

nicotine is a great synopsis enhancer. The problem, of course, is that it's killing you at the same time it's helping you compose. Still, I believe the first draft of a book—even a long one—should take no more than three months, the length of a season. Any longer and—for me, at least—the story begins to take on an odd foreign feel, like a dispatch from the Romanian Department of Public Affairs, or something broadcast on high-band shortwave during a period of severe sunspot activity.

I like to get ten pages a day, which amounts to 2,000 words. That's 180,000 words over a three-month span, a goodish length for a book—something in which the reader can get happily lost, if the tale is done well and stays fresh. On some days those ten pages come easily; I'm up and out and doing errands by eleven-thirty in the morning, perky as a rat in liverwurst. More frequently, as I grow older, I find myself eating lunch at my desk and finishing the day's work around one-thirty in the afternoon. Sometimes, when the words come hard, I'm still fiddling around at teatime. Either way is fine with me, but only under dire circumstances do I allow myself to shut down before I get my 2,000 words.

The biggest aid to regular (Trollopian?) production is working in a serene atmosphere. It's difficult for even the most naturally productive writer to work in an environment where alarms and excursions are the rule rather than the exception. When I'm asked for "the secret of my success" (an absurd idea, that, but impossible to get away from), I sometimes say there are two: I stayed physically healthy (at least until a van knocked me down by the side of the road in the summer of 1999), and I stayed married. It's a good answer because it makes the question go away, and because there is an element of truth in it. The combination of a healthy body

and a stable relationship with a self-reliant woman who takes zero shit from me—none else has made the continuity of my working life possible. And I believe the converse is also true: that my writing and the pleasure I take in it has contributed to the stability of my health and my home life.

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You can read anywhere, almost, but when it comes to writing, library carrels, park benches, and rented flats should be courts of last resort—Truman Capote said he did his best work in motel rooms, but he is an exception; most of us do our best in a place of our own. Until you get one, you'll find your new resolution to write a lot hard to take seriously.

Your writing room doesn't have to sport a Playboy Philosophy decor, and you don't need an Early American rolltop desk in which to house your writing implements. I wrote my first two published novels, *Carrie* and *Salem's Lot*, in the laundry room of a doublewide trailer, pounding away on my wife's portable Olivetti typewriter and balancing a child's desk on my thighs; John Cheever reputedly wrote in the basement of his Park Avenue apartment building, near the furnace. The space can be humble (probably *should* be, as I think I have already suggested), and it really needs only one thing: a door which you are willing to shut. The closed door is your way of telling the world and yourself that you mean business; you have made a serious commitment to write and intend to walk the walk as well as talk the talk.

By the time you step into your new writing space and close the door, you should have settled on a daily writing goal. As with physical exercise, it would be best to set this

goal low at first, to avoid discouragement. I suggest a thousand words a day, and because I'm feeling magnanimous, I'll also suggest that you can take one day a week off, at least to begin with. No more; you'll lose the urgency and immediacy of your story if you do. With that goal set, resolve to yourself that the door stays closed until that goal is met. Get busy putting those thousand words on paper or on a floppy disk. In an early interview (this was to promote *Carrie*, I think), a radio talk-show host asked me how I wrote. My reply—"One word at a time"—seemingly left him without a reply. I think he was trying to decide whether or not I was joking. I wasn't. In the end, it's always that simple. Whether it's a vignette of a single page or an epic trilogy like *The Lord of the Rings*, the work is always accomplished one word at a time. The door closes the rest of the world out; it also serves to close you in and keep you focused on the job at hand.

If possible, there should be no telephone in your writing room, certainly no TV or videogames for you to fool around with. If there's a window, draw the curtains or pull down the shades unless it looks out at a blank wall. For any writer, but for the beginning writer in particular, it's wise to eliminate every possible distraction. If you continue to write, you will begin to filter out these distractions naturally, but at the start it's best to try and take care of them before you write. I work to loud music—hard-rock stuff like AC/DC, Guns 'n Roses, and Metallica have always been particular favorites—but for me the music is just another way of shutting the door. It surrounds me, keeps the mundane world out. When you write, you want to get rid of the world, do you not? Of course you do. When you're writing, you're creating your own worlds.

I think we're actually talking about creative sleep. Like your bedroom, your writing room should be private, a place where

you go to dream. Your schedule—in at about the same time every day, out when your thousand words are on paper or disk—exists in order to habituate yourself, to make yourself ready to dream just as you make yourself ready to sleep by going to bed at roughly the same time each night and following the same ritual as you go. In both writing and sleeping, we learn to be physically still at the same time we are encouraging our minds to unlock from the humdrum rational thinking of our daytime lives. And as your mind and body grow accustomed to a certain amount of sleep each night—six hours, seven, maybe the recommended eight—so can you train your waking mind to sleep creatively and work out the vividly imagined waking dreams which are successful works of fiction.

