

# WRITING BY ST★RLIGHT

A collection of inspirational posts for writers

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## CONTENTS

Introduction ★★★★★ 3

You Have the Right to Write ★★★★★ 4

It's Good to be Bad ★★★★★ 7

From Dropout and Drugs to Writing Success ★★★★★ 10

Digging Your Way Out of Writer's Block ★★★★★ 14

How J K Rowling Helped Me Through My Darkest Days as a Writer ★★★★★ 17

How to Create a Loose Plot for Your Story or Novel ★★★★★ 19

Creating Characters Who Leap From the Page ★★★★★ 21

Never Give Up On Your Writing Dreams ★★★★★ 23

You Are Still a Writer ★★★★★ 26

Why *Where* You Create Affects *How* You Create ★★★★★ 27

How Focus Gets Things Finished ★★★★★ 29

How to Write a Book in a Month ★★★★★ 31

Let Your Creative Passions Lead You Back to You ★★★★★ 34

Dear Dare to Dream: Should I Self-Publish My Novel? ★★★★★ 37

15 Things I've Learned From 15 Years as a Writer ★★★★★ 41

Writing by Starlight ★★★★★ 46

The Novelist's Backpack ★★★★★ 48

About the Author ★★★★★ 49

## ★ INTRODUCTION

*'And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.'* **Sylvia Plath**

Writing can be one of the most rewarding activities in the world. It can also be one of the most challenging.

I know this not only because of the challenges I've faced in my own writing career - but through my work as a writing consultant.

Over the past thirteen years I've worked with thousands of writers in my workshops, talks and one-to-one coaching and I've seen at first-hand how difficult it can be.

It's also been hugely rewarding helping these writers overcome their obstacles and achieve their dreams.

**WRITING BY STARLIGHT** is a collection of the most popular posts I've written on writing over the past few years.

It contains a mixture of practical advice - on topics such as creating characters, devising plots and self-publishing - and posts to read for inspiration on those days when you're just too tired to write, or your dream of completing your novel feels a million miles away.

Writing is one of the best ways we have of expressing ourselves, channelling our emotions and making sense of the world.

We owe it to ourselves to honour our writing dreams.

I hope this collection helps you do that.

Ray Bradbury once said, *'You must stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you.'*

Here's to a 'drunken' writing life.

Here's to writing unhindered by fear or self-doubt.

Here's to writing by starlight.

### **Siobhan**

If you're interested in getting more detailed support with your writing please check out details of **THE NOVELIST'S BACKPACK** on page 48 or visit my Writing Consultancy at: **[daretodreamcoaching.co.uk](http://daretodreamcoaching.co.uk)**

## ★ You Have the Right to Write!

A VERY IMPORTANT AND \*ahem\* OFFICIAL report recently found that often, people will do JUST ABOUT ANYTHING rather than write.

In the report, the following ten things were found to be the favoured forms of procrastination keeping people from putting pen to paper:

1. Spring-cleaning the house
2. Walking the dog - even if you don't have a dog
3. Checking the garden for weeds
4. Checking *next door's* garden for weeds
5. Polishing the skirting boards
6. Clearing out *that* cupboard
7. Taking the contents of *that* cupboard to the dump
8. Staring into space
9. Staring into space while wondering what comes *after* infinity
10. Making a cup of tea when you still have one steaming away on your desk

This is one of the great conundrums known to writing-kind (almost as great a conundrum as *what comes after infinity*).

Even when we want to write we become masters at blocking ourselves. But why?

The answer is FEAR.

Fear of looking stupid.

Fear of criticism or rejection.

Fear of making ourselves open and vulnerable.

And maybe even fear of success.

But the fact is, writing is one of the best ways of making sense of the world.

It's like breathing for the brain as you sigh your thoughts and feelings on to the page.

And it's one of the most powerful forms of self-expression we have.

*We all have the right to write.*

Rich or poor.

Young or old.

Educated or uneducated.

So how can we overcome our fears?

You might be familiar with the following quote about how to live a happy life:

*'You've got to dance like nobody's watching. Love like you've never been hurt. Sing like nobody's listening and live like it's heaven on earth.'*

Well, I'd like to tweak that quote slightly for the purposes of this piece:

*'You've got to write like nobody's reading. Write like you've never been hurt. Write like nobody gives a damn and write like the last writer on earth.'*

You. Have. The. Right. To. Write.

It's your voice.

Your self-expression.

Your right.

So what if you can't spell and you think a colon is something people with more money than sense irrigate? It's your *voice* that counts - your vision and message.

So what if people criticise or reject what you do? At least you had the guts to do it.

So what if it feels as if you're bleeding your heart all over the page? How can anything heartfelt and authentic ever be wrong?

And so what if someone actually likes what you do - and likes it enough to publish it? So what if this leaves you wide open to potential criticism and hurt on a huge scale?

Your words will have taken on a life of their own. Let them fly free and know that it's impossible to please everybody.

There was a time when I felt too terrified to write.

A time when my skirting boards were so clean you could eat your dinner off them and none of the gardens in my street were troubled by a single weed.

But my need to make sense of the world and pour my heart and soul on to the page won out in the end.

And as soon as I started writing, some of my worst fears were realised.

I had work rejected and criticised.

I wrote things I felt embarrassed about (*article about lucky underpants, anyone?!*)

But I kept going.

Kept writing.

Every day, I faced down my fear and put pen to page.

And today I made the finishing touches to my thirteenth book.

So, if you feel the call to write, shove your fear to one side and...

*Write like nobody's reading. Write like you've never been hurt. Write like nobody gives a damn and write like the last writer on earth.*

Go on - I dare you!

## ★ It's Good to be Bad

Today I want to talk about creativity and how, when it comes to creating something, it's okay to do it badly.

In fact - scrap that - it isn't just okay, it's downright bloody brilliant.

Previously, I've written about our inner voice of doom and how it always likes to throw a spanner in the works whenever we're attempting something remotely scary. Well, creating something - whether it be a story, picture, song, cake, business - can be a very scary process indeed, and it's at precisely these moments when it can feel as if our inner voice of doom is bellowing at us through a loud hailer.

*'You can't do that!'*

*'That is rubbish!'*

*'Oh my God, you'd better never show that to anyone!'*

*'Delete! Delete! Delete!'*

Sound familiar?

So why then, am I telling you that it's okay to be bad at something? Surely that's only going to encourage your good old inner voice of doom to get even meaner and shout even louder.

Au contraire, my dear Dare to Dreamer. Let me explain why...

I've previously likened the inner voice of doom to a bully - something that is actually coming from a place of deep fear.

Once upon a time, many years ago, I was playing tennis with a guy who was known for his bullying behaviour. It was meant to be a friendly knock-about, but pretty soon it became apparent to me that he was intent on winning at all costs. One of the ways in which he did this was to aim power shots right at my body. Another was to keep up a sarcastic commentary about my own performance.

After about twenty minutes of this, I decided enough was enough. I didn't stop playing, but I stopped trying to play well and focused instead on playing as badly as I could.

My opponent soon realised what I was up to and it frustrated the hell out of him. After all, how could he claim any sense of achievement, winning against someone who was deliberately smashing the ball into the net and crawling round the court like a snail on valium?

So to get back to the subject of creativity, you completely take the sting out of your inner critic if you refuse to play the game. If you say things to yourself like:

*'My writing / picture / song / cake / business plan is going to suck but who cares because at least I'm going to have fun trying.'*

By adopting this attitude, you immediately take away your inner critic's power. Like my tennis opponent, they will become bored and no longer want to play.

And once you've got them to shut up, you can get down to the serious business of being messy and having fun - key ingredients for any creative endeavour.

If you don't dare to be bad, you might never be any good.

