

Introduction to the Novel

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'How do you begin to write a novel?' There are two answers to this question, and the first is, 'I don't know'. I've written seven and I still don't really know. Ask a number of novelists where their novels begin and you will get some of the following replies: they begin with an idea, a feeling, an image, a mood, a face, a place, a plot, a dream, an autobiographical experience, an item in the news, a story from history, family, friends, Shakespeare, the bible, myth or fairytale; or more probably, a mixture of several of these. What this adds up to is that anything can be the starting point for a novel. My favourite answer of this type comes from Virginia Woolf:

To the Lighthouse is going to be fairly short; to have father's character done complete in it; and mother's; and St. Ives; and childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in – life, death, etc.

But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting. We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel. (Woolf 1953: 76)

It is daunting, the notion of finding this beginning, because by its very vagueness it might not be a beginning of a novel. It might be a great baggy mess of life love the universe and everything, the literary equivalent of a drunk at a party. Or it might simply be the beginning of a short story.

The second answer to 'How do you begin to write a novel?' is much simpler, 'Start writing words on a page'. I am always reassured by this. No matter how complex or ethereal the inspiration for a novel is, what it boils down to, is writing words on a page. Which pulls the whole thing back into the realm of the practical and possible. Woolf goes on to say, 'I must write a few little stories first and let the Lighthouse simmer, adding to it between tea and dinner till it is complete for writing out'. So it seems that the way to begin writing a novel is to ring-fence a time to do it in – I prefer morning to 'between tea and dinner' myself, but that may be because I don't have a cook – and to begin putting words on paper. What you begin by writing may not figure at all in the finished novel; and indeed, it is easier to begin writing if you have told yourself that what you're writing is provisional and can easily be thrown away. But what you are doing is writing yourself into it, you are finding out what it is, you are edging your way into defining the book's territory. And best of all, by writing something down, you are providing yourself with something concrete to work on, even if it is only to cross out.

There is another breed of writers, who work out whole novels – plotting, chronology, even precise sentences – in their heads before putting pen to paper; my guess is they may not need to read about beginning to write a novel, so I won't address myself to them. For the rest of us, the early stages of a novel are a period of exploration. Whatever the story, there will be lots of different possible ways of telling it. Sometimes, instinctively, one hits on the right way from the start; sometimes it takes a lot of playing around and trial and error to discover the right way. What follows in this chapter are a number of thoughts and suggestions for what to do in the early stages, to encourage wider exploration of the material, and to help with structuring it. Given that, as a writer, you are choosing every twist and turn of the plot, every detail of characterisation, every sentence structure, every single word you write, it is important to make the best choices possible – and to be able to do this, it's important to have some sense of the range of options open to you. The exercises are about playing with the way you write, and trying out different techniques. Obviously, there is interplay and overlap between the elements of the novel which I have here crudely singled out.

Subject matter and theme

No one can tell you what to write about: it must be your own obsession. And if you don't have an idea for a novel, please don't write one, it will be better for everyone if you don't. It is also worth bearing in mind that there are some subjects which people may not much want to read about; these change according to fashion but may currently include wretched childhoods of abused children, and the amusing plight of thirty-something single women. What is important to remember is that a good novel usually contains more than one theme. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is about a rift between a brother and sister, but it is also centrally about the passage of time, about childhood and age, love (both familial and romantic), and about the wounds inflicted upon individual lives by the partition of India and Pakistan. Its themes are both personal and public; it is this range and complexity which make it so satisfying. If you have written a few thousand words of your novel and can only find one theme in it, it may be happier as a short story.

Narrative voice

Narrative voice is the most important single choice I make about the novel I am working on. Finding the right voice makes the writing of the book possible; the narrative voice or voices tell the story, their vocabulary and style and tense determine the texture and mood of the novel. There are a number of options, and I find it useful to play with them and try them all, before settling upon one.

