tell their story, through you. At the same time, know as much as you can about them. You don't need to know their brand of toothpaste, and in fact come to the character in a different sort of way. Like an actor, get inside the skin of your character. That way you get to know who he or she is from a deeper place.

Though you want to give the reader enough physical description so that he or she can visualize the character in her imagination, it's important to show who your character is, in his mind and soul. In a novel, you have the freedom to portray your character through his thought processes (interior monologue). And by what he or she says and does, just as we come to know people in real life.

For my own main character, I draw on those traits I like to think I have in myself - sincerity, loyalty and courage. Although my main character will have them in far greater measure. Alas, she's also better looking, thinner, and younger than I am.

Interviewers often ask me if my characters ever threaten to take over the story.

My answer is no. Although a character does act according to his or her own nature, the nature I've given him, and if I try to force him or her to go in a direction that is contrary to that nature, (at least without a very good reason) they let me know quickly enough, by refusing to do anything at all. A whole new meaning to 'freeze frame.'

SERIOUS PLAY

You've heard runners talk about getting into the zone, when something else takes over and they 'hit their stride' so to speak. Have you ever watched a child at play? How serious that play is. That's the ideal state we writers aim for - where, instead of being painfully conscious of putting one word after the other, one sentence after the other, we're writing our story. There is a flow

that happens. Personally, I wish it would happen more often than it does. But still, it happens enough that the book gets written. In fact, the proof lies in the fact that thousands of books get written every year. I offer here a few more tips that I hope will increase the chances of your book being one of them:

SENSORY DETAIL

Guide the reader into your story through her/his senses:

Let the reader see what you see - zoom in - let her see the sunlight laying a warm path on the square maple table. Maybe that sunlight on the kitchen table is filtered through a lacy, moving yellow curtain. Can you see it? If you describe no more than that, the reader will fill in the rest of that room. The frig, the chairs...come up with other ideas for describing your room. Maybe just...he crossed the long, rectangular room in 4 strides. Well, we know something about the room, and we know your character is tall and in a hurry. There are many ways to weave description into your novel, without having it overwhelm the reader, and interfere with the flow of the story.

Open up a favorite book, and find a descriptive passage YOU like. The best ones don't stand out there on their own, drawing attention to themselves, they are woven into the story. They don't interrupt the 'flow.'

Smells are important; Let your reader smell the enticing aroma of coffee perking. Or lead him down an alleyway. Instead of saying the alley smelled horrible, be specific. Write: the alley reeked of urine and rotting meat. Let your reader hear the chimes above the door, the click of cat claws on the hardwood floor. Use all five senses in your writing- sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. But use them selectively. Again, weave them into your prose - don't let them take center stage. Unless that's your purpose. For example, if you were writing about a man who can transform himself into a panther, the click of the cat claws (in the darkness) would take on a whole new meaning. And create the desired tension.

Set your novel in a concrete place and time. And, to paraphrase Hemingway, Don't forget to put in the weather.

Even when you're not actually writing, thoughts and ideas will present themselves to you... while you're doing the dishes, taking a walk, or soaking in the bath. Some you will toss off, others will be

keepers. But had you not been thinking of your story, and given it to your subconscious to mull over as well, those great ideas would have remained 'unimagined'Stephen King, in his book *On Writing* calls this subconscious workings - "the boys in the basement." And he's right; those boys in the basement give you your greatest ideas. They're very creative. Those 'Eureka moments' that occasionally seem nothing short of genius, are gifts from 'the boys'. But you've got to give those guys something to work on, while you're doing your own conscious work, in the main house, to press a metaphor.

All novels are written the same way; one paragraph at a time, one page at a time, one chapter at a time. I don't like to cut it down to one sentence or one word, because you are not 'in flow.' We are like the blind, feeling our way along, recognizing where we are at various points, uncertain at others. And sometimes altogether lost. But you will get back on the path. You just keep going. Make notes. Write a loose synopsis of your story. Solve plot problems as you go. If you get stuck at some point, leave it for a bit, move on to a different scene in your story. Sleep on it. Soldier bravely on, and believe in your creative intelligence. And there is never any question that you have creative intelligence...we ALL do. So trust in yours.

When you have written chapter One you will know more about your story than you did when you started. Now you will write chapter Two and so on. While always trusting trust in your Creative Intelligence.