When I started out as a novelist I didn't really take any risks creatively. I was so scared of being bad that the writing of my first novel was a painstaking process. I would spend ages over each line, then each paragraph, then each page - rewording and restructuring and hitting that frickin' delete button every other second.

I didn't realise back then that you have to allow your ideas to flow and to do that, you have to allow for the possibility that they might not work.

When I decided to relaunch my coaching practice I wrote pages of scribbled ideas about how I could help clients. Some of them are downright bonkers and will never see the light of day but, because I was allowing my thoughts to flow freely, some of them are really original and fun.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter...

*Just because you allow yourself to do something badly it does not mean that everything you do will be bad.*

And it most definitely does not mean that you have to keep anything you're not happy with. You are allowed to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Getting into a creative flow allows your very best ideas to come up and then, once your creative cup runneth over, you can keep the good stuff and get rid of the bad. (Just like I got rid of the nude bongo dancing from my coaching master plan \*ahem\*).

So, to recap:

- Tell your inner critic they can take the day off as you're embracing all things crap
- Make a hand-written sign saying: *Everything I create is crap and that's OK!*
- Place it by your desk / computer / work station
- Take a deep breath and smile
- Enjoy the freedom of no longer caring
- Let your ideas begin to flow



- Don't question them, just let them pour out
- GET MESSY!!
- HAVE FUN!!
- Once you've finished, step away for a while, even if it's just to make a cup of tea or have a quick air guitar session
- Then come back to your creation
- What do you like? What do you love? What would you like to let go of?
- Polish the diamonds and get rid of the dirt
- Simple

Interestingly, the more daring I've become creatively and the more I've risked making terrible mistakes in my novels, like writing one entirely made up of emails, or putting a \*gasp\* sixty-year-old main character in a book for teens, the better they've been received.

So in your next creative endeavour, allow yourself to be breathtakingly bad - and be prepared to be breathtakingly good...

## ★ From Dropout and Drugs to Writing Success

If there's one saying I hate even more than '*a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*', it's '*pride goes before a fall*.'

I hate the sing-song smugness of it. And I totally disagree.

**I think that pride – as in being proud of yourself – can *prevent* a fall, and here's why...**

When I was a little kid I grew up in a house full of books and records and political activism.

My parents met at an anti-apartheid meeting, my dad wrote letters of support to political prisoners and we knew the lyrics of protest songs far better than any nursery rhyme.

**I was brought up to question and learn and explore.**

If I ever went to my dad asking him the meaning of a word, his reply would always be the same (*said in deep, gruff, Irish voice*): 'Look it up in the dictionary.' I'd give a dramatic sigh and go through to the wall of books in the living room and haul down the huge Oxford Dictionary and trawl through the words until I found the one I was after. I used to think my dad was being lazy when he told me to do this but now I know his evil genius plan. Hunting through a sea of words until I finally found the one I was looking for, seeing the mysterious pronunciation (*pruh-nuhn-see-ey-shuh n*) in italics and discovering the sought after meaning, all added to my growing love of words.

Another big contributor to my growing word nerdery was the fact that we didn't have a TV – which at the time I thought was a crime worthy of a call to Childline – but I'm now eternally grateful for. By the time I was twelve I'd devoured all of the kids' books in our house and the local library and had moved on to Tolkein and Orwell and Heaney. My imagination was as big as the universe. My reports shone with A stars.

Despite the fact that we lived on a council estate, I took it for granted that I'd one day go to university because my parents took it for granted that I would (even though neither of them had).

As a young child I was introverted and shy but I was quietly and fiercely proud of my intelligence. I saw it as the superpower that would help me achieve my dreams.

In my mid teens my parents' divorce knocked me off kilter for a while and my reports slumped into Ds and Es but then in sixth form I realised that further education was my ticket

out of unhappiness so I started working again. I worked my way back to A grades and set off to university with a heart full of hope and a head full of writing dreams.

**But ironically, it was at university that my dreams died.**

This was back in the time when only about 10% of the population went into further education; a fact my dad had raised his glass to, with pride, the day I got my A level results. But the trouble was, most of that 10% came from a very different background to me.

On the surface, when I got to uni, everything was grand. I made a great group of new friends. I enjoyed my course. But I couldn't shake the nagging sense that I didn't belong.

I wasn't privately educated. I didn't have money in the bank. My parents didn't even own their own home.

In contrast, most of my fellow students seemed so confident and well-connected.

I felt myself fading in the brilliance of their middle class sheen.

I stopped seeing myself as intelligent and started seeing myself as inferior in just about every way.

**Instead of feeling proud I felt inadequate and ashamed.**

And my lack of pride led to an almighty fall when, at the end of my second year, I dropped out of university, and ended up working in the complaints department for a high street store.

*Aha, I lied to myself, this is where I belong, ploughing all of my passion for words into writing grovelling apology letters to customers who are clearly one valium away from a violent psychosis.*

Now, there is nothing wrong with working in a complaints department – especially if you like being sworn at and abused on a regular basis – but there's everything wrong with giving up on the things that make you come alive to your very core.

You end up trudging through life, dreary and depressed – or chasing false highs in toxic drama-ships and drugs.

Instead of writing books, I wrote letters that said things like:

***Dear Madam,***

***I'm so sorry that our delivery driver defecated in your toilet and failed to flush...***

And to stop myself from dying of boredom and despair, I took E and whizz at the weekends and let out my frustrations on the dance-floor.

*'Everybody's freeeee to feel good!' I'd sing, pupils dilated, hands in the air.*

But the truth was, I didn't feel free or good at all. And when the Monday morning come-down hit, I felt 57 kinds of horrible.

My lack of pride and self-worth led to me almost losing myself completely in a hugely destructive relationship. Rock bottom saw my neighbours wanting to call the police in order to save me.

But somehow, it was my passion for words that saved me.

**Instead of dreaming big, I dreamed small. Small felt just about manageable. Small didn't require pride.**

So, instead of writing a novel, I wrote a short story.

And when the short story got published, I felt the first glimmer of pride in a very long time.

And that glimmer of pride gave me the confidence to write an article.

And when the article got published, and the magazine sent me a load of letters from grateful readers, my glimmer of pride turned into a beam.

And that beam lit the way for my first attempt at a book – a non-fiction guide to *Antenatal & Postnatal Depression*.

And when that book was published, I cried hot tears of pride when I saw my name on the cover.

I wasn't a university drop-out any more, I was an author.

**Finally, I had enough pride in the tank to fuel writing my first novel.**

I've just finished writing my eleventh.

It was pride that helped me clamber out of the depths to which I'd fallen.

I still have moments of insecurity – when I'm in a meeting with publishers and they start talking about the private schools they went to, or when I go to a literary event and a fellow writer talks about being funded by their wealthy husband or parents. But then I remember where I come from and instead of feeling shame, I feel pride. Wonderful, warming, glowing pride, and it fires me up to climb even higher.

Feeling proud of your achievements isn't arrogant or boastful (unless you make it so by boring on for hours about them), feeling proud is healthy. It makes you happy and confident and fills you with hope.

## ★ Digging your way out of Writer's Block

*"There's no such thing as writers' block. That was invented by people in California who couldn't write."* **Terry Pratchett**

*Ouch*, Terry Pratchett. *Ouch, ouch!*

But, as with many things that are uncomfortable to hear - such as, '*there's no such thing as Father Christmas*' and '*the tooth fairy is actually your dad*' - it's sadly true.

Writer's block isn't some mysterious malady, known only to scribes; the literary equivalent of athlete's foot or tennis elbow.

Being blocked isn't an inevitable part of the creative process that strikes on a whim.

We have to dig deeper than that to discover the real reason for those times when inspiration just won't strike and the page remains a terrifying shade of blank.

So, let's do a little digging today to find out why we sometimes experience the block and more importantly, how to get the words flowing again.