First person ('I')

This is preferred by many first-time novelists because of its immediacy. It draws the reader straight into the narrator's head, it is easy to write in the sense that it is a limited, circumscribed point of view; it is fun to write, *because* it is circumscribed. A first person narrator cannot know everything, and therefore will sometimes misinterpret information or other characters; so they can be exposed to the reader as unreliable, providing a detective role for the reader. The first person voice is dramatic – indeed, it is a monologue. And the character of the narrator is revealed in the most direct way possible, by the language he uses. Consider

how much we learn about Mark Haddon's narrator from this sentence, with its pedantic, logical thinking, its simple vocabulary and inadequate punctuation, and the odd formality of the narrator not using contractions:

I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. (Haddon 2003: 1)

There are conventions of first person storytelling which you can adopt and which readers accept without question; the diary, letters, a confession, a 'I have decided to write my story in an attempt to understand what happened' or simply, an internal monologue.

The chief disadvantages of first person are that a single voice can become rather relentless, particularly if it has a limited vocabulary, and that it is sometimes difficult to find ways of conveying essential information to the reader, if that information is unknown to the narrator. Both difficulties can be overcome using such means as more than one narrator, or including information via a medium like newspaper articles. Look at Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) to see how he frames a first person narrative with an informational third person account of the shoot-out which finished off the gang, and of Ned's death – information the reader needs to know, but which the narrator, Ned, cannot furnish for obvious reasons.

Exercise

Your character, writing as 'I', takes a walk down the street. What does she see? Is it external? Internal? Is she looking at other people, cars, flowers, litter, sunshine, dogshit, or is she oblivious to it all, and if so, what is she seeing in her mind's eye? Think about the language you are using, which is defining your character.

Second person ('you')

This is rarely chosen, and can feel rather contrived. But in the hands of some writers it is even more compelling than the first person, leading the reader to identify strongly with the protagonist. B. S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964) has a section in the second person from the point of view of a supply teacher who has found some boys messing about in a painting class:

You walk slowly up and demand the painting. In the foreground are hardly identifiable animals with television aerials on their heads, yoked to a sleigh. Underneath each is a series of brown splodges, and, leaving no room for dubiety as to what was represented, an arrow and the word *shit*. You conceal your amusement with difficulty, confiscate the drawing for your collection, and stand the boys out in the front facing the board. (Johnson 1964: 27)

Second person is often used for short passages within a first or third person narrative, when a character is (schizophrenically) talking to herself as 'you'. Some writers, like James Kelman, have their protagonist move fluidly between all three voices within one novel, and this is an interesting exercise to try.

Exercise

Transpose a paragraph you have previously written in the first person, into the second person. You may find it necessary to change more of the language than simply the I/you

and the verbs. (Note how Johnson generates humour, above, by the contrast between the formality of the language, and the intimacy of the narrator's inwardly childish response.) Compare your two versions, considering how different an impact the second person makes.

Third person ('he' or 'she')

This breaks down into two further choices. The first of these is the God-like third person voice of many nineteenth-century novels, the authorial voice who has created the world of the novel and who knows the thoughts and feelings of every character in it. In contemporary writing it is uncommon, but Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) is a fine example. It opens 'Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyle, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns. Hive spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood . . .' and moves effortlessly through the thoughts and feelings of all its characters, revealing and commenting upon them. Note how elegantly this third person voice allows her to leap over swathes of time.

Exercise

Try the all-knowing third person. Describe the scene in a courtroom where a woman is awaiting sentence for infanticide. Her husband and parents are present, as the jury files in.

The second choice, for third person, is use of restricted point of view. A novel may be restricted to the point of view of one character, as in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). This has many of the advantages of first person, in terms of intensity and leading the reader fully into the protagonist's head, but it makes the summarising of information easier, as can be seen in these thoughts of David, the central character in *Disgrace*:

He has not taken to Bev Shaw, a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck. He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive. It is a resistance he has had to Lucy's friends before. (Coetzee 2000: 72)

Imagine how informational this would feel, transposed to the first person. Coetzee creates an added sense of alienation by presenting his protagonist's story in the third person, as if David himself is at a slight remove from his own experiences; the first person would make him more intimate with the reader, which would work against the grain of this chilly, deeply disturbing novel. The lack of any other point of view reinforces the sense of David's isolation, his inability to understand those around him.

A third-person novel can also range through the restricted points of view of a number of characters, moving from one to another within the course of a page, or separating them out into distinct chapters. John Updike's *Rabbit Run* (1960) is centrally the point of view of Rabbit Angstrom, but also contains sections from the point of view of his wife and his mistress and a handful of minor characters, which reveal to us, almost shockingly, that Rabbit is not actually the centre of the universe. This is used to brilliant effect after Rabbit's wife (whom he has walked out on) accidentally drowns their baby, and the point of view shifts to Lucy, a woman who dislikes Rabbit and is simply concerned about how his behaviour impinges on the life of her Rector husband (Updike 1964: 215).

Exercise

Select a day of crisis in your protagonist's life, and write in the third person about an action he performs from the point of view of someone with different values or concerns. It could be a pet, a door-to-door salesman, a plumber, an airline hostess, a child. Use the new point of view to attempt to find meaning in the protagonist's action, and to reveal how it affects the character whose point of view you are using.

The storyteller

This is really a subsection of 'first person', but the effect is so entirely different that it deserves considering on its own. The storyteller is a device occasionally employed by novelists ranging from Dostoevsky to Conrad to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Storytellers are not players; they simply observe and record, and occasionally, pass judgement. They put a frame around the story. In Dostoevsky's work, look at the difference between the in-your-face unreliable first-person narrator of *Notes from Underground* (1864), and the shadowy storyteller who is not even a character in the novel, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The storyteller is not the authorial voice, but is privileged to an overview and a wide-ranging knowledge of events, which characters in the thick of the action cannot have. Philip Roth in *American Pastoral* (1997) gives this device an extra tweak by having his storyteller, Zuckerman, admit that he is making up those parts of the story of which he could not realistically have knowledge:

I dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his (Swede Levov's) life – not his life as a god or a demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man – and inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey, at the seaside cottage, the summer his daughter was eleven . . . (Roth 1998: 89)

From here the story homes in on Swede and his daughter, leaving Zuckerman's life behind. A storyteller uses her own language to present the story, and thus interesting contrasts can be generated, for example between emotional subject matter and a distanced, measured narrative voice; irony and humour can arise from the gap between the protagonist's feelings and the storyteller's attitude.

Exercise

Use the voice of a cynical and weary journalist to narrate the story of a joyful incident in your protagonist's life, for example winning a prize. The journalist is a neighbour of your protagonist, but is not a close friend.

Characterisation

Fictional characters are often partly based on real people known to the writer, or on aspects of several different people, run together into one fictional character. But creating a character in fiction is rather like acting. The writer needs to enter, imaginatively, into that character's head; see as he sees, think as he thinks, feel as he feels. Creating a convincing character is often about pushing one aspect of your own personality to an extreme. Most writers are not murderers, but, to write about a murderer, you need to be able to imagine inhabiting a murderer's skull, understanding and believing in the motives that prompt him,

embracing the contradictions and confusions he feels. You need to know your characters well enough to sympathise with them. A writer who sets out to present the murderer as bad will write a two-dimensional character.

It is worth drawing up a list of the ways in which writers can reveal character, and then testing your own writing against the list – to see how many of the available techniques you have used, and to consider whether trying some that you have not used, might be a way into more interesting or complex characterisation. Some ‘ways of revealing character’ are listed below.

Physical description

For example ‘the babysitter came to loll in front of the television set – Mrs Moosup with arms too fat for sleeves’ (Proulx [1993] 1994: 14). Note here that one telling detail can be more effective than a page of photographically accurate description. Be wary of over-description, and cut down on your use of adjectives.