But you need the room, you need the door, and you need the determination to shut the door. You need a concrete goal, as well. The longer you keep to these basics, the easier the act of writing will become. Don't wait for the muse. As I've said, he's a hardheaded guy who's not susceptible to a lot of creative flustering. This isn't the Ouija board or the spirit-world we're talking about here, but just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks. Your job is to make sure the muse knows where you're going to be every day from nine 'til noon or seven 'til three. If he does know, I assure you that sooner or later he'll start showing up, chomping his cigar and making his magic.

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So okay—there you are in your room with the shade down and the door shut and the plug pulled out of the base of the telephone. You've blown up your TV and committed yourself to a thousand words a day, come hell or high water. Now

comes the big question: What are you going to write about? And the equally big answer: Anything you damn well want. Anything at all . . . *as long as you tell the truth.*

The dictum in writing classes used to be “write what you know.” Which sounds good, but what if you want to write about starships exploring other planets or a man who murders his wife and then tries to dispose of her body with a wood-chipper? How does the writer square either of these, or a thousand other fanciful ideas, with the “write-what-you-know” directive?

I think you begin by interpreting “write what you know” as broadly and inclusively as possible. If you’re a plumber, you know plumbing, but that is far from the extent of your knowledge; the heart also knows things, and so does the imagination. Thank God. If not for heart and imagination, the world of fiction would be a pretty seedy place. It might not even exist at all.

In terms of genre, it’s probably fair to assume that you will begin by writing what you love to read—certainly I have recounted my early love affair with the EC horror comics until the tale has gone stale. But I *did* love them, ditto horror movies like *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, and the result was stories like “I Was a Teenage Graverobber.” Even today I’m not above writing slightly more sophisticated versions of that tale; I was built with a love of the night and the unquiet coffin, that’s all. If you disapprove, I can only shrug my shoulders. It’s what I have.

If you happen to be a science fiction fan, it’s natural that you should want to write science fiction (and the more sf you’ve read, the less likely it is that you’ll simply revisit the field’s well-mined conventions, such as space opera and dystopian satire). If you’re a mystery fan, you’ll want to write

mysteries, and if you enjoy romances, it’s natural for you to want to write romances of your own. There’s nothing wrong with writing any of these things. What would be very wrong; I think, is to turn away from what you know and like (or love, the way I loved those old ECs and black-and-white horror flicks) in favor of things you believe will impress your friends, relatives, and writing-circle colleagues. What’s equally wrong is the deliberate turning toward some genre or type of fiction in order to make money. It’s morally wonky, for one thing—the job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story’s web of lies, not to commit intellectual dishonesty in the hunt for the buck. Also, brothers and sisters, it doesn’t work.

When I’m asked why I decided to write the sort of thing I do write, I always think the question is more revealing than any answer I could possibly give. Wrapped within it, like the chewy stuff in the center of a Tootsie Pop, is the assumption that the writer controls the material instead of the other way around.* The writer who is serious and committed is incapable of sizing up story material the way an investor might size up various stock offerings, picking out the ones which seem likely to provide a good return. If it could indeed be done that way, every novel published would be a best-seller and the huge advances paid to a dozen or so “big-name writers” would not exist (publishers would like that).

Grisham, Clancy, Crichton, and myself—among others—are paid these large sums of money because we are selling uncommonly large numbers of books to uncommonly large

*Kirby McCauley, my first real agent, used to quote science fiction writer Alfred Bester (*The Stars My Destination*, *The Demolished Man*) on this subject. “The book is the boss,” Alfie used to say in tones indicating that that closed the subject.

audiences. A critical assumption is sometimes made that we have access to some mystical vulgate that other (and often better) writers either cannot find or will not deign to use. I doubt if this is true. Nor do I believe the contention of some popular novelists (although she was not the only one, I am thinking of the late Jacqueline Susann) that their success is based on literary merit—that the public understands true greatness in ways the tight-assed, consumed-by-jealousy literary establishment cannot. This idea is ridiculous, a product of vanity and insecurity.

Book-buyers aren't attracted, by and large, by the literary merits of a novel; book-buyers want a good story to take with them on the airplane, something that will first fascinate them, then pull them in and keep them turning the pages. This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in a book, their behaviors, their surroundings, and their talk. When the reader hears strong echoes of his or her own life and beliefs, he or she is apt to become more invested in the story. I'd argue that it's impossible to make this sort of connection in a premeditated way, gauging the market like a racetrack tout with a hot tip.

