

The Craft of Writing

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The Craft of Writing

When we retired here, I vowed that I would never sit on another committee and never give another talk about writing. Both decisions are straws in the wind.

time
 Usually I talk specifically about my own field of work, but there is really little difference about any kind of writing. It is ~~laborious~~ ^{consuming} and for the most part hard work. A reader can read a novel in an evening but with a few exceptions like Simenon or Dickens, it takes months or even years to write the novel.

The beginning, chapter one, is fine. The idea is there. Something has moved the writer and he or she is enthusiastic. The end is very exciting when everything is wound up and the dénouement is reached. But the chapters in between have to be worked out. The very first point to make is that a writer needs a disciplined approach. So many hours, so many words put down. Sixty thousand words have to be found. Trollope had the maxim 'Let no day pass without a line written.'

I used to go to my study every day after the evening meal and work until the nine o'clock news. That produced about five thousand words a week. Four months or so would produce the first draft of a 60 thousand word novel.

I have hinted there that something

has to trigger the writer. Two things. An idea and an emotional charge.

Science Fiction, which has been my main output, is an ideas business. So I will illustrate this first point by referring to a particular book. 'The Phaeton Condition.' Three things came together. ~~The~~ Some publisher sent a large flow diagram to school on the subject of Pollution, I put it up on the wall in my office and was impressed by it. It showed rivers pouring chemicals & human waste into the seas. It showed deforestation. Farms going out of use. Population spreading like a fungus. Erosion of cultivated land. The spread of deserts. It niggled away at me like an aching tooth.

Then a member of staff asked in the staff room what the Phaeton Condition was. A great thing about a good staff room is that there is always a reservoir of arcane knowledge and the answer came that it was the idea that Man has a capacity for tackling tasks that are beyond his grasp - man's reach exceeds his grasp or what's a heaven for...

It struck me that it would make a good title.

Then I found a monograph on pollution by a young woman researcher who underlined the danger the world was in and that the blind drive for immediate profit was taking us to the edge of an

abyss. Her picture was on the dust cover. She was heroine material. If she was in trouble any Lancelot would beat a path to her relief.

So there was a theme, a title and an emotional charge. I began writing without a clear idea of the end game.

I find that it helps to have a framework.

At that time I used a ten chapter format and I had a large piece of squared paper stuck on a display board over my desk. This is useful. In the course of work one can pin up scraps of information, name lists, super sentences that may be used somewhere along the line. In this case I thought up TWIG as a ^{Logos} name for an organisation TOXIC WASTE IS GAINING.

The framework for Phacton looked something like this — a board grid — names ... Tom Lockhart — a rising accountant — it is the bright day brings forth the adder — Margaret Hampton — the girl. Complications — Lockhart engaged to Melanie Leach a pushy executive type. Margaret close to the organiser of the Twig organisation. (Malcolm)

So there was a plot line — how to detach Tom from Melanie, get him to meet Margaret, detach M from Malcolm and interest her in Lockhart.

② A second plot line was the global disaster which was imminent under the

pollution threat

(3) A third was the involvement of a big chemical International which was the prime mover behind the action.

These three would produce three crisis points in the last three chapters.

In a ten chapter structure:-

1 is the beginning

3 is the end of the beginning with no new major characters introduced later

4, 5, 6 are the development

7 is the beginning of the end

8 - 9 - 10 each have one plot line brought to a crisis

10 being the end of the end and the denouement on a high note

It is important to write about what you know... or at least to make a starting point in what you know... For instance, the first school where I was head was actually a ruin. It had been hit by a bomb. One upper storey had been taken off. Close by, a large church had been demolished in the same raid and levelled as a play area. The rebuilding began around us.

I imagined that the bulldozers had uncovered an unidentifiable object. A massive oval. Markings on the outside seemed to suggest a binary code

In fact they could be interpreted as the number 26 - the last letter of the alphabet - Z. The object could be called BINARY Z.

It occurred to me, ~~that~~ looking out on the wilderness, that some such object might well be found. Suppose that uncovering it and giving it a shrewd knock with a digger was enough to set it moving to complete whatever programme it had... It could cause problems.

At that time there were all kinds of Educational Problems going on. I was representing the local teachers on the Education Committee and there was a difference of opinion about reorganisation. The Committee wanted a political solution, we wanted an Educational solution.

At the same time a new teacher joined the staff. She was very vulnerable looking with fair hair and an Alice in Wonderland headband - it seemed to me that if Binary Z was looking for somebody to threaten she would be a natural victim.

Again the structure had 3 plot lines.

- ① The progress of the experts trying to sort out the threat posed by Binary Z
- ② The Educational battle waged by the headmaster
- ③ The reactions of the heroine figure and the hero figure in the stressed situation.

Tension of one sort or another is essential. Tension and the resolution of

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Tension. Tension between Elizabeth & D'Aray
in P. & Prejudice. Illustrate with Interstella 25

Move from the known to the unknown. People are a known factor. People do not greatly change.

The program that makes us human was laid down over millions of years etc. Computers are only high speed idiots. Hackers breaking into computer programmes to feather their own nest are only Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright. Dallas and Dynasty are only David wheeling and dealing for his own ends his elaborate palace is only South Fork.

There has been no great change in recorded history as far as human nature goes. So the human situation is a constant resource for material. Jane Austin's advice to her niece was to look around and pick out a few local families as novel material. She herself claimed that she worked in miniature on a small ivory tablet.

So we have - make a structure plan and use known material as a starting point.

Once the start has been made, a novel gathers its own momentum. As soon as characters begin to talk they develop a life of their own. True. The writer feels he is only recording what goes on.

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Writing skills can only be learned by writing. It is a matter of organisation. Anyone who can write a sentence can write a paragraph. Anyone who can write a paragraph can write a chapter. A chapter is the building block of a book. The only direct advice I ever had was from my agent. He said, "It's a good thing not to have dialogue for more than a thousand words. Similarly, don't have more than a thousand words of direct descriptive or explanatory material. Watch the characters, don't let them disappear without trace when the reader wants to know where they've gone!"

- That was germane to the first novel *Interstellar 25*. In the first draft I had left two minor characters in a cave and forgotten about them in the excitement!

Perhaps I can leave it to you to raise matters of interest which might answer questions?

Why SF? Nature of S.F.

Presentation of MS.

Writing Methods

Discipline only way to produce wordage.

Get materials you like to use.

Collect information. Names etc.

Make a plan & be prepared to depart from it when the story takes over.

Mix dialogue & description.

No scene less than 1000 words.

(10% for punctuation)

Presentation.
well bound.

A4 double space
Think of the reader

No rules.
no tricks.

Only practice will work
Triggered by emotion

Trottyze: Let no day pass without
a line written

The emotional change.