The first thing to ask yourself when you find your writerly well has run dry is:

### **Do I care enough?**

We've all had ideas that, in the heady glow of conception / half a bottle of merlot seem like the book *that just has to be written*.

But in the cold light of the computer glare, that same idea seems flat and uninspired.

Sometimes it can be hard admitting that we got it wrong - that the idea we thought would have us writing till '*The End*' do us part just isn't the right match.

Imagine for a second not writing the thing that you're blocked on.

### **How does that make you feel?**

Do you feel a sweet burst of freedom at the thought, or a jolt of horror?

If you feel the clarion call of freedom, recognise that your block is actually your intuition and act accordingly.

If you feel horror, you need to write this thing, so something else is blocking you.

Let's try a few more questions to see if we can find out what.

Try asking yourself:

***How will writing this make me feel guilty?***

***Who will it hurt?***

***What will I be risking?***

***What obstacles will I need to overcome?***

And then boil it all down into this one key question:

***What am I afraid of?***

I'm willing to bet that in 99.9% of cases, Writer's Block is actually Writer's Fear.

*Fear of not being good enough.*

*Fear of being wrong.*

*Fear of rejection.*

If you believe this is true for you, my best advice would be to focus on the journey, rather than the destination.

Stop stressing about what *might* happen and focus instead upon the pleasure of the writing itself.

*The joy of bringing the characters to life.*

*The sweet satisfaction of knocking the plot into shape.*

*The incomparable bliss of finally finding just the right words, in just the right order.*

What happens next can wait - *until it actually happens.*

**When your inner voice tells you that whatever you write is bound to be crap, agree and write anyway.**

There's so much freedom in allowing yourself to write badly and it's a great way of beating the block.

When your inner voice tells you that it would be the height of selfishness to spend time on your writing, reassure yourself that pursuing your passion is one of the best examples you can set your kids. And know that you will be a far happier family member, partner and friend when you give yourself the time and space to create.

Unwritten stories can hover around us as clouds of resentment - definitely not something you want to inflict on your loved ones.

And as you start writing, something magical happens - your fears start melting away.

As the super-positive human being W. Clement Stone once said: "*Thinking will not overcome fear, but action will.*"

**So, today, take action.**

Write that first paragraph.

Write it badly.

But write it anyway.

And then write another...



## ★ How JK Rowling Helped Me Through My Darkest Days as a Writer

I started writing books during a very difficult time in my life.

My marriage had come to a painful and traumatic end and I was single mum to a young son.

It was a very fearful time - I can remember many sleepless nights spent wondering how I was going to make ends meet and keep a roof over our heads.

I also felt like a total failure. Coming from a 'broken home' I had always vowed that I'd never put any child of mine through that trauma.

Apart from my son, the only light in the darkness of those days was my writing.

When I began working on my first novel it provided a welcome escape from the harsh realities of my life at the time.

But my writing itself was not without fear.

I had no previous experience of writing fiction.

I hadn't done any courses in creative writing.

I didn't have any contacts in the publishing world.

I wasn't a member of any writing group.

I had no idea if what I was creating was any good at all - let alone publishable.

I wrote mainly when my son was asleep and there were some nights when I would be slumped over my typewriter (I couldn't even afford a computer!) crying with exhaustion and wondering why the hell I was even bothering.

It was on those nights that one person helped urge me on and gave me just enough hope to keep me typing.

That person was J K Rowling.

Like the rest of the world, I'd read all the stories about how Rowling had penned the first Harry Potter novel in a cafe in Edinburgh as a penniless single mum.

But, rather than merely being a heart-warming anecdote, this story became a life-line for me.

When Rowling talked about her feelings of despair as a single mum I could so relate to her experience.

And the fact that she had kept on working through her dark times; had kept the faith in her creative dream and gone on to achieve such remarkable success, formed a beacon, guiding me through my own doubt and fear.

Last week, I went up to Edinburgh and visited the cafe where J K Rowling had written that first Harry Potter book.

Having played such an important part in my own vision of hope for the future, it was extremely moving to finally be there.

And in a really magical way, it proved to be a gift that kept on giving.

The past couple of months have been a bit of a tough time for me, in that I've suffered some personal loss and felt a bit demotivated work-wise.

But sitting at a table in the corner of the cafe, picturing J K Rowling writing away and conjuring up such a magical future for herself and so many readers, I felt a wave of optimism and hope wash over me.

Remembering how far I'd come since my own dark days made me feel humbled and excited. It reminded me that anything is possible if you are prepared to work hard and simply *believe*.

Before leaving the cafe I went into the toilets. They were covered from floor to ceiling in graffiti dedicated to J K Rowling from grateful readers.

Once again, I felt a wave of happiness and excitement. It reminded me what a privilege it is to be a writer - and how thrilling it is to be able to affect people's lives for the better with your words.

Once again, I felt J K Rowling inspiring and motivating me - and urging me on.

A bit later, I was walking past Waterstones in Edinburgh. I popped inside and headed for the Young Adult section.

When I saw my books there on the shelves it brought tears to my eyes.

All those years ago, when I'd sat hunched over my typewriter, with just my love of writing and J K Rowling's example to keep me going, I never would have dreamed that I'd go on to achieve all that I have.

And if I can share anything at all with you to help you through your own doubt and fear, it would be this:

*Sometimes, in our darkest times, we need a light to guide us. So rather than cower in the shadows of your fear, seek out your light - whether it be in the form of another person, some words of wisdom, or God / the Universe. Let them lead you on, into your own brighter, happier future...*

## ★ How to Create a Loose Plot for Your Novel or Story

If there's one thing guaranteed to have writers banging their heads on their keyboards in despair it's trying to find the fully formed plot for a novel.

What can seem like a great idea when inspiration first strikes can soon appear daunting when faced with the challenge of expanding it from scrawled note to 300+ page manuscript.

Before I start writing a novel I like to create a loose outline to guide me.

**Today I'm going to share how I create this outline. So if you have the germ of an idea for a novel (or story) use the exercises below to help your idea grow.**

Simply free-write your answers to the following questions (I will use how I came up with the plot outline for my novel *Finding Cherokee Brown* to demonstrate):

### **What is the core story you want to tell?**

This is the one-line pitch. The crux of your novel. The central story.

For *Finding Cherokee Brown* it was: *The story of one girl's bid to beat her bullies.*

### **What are the sub-plots?**

These are all the other storylines that will weave in with the central one.

In *Finding Cherokee Brown* the subplots were:

- Cherokee being reconciled with her errant, rock musician father
- Cherokee writing her first book
- Cherokee falling in love with graffiti artist Harrison
- Cherokee realising that her mum and step-dad have her best interests at heart

What subplots do you want to include in your novel? Try answering these three questions as prompts:

- On their way to achieving their main goal, what obstacles will your central character encounter?
- Do you have more than one main character?
- What are their storylines?

### **What key scenes do you *have* to have in your story?**

Usually when I flesh out my characters and begin plotting a novel some key ideas or scenes will pop into my mind. When I began work on *Finding Cherokee Brown* I knew that there had to be a showdown scene between Cherokee and her bullies and I wanted it to take place in a school assembly for maximum impact. Also, I had a vivid picture her at some point having to seek refuge in the disabled toilet in school.

I didn't know exactly where these scenes were going to take place in the plot but I knew they had to be in there somewhere.

What scenes do you *have* to have in your novel? It doesn't matter if you're not sure exactly where they will go, just jot them down.

### **How do you want your book to end?**

Although I like to plot loosely, I always want to know where my novel will end and how I want my main character to feel at the end.

When I began work on *Finding Cherokee Brown* I knew that I wanted my heroine to end up in Paris and I knew that I wanted the final scene to take place at Sacre Coeur (and not just because it's my favourite place in the world and I wanted an excuse for a 'research trip'!)