Stylistic imitation is one thing, a perfectly honorable way to get started as a writer (and impossible to avoid, really; some sort of imitation marks each new stage of a writer's development), but one cannot imitate a writer's approach to a particular genre, no matter how simple what that writer is doing may seem. You can't aim a book like a cruise missile, in other words. People who decide to make a fortune writing like John Grisham or Tom Clancy produce nothing but pale imitations, by and large, because vocabulary is not the same thing as feeling and plot is light-years from the truth as it is understood by the mind and the heart. When you see a novel

with "In the tradition of (John Grisham/Patricia Cornwell/Mary Higgins Clark/Dean Koontz)" on the cover, you know you are looking at one of these overcalculated (and likely boring) imitations.

Write what you like, then imbue it with life and make it unique by blending in your own personal knowledge of life, friendship, relationships, sex, and work. Especially work. People love to read about work. God knows why, but they do. If you're a plumber who enjoys science fiction, you might well consider a novel about a plumber aboard a starship or on an alien planet. Sound ludicrous? The late Clifford D. Simak wrote a novel called *Cosmic Engineers* which is close to just that. And it's a terrific read. What you need to remember is that there's a difference between lecturing about what you know and using it to enrich the story. The latter is good. The former is not.

Consider John Grisham's breakout novel, *The Firm*. In this story, a young lawyer discovers that his first job, which seemed too good to be true, really is—he's working for the Mafia. Suspenseful, involving, and paced at breakneck speed, *The Firm* sold roughly nine gazillion copies. What seemed to fascinate its audience was the moral dilemma in which the young lawyer finds himself: working for the mob is bad, no argument there, but the frocking pay is great! You can drive a Beemer, and that's just for openers!

Audiences also enjoyed the lawyer's resourceful efforts to extricate himself from his dilemma. It might not be the way most people would behave, and the *deus ex machina* clanks pretty steadily in the last fifty pages, but it is the way most of us would like to behave. And wouldn't we also like to have a *deus ex machina* in our lives?

Although I don't know for sure, I'd bet my dog and lot

that John Grisham never worked for the mob. All of that is total fabrication (and total fabrication is the fiction-writer's purest delight). He *was* once a young lawyer, though, and he has clearly forgotten none of the struggle. Nor has he forgotten the location of the various financial pitfalls and honeytraps that make the field of corporate law so difficult. Using plainspun humor as a brilliant counterpoint and never substituting cant for story, he sketches a world of Darwinian struggle where all the savages wear three-piece suits. And—here's the good part—*this is a world impossible not to believe*. Grisham has been there, spied out the land and the enemy positions, and brought back a full report. He told the truth of what he knew, and for that if nothing else, he deserves every buck *The Firm* made.

Critics who dismissed *The Firm* and Grisham's later books as poorly written and who profess themselves to be mystified by his success are either missing the point because it's so big and obvious or because they are being deliberately obtuse. Grisham's make-believe tale is solidly based in a reality he knows, has personally experienced, and which he wrote about with total (almost naive) honesty. The result is a book which is—cardboard characters or no, we could argue about that—both brave and uniquely satisfying. You as a beginning writer would do well not to imitate the lawyers-in-trouble genre Grisham seems to have created but to emulate Grisham's openness and inability to do anything other than get right to the point.

John Grisham, of course, knows lawyers. What *you* know makes you unique in some other way. Be brave. Map the enemy's positions, come back, tell us all you know. And remember that plumbers in space is not such a bad setup for a story.

In my view, stories and novels consist of three parts: narration, which moves the story from point A to point B and finally to point Z; description, which creates a sensory reality for the reader; and dialogue, which brings characters to life through their speech.

You may wonder where plot is in all this. The answer—my answer, anyway—is nowhere. I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted any more than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our *lives* are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. It's best that I be as clear about this as I can—I want you to understand that my basic belief about the making of stories is that they pretty much make themselves. The job of the writer is to give them a place to grow (and to transcribe them, of course). If you can see things this way (or at least try to), we can work together comfortably. If, on the other hand, you decide I'm crazy, that's fine. You won't be the first.

When, during the course of an interview for *The New Yorker*, I told the interviewer (Mark Singer) that I believed stories are found things, like fossils in the ground, he said that he didn't believe me. I replied that that was fine, as long as he believed that *I* believe it. And I do. Stories aren't souvenir teeshirts or GameBoys. Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground