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# Introduction

Heather Leach

The idea of life as a story and of the story as a journey seems to be hard-wired into our consciousness and culture, which is why this book is called *The Road to Somewhere*. Thousands of years ago, most human beings gave up the nomadic hunter-gatherer life and settled into villages, but perhaps old memories of walking from place to place, of owning nowhere yet belonging everywhere, are still locked into the synapses of our brains. Like dogs, whose legs twitch as they run in dreams, so we still wander the world, the imaginary universe, in our stories of journeys. Each of us must find our own way to the art of writing – to the voice that is ours alone. But writing is a practical craft as well as an art, and like all crafts, it can be learned, given time, effort and motivation.

## Who This Book Is For

The book is intended to be useful to all writers: student writers and their teachers in Creative Writing courses in universities, colleges and schools; writing-group leaders and participants; new and experienced writers. All will find plenty here to inspire, stimulate and help. The editors and the majority of the contributors have taught Creative Writing in universities and other settings and are published writers in a variety of forms and genres. There are many practical activities and exercises that can be used by groups and individuals, as well as substantial resources and references.

## What's In This Second Edition?

A lot has changed since the first edition of *The Road to Somewhere* was published in 2005. The banking system almost crashed, but survived to crash another day. The climate got warmer, springs got colder, the print-publishing world shivered in a raging digital wind, and writers and readers just kept on trucking. We have revised and updated this second edition to take account of at least some of these changes, added new chapters and expanded others, made improvements to the structure and layout and introduced many new resources and references.

The first part, **Getting Going**, has been reordered and expanded to include the essential elements that all writers, whether beginner or expert, need as part of their writing life: creative process, a place to write, courage and persistence, reading and reflecting.

**On the Road** offers detailed and practical help with specific skills, forms and genre. There are a number of new chapters. *Style* gathers all the related sections from the first edition into one place, adding useful extra material. *Flash Fiction* and *Memoir* are new to this edition, and these chapters look at forms of writing that have increased in popularity in recent years. *Digital Writing* is a new chapter that attempts to take account of the fast-moving revolution that is changing all our writing lives. The revamped *Scriptwriting* chapter has now been expanded to include writing for screen, stage and radio.

**Going Where?** Publication, publication, publication! This section tackles the elephant in the creative room in a number of ways. As well as a chapter on traditional print publishing through an agent, there are chapters on *not* getting published, and on writing as personal journey. A new chapter, *Taking Your Writing out into the World*, contains interviews with three contemporary writers: Elizabeth Baines on writing and the internet, David Gaffney on commissioned writing, and James Harker, a recent Creative Writing student, on becoming a professional writer.

**Help** brings all the *Agony Aunt* pieces of the first edition together into one chapter, so if you're facing existential meltdown, this is the place to go. If you need advice on when to use a comma or a semicolon, you'll find it in *Paragraphing and Punctuation*.

**Going Further** includes *A Writers' Bookshelf* and a guide to *Writers' and Readers' Festivals*. There is a useful index, including a separate index of writing exercises.

## Many Roads

*The Road to Somewhere* has been written and edited by active writers with active minds and individual philosophies. There are plenty of debates about how to teach and learn the craft, and you will encounter a rich and varied approach in these pages. This is not an A-to-Z plan but a guidebook written by people en route. However, we all believe, and hope you do too, that writing is not just a road to somewhere, it is also that somewhere itself: an activity worth doing, whatever the outcome or destination, a journey to be taken for the sake of the journey.

PROOF

I

Getting Going

PROOF



# I Becoming a Writer

Heather Leach

## One Writer's Beginning

I used to work in an office. I used to sit at a desk next to a window, which looked out into an odd half-secret space, an inner enclosure. Around the walls were other windows, usually blinded. I was often bored, sifting my way through reports and policies, writing my own in the same rational calm language that slowly gets things done or undone. There was a door at the bottom of the courtyard which I supposed was used by maintenance and repair people, but I never saw them, and so as far as my office day was concerned this strange interior space was inhabited only by birds: pigeons, starlings, sparrows; occasionally a pair of magpies (one for sorrow, two for joy). Throughout a whole year I watched them come flying down out of the trapezoid sky, their anxious fluttering and flapping amplified by the walls as they hustled for space on ledges and buttresses. In the rain and cold they rested there in rows, patient, silent, looking back at me, their thick white droppings staining the already soot-stained stone.