I also wanted Cherokee to end up feeling wiser, loved and empowered.

### **How do you want your main characters to feel at the end of your novel? What do you want them to have overcome? Where do you want them to be?**

Getting clear on the ending is like programming your final destination into a sat nav. Even if it's somewhere you've never been before and you're unsure of the route you're going to take it gives you the security of knowing where you'll end up.

It gives you something to work towards.

## ★ Creating Characters Who Leap From the Page

*“When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature.” Ernest Hemingway*

There's nothing worse (in my humble opinion) than reading a book or watching a movie that features wooden, unrealistic characters.

You can have the best, most page-turning plot in the world but if the characters are clichéd or one-dimensional it can ruin the whole experience.

Recently I published a post about the 15 things I'd learnt from 15 years as a writer.

One of the things I shared was the joy of the Character Questionnaire and how useful it can be in helping writers develop well-rounded, interesting characters.

Another bonus of the Character Questionnaire is that you always end up getting ideas for your plot too.

Win - win.

So today I thought I'd share the Character Questionnaire I use in my writing workshops.

Feel free to copy and paste and add questions of your own.

Then take some time, preferably before you start writing your story, really getting to know your characters.

It's a lot of fun and saves a load of time in the long run.

When you know your characters inside out the story is much more likely to flow.

### CHARACTER QUESTIONNAIRE

- How old are they?
- What are their best and worst points physically?
- How important is their appearance to them?
- Are they attractive?
- Do they believe themselves to be attractive?

- Overall, was their childhood happy or unhappy?
- What was their favourite toy as a child?
- How do or did they get on with their parents?
- Think of one key event from their past and how it has shaped them – positive and negative.
- How do they speak? Accent? Catch-phrases etc?
- What is their favourite meal?
- What are their politics?
- What newspaper do they read?
- Do they believe in a God?
- What is their bedroom like?
- Do they have any secrets?
- What makes them jealous?
- What sports do they like?
- Are they superstitious?
- Have they ever been on a protest rally?
- What is their greatest hope?
- Who do they most admire?
- How do they behave at a party? Are they shy or outgoing?
- What is their favourite music?
- Do they have any pets?
- Have they ever lost anyone dear to them?
- What is their perfect Saturday night?
- What last made them cry?
- Is their glass half full or half empty?
- Are they popular?
- Who is their best friend?
- What is their favourite season and why?
- What do they think of vegetarianism?
- Have they ever taken drugs?
- Would rejection make them angry or sad?
- What car do they drive?
- Do they love themselves?
- What is their motto in life?
- How do they behave when outside – day and night?
- What are they most afraid of? And why? What is the root cause?

## ★ Never Give Up on Your Writing Dreams

Five years ago, I was browsing around the Young Adult section of the Waterstones store in Piccadilly.

I'd just self-published my first novel for young adults, *Dear Dylan*, and my head was full of dreams.

***The dream that one day Dear Dylan might be stocked in a store like Waterstones.***

***The dream that one day I might become a recognised YA author.***

***The dream that one day I might get a 'proper' book deal for my YA novels.***

But standing there as a self-published author, those dreams all felt so far away.

The fact is, stores like Waterstones hardly ever stock self-published books - and certainly not in bulk.

And without being stocked in stores, how would I ever raise my profile as a YA author?

Then I spotted the spine of a book that looked a little different from the others so I pulled it from the shelf.

The book was called *The Sky is Everywhere* and it would be no exaggeration to say that it was a thing of beauty (or at least it was for a *Certified Book Nerd* like me).

The cover was sky blue and had a fabric feel to it, with the title indented in white, like wisps of cloud.

When I opened the book, I actually gasped at how incredible it looked. (I did warn you I was a book nerd...)

Instead of the usual black, the font was in blue, in keeping with the sky theme. And the text was interspersed with the beautiful photographs of handwritten poems.

The imagination and attention to detail involved in producing a novel like this exuded a real love for the story.

A real love for books.

A new dream entered my head: a dream that one day I would have a publisher who felt this passionately and imaginatively about books

I made a note of the publisher's name: Walker Books.

I bought the book.

I took it home - and devoured it in one sitting.

It was exactly as good as it looked.

*The Sky is Everywhere* by Jandy Nelson became my all-time favourite novel.

And for the next five years I regularly dipped into it for inspiration.

Nelson's poetic prose became a constant reminder to me of just how magical writing can be.

And how well-drawn characters can come to be much-loved friends.

Inspired by *The Sky is Everywhere*, I started achieving the dreams from that day in the book store.

I received 'proper' book deals for five young adult books with two wonderful publishers.

Then, a couple of months ago, my agent, Erzsi Deak, sent out an extended sample of a novel I'd been working on called *The Moonlight Dreamers*.

Normally it takes a couple of weeks at least to start hearing back from publishers.

A few days after the manuscript was sent out, I got a text from Erzsi.

**"I NEED TO TALK TO YOU!"**

The last time I got a text like that it was over something semi-apocalyptic, so I did what every Brit does in times of potential crisis - I made myself a cuppa.

And another.

Then I had a bath.

Then I had some dinner.

And then I called her.

'We've had a pre-empt!' she yelled.

'A pre-what?'

'A pre-emptive offer. For *The Moonlight Dreamers*. From Walker.'

**From Walker.**

Instantly, I thought back to that day in Waterstones and my eyes filled with tears.



The people who had published *The Sky is Everywhere* wanted to publish my book.

It's been a long and winding - and at times bumpy - road, but my final dream from that day in the store had come true.

A month or so later, I went to the Walker office to meet the team.

The first thing I saw when I walked through the door was a pile of copies of Jandy Nelson's new novel, *I'll Give You the Sun*.

'Would you like one?' my new editor, Mara asked.

Being handed that book was one of the happiest moments of my writing life.

And it reminded me yet again that you should never give up on your dreams - no matter how long and winding and bumpy the road becomes.

Just keep taking one step after another in their direction.

Find a source of inspiration to light the way.

And one day, just maybe, you'll have the magical experience of realising that you've arrived.

## ★ You Are Still a Writer

Sometimes it can feel like the hardest thing in the world to actually sit down and write.

Sometimes it feels as if the whole world is conspiring to stop you putting pen to paper.

And to put it frankly, this can be a real pain in the butt!

Last week, I was coaching a writer.

One of her main frustrations was having to juggle so many things she felt as if her writing was being forced on to the back-burner.

I could relate straight away - and I bet so many of you can too.

If you need to earn a living, go to school or college, or bring up a family, it can be exhausting trying to write as well.

And so sometimes you give up trying.

But if writing is your passion, not being able to write can feel like a part of you - a vital part - is withering away.

And this makes you feel crotchety

unhappy

on edge.

But all is not lost.

For those times in your life where you are genuinely too busy or too tired to write, remember this:

***You are still a writer.***

*You still have thinking time.*

*You can still be plotting and planning in your head.*

*You can still be growing characters in your imagination.*

*You can still be jotting ideas down in a notebook.*

*You can still be allowing a story or poem to percolate.*

*You can still be using your life experiences as inspiration.*

*You can still call yourself a writer*

*Because writing is in your blood.*

***You are still a writer.***

## ★ Why Where You Create Affects How You Create

This morning, I was coaching a writer about her book-in-progress and we got to talking about the importance of *where* you write.

One of the luxuries of being a writer is that you can do it pretty much anywhere, but of course it follows that some places are far more conducive to creativity than others.

And what determines this is a very personal thing, unique to each writer.

One time, I tried to do that whole *author-sets-up-camp-in-coffee-shop* routine and I couldn't think straight for the sound of babies crying and businessmen bellowing.

Instead of focusing on my supposed to be heart-warming work-in-progress I became fixated on which would make the most effective gob-stopper - a blueberry muffin or a pain au chocolat.

