Creative Writing Workshop

Workshops

I never attended classes or workshops because I thought:
(a) that I would curl up and die if I had to read my work to anyone,
(b) that criticism would paralyze me,
(c) that my limited time would be better spent writing,
(d) that no one can teach you to write.

Now I've changed my mind. I think it's a really good idea to join a workshop if you can find one you like. This is because:

(a) you'll have to show your work one day, so you might well break through the pain barrier now (or you could keep your work locked in a drawer for ever…)
(b) constructive criticism from friends, or brutal criticism from editors, is vital,
(c) sometimes people write more in half an hour in a workshop than they would in a day twiddling their thumbs at home (deadlines and fear are highly motivating),
(d) no one can teach you to write, but they can help you to think about writing.

If you can't find a workshop, or don't want to join one, then you can do a huge amount online.

Try US sites like Wired for Books at Ohio University http://wiredforbooks.org/

Both NPR and the BBC produce weekly podcasts of interviews with authors. Or just Google interviews with authors that you are interested in. Best of all, buy the Paris Review collections of interviews with authors.

Most importantly, whatever fiction you read, read it critically and think about the techniques you want – and those you don't want – to use in your own writing.

Inspiration

Inspiration doesn't strike in a fully formed hundred-thousand word bolt of lightning trailing believable characters, thrilling plot and a perfectly honed dramatic arc in its wake. Inspiration comes in tiny flickering pieces, and it comes from all around you, and from inside your head. For most writers, creating a novel is slow, hard work. But don't let this put you off. There are also moments of ecstatic revelation when your synapses silently fire and suddenly your brain comes up with exactly what your story needs. It may not be a bolt of lightning, but it can feel like one.

Light Bulbs

Since inspiration is often portrayed as a light bulb suddenly being switched on in someone's head, I think it's just about relevant to talk about the invention of light bulbs. Thomas Edison spent years trying to find a substance to work as an effective carbon filament in the light bulb. He tried substance after substance, and one after another, year after year, they failed. Challenged on this, he reportedly said, 'I have not failed ten thousand times. I have successfully found ten thousand ways that will not work.' That's often how writing feels.

Or, as Samuel Beckett put it: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.'

Break it Down

Starting a work of fiction can feel overwhelming. I think it's useful to break writing down into three parts: thinking, writing and editing.

The first and third – thinking and editing - use primarily your conscious, critical faculties. The second - the writing - uses your subconscious and unconscious.

1. Thinking.

This is not limited to preparation before you start writing. It's what many writers do throughout the writing of a story. When he was writing East of Eden, John Steinbeck started every working day writing a journal entry, which he addressed to his friend and editor, Pascal Covici. He wrote about moving house, about his children, about sharpening his pencils. But he also wrote at length about what he wanted his novel to be about, what shape and form he wanted it to take, what he needed to happen next, and always, always, how he was going to achieve that. He was thinking consciously about an act of creativity. The idea that writers sit down without a thought in their heads, and that words pour forth is a myth.

Here's John Steinbeck's *Journal of a Novel* on the subject of furniture:

The writing table is perfect. I have never been so content with anything. And the blue wing-back chair is wonderfully comfortable. It might possibly be too comfortable but this I do not believe. I think that if I can be relaxed, the book has a chance of being relaxed, and I have a very strong feeling about this book being completely at ease and comfortable. Also I have a strong feeling about its being very long. Otherwise I will have lost my whole direction.

2. Writing

If you've done your thinking about what you're going to write next, you can now stop thinking too hard, and simply let the words flow. The wonder of this lies in the fact that your subconscious and unconscious brain will now make all sorts of other connections on the page while you are writing. You will simply not know where some things have come from, and it is this experience which has led people sometimes to think of inspiration as an external force, something hitting you, or gushing forth.

Here's how David Vann described it in an interview with Simon Mayo on BBC's Radio Five Live on 29th October 2009 (this is my own transcript, with apologies for any inaccuracies). Note that failure comes before inspiration.

…..David Vann talks about a line in the middle of his novel, *Legend of a Suicide*, which comes as a shock to the reader, and says that it came as a shock to him while he was writing, as well.

SM: How can it come as a surprise to you?

