

Chapter 1

The imaginative spark

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Editors' preface

This contribution presents detailed insight into the activities of a successful working author. Ann describes the process of writing from inception to publication, and provides a fascinating overview of the links between author, publisher, libraries and readers.

Introduction

In this chapter I consider how reading influences the process of writing - from the way the stories we read as children feed into our adult experience of the narrative, through to the editing, reviewing and promotion of a finished book. I explore the development of a book from original idea to completed manuscript, using two of my crime novels as examples, and then describe how the writer must be both author and reader during the editorial process. I look at the other professionals in the publishing industry - agents, editors and publicists - and suggest that a passion for reading is as important for them as it is for the writer. I consider the importance of the public library system in developing and promoting both new and more established writers, and suggest that librarians and publishers should make more effort to understand the other's role. Writers now understand the need to engage more directly with their readers, and I explore the way some authors come together to bring their work to reading groups and festival audiences. I use the Harrogate Crime Writing Festival as an example

of good practice. The range of reading groups is considered and the potential of new technology in the promotion of books is discussed. I explain that at last publishers have come to recognize the importance of the reader.

In the beginning

First of all, I'm a reader. I understand how fiction works, what makes a good story and how to get inside a character's head, because I've always been absorbed by the books I read. I don't analyse what I read from a writer's perspective; when I'm reading, I'm lost in the story like everyone else. The process of writing is instinctive and develops naturally. We all know how to structure a joke. Standing at the bar, a beer in one hand, we string our listeners along, pausing just before the tag line for dramatic effect. Nobody's taught us how to do that. We've just heard enough jokes to know how it's done. The same goes for writing fiction. The more widely we read, the more we develop a feel for the best way to develop a plot.

I did 'A' level English and went on to read literature at university - although I dropped out in my second year. I'm not sure that much of the fiction I read academically has influenced my own writing. Something about all the probing for meaning and context seemed to inhibit the flow of the narrative and distance me from the process. Reading at its best has been an escape for me. I love to enter completely different worlds and to be carried along by the action. I really don't care what the writer meant to convey. I'm a selfish reader; I'm interested in my own relationship with and experience of a book. I like to hear what other readers have made of the same title, but only after I've finished it myself.

Like many contemporary crime writers, I started out with Enid Blyton - the detective stories, not the soppy school books. There was something compulsive about the adventures. I didn't care at all about the characters; I just wanted to know what was going to happen next. Then I moved on to Malcolm Saville. His writing was a revelation. Not only was there a pacy plot, but the books had characters I wanted to get to know better and a tremendous sense of place. In my teenage years I found Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories, then the 'Golden age' crime novels of Christie, Sayers and Allingham.

And all this time I was writing: dreadful bits of verse, stories to bore my sister and impress my teachers, and an angst-ridden diary. It was when I dropped out of university that I started my first novel. It had literary

pretensions, and if I'd ever finished it, it would have been very short. Luckily the reader in me brought the writer to her senses. Would this be a book I'd actually want to read? Pay good money for? Carry home on the bus from the library? Absolutely not. I'd read the first page and the blurb and decide I didn't want to touch it with a barge pole. The books I read for pleasure, my comfort books, were all about crime. So why not try that form as a writer?

Completing the first novel

It was several years before I plucked up the courage to start a new novel. I'd met my husband, discovered Shetland and the Russian novelists, and still came back to reading crime when I was miserable or ill. Then we moved to the tiny tidal island of Hilbre. My husband was warden of the local authority nature reserve there. We were the only residents; we lived in the old telegraph house without mains water or electricity. At the time I was at Liverpool University, training to be a probation officer, and one of our assignments involved writing a dissertation about a sub-culture. Other people looked at groups relevant to social work. I chose twitchers, the obsessive bird watchers who collect the names of all the rare species they have seen. It generated quite a bit of interest in our seminar group, and I had the germ of an idea for a novel.

I didn't start writing properly until I'd given up work. I did write some scenes, and thought a lot about the characters, while I was preparing social enquiry reports for the Merseyside Probation Service. And my work as a probation officer gave some great insights - not just into the criminal justice system, but also into the lives and relationships of people I might not otherwise have met. Then I became pregnant, and decided a commute across several miles of mud and sand wasn't really much fun - and at last I had time to complete the book.

A Bird in the Hand (Cleeves, 1987) owed a lot to my reading of 'golden age' mysteries. It had an amateur sleuth as its central character: an amateur sleuth with a double-barrelled name and an Oxford education. I hadn't met many people like that in the council estates of Birkenhead, but thought that detective stories all had rich and usually aristocratic heroes. It was only later when I started reading more widely - the wonderful Resnick novels of John Harvey, and the hugely entertaining Rebus books by Ian Rankin - that I realized crime novels could be rooted in a real landscape and explore in a more digestible way the themes I'd identified in other literary works.

The writing process

Everyone writes differently. I have friends who plot out a book entirely in advance. They know what will happen in each chapter before they start the business of telling the story in the best way they can. For me, though, the process is more organic. The book develops from one scene and often starts with a theme rather than an idea for a plot. I don't plan at all, and although I do spend quite a lot of time brooding before I begin the first chapter, I'm thinking about abstract things like mood and voice rather than about the plot. In fact, in my sort of detective novel the plot rather takes care of itself. There's a murder, a limited number of suspects and a resolution. That structure allows me to devote my imagination to the strands of the book I enjoy most: the development of character, the relationship between people and place, and the unsettling nature of much family life. My books are surprisingly quiet and domestic. Perhaps this process will make more sense if I explain the genesis of my two most recent books: *Raven Black* (Cleeves, 2008) and *Hidden Depths* (Cleeves, 2007).