But other writers I know love that kind of background noise. It feeds their creativity rather than drives them to acts of gagging by cake.

My client this morning had been experiencing a few blocks with her writing, then one day last week, she decided to relocate from her study to her lounge.

*'I wanted to make the experience more nurturing,' she explained. 'So I snuggled under a duvet and lit some candles and started tapping away on the laptop.'*

This instantly resonated with me.

Back in January of this year I had two books to write so I needed to drastically up my daily word count. But it was the middle of winter and the downstairs of the cottage I was living in at the time was drafty and cold.

So one day, I decided to write in my much cosier bedroom instead.

And so began one of the most pleasant periods of my writing life.

Every day I'd set my laptop on a pile of cushions, create myself a nest of pillows, light some scented candles and away I'd go.

This new writing post on top of my bed also gave me a stunning view across the valley, which became a great source of inspiration.

I felt snug and secure and relaxed and I guess this freed me up because the words just flowed and flowed.

By the end of March the weather started warming and the world started stirring again.

My books were done and life - and I - moved on.

But the experience stayed with me.

I've since moved house and I have a great little work space at the breakfast bar in my kitchen - which happens to have a direct view through the living room to the high street outside. It's a people-watching paradise.

But whenever I'm feeling blocked, or tired, or in need of a little nurturing, I relocate with my laptop to a pillow nest on my bed.

It works every time.

So next time you sit down to create, ask yourself how you need to feel first.

*Do you need to feel nurtured and snug or energised and business-like?*

*Do you need some soothing peace and quiet? Or do you need a background buzz to give you a lift?*

Then pick a location that will inspire that feeling in you and watch your creativity flow...

## ★ How Focus Gets Things Finished

So here we are: 2016 laid out before us, as sparkly clean as a brand new Word doc.

And writers everywhere are resolving that this will be *the year*.

*The year the novel finally gets written.*

*The year the poetry collection finally comes together.*

*The year the screenplay makes it from scribbled index cards to properly formatted script.*

*The year the short story gets published.*

*The year the blog gets launched.*

And for some writers, all of the above and more may apply.

Some writers have so many goals, their list of writing resolutions is practically a novel in itself.

And while this might initially fire them up with enthusiasm, February tends to find them face down in a bottle of gin, suffering from a chronic case of Resolution Overwhelm.

I know this because there was a time when my own writing resolutions had a higher word count than *War and Peace*.

There were so many things I wanted to write; so many genres and age groups and mediums I wanted to write for.

So I'd list them all.

And then, in January, I'd make a start on them all.

And I'd end up spreading my writing so thinly that I'd lose heart.

Nothing ever seemed to get done.

So I'd give up doing it at all.

Then I discovered the clear-headed joy that is prioritising.

And it has revolutionised my life.

Let me show you how...

First, write a list of every single writing goal you have.

Then look at your list and pick the *one goal* that makes your heart sing the most; the one you absolutely have to write before the new year is out.

Take a separate piece of paper.

Write your number one goal - *and this goal alone* - upon it.

Welcome to your new year's writing resolution.

Take the piece of paper with your list of other writing goals.

Fold it up.

Put it away in a drawer where it won't distract you.

For the whole of January do nothing but focus on your number one writing goal.

Repeat for February.

And repeat as necessary, until this goal is achieved.

Know that your other writing goals are still important.

You haven't abandoned them.

They're simply waiting in that drawer for a time when they will have your undivided attention.

And they will get your undivided attention, once you've finished the piece of writing that is most important to you.

Then you can go back to your list and pick a new number one to focus on.

When it comes to your writing resolutions, **prioritising = clarity.**

And **clarity = success.**

**Side note:** *I ran a weekly writing workshop in London for six years. A lovely and very talented writer used to come to the workshop, always brimming with ideas. Each week he'd read something different - the latest chapter from his novel-in-progress, the latest story from his anthology-in-progress, the latest poem from his collection-in-progress. Then, one week, he asked me why he never seemed to get anything finished. I told him to pick one of his projects and focus on nothing else until it was done. That year, he finally completed his novel and published a collection of poems. **Focus gets things finished.***

## ★ How to Write a Book in a Month\* – Without Losing the Plot

*(\*OK, so when I say 'book' I mean first draft and when I say 'month' I mean 4 - 6 weeks)*

I've been writing books for fifteen years now and whenever I'm asked how long it takes to write a novel, I always reply, 'around nine months'. Usually followed by some naff quip about the length of time it takes to make a baby.

But sometimes I've had to write books to a much shorter deadline and I've discovered that not only is it possible to write a first draft in four to six weeks, it can actually be strangely enjoyable.

So, if you're a novelist who has always told yourself that it takes months / years to write a book...

Or a self-publishing author who needs to up your output...

Or you're thinking of doing *NaNoWriMo* (a crazy online initiative where people attempt to write a novel in a month)...

... here are my tips for writing a first draft in four to six weeks without totally losing the plot.

### 1. Know where you're going before you start

If you're going to write crazy fast you need to know where you're going - and with who. So sketch out a rough outline of the plot and characters before you begin. These can obviously change as you get further into the story but to get off to a flying start, you need to be headed in the right direction - and be very clear on what that direction should be.

### 2. Divvy up your word count

Divide your total word count into weekly word counts. Then divide your weekly word counts into daily word counts. 2,600 words in a day (allowing for weekends off) sounds infinitely more achievable than 80,000 words in six weeks. Stick to this schedule and you should avoid a one-way ticket to Crazy Town.

### 3. Allow yourself to get 'messy'

I would give this advice to any writer, regardless of deadline, but it is ultra-important when you only have six weeks. You don't have the time to be overly-critical, so give your inner editor some time off and JUST WRITE.

#### **4. Write fast**

Er, yeah, seems obvious I know, but what I mean is, don't pause for hours to ponder exactly the right word. If it doesn't come straight away, use a holding word - or if you can't think of a holding word just write 'xxxxx' and come back to it later. You have to stay in the flow and the flow cannot be slow.

#### **5. Start a new writing day by editing the previous day's work**

This helps you get back into the flow of the story and frees you up to write messily - when you know you'll be coming back to make improvements the next day.

#### **6. Get physical**

It's vital for your health and sanity to make sure you're still getting plenty of fresh air and exercise during your writing marathon. I find regular walks, runs and yoga workouts to be life savers. Especially if you do hit a block with your writing. Getting outside really helps to clear any creative cobwebs. If for whatever reason, you can't get outside, then get up and dance like a loony around your living room for ten minutes. Sometimes blocked ideas literally need to be shaken free. (Don't overdo the physical exercise though - view it as something to invigorate, not exhaust you.)

#### **7. Have at least one day off a week**

And make this day off away from your computer. Away from your house if at all possible. Fear and pressure can make us want to chain ourselves to our laptops till the darn thing's finished but this is actually massively counter-productive. Getting away from your work in progress and having some F.U.N. can work wonders for stimulating your writing flow.

#### **8. Eat healthily and drink lemon water by the gallon**

The fact is, you are embarking upon a writing marathon. You need to make sure your brain and those poor keyboard-bashing fingers are getting the proper fuel. Eat fresh food. And by that I mean, fresh fruit and veg - not freshly delivered pizza. And drink loads of water - with lemon juice for some added zing and vit C. I know writers are supposed to be tortured alcoholics, slumped over their typewriters, necking Jack Daniels and chaining Marlborough Reds, but if you've only got a month to write a book, you haven't got time for hangovers. Or deleting your way through the sozzled, sorry prose of the night before.

#### **9. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep**

To write quickly and well, you need to be at your sharpest and to be at your sharpest, you need to stock up on your supply of sleep. And *good quality* sleep now we come to mention it. So try to avoid having a final surf of the net when you get into bed and falling down a late night Facebook / twitter hole. Unwind by having a warm bath or watching a good movie. Switch off fully from your work in progress until the next day's writing. Give your work a chance to percolate and give yourself a chance to rest and recharge.