That's not to say you won't feel frustrated along the way, when nothing seems to be working, and the characters are as wooden as Frankenstein putting one foot stiffly in front of the other, and the dialogue just as wooden. Most writers go through bouts of anguish and uncertainty, and the way to get through it is to work your way through it. The alternative is to leave the book alone for awhile and come back to it refreshed. But don't leave it for too long, though ...two or three days at most...other ideas and solutions will present themselves to you, the characters will nag you to get on with their story, and you'll be off and running once more. These ugly happenings can simply be the results of fear - fear of success, fear of failure ...fear that you aren't good enough.

Don't listen! Let yourself experiment, write without margins, by which I mean give yourself permission to color outside the lines like you did when you were a kid. Remember why you wanted to write in the first place.

I like what Stephen Cannell has to say about fear that we're not very good, while at the same time we want to be brilliant. "Every great writer who ever lived has, on occasion, written garbage. Hemingway wrote garbage, Faulkner wrote garbage. It is okay. Every writer has bad days, or a day when he or she isn't connecting with the material. A day when, unknown to us, the story of the character we are writing has been improperly designed."

He's right. He's also right in reminding us that we haven't lost our muse, or that we're a creative burnout. It just means that you have a problem in your story structure or with character motivation. Something is dishonest that seemed okay when you set it up.

Ask yourself a few questions. "If I were this character, would I be responding in this way. Would I be saying or doing what he or she is saying and doing? If the answer is no, rethink that scene.

Sometimes our aims are too high - we want to write the great literary masterpiece when our talents are more geared to a terrific mystery novel. One is no more difficult than the other, or evident of more talent. They're just different. You know best the kind of story that comes naturally from you.

Write it!

MIDDLE OF THE NOVEL BLUES

For those times you feel uninspired, which visit all of us - often in the middle of that novel - reconnect with your writing. Try to recapture that excitement you felt when you knew you wanted to be a writer...the pure satisfaction and you felt describing dew on the grass, a baby's tiny, reaching hand, the smell of lilacs wafting through the bedroom window. To quote E.L. Doctorow, "Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader-not the fact that it's raining, but the feel of being rained upon." Then remember what it was about your novel that first excited you, what about it made you eager to get to the computer, or grab your pen.

There's so much emphasis on marketing, we writers can get bogged down with what happens after the book/story is written. Enjoy the journey, the process. Whatever happens, happens. Again, the writing itself is the only thing over which we have a real and direct control.

RESEARCH

As to research, I do my own on a need to know basis. I have a set of world Books that I used before I finally came, kicking and screaming, into the computer age. There's little you can't find out on the internet. But I have also phoned someone knowledgeable in a particular field, and have found, almost without exception, that people love to share their expertise with you. Especially when you explain that you're writing a novel. For example, when I wanted to know what color body bags are, I phoned our local morgue, and asked. They're green. At least they were at the time. But doing research can be a two-sided coin; you can get side-tracked with all sorts of interesting bits of information, when you should be working on your novel. Almost anything can seem easier than actually writing that novel. Writers find all sorts of excuses to avoid it. Easier to scrub the bathroom floor than rework that scene that seems to resist your every effort. That's the thing, though; only through concentrated writing sessions will you break through the barriers, and enjoy watching your story begin to take shape, and breathe on its own.

Here's some helpful advice from bestselling author James Patterson: "Stop trying to write sentences and start trying to write

stories. Stories are easy to write because they flow out of our brains naturally; sentences are extremely hard. There's nothing to be afraid of because you never have to show anyone your work until you're ready.”

It's also important to remember that great novels aren't written - they're rewritten. Even Shakespeare would change a scene or two if the laugh didn't come when it was supposed to, or no one dabbed at their eyes during a sad scene.

I revise - a lot - and so will you - until you just can't stand to rewrite one more word, and to do so would not really make a noticeable difference, and may even be counter-productive. Then go through and look for typos and inconsistencies, awkward sentences and so on. When your manuscript is the best you can make it, then is the time to shop for an agent.

GETTING PUBLISHED

I found a publisher for my first novel by haunting my local bookstore, and familiarizing myself with publishers that published the sort of book I'd written. I'd also armed myself with a copy of

Writer's Market which gave me the name of the correct person to submit to, the address and 'how to submit' information, and even examples of query letters, and other pertinent information.

You get an agent the same way. One thing about finding an agent's name in on the acknowledgement page of a novel, you know he's legitimate. But you can also find lists of agents on the internet. Review their client list and their submission guidelines. Some agents even accept email queries. Just remember that the literary waters are alive with sharks, eager to prey on the dreams of unsuspecting writers. They make their money off writers, but not by selling their books. Although in fairness, some legitimate agents do charge a reading fee. But you can also find many good agents who do not. They earn their living solely from the sale of books.

Whatever the agent requests, that is what you should submit. If the agent wants more, he or she will ask. So focus on making your query letter as enticing and well written as possible.

In your query letter, include the title of the story, the sort of novel it is - mainstream, mystery, romance... If you have writing credits, mention them. Give the agent just enough about your novel that he

or she wants more! Include the approximate word count, your phone number and email address, though most agents will call if they want to receive sample chapters. One to two pages are sufficient unless the agents asks for more.

Use quality paper and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the agent's reply.

DEALING WITH REJECTION

George Orwell, Norman Mailer, D H Lawrence, and Leo Tolstoy were all rejected by publishers. Mary Higgins Clark's first novel was rejected more than a couple of dozen times. Five publishers rejected J K Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame. *Gone With The Wind* received eighteen rejections. *Dr. Seuss* was rejected twenty-three times before Vanguard Press accepted his renowned series of forty-four children's classics. Stephen King's first novels were rejected several times, Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* was rejected eighteen times, Jack London received forty *rejection* letters before being published, and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* was turned down twenty times. So if you're getting rejected, you're in fine company.

As Richard Bach says, the difference between the amateur and the profession is that the professional didn't quit.

So stay positive, no matter how many rejection letters you get. That can be difficult, I know. But rejection goes with the territory. And you can learn something from those letters if you're receptive. Publishers often scribble helpful critiques on the rejection letter to a writer they think has potential. Publishers don't have time to waste on manuscripts that don't have merit, so take those notes as an encouragement from someone in the business, and see if there's something in them that can help you improve your manuscript before sending it off to the next publisher or agent on your list.

Having been a writing instructor for some years, I know that many struggling writers think there is some trick to getting published. Some well-guarded secret at the bottom of it all, and perhaps they are not too far off the mark. The secret is, of course, an indomitable belief in yourself - a belief so well entrenched that all the rejection and frustration that is part of the writer's life, (or any artist's life) will not dislodge it.

You must have the willingness to do the work, to serve the apprenticeship, for however long it takes. And first and foremost, you must love the actual process of writing; otherwise it's just too darned hard. It goes without saying that some innate talent is necessary to be a successful writer. But it's not enough. I've known writers who could break your heart with their words, but it doesn't happen for them because they just don't hang in there. They don't want it badly enough. And I've had students with a modest talent who are writing professionally today. So there you are!

I can tell you, there is no rush quite like the one that comes from hearing (or reading) the words: 'We love your novel and would like to publish it'. I've compared the novel to having a baby (maybe a slight exaggeration) but it is true that the sight of that beautiful child tends to make you forget the pain involved in bringing it into the world. And here are the real perks: Writing a novel allows you to play god, albeit with a small 'g'. You get to play all the roles, you are producer, director, soundman, lightman -- what freedom. So, although there are no guarantees in this precarious business, the possibilities are boundless. And you never know - you could hit a home run right out of the park, with your first book! It's rare, but it happens.

Trust in yourself, and do the work - day after day, week after week, until the book is written. Then comes the polishing and rewriting to make your book the very best it can be. When you simply can't bear to look at it anymore, start sending out query letters and sample chapters to publishers/agents. Go through your *Writer's Market* and list those that seem most likely to be interested in the type of book that you've written. While you're waiting for a reply, instead of haunting the mailbox, get started on that next book.

Again - give that critical editor on your shoulder the bum's rush (he gets called in for work later) and just write. Enjoy the writing; give yourself to it like a lover. Get out of your own way by focussing on the characters and their story. And know you are not alone. All around the globe, at this very moment, writers are sitting at their kitchen tables with pen and paper, or at their computers, struggling to write their own novels. Tell your demons to take a hike. I know, I hear them too: "You can't write. Whoever said you could write? Who would want to read this drivel? If I let the words (the demon(s)) settle into my consciousness, my words become stilted, the characters flat. My creative powers crippled. It's all about overcoming fear to do what you know how to do when all cylinders are firing.

It takes courage to be a writer, to put your work (yourself) out there, never knowing if it will be praised or ridiculed. Writing *is* a precarious business, not for the faint of heart. There are no guarantees for any of us. So we must rise above the fear and focus on the work at hand. There is no other way.

You're in noble company. Welcome, dear novelist!

Good luck!

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## WRITE YOUR NOVEL

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