I began to hate my job. Not the point of it, the meaning, which was worthy and honest, but the practice, the necessary but relentless daily discipline, the painstakingly detailed attention that was needed to carry it out. I hated as well the kind of person that this work was slowly turning me into. And the place, the room: that too. It was square with all the usual office accoutrements: desk, telephone, coat-stand, strong overhead lighting, cream cleanable walls. There were no computers then, no fax machines, but you get the picture. Oh yes, and there was also a picture on the wall in front of me, one picture per office, each labelled 'our wonderful rural heritage': unmechanised farms, traffic-free roads, rainless summers.

The more I hated the job and the room, the more I watched the birds. They inhabited their strange interior space with ingenuity, one or two even managing to make a scruffy nest in a corner, although I never saw any fledglings. As the year went by it became a kind of fetish to look out, to say hello to the birds before I did anything else. I found that, with effort, I could climb onto a chair and force the stiff window handle downwards and so lift the latch. The window hinge itself was rigid with years of disuse but I managed a few inches, enough to get my head through, enough to get a breath of acrid feathery air. In winter, when I looked down, there was often a body lying below me on the concrete ground, a small dark shadow, its frozen wings folded. By the next day these corpses had always gone.

In telling this story of the birds, I am trying to put together an account of the year that I started to be a proper writer. But as this is a book about the forms and processes of writing itself, I have to confess that I'm making it up as I go along. What's emerging, I see, is a fairly familiar story: the one about the sad would-be writer/artist/singer/actor who sits day after day trapped at a tedious desk, dreaming of creativity/fame/ riches. The birds, of course, represent – but it should be quite obvious now what they represent – all the slightly embarrassing but pleasantly satisfying clichés that we already know: our wonderful literary heritage; lightness, freedom, flight; somewhere over the rainbow; all that stuff.

This is the way stories go, I find. You begin at the top of the page with a few words, not always quite sure where you're going, but if you persist, if you battle your way through the uncertainty, letting words come by themselves, sooner or later a narrative picks you up, huge rivers of language and form carrying you with them down to a sea of stories. So far: so good. Let's go with the flow, man. Except that each writer needs to find their own direction, to know when to go with the current and when to resist it, not to float or to drift but to swim, sometimes even upstream.

In my office story what should come next is a moment of revelation, clear insight, a bird-inspired epiphany. In fact, as I remember, there was no sudden sense of understanding that year, no dramatic change. I simply began to sit down at a table at home and instead of thinking about how I'd like to be a writer, I actually began to put words onto paper and kept on doing it. If you want to write there's no escape from the desk. Nothing transformed me overnight, and nothing will transform you except *the act itself: writing*. Two things make you into a writer: writing regularly; and reading as much as you can so that you will learn to be aware of the currents of language and culture; aware enough to be able to distinguish between drifting and swimming. There's a lot more

to it of course, but that's where we all begin: at the page, the screen. Curious, thrilled, afraid. The words appear one after another. You cross them out, erase them, write more, and gradually something begins to form itself, a knot of thought, an image: the way birds patiently stand side by side, for example, thinking of nothing, their claw feet blanket-stitching a ledge.

This room where I am now is small, square, plain. There's no coat-stand but there is a computer, plus desk, telephone and chair. Sometimes I hate having to sit here day after day; sometimes I hate the relentless discipline, the painstaking hours. I left that other office many years ago and I'm usually sceptical of magical stories but I have to tell you that the birds came with me. They've appeared in a number of stories that I've written, bit parts only, but significant, often shifting the eye of the main character away from the action on the ground, out of the frame, into the sky. Here too, in this writing, they appear again, witnesses, protagonists. I look down at my hands, fingers tapping out this exact word, this particular full stop. To the left is a window and every so often I glance up from the screen, resting my eyes, pausing for thought: just a suburban garden, conifers, bushes, a child's boat-shaped sandpit. But then I look across and see you, reader, looking back at me. Between us is the place where the birds are, a place of beaks and claws. Of wings.