## **10. Have fun with it**

The notion of having fun when you're up against a crazy writing deadline might seem totally insane but you'd be amazed at how much you can get done when you take the pressure off yourself and decide to just enjoy the experience. This has been the biggest revelation to me - how much I enjoy writing a super-speedy first draft.

The first drafts I've written in four to six weeks have been some of the most focused and creative experiences of my life. I feel totally immersed in the world of the book, without any of the usual pain in the butt niggles of writer's block and indecision and self-doubt - I just don't have the time for them!

## ★ Let Your Creative Passions Lead You Back to You

It had been billed to me as (and I quote) 'a holiday club for troubled teens', and I had been asked to run a drama workshop every day for the week.

I knew as soon as the first chair went flying that my carefully prepared programme of fun drama exercises (*'hey guys, let's all pretend to be trees'*) was not going to cut it with this crowd.

These teens weren't just 'troubled' by not having the latest x-box game or designer trainers, they were troubled by things like abject poverty, damp-infested homes on crime-riddled council estates and being pushed from pillar to post in foster care.

The last thing they needed was some well-meaning eejit telling them to pretend to be a sycamore.

So, as I broke up the fight and prayed to the God of Drama Workshops for salvation, I mentally binned my week's programme and started again.

'This week, you're all going to create and perform in your own play,' I yelled over the noise.

'What, we get to write the play?' a sullen-faced girl asked in between gum-chews.

'Yep,' I replied, wondering if I'd just made the biggest mistake of my professional life.

'And it can be about anything we like?'

'Yep.'

Silence.

Followed by an explosion of chatter.

But this time it wasn't about who was going to kill who, it was about their play.

And the sullen-faced girl, who had been instrumental in inciting the chair-throwing, was transformed.

Her eyes shone, her arms windmilled wildly as ideas burst from her.

'We could do ....'

'Or how about...?'

'Wouldn't it be cool if...?'

Her enthusiasm was infectious and soon the whole group had united behind the bones of an idea – about a group of kids who find the courage to stand up to the drug dealer on their estate.

All I had to do was hover in the background, offering suggestions and help when it was needed.

By the end of day one they'd created the basic outline of their plot.

At the start of day two, they all raced into the room, along with a few extras who'd heard about the 'drug dealer play' and wanted to swap from the workshops they were on to be a part of it.

I watched and guided as the girl once again took charge of the group, her passion for drama lighting up the room.

By Wednesday the play was written and cast.

By Thursday it had been workshopped and rehearsed.

And on Friday, '*Dirty Dealings*' was performed in an impromptu showcase to all of the other kids, their parents and carers and the holiday club staff.

All the cast shone but the transformation in that one girl was incredible.

And the lesson lodged deep inside of me: our passions always lead us back to our true selves, no matter what crap we might be dealing with.

When she'd first arrived at the workshop, the girl hadn't just created a mask, she'd created an entire exclusion zone of anger around her. But as soon as she was allowed to plug into her passion for drama, her guard lowered and we all saw the exuberant, fun-loving girl she really was at heart.

I found out later that the girl had come to the UK from Eastern Europe as the very young child of asylum seeker parents and she'd been living in a children's home for several years.

I've often thought about her in the years since that workshop, wondering what happened to her and hoping that our week together sparked something inside of her, a way out from her problems; a way back to her true self.

And I continue to use my encounter with her as inspiration. My first young adult novel, *Dear Dylan* was loosely based on her and in *True Face* I have a whole section on the importance of identifying and pursuing your passions.

Her zest for drama, in spite of the battles she was facing on a daily basis, left an indelible mark upon me.

And this is the most important thing about pursuing our passions: when we do so, we shine so brightly we light the way for others to pursue their passions too.

So, if you're feeling a little battered down by life, if you know fear of being hurt is causing you to put on a mask or even create an exclusion zone of anger, hurt or indifference, ask yourself these two simple questions:

*What are my passions?*

*How can I spend one hour today in the pursuit of one of them?*

Let your creative passions lead you back to you...

## ★ Dear Dare to Dream: Should I Self-Publish My Novel?

**Dear Dare to Dream,**

I feel a bit like I've lost my mojo.

This year, I started sending the first three chapters of a novel I've written out to literary agents. Three of them asked to see the whole thing but then never got back to me, not even to say no.

I've worked on this book for four years and I feel it's good enough to be published, but I am now losing my confidence and I worry that if I self-publish I will make a fool of myself. Basically, I feel like a crap writer.

A writer friend of mine is dead against me self-publishing, telling me that I'm good enough to get a book deal, but I just don't know and I'm such a hands-on type person. It hurts sitting around doing nothing.

I've started working on another novel but it feels as if I'm just building sandcastles. I want to have something published to give me the confidence and power to write.

Have you ever felt this way? So down in the dumps?

And should I take the bull by the horns and just self-publish, even if so many tell me that it's 'vanity publishing'? I know it sounds silly but I can just see my colleagues sniggering behind my back and saying, 'she thinks she can write!' Stupid, I know.

I guess I just need some encouragement, or just to know that others have felt this way too...

Down in the Dumps x

**Dear Down in the Dumps,**

Once upon a time, writing made me so sad, I sat in the corner of my kitchen floor and cried.

I cried so long and so hard, I forgot I had a chocolate cake baking and it burned to a cinder.

Normally, *nothing* makes me forget I have a cake baking, so yes, writing has definitely made me as down in the dumps as you are feeling right now.

But I wasn't crying because I couldn't get a book deal. I was crying because I'd got a book deal, had three novels published, and then been dropped by my publisher.

And the reason I felt so cake-burningly bad was because it truly felt as if my life was over.

And it truly felt as if my life was over because getting a book deal had meant so, so much to me.

It had made me feel good about myself for the first time in years.

It had made me feel as if I'd finally achieved something in my work life.

It had given me the confidence to leave a relationship that had been destroying me from the inside out.

It had made me believe that I was finally a writer.

*I wasn't a university drop-out any more - **I was a writer.***

*I wasn't a loser in love any more - **I was a writer.***

*I wasn't worthless any more - **I was a writer.***

I thought that losing my book deal meant that I was no longer a writer. Just as you think that not getting a book deal makes you a 'crappy writer'.

But I was wrong.

And so are you.

Having a book deal does not make you a writer.

*Writing* makes you a writer.

Writing even when you're bone-tired and emotionally drained.

Writing around the edges of your busy life because you'd rather do it then than not at all.

Because you can't do it 'not at all'.

Because the words and the stories and the characters and the feelings are just bursting to come out.

And they all want to burst out through you and your own unique voice.

So, dear Down in the Dumps, you have a choice.

You can either let a bunch of strangers who can't even be bothered to reply to you determine your fate, or you can take full control of your writing destiny.

That's what I did, when I lost my book deal.

After crying and burning a cake and throwing a pity party for about a month, I picked myself up and I found my way back to the beginning. Back to the time when I wrote purely for the love of it.

And I wrote a novel, purely for the love of it and I self-published it so that I could give it away for free, purely for the love of it.

About a month after the book came out, I was invited to speak on a panel at London Book Fair.

My fellow panellists were two best-selling authors, a very well-known literary agent and the head of a major publishing house. I was invited along as the token self-publisher.

During the course of our debate I was roundly sneered at and put down by my fellow panellists - to the point where one member of the audience walked out in disgust.

There would have been a time when this would have really upset me, especially when one of the novelists suggested that the book I'd self-published was probably crap.

But if anything, her sneering only got me more fired up. Because I wasn't writing to massage my ego or for money or fame, *I was doing it for the love of it*. And I might not have been a best-selling novelist with a book deal, but at least I wasn't a self-important arsehole.