Action

This example is from *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and follows a scene in which Ned has just shot two men: ‘we knocked up an old man in a nightgown Coulson were his name. I counted out the price for what we took telling him my name so he could tell Ned Kelly were no thief’ (Carey 2001: 246). Quite apart from the curious revelation that he is anxious not to be thought a thief, after admitting to being a murderer, note how Kelly’s language reveals his lack of formal education.

Speech

This outburst is from David Lurie in *Disgrace*: ‘I have not sought counselling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling’ (Coetzee [1999] 2000: 49).

Possessions or setting

This example is a description of the London room furnished by Nazneen’s husband Chanu, in *Brick Lane*:

The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred per cent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cow dung, which was a practical colour. They had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu’s hair oil. (Ali 2003: 15)

Note the economy here; the room is described from Nazneen’s point of view and we can see that it is hideous, but she does not pass this judgement herself. Her description tells us as much about her as it does about Chanu.

Thoughts

In Valerie Martin’s *Property*, the protagonist watches her husband’s sadistic sexual exploits with young black boys, and reports, ‘Often, as I look through the glass, I hear in my head

an incredulous refrain: *This is my husband, this is my husband'* (Martin [2003] 2004: 5). The character's extreme self-control and her powerlessness to change her situation are succinctly revealed by this thought.

Speech or thoughts of other characters

Other characters may give their view of this particular character, as in *Clear Light of Day*: 'Bim watched her sister in surprise and amusement. Was Tara, grown woman, mother of grown daughters, still child enough to play with a snail?' (Desai [1988] 2001: 2).

Language and style

In the first person, the language is the character; but also consider the choice of language you are using about the character in the third person, whether it is colloquial or formal, direct or circumlocutory, etc.

Exercise

Try any of these ways of revealing character which you have not already used, for example, through describing possessions. Describe your character's bedroom. How have they personalised the room?

Setting

Setting in a novel is not background; it is a key, vital element. In the best novels it permeates and determines the characters' behaviour; it thwarts or facilitates their actions. It may echo their moods or present an ironic contrast. Consider the role of contemporary South Africa in *Disgrace*, Delhi and Partition in *Clear Light of Day*, nineteenth-century Louisiana in *Property*, and London in *Brick Lane*. Setting may be simply geographical; but more often it is also politics, class, public events, all of which impinge upon the lives of your characters. Setting needs thorough research and convincing writing, even if it is a fantasy setting. (See Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristram Smith* [1994] for a meticulously imagined alternative world, complete with footnotes detailing its history.)

When researching historical setting, first-hand accounts are always the most useful. Look at diaries, letters, and travellers' accounts. When researching *Promised Lands* (1995), I was able to build up for myself a very real sense of Australia in 1788 through reading four journals by different members of the First Fleet. Diaries give the kind of specific detail (what they ate for breakfast, how clothes were washed, the weather on a certain day) which history books omit.

Exercise

Write a scene where the external world impinges on your character's life and changes it. For example, a storm, a riot, threat of a terrorist bomb, a fire. Or it could be something as simple as being stung by a bee.

Plotting and structure

Plot and structure often change as a novel grows. But it is still necessary to know what they are from the beginning: if writing the novel is a journey of exploration, then the plot and

structure you have in your head at the beginning is the map. The map may turn out in the end to be wrong in some respects, or even entirely useless. It will need redrawing numerous times along the way; but still, it's no good setting off without one. And in fact the maps of plots are all very well known. People will argue about exactly how many plots there are in the world, but it is generally agreed to be a limited number (somewhere between seven and eleven). The bones of one of these key plots can be found in all novels, and most of the best novels contain at least four.

This is my list of the basic plots; your own list might vary.