## Getting Started

There are many ways of becoming a writer. Some people begin as children, keeping a diary or writing poems that explore feeling and thought. Others get hooked on reading, drawn into fictional worlds that, unlike the mundane and confusing *real* world, offer clear beginnings and definite endings. You might already have a great plot idea, a detailed plan that is working itself out in your head. Or maybe you have a cause, a strong viewpoint that you want to get over to others, a message to change the world. Some people dream of riches and fame: perhaps you can write a killer script that film studios will fight over, or become the next J.K. Rowling and make millions by writing children's books. Maybe you simply want to write down your life, to pass on everything you know, all the things that have happened to you, your own take on the world, your particular voice. Writers come in all shapes, colours, ages and sizes. There is no right way or wrong way to be a writer.

If you're reading this book, then you've almost certainly put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard and made some kind of a start at writing.

Before you go much further let me tell you something really worth knowing: all you need to do to become a writer is to get the words down: your own words on paper or screen: your own voice. That's all it takes. When you're writing, in the act of writing itself, you're a fully paid-up and welcome new member of a club without any rules and without any rulers. You're the equal of all other writers, dead and alive, from Tolstoy to Tolkien. Let me say it again. It's as simple as this: *writers write*. Full stop.

So why write a book about it? Why join a writers' group or pay somebody's hard-earned money for a writing course? I think the answer is that most of us want to do more than just write. We want to be able to produce something that other people might want to read, that they might even be willing to pay for: a fantastic, unputdownable story; a magical, terrible poem; a great script; writing that's up there with the best; dramatic, emotional, brilliant, funny. This is harder, but a great many of the skills and abilities can be learned if you are willing to put in time and commitment. Below is a list of the absolutely essential activities – five commandments if you like – that you need to develop and practise the actions and attitudes that need to become part of your life.

## Write Regularly

Think of writing as a muscle. It needs to get lean and fit. Writing leads to more writing: as you write, new ideas spring up, words lead to other words, stories start, voices speak. Don't wait for inspiration. Like Father Christmas, inspiration knows where you live and if you begin it will eventually find you all by itself. *Regularly* means different things to different people – every day is good, but may not be possible. Don't beat yourself up if you can't manage that, but once a week is probably a minimum. Try writing at different times and in different places and find out which works best for you. Write about anything and everything. Don't think about whether the outcome is good or bad: this is practice not performance. Work that writing muscle. Hard.

## Read

The second commandment: *writers need to read*. Stephen King describes reading as the centre of the writer's life. 'If you don't have time to read,' he argues, 'you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as

that'.<sup>1</sup> But *what* should you read? First: read for pleasure. Forget all those rules about 'serious' literature, the classics, etc., and simply read what you like. If, at present, you only like one particular form or genre – fantasy, romance, history, sci-fi, celebrity biography, for instance – then read that form with enjoyment, regardless of what anyone else thinks or says. Try not to get stuck, however, in a reading groove; keep pushing back the boundaries of what you enjoy. If you try something new and don't like it, fine, but make sure you give it a chance. Be aware that difficulty or confusion may be yours, not the writer's, and that greater attention and persistence on your part may light up parts of yourself you didn't know existed. Make a particular point of reading the forms you are trying to write: if it's poetry, read poems; if it's fiction, read stories and novels, if you're writing a blog, read blogs. As you read, not only will you be enjoying the story, poem, whatever it is, you'll also be absorbing the way language works, all the things it can do. Read on the bus, in bed, on your smartphone, on the loo, anywhere and everywhere. Buy books. Use libraries. Writers need your cash and libraries are free. Use them or lose them.

## Know Your Medium

Your medium is, of course, language: words, sentences, paragraphs, story, dialogue, image. This is your material – I'm tempted to write *raw* material – but by the time we get our hands on it, it's already well cooked in history and culture. We are born into a world where words shape much of the way we think, feel and understand: an ocean of words, constantly moving, constantly changing. There's far too much language for any one person to know it all, and most of us need a lifetime to grasp even a small part, but this doesn't matter. What does matter is to develop an energetic curiosity about its current and tides, its layers and depths. Reading will certainly help, and the good news is that you have already gained many of the language skills that you need.

The not-so-good news is that to become a writer, particularly a good writer, you need to develop and extend these skills well beyond the average. For many of us, the phrase *language skills* has the stink of grammar about it: all those dry, complicated rules, structures and formalities that make the heart shrivel. Just as the car mechanic needs to know that the name of that thing which mixes air and petrol is the carburettor, so the writer needs a *working* knowledge of many of these forms and structures, to know, for example, what an adjective does and

how to use it. The mechanic doesn't necessarily need to have the exact chemical formula for combustion at their oily fingertips, but they have to be able to distinguish, and therefore to name, the parts of the car. You need to be able to name the parts of language, to understand the way it works, to know when something isn't right and to have ideas about how you could make it better.

## Play

At the end of this chapter are a number of writing exercises which use random methods to stimulate ideas and generate new work. Many writers have used variations on these methods with surprising and productive results. When the short-story writer, Kathleen Mansfield, was at a loss for an idea, she used to call downstairs to her husband, John Middleton Murry. He'd shout back a word – *table, party* – and this would be enough to get her writing again. The random approach takes away the anxious responsibility of having to think of something 'significant' or 'important', helping you to relax and allowing the associative qualities of mind to develop.

Some people love this kind of exercise and some hate it. A word of warning to the first group. Einstein said that he made some of his greatest discoveries simply by staring out of windows, but even so, he still had to do the sums and work out the theories, and he already knew the language of physics inside out. James Joyce, one of the pioneers of the stream-of-consciousness technique, did not write *Ulysses* randomly: he attempted to write it so that it *appeared to be* the random thoughts of his characters, which is hard. We need playfulness, but it isn't *all* we need.

Perhaps you're one of the second kind of people – you may already know what you want to write about – you've got a definite story to tell – maybe you've got a project planned and you'd really rather get on with that. I'd like to persuade you to at least give the playful method a try. Try it out on a piece of writing that's stuck. Pick a list of words at random and try to integrate them into the next chapter, scene, verse. It could give you a surprising kick-start.

There's a traditional Eastern saying – 'Don't push the river' – meaning that some things have to be left to happen by themselves. The ability to play, to swim in the river of language, may not be all we need, but it's a good place to start.

**Try This: Begin with a Word**

Take any printed page and, with your eyes closed, let your finger pick out a word at random or ask the person next to you to give you a word. The next step is to follow the word and see where it takes you. Don't try to write cleverly or beautifully. Write for five minutes, then stop.

**Try This: Put Words Together**

Make a list of words that you like or which are at the forefront of your mind. Use words that refer to things or people, rather than ideas or emotions. Sometimes the simplest words are the most productive. For example, my list at this moment could be:

Shed Coffee Tesco Birds Rain

Write for five minutes, including all the words. Try not to think too hard. Just visualise what the words represent and write about them. Use my list if you're stuck.

**Try This: The Three-Word Trick**

Take three words from any source and write a paragraph or two, which includes all three words. The more unconnected these words are to each other, the better. If you're in a group you can have a great time seeing who can make up the weirdest list. Examples:

reindeer; bin-bag; Facebook.

cheese; Superwoman; nits.

brother; rats; room.

valentine; telescope; referee.

Add an emotion to your list:

boredom; hopeless desire; terror; obsession.

Now write two pages weaving all four elements together. Try not to actually use the emotional word – *show* the emotion through action and implication. You can use the exercise to write in any form: prose, dialogue, poetry.

## Further Reading

Natalie Goldberg (1986) *Writing Down the Bones* (Boston: Shambala).

Lots of playful ideas to get you started – inspirational.

Stephen King (2000) *On Writing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).

An autobiography of writing: helpful but uncompromising advice for beginners.

*Write Words: What advice would you give to a new writer starting out?*, <http://www.writewords.org.uk/interviews/answers.asp?qid=8> (accessed 3 September 2013).

A collection of collated comments from interviews with writers, wide-ranging and detailed. There is much excellent help and advice here.



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