My self-published novel went on to win a national book award and I now have book deals with eight different publishers, in three different countries. But I'm also building my own indie imprint where I can enjoy complete creative control over my writing career.

I'm proof positive of the incredible things that can happen to writers when they take their careers into their own hands.

But don't just take my word for it, pay a visit to *The Creative Penn*, a fantastic website run by indie author, Joanna Penn. It's crammed full of inspirational interviews with writers who are achieving phenomenal success without a traditional book deal. And it also contains loads of helpful tips and advice for writers who want to achieve the same.

I also recommend you read *Turning Pro* by Steven Pressfield. It's a kick up the butt in book form.

The only people who sneer at self-publishing and call it 'vanity' publishing these days are old-school, self-important, literary snobs or unhappy people too fearful to chase their own dreams.

I'm sure your writer friend has your best interests at heart, but self-publishing isn't a sign of failure - it's a sign of enterprise and passion. It's the sign of a true writer who doesn't want to let anything hold them back.

If a musician builds a following on YouTube prior to getting a record deal they aren't laughed at or called stupid. Just ask Jessie J or the Arctic Monkeys or Lily Allen.

So, why not follow their example?

Get your book out there.

Get writing the next one.

Get back to the beginning and write and publish for the love of it. Nothing else.

You aren't building sandcastles, you're building imaginary worlds for others to enjoy.

And you're building a happier future for yourself by daring to dream.

As Ray Bradbury so eloquently puts it:

*“To sum it all up, if you want to write, if you want to create, you must be the most sublime fool that God ever turned out and sent rambling. You must write every single day of your life. You must read dreadful dumb books and glorious books, and let them wrestle in beautiful fights inside your head, vulgar one moment, brilliant the next. You must lurk in libraries and climb the stacks like ladders to sniff books like perfumes and wear books like hats upon your crazy heads. I wish you a wrestling match with your Creative Muse that will last a lifetime. I wish craziness and foolishness and madness upon you. May you live with hysteria, and out of it make fine stories — science fiction or otherwise. Which finally means, may you be in love every day for the next 20,000 days. And out of that love, remake a world.”*

Wishing you much love and writing happiness,

Siobhan x



## ★ 15 Things I've Learned From 15 Years as a Writer

I've been a published author for 15 years now and it's been a massive and fascinating learning curve.

And as I know many of the readers of this blog are writers or aspiring writers I thought it would be fun to write a piece on the key lessons I've learnt from my years at the writing coal-face...

### 1. You do your best work when you write from the heart

A lot of people who dream of getting a book deal make the mistake of writing what they think publishers will want rather than what *they* want. As a result, publishers get inundated with imitations of previous best-sellers and end up craving something fresh and new. And writers end up demotivated and uninspired as they churn out some *Harry Potter meets Fifty Shades* epic. When you write from the heart about something that means a lot to you, you write with passion and your manuscript is far more likely to catch the editor's eye and capture their imagination. Another bonus of writing something you feel passionately about is that you're way more likely to find the stamina to show up at the page, day after day.

### 2. Don't be afraid to be bold and experiment

Following on from the previous point, don't be afraid to be bold in your writing. My first novel for young adults, *Dear Dylan*, was a real experiment for me - it was comprised solely of emails and one of the main characters was sixty years old (not usually a done thing in the YA book world). But my gamble paid off as this book went on to win a national award.

### 3. Character questionnaires rule

One of the best ways of quickly developing well-rounded characters is to complete a questionnaire for each of them prior to beginning the book. Give '*character questionnaire*' a quick Google and get downloading. Or you can create your own. A character questionnaire is a list of around 20 - 30 questions designed to help you get to know your character inside out, with questions such as: '*What is your character's worst fear?*' and '*How does your character get on with their parents?*'

#### 4. A book board helps you visualise the world of your story

Prior to starting a new novel I always create a book board; a visual representation of the world of the book, full of photos of people and places and objects. It really helps me to be able to see the characters and locations before I start writing about them. You can create a book board on Pinterest or get cutting and pasting and make a collage.

#### 5. Show don't tell

Possibly the most common note I've made in my work as an editorial consultant is SDT (not to be confused with STD). SDT stands for *Show Don't Tell*. All too often, writers can end up telling the reader what's happened in a reportage style, rather than showing it through the character's actions and dialogue. Whenever you're checking over your work, make sure to be on the look out for examples of SDT and change your telling into showing.

#### 6. You need to get messy

When I started my first novel it was a pain-staking process because I was so afraid of doing a bad job. I'd type a couple of lines, then edit the couple of lines, then change the words around, then experiment with some Italics, then wonder if I was using the right font, then read something by one of my favourite writers, then realise that what I'd written was useless in comparison and delete it and start all over again. This is the worst way in the world to write. Editing and writing use two entirely different parts of the brain, so when you edit as you go along your brain is actually at war with itself. I finally managed to escape this torture by telling myself that it was *OK to get messy and write crap*. Now it's the first thing I tell any of my coaching clients. 'Get messy and write crap then come back and edit it another day!' Freeing yourself up in this way allows the words to flow and your writing becomes far less self conscious and clunky.

#### 7. Reading is like fuel

Reading is like putting fuel in your writing tank. There's something so inspiring and encouraging about reading another writer's words. Whenever I read something well-written it fills me with excitement and has me itching to write because it reminds me of the beauty of just the right words, placed in just the right order and inspires me to raise my own writing game. There are also some great books about writing out there which can fuel you up to write. My top recommends are: '*On Writing*' by Stephen King, '*Still Writing*' by Dani Shapiro and '*Solutions for a Novelist*' by Sol Stein.

## 8. Getting physical helps your creative flow

Writing a book requires hours of sitting, bum-on-seat, hunched-over-screen. It's important that you break this up with regular exercise. My typical writing day will always include a walk, dance class or yoga routine. And getting physical has creative bonuses too, curing writer's block and getting ideas flowing.

## 9. Editors are invaluable

The fact is, there comes a point when writing a novel, when you can no longer see the wood for the trees - or the plot-holes for the typos. It's at this point that an *expert* pair of eyes is needed, in the form of an editor. When I got a book deal for my first young adult novel I was lucky enough to work with an editor called Ali Dougal. Ali edited four of my young adult novels and over the years, her eagle-eyed notes really helped knock my novels into shape and helped me hone my skills as a writer. Subsequently, other editors have commented on how 'clean' my manuscripts are. This is all thanks to Ali and the incisive feedback she gave me on my earlier books. So, if you're self-publishing your book, and you want that book to be its absolute best, it's vital that you invest in the skills of an experienced editor. As Dr Seuss so eloquently put it: "*So the writer who breeds more words than he needs, is making a chore for the reader who reads.*" Let an editor help you cut the slack and get your book as sleek and polished as possible.

## 10. People DO judge books by their covers

I learnt this one the hard way. My second novel for adults was a gritty love story, set during the miners' strike of the 1980s. When I'd imagined a cover for it I'd pictured an 80s style vibe, incorporating a bright yellow 'COAL NOT DOLE' sticker. When my publisher sent me what they'd come up with, I wanted to cry. It was pink, with the photo of a model in a skin-tight t-shirt *and it had a glittery font* (the horror!). It was in no way representative of the story I'd written. But I was so grateful for being published I didn't say a word. I also reasoned that a publisher that size would definitely know what they were doing when it came to book covers. A month after the book came out I did an author event in a book-store. When I introduced myself to the store manager she greeted me with: '*I really enjoyed your book but I have to say I think the cover's f\*\*\*ing awful.*' Hardly the most encouraging start to the evening! I then gave a reading from the book and afterwards, when I was signing copies, everyone who bought one said the same thing: '*I really enjoyed your reading but I would never have picked it up if I'd just seen it in the shop - I hate books with those kind of covers.*' Getting just the right cover for your book is a tricky and complicated business. If you're

being traditionally published and hate the cover your publisher sends you, don't be afraid to speak out about your concerns. Most publishers really want to keep their authors happy. And if you're self-publishing, invest in a professional cover designer - it will be worth every penny. I thoroughly recommend Michael A Hill, designer of the Dare to Dream logo and cover.