DV: It came as an absolute shock. This is what's wonderful about fiction, this is why I love fiction. Sometimes it's out of control and speaks back to you in ways that you didn't suspect, and seems more true to your life than the events you actually lived, so when I came to that surprise I realised that everything I'd been writing up 'til then had led to that moment, but I hadn't seen it, I hadn't seen it coming…

SM: So where did it come from then? Which part of your brain delivered that line for you?

DV: I have no idea, but I know that I failed for years in writing this story. I failed, for three or four years I had to throw away everything, and it took ten years overall, and it just felt that occasionally a piece would work where it would just seem to write itself over a couple of days, and this novella I actually wrote where I was sailing offshore from California to Hawaii and I was in big seas and I had the laptop strapped to my knees, and I was writing along, and I wrote most of it in those seventeen days, and it just all seemed to come out in one massive rush.

3. Editing

Someone once said to me that he'd liked the idea of writing fiction but couldn't work out whether you had to include every time someone needed to go to the toilet. Fiction is selective. What is cut out is as important as what is left in. You can cut most, if not all, toilet visits. Stand back from your story, cut your emotional ties with it, and read it as though you were a stranger to it. The more you cut, the more you pare your story

to its core. During this process you'll also find areas which need more writing. You'll find connections you didn't notice first time around, and be able to exploit them. Stylistically, you must examine every word and decide whether it is adequate to its task. Is that the right verb? Have you used this word repeatedly? One Booker prize winner said that she had written a million words in order to find her one-hundred-thousand word story. This is also a common experience – sometimes you don't know the story until you've written it, and sometimes it's hiding inside what you thought was a different story.

It's said that Robert Louis Stevenson burned the first draft of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde when his wife told him that the story needed to be more clearly allegorical. The story goes that he burned the first draft so that he didn't have the option of just playing around with what was there already. By destroying it, he had to start from scratch. It's an excellent editing technique, if you can face it.

Whatever you're writing towards, whether the story is heading for a magazine, or a Short story website, or a competition, or a publisher, it should be as good as you can make it. Don't think that an editor will tidy it up for you, that's not their job. If a manuscript is slapdash, it will go in the bin. Agents and publishers receive such a lot of material that they're actually pleased to have an obvious reason to get rid of some of it.

I've always found it really helpful to show my work to a friend first. It's got to be someone who likes reading the kind of fiction you're writing, or there's no point. Tell them what you want – tell them that your work means a lot to you, so not to be unnecessarily cruel (some people wallow in being asked for criticism, and really go to town), but that you do want honest feedback, and that it should be specific as possible.

It's normal, when a friend or editor gives that honest feedback to feel first offended and then outraged. It's normal, in fact, to think that the friend or editor must be very stupid if they did not understand your story. If they were clever, they would have picked up on this subtle hint, or that nuance. It's normal to decide not to change a thing. You have to get over it. Your friend represents your readers, who may or may not be clever enough to intuit exactly what it is that you're trying to imply. Most likely, if they don't get it, your other readers won't either, so the most constructive response is to fix it so that they do understand. This is one reason you need to have extra eyes reading your work. It may be that a large portion of your story is in your head, and not on the page at all. Or that your story is clear in your own head, but is muddied by unnecessary complication on the page.

Kate Grenville has said that during the writing of her prize-winning novel *The Secret River*, it was only at the very end of writing the first draft that she fully understood the role that the hero's wife, Sal, should play. Yet Sal, and the nature of her relationship with her husband, is at the very heart of the book. It looks, to the reader, as though it was there from the very beginning.

Sometimes friends or editors try to be extra constructive, by making suggestions about how you could fix a problem in your story. Often those suggestions will make you cringe (how on earth could they have misunderstood so thoroughly what you're trying to do in your literary masterpiece, that your editor should suggest an alien visitation to clear up the problem.) It's alright to cringe, and it's fine to dismiss their suggestion although there are times when an alien visitation might just do the trick. But one way or another you still have to fix the problem. Just because they came up with a silly idea to fix it doesn't mean there wasn't a problem in the first place. From what I've read, it seems to me that perceptive friends and editors have sometimes changed mediocre books into great books.