1. Rags to riches – the Cinderella plot. For this plot reversed, see *Disgrace*.
2. Love – succeeding after being thwarted. See *The Shipping News*. Or, for an interesting inversion, *Brick Lane*.
3. Transformation – which may be literal, children growing into adults (*Clear Light of Day*) or psychological (*Disgrace*, *Brick Lane*).
4. Disaster – how does the protagonist cope under ever-increasing pressure? As in Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (2001). This is a plot more commonly used in films than novels.
5. Good v. evil – for example *True History of the Kelly Gang* (with the twist that the outlaw Ned is good, and the police and society are evil).
6. The Outsider – someone strange comes to town. This is the central plot of much Science Fiction and many Westerns, but also literary fiction like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Night-time*, *Property* and *Brick Lane*.
7. Quest or mission – the protagonist has to find or accomplish something. See *American Pastoral*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Night-time*.

Most good novels contain elements of most of these plots. Crossing from one plot to another creates suspense; look at the structure of the great Victorian novels written for magazine serialisation, switching from one storyline to another, chapter by chapter. Or look indeed at soap opera, as we cut from one family's story to the plot of another set of characters.

Exercise

This is a crude exercise, but can be helpful in exposing weaknesses in an idea. Check how many of these archetypal plots feature in your novel. A plot represents questions for the reader to ask, and assumptions the reader will make; questions you can avoid answering, by twists and turns, thereby creating suspense, and assumptions you can foil by taking off in another direction. Since the blueprint of these plots is already in all readers' heads, you can play against it, you can do the unexpected.

Structure is the shape of the book; baldly, it is the sections it is divided into (for example, four parts, thirty chapters). It is the order in which the plot is told, which may be chronologically, or backwards in flashbacks, or from the point of view of a minor player, or through conflicting points of view, or counterpointed with another story (or stories) altogether. It is composed of sequences of writing in which contrasts of pace and tension, comedy and tragedy, action and reflection, lead the reader through a range of emotions, always asking questions.

It is something the writer needs to be aware of from the start, but it is infinitely open to change. It is perfectly possible to write a book and completely change its structure when it

is finished. For example a novel may consist of two characters' contrasting views of a love affair; first one, then the other. It could be restructured by chopping them up, re-ordering, and intercutting the two voices, with an eye to varying pace and increasing suspense. For the novelist at the beginning of a novel, an idea of structure is vital because it breaks the novel into manageable chunks. It is difficult to sit down and write a novel. It is less difficult to sit down and write a ten-page chapter. Invent a structure to begin with, even if you need to change it as you go along.

And once you have a draft, test it against received notions of what structure should be; not necessarily in order to change it to fall in line with these, but to see if they will help to reveal weaknesses. The five-point structure pattern for novel which is most frequently cited goes: (1) inciting incident, (2) major climax around page 80, (3) midpoint crisis where underlying motives are revealed, (4) climax, (5) resolution. I am not recommending anyone to set off writing a novel to this formula. But applying it to a first draft can help to diagnose problems. If I had known of it when I was writing my first novel, I may have been able to work out why the ending feels so abrupt: there is a climax but no resolution.

Exercise

Analyse the structure of your three favourite novels. Consider use (or non-use) of parts, chapters, divisions. Write a brief summary of what happens in each chapter or section, note crises, time gaps, changes of voice, etc. Now do the same for your own novel-in-progress. Although this will throw up problems, it usually makes the writing seem more manageable, and there may be aspects of the structure of the novels you have analysed which you decide to borrow. Bear in mind that there are no rules about writing. You don't have to begin at the beginning. If there is a difficult section, leave it till later. Very often, the way to tackle it will emerge mysteriously, from somewhere in the back of your mind, while you work on other things. And allow yourself to work on from bad writing to good, don't waste days repeatedly crossing out that awful first sentence.

The most important preparation for writing a novel is to read. Look at how other writers have constructed novels, created characters, generated suspense, evoked powerful settings. Look at the voices they have invented, the language they use, the structures into which they have composed their work. The more you can read and gain understanding of how other novels are put together, the more tools you have at your disposal in the creation of your own novel. Once you have read, you can begin to write.

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