### **11. The publishing business model is bonkers!**

I don't know of any other industry where products are launched with virtually no marketing spend, but in the publishing world, this is a routine practice. Most debut authors only get a tiny slice of their publisher's marketing budget. They then have a month for their book to start selling well before the stores clear the front tables and shelves ready for the next wave of new releases. When I was first signed by a publisher I naively assumed that I'd see posters advertising my book on the tube - I thought this happened for every book that got published. It doesn't. And I've lost count of the number of authors I've spoken to who've become deeply disillusioned at the lack of marketing support they've received. But all is not lost because...

### **12. The internet is your new best friend**

These days the internet makes it so much easier for authors to market their books themselves. Building your online profile via social media and growing a readership via your website and blog are fantastic ways of making people aware of your books. It also provides a great sense of community, something that can be all too lacking in the solitary, pyjama-clad world of the writer.

### **13. Getting dropped by a publisher is not the end of the world**

In fact, it can be an exciting new beginning. With most writers only earning around £15,000 per year and most books only selling hundreds of copies (if that), the chances of being dropped by a publisher run pretty high. It happened to me after my first four books and it was devastating. But now I look back on being dropped as one of the best things that's ever happened to me career-wise. It led to me developing a successful secondary career as an editorial consultant and writing coach and it made me write a book purely for the love of it - which went on to win an award and win me new book deals. Once I realised how crazy the publishing business model is, I redefined success. Now I no longer think of it in terms of book sales, I see success as pursuing my passion for writing and helping others through my words. Take the pressure off yourself by redefining success for you.

#### **14. Indie publishing is great**

In the fifteen years I've been writing I've had traditional deals for eleven books and I've self-published four. In my humble opinion, indie publishing is one of the most exciting things to have happened for writers. It allows us to take full control of our careers - giving us the opportunity to print what and how we want, often at very little cost. There was a time when self-publishing was sneeringly referred to as 'vanity publishing'. But not any more. Now, many writers are making a great living from the much higher royalty rates indie publishing provides, and running thriving businesses, coining the term '*author-preneur*'. For more info on the exciting world of the indie author check out the website: [The Creative Penn](#).

#### **15. And after all ... it's only writing**

My ex-boyfriend is an actor. One time, we were at my mum's house and he was talking about how much a friend of his had just been paid for his role in a movie. It was more than my social worker mum would have earned in ten years. 'But I've just talked somebody out of killing themselves,' my mum said incredulously, 'and he gets paid all that just for pretending to be someone else.' It was a sobering moment. The truth is, sometimes when we're paid for a creative talent, it can lead to feelings of 'specialness'. And if publishers, reviewers, readers shower us with praise, it can stoke our ego until it rages out of control. I once read an interview with a writer who talked about how 'agonising' it was when he was thinking up ideas for his latest masterpiece and his wife and children would insist on talking to him (the outrage!). In the end, he took to wearing a special cap whenever he was 'thinking' around the house so that they'd know not to talk to him. If I was his wife I'd have embroidered 'SELF IMPORTANT EEJIT' on to that cap. Having your family talk to you when you're thinking isn't 'agony'. Working a back-breaking shift down a mine is agony. Don't take all of the hoo-ha seriously. Write purely for the love of it and don't believe the hype. Feel grateful and humble that you're being paid to do something you love and enjoy every last moment of it.

## ★ Writing by Starlight

*"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."* **Oscar Wilde**

One of the lowest points of my life was when (as a newly single mum) I had to claim housing benefit to help pay my rent.

I'd never had to claim any kind of benefit before, I always like paying my own way, so my skin crawled with shame and embarrassment as I made my way to my local housing benefit office to make my application.

Sitting in the reception area waiting to be called for my interview was a grim experience. Think Waiting Room for Hell.

The prospect of losing my home was terrifying.

**It felt as if I was just one step away from the gutter.**

But instead of letting it crush me I made a promise to myself - and my son.

I vowed that I would work my butt off to become financially self-sufficient again.

And I vowed that I wouldn't give up on my writing dream - despite having just been dropped by a publisher.

**I was one step away from the gutter but I was still looking at the stars.**

I forged a new career as a writing coach and editor.

I started running weekly writing workshops in my local library.

I finally got a new book deal.

I've been financially self-sufficient for years now - something I'm grateful for *every single day*.

**Today, I was invited to run a workshop and a book signing at a literary event called YA SHOT.**

The workshop took place in the library where I ran the weekly writing group.

And the book signing took place at the civic centre where I was interviewed for my housing benefit claim.

When I got to the civic centre I saw that the book signing was actually taking place in the same building as the housing benefit office!

As I walked up those steps I had a flashback to how terrified I'd felt walking up them all those years ago - not knowing whether I'd be able to keep a roof over my son's head.

If someone had called me to one side that day and told me there was no need to worry, that all these years later I'd be coming back to that very same building to sign copies of my books I'd probably have laughed them out of town.

But this is what happens when you end up in the gutter and keep looking at the stars.

They steer you to a happier, brighter future.

## ★ THE NOVELIST'S BACKPACK – COMING MARCH 2016 ★

I want to live in a world where everyone feels free to write, regardless of background or experience.

I want to live in a world where everyone who dreams of writing a novel has access to the advice and support needed to do so.

I'm tired of literary snobbery and the aura of elitism that still surrounds the publishing industry.

And please don't get me started on writing courses that require you to re-mortgage your home / sell vital body parts / pawn your 1970s Glam Rock record collection to fund.

Enough of that craziness!

If you dream of writing a novel – *or writing a better novel* – I want to help you write with passion and confidence ... without breaking the bank.

So I've created **THE NOVELIST'S BACKPACK**, a unique digital bundle containing tutorials, exercises, expert advice, guided visualisations and podcasts for every stage of your novel writing journey.

From finding ideas and inspiration to overcoming blocks and fears, creating page-turning plots and compelling characters, editing your work and pitching to agents and publishers.

**All for just £35 (\$55).**

To be notified as soon as **THE NOVELIST'S BACKPACK** is launched and for more inspirational posts on writing please follow my blog at: [daretodreamcoaching.co.uk](http://daretodreamcoaching.co.uk)

I really look forward to helping you make your novel-writing dreams a reality ... and filling the world with more great books!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm the author of five books for adults: *The Sweet Revenge of the Football Widows*, *True Love Always*, *The Scene Stealers*, *Antenatal & Postnatal Depression* and *Dare to Dream* and six books for young adults: *Dear Dylan* (winner of the Young Minds Book Award), *Finding Cherokee Brown*, *Shipwrecked*, *Dark of the Moon*, *True Face* and (coming in July 2016) *The Moonlight Dreamers*.

I've also ghost-written several other books.

I love helping other people achieve their writing dreams through my Writing Consultancy at [daretodreamcoaching.co.uk](http://daretodreamcoaching.co.uk).

I also love giving talks and running workshops on any / all of the following themes:

- *Daring to Dream*
- *Daring to Write*
- *Living Authentically*
- *The Life Transforming Benefits of Coffee & Snickers Bars*

OK, I haven't given a talk on that last one, but it's only a matter of time.

You can find me online here:

**Blog:** [daretodreamcoaching.co.uk](http://daretodreamcoaching.co.uk)

**Facebook:** Siobhan Curham Author

And very occasionally on **Twitter:** @SiobhanCurham

## Spread the Word

If you've enjoyed **WRITING BY STARLIGHT** please feel free to share it with your friends and social networks.

Thank you!

**Siobhan**