Writer's Block

In my experience, this is what happens when something goes wrong with a story – which is more often than one might hope. It's not that you don't much feel like carrying on, it's that you physically can't. So see it as an opportunity to reassess the work so far. Here would be my advice:

1. Give yourself a break, and get some physical exercise. Take a complete mental break.
2. Print out what you've written so far.
3. Read it aloud, all in one sitting, with a red pen in your hand.
4. Be ruthless in cutting what doesn't work but try not to delete the whole thing.
5. Enjoy the bits that work, and make a note of them.
6. Any passage that actually sends you to sleep should be cut.
7. At the same time, ask yourself questions, and write them down:
   Why don't I like this character?
   Why on earth would anyone do something so stupid?
   Is the structure strong enough?
   Why hasn't anything happened for twenty pages?

With any luck, if you can think through your list of questions, you'll be able to make a fresh start. It may mean getting rid of a large number of words, but that, I'm afraid, is life.

A Problem Defined is a Problem Largely Solved

I cannot remember who said this, or why, or even whether it had anything to do with writing. It's common sense of course, but the kind of common sense that can feel like a revelation. Throughout the writing process, even when you're not blocked, try to define what your problem is. Write it down. Take it away with you when you leave your desk. Let it bubble and mull at the back of your mind while you do the washing up (if you're male, it's particularly important that you do the washing up, and do it as frequently as possible - I say this entirely for the sake of your writing) or while you sleep. Often you will find that your subconscious sorts it out for you. It may even be that the solution to

your problem seems so very obvious that you wonder what on earth the problem was in the first place.

Your Notebook of Aha's and What If's

Before we get to the Aha's and the What If's, here's a basic list of some things you need to be considering constantly. Some of these are very obvious, so bear with me. If John Steinbeck bothered to think about the basics, so should you.

- What kind of story are you writing? Is it funny, horror, mystery, love?
- What kind of tone do you want your story to have?
- What is the theme of your story? (Notice what kind of news stories or feature stories you listen to on the radio or read in the paper, what you argue about with friends – these are the things that interest you, and perhaps they are your theme.)
- Who is the protagonist? What should the reader feel about the protagonist?
- Where does your story take place?
- Whose voice will you use to tell the story? (Remember, first person is the most engaging to the reader, who can immediately identify with the character. It is also, however, the most limiting, because the first person can only describe what he or she has directly experienced.)
- What kind of tension or conflict will there be in the story? (Just as in life, there's no drama without conflict or tension.)

An **Aha!** Is anything you hear or see which makes you think, 'Aha! I can use that in my story!' Make your notes as detailed as possible. Last year I was at a bus station and I overheard two elderly women discussing the bus timetable. Something about their conversation made me think Aha! I wrote myself a note. Later I thought I would try to turn their conversation into a short story, and went back to my notes, only to find that all I had written was: 'Two elderly ladies discuss bus timetable' Without the detail I couldn't recreate it, so that was that, no story. Everything you think you will remember because it's the best and most interesting thought you ever had, you will most likely forget within five minutes, especially if you have a busy or chaotic life. I am quite sure that the reason all the great classical philosophers were men, is that when women had the same thought a century or so earlier, they were too busy cooking dinner or doing the laundry to write it down.

A **What If?** is what fiction is all about – taking reality and tweaking it. You can take any factual sentence, add a What If? and you'll have a simple story,.

Jack was eating a bacon sandwich. (What if it tasted like chocolate?)
Sonya was walking along the pavement. (What if a huge hole opened in the ground in front of her, and she fell in and was swallowed up, and the hole closed, and she was never seen again….?)
Philip loved Ruth. Philip married Ruth. (What if Ruth loved someone else?)

Choices

The choices people make are the stuff of conflict and tension, and therefore of drama. The choices our characters make are the markers for their character, and not only that, but for their development. If you are having trouble plotting, then present your character with some difficult choices. The story will come alive, and so will your character, although of course if he chooses to trust the wrong woman or throw himself on a grenade to save others, he may end up dead.

Like an Aha! Or a What if? A choice can be very simple:

Terry really wants to buy a new computer game. He's seen his father's wallet open on the sideboard. Does he steal the cash, or doesn't he?
Gary is new in school and is afraid he'll never make any friends. Jeff befriends him and suggests they play truant. If Gary doesn't agree, he'll lose his only friend. What does he do?

Plot and Character

Without believable characters, your plot won't move. Without a plot, your characters will sit around twiddling their thumbs and muttering, 'What next?'

You have to know much more about the character than you put on the page. Some writers write it all down in background notes. I think writing characters notes is a bit tedious. How can anyone come alive in a list of attributes? But I find that many of the thousands of words that I edit out of my story are scenes in which I am exploring characters.

When you write about your character, it's not very elegant to include a potted biography, or to baldly and at length describe him or her, although everyone from Tolstoy on down does give the reader a few pointers here and there.

Here, in *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier allows her first person narrator to give a little description of Mr De Winter:

He belonged to a walled city of the fifteenth century, a city of narrow, cobbled streets and thin spires, where the inhabitants wore pointed shoes and worsted hose. His face was arresting, sensitive, medieval in some strange inexplicable way, and I was reminded of a portrait seen in a gallery, I had forgotten where, of a certain Gentleman Unknown.

It is straight description, but not only is it not boring, it tells you as much about the young and romantic narrator as it does about the mysterious Gentleman Unknown, Mr De Winter.

Mostly your character should describe himself or herself to the reader. He or she should reveal themselves in the things that they do and the words that they say.

The Power of the Specific

When you have the choice, don't use a general word when you can be specific. The more specific you are, the more the reader can identify what exactly you are talking about. And it makes you look more confident – as though you know exactly what you're talking about.

One thing that is difficult, however, is brand name**s**. Is your hero driving a car or a Porsche, is he wearing a mac or a Burberry, and is he drinking a coffee or a Starbucks? This will depend on the context and the type of story that you're writing. There are times when brand names get in the way, and other times when they feel right. There are cases where it will be important to the story. For instance, say you're writing about a young and fashionable young woman, it may not much matter whether you say that she's reading a magazine or that she's reading a copy of Vogue. But say you're writing about another character, a middle-aged man, who's got his head stuck in a magazine. Well, a magazine is one thing, a copy of Vogue is quite another.

Dialogue:

Dialogue is the voice of your characters. Dialogue comes alive – or doesn't – in their mouths. Do they speak with an accent? Do they make bad jokes? Are they pompous? Are they self-effacing? All this and more can be shown in the space of a line or two of dialogue.

Dialogue caries the texture of your prose, its shorter lines break up blocky paragraphs . If you want to impart information, put it in the form of dialogue and it looks a lot more natural than if you had simply stated the information in your authorial voice.

Often, dialogue moves plot or action on.

'Where's Richard?'
'Didn't you hear? He's been shot dead.'
'My God, when?'
'At dawn, inside the cathedral.'

Dialogue should be realistic and natural. Think about the way people speak, the informal language they use, the careless grammar. Beware, however, being too realistic – real conversations are full of repetition. Try transcribing a real conversation, then editing it down to its essence. I would bet that most conversations could be cut by three quarters for the purposes of fiction. Also beware telling your whole story through dialogue. It may begin to drag, and endless short lines of dialogue are no less tedious than endless wordy paragraphs. Get carried away, and it could end up like this:

‘Where’s Richard?
‘‘Didn’t you hear? He’s been shot dead.’
‘My God, when?’
‘At dawn, inside the cathedral.’
‘Oh no.’
‘I’m afraid so.’
‘Who did it?’
‘Two armed men wearing balaclavas.’
‘I can’t believe it. And inside the cathedral, you say?’
‘It’s terrible isn’t it, the door wasn’t locked.’
‘Dead? Are you sure?’
‘Yes, he’d stopped breathing.’

Which is not what you want.

Dialogue is also a really nifty way of hiding or revealing your characters’ intentions.

In the opening of Phillip Pullman’s *The Subtle Knife*, Will is dragging his mother along the road. In just two lines of simple dialogue (and with the help of an adverb) Pullman turns on its head the usual mother-son relationship. Here it’s Will who’s in charge and his mother who, like the reader, hasn’t a clue what’s going on.

> *‘Mum, let’s go in and see Mrs Cooper,’ he said. ‘Look, we’re nearly there.’*
> *‘Mrs Cooper?’ she said doubtfully.*

Vocabulary

Adverbs are much maligned, but look how important the word ‘doubtfully’ is in the example above. Use adverbs, but only when you need to. It is often better to use a more specific verb. Richard Ford says that when he wrote *Independence Day*, an editor mentioned there were quite a few adverbs. At which Richard Ford went through the entire 700 pages deleting many and changing them to strong verbs. A good verb is a powerful thing. However, you also want to avoid the following scenario.

‘Do you love me?’ he whispered.
‘Yes, oh yes,’ she sighed.
‘Then marry me,’ he murmured.
‘Oh,’ she breathed. ‘I can think of nothing I want more.’
‘Tomorrow?’ he demanded.
‘Yes,’ she laughed, ‘tomorrow.’
‘The sooner the better,’ he hissed.

Usually a simple *said* is the best option, largely because most readers don't even notice it.

Most stories sound utterly banal when they're shrunk to the essential.

God had a son who was born in the Middle East and died there. (The Bible)
Harry was an orphan who could do magic. (JK Rowling)
A girl dressed up as a boy. (Most of Shakespeare)
They fancied each other but there was a misunderstanding. (The rest of Shakespeare)
An orphan had a really hard life, then it got better. (Most of Charles Dickens)
Several young women got married. (Most of Jane Austen)

It's not the mechanics of the plot which woo the reader, it's how you tell the story and the vocabulary you use. Look at the opening of Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. She sweats and slaves over certain adjectives, verbs and nouns which, in order to ram my point home, I have underlined.

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley…Nature had come into her own again, and little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way, had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious, fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive. The beeches with white, naked limbs leant close to one another, their branches intermingled in a strange embrace, making a vault above my head like the archway of a church.

She is telling the reader that her story is about secrecy and fear, marriage, sex and death. Yet not one of those words appears.

Avoid cliché like the plague.

When your action speeds up, you might consider slowing down. Think about a frightening experience you've had. Was it over in an instant, or do you still see it in slow motion, every detail sharp and significant?

If you're writing violence, make it hurt.

Count Your Words

Counting words is deeply satisfying (unless you have failed to produce any, in which case it's hell). It is best done with a paper and pen and….. bliss…. a calculator. In this way, you can estimate not only how many words you've written so far, but subtract that figure from the total you want to write, and then you can divide that figure by the number of days you have left before your deadline, thus estimating a daily average that you need to maintain in order to complete your work. Needless to say, this is only in part a useful exercise. Mostly, it just makes you feel good about ploughing on. And really, words – like bills – add up. Five hundred words a day makes two thousand five hundred words a

five-day week. That's ten thousand a month, and at that rather leisurely rate you should be able to turn out a seventy thousand word first draft in seven months! Of course, if you then edit out sixty thousand words, you'll have to work another six months (still at this leisurely pace) to finish your second draft. Still, that sounds to me like a bargain. Remember, every moment you procrastinate is a word lost on the page. Writers are people who write.

Publication

Publishers and agents have the attention span of a flea. But so do most readers. If you want to be published, the beginning of your story must be outstanding. It's your one and only chance to grab a publisher's eye. It doesn't matter if the rest of the book is Tolstoyan in its scope and brilliance. Flunk the first page, and you can recycle the rest.

In fact, publishers rarely read anything which has not been set in front of them by one of their favourite agents. Approach agents first, using one of the reference volumes like *The Writer's and Artist's Yearbook*. Read this not only for addresses of possible agents, but for instructions on how to approach them. I've always sent a brief query letter and the first three chapters of the book. If they want to read more, they'll ask for it. Usually they won't consider a full work that's less than sixty or seventy thousand words long, and many manuscripts are well over a hundred thousand words.

Agents work as individuals, even when they are part of a large agency. Ring the switchboard to ascertain which agent to send your work to. Otherwise you may be sending your feminist thriller to the sports editor.

Expect rejection. It's an inevitable part of being a writer. Consider criticism, shrug off cruelty. Weep in secret. Keep on writing. Try again.

And Finally

A reader once told me she had been sitting on the sofa when she started to read *Falling Off Air*, and was unable to put it down. She finished the book very late at night and blearily rose from the sofa. She tried to stand up, but she'd failed to realize that her feet had gone to sleep, so she fell and broke her ankle. I was very sorry about her foot, but rather pleased she hadn't been able to put the book down and would have liked to use the story on the back cover of the paperback. Remember, you may put your readers' feet to sleep, but never let their eyelids droop.