Raven Black

I've been asked many times where I got the idea for *Raven Black*. As this was the book which won the Crime Writers' Association's Duncan Lawrie Dagger crime fiction award, it's attracted the most attention. It began as a single scene. My husband is still a keen bird watcher and at that time there was a very rare coot on a loch in Lerwick, Shetland's main town. My Christmas present to him was a trip to see the bird. We did it as a day trip - 13 hours overnight on the ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick, ten hours on the island, then an overnight trip back. It was between Christmas and New Year and there was very little daylight. After we had seen the bird, some friends took us out for the day. It had snowed and frozen very hard on top of the snow. There was even ice on the shore. The light was very clear once the sun came up. We saw three ravens, black against the snow. I thought if there was blood as well it would make a magnificent first scene.

That was all I had to work on. The image came from the fairy stories I'd read as a child. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty had skin as white as snow, hair as black as ebony and lips as red as blood. I was already working on a novel and thought I might turn the Shetland idea into a short story. Then I was invited back to Lerwick to run some events for World Book Day, and

the idea took hold. I talked to some people, including a local ex-cop. By the end of the visit I was hooked.

The themes grew out of the place. I'd spent two seasons on Fair Isle but knew that however long I lived there I'd always be an outsider. I was interested in what constitutes belonging. I made my central character a Fair Islander, but of Spanish descent. There is a wreck of an Armada ship off the isle and, in my fiction, Inspector Jimmy Perez's ancestor was a survivor of that ship which is called the Gran Grifon. Does a man whose family has lived in Shetland since the 16th century belong there, even if he has a Spanish name and a Mediterranean appearance? What about a teenager who grew up in England, but who has made her home there? Or an elderly man who crofts the land but has never quite fitted in?

Hidden Depths

Hidden Depths was less serendipitous and more contrived in its inspiration. I wanted some strong visual scenes to start off the action. The idea of water and flowers creating a sense of theatre around the crime scene appealed. Then I had to consider what sort of person might commit murder in that way. At the same time I was interested in writing about a woman who has devoted her life to her family and feels in middle age that she deserves her own secret pleasure. The model for the woman and her marriage was Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf, 1927). Mrs Ramsay holds the show together, entertaining her husband's friends and massaging his ego. There is no question that she will betray him, although she probably sees her realization that he is not the great man she has always believed him to be as a betrayal in itself.

I started off by liking Felicity Calvert, the Mrs Ramsay figure in *Hidden Depths*. Her husband is a self-important, self-obsessed man and Felicity looks after him. She is kind to the crew of friends he has gathered about him. She can throw a good party. However, later in the book I came to despise her. She needs the admiration of her husband's friends. Her turning of a blind eye to her husband's faults leads to violence.

You see that now I talk about Felicity as if I were a reader, not her creator. Throughout the writing process the author becomes a reader to check that the book is working. We ask the questions the readers will ask. What will happen next? Why did that person do that? Does that really make

sense? And so the action moves on. And, like a reader who comes to the book for the first time, our sympathies shift.

The editorial process

Once the book is finished it's important to leave it for a while before coming back to it with a reader's eyes. If I'm too close to it I make assumptions: because I see a scene very clearly in my own head, I assume the reader can see it too, even if I haven't passed on the one small detail which might bring it to life. This last read-through before the book goes to editor or agent is vital. I read it very quickly, usually in one sitting, to check that the structure works and that there's sufficient pace. Sometimes awkwardness of phrasing jumps out even though I've already read it many times before. Often the scenes I thought most clever - the tricky flashback in the second chapter - are the ones that need to be cut.

However, the distance I've created by setting aside the book for a while is illusory. I know these characters too well to read about them dispassionately. I know what's going to happen next. And that's why the roles of the agent and the editor are so important. I might discuss the ideas for a book with my agent and publisher in vague terms before I start writing, but I make a point of never describing work in progress. They need to come to the novel without preconceptions. I think they should read a novel first as if they'd picked it from the shelf in search of a good read. They should be prepared to lose themselves in the story. Only later should the commercial imperative kick in.

The relationship between author and agent is delicate and intimate. Your agent knows how much you earn, and has seen the rejections and the bad reviews. Agents negotiate business contracts, and are there to celebrate successes and commiserate after disappointments. My agent is the first person to read my books. I wait for her response as keenly as I do my publisher's. I value her judgements and consider all her suggestions about character and plot seriously. She is, after all, a professional reader.

I have been fortunate throughout my career in my agents. I hear terrible stories about writers who feel under-valued, betrayed and lied to. I have trusted both of my agents implicitly to act in my best interests. I acquired the first by chance, through the recommendation of a friend after *A Bird in the Hand* had already been accepted for publication. Murray Pollinger was one half of an exceptional partnership. His wife Gina represented most of

the most celebrated writers for children in the country, and Murray had contacts with publishers throughout the world. When he retired I was transferred to his assistant Sara, who in time set up on her own. I know absolutely that Sara is on my side. Her criticisms are to make the books better. She battles for every translation deal, and her network of associate agents - in the US and Europe, and to deal with film and TV rights - is outstanding.

The role of the editor is always slightly more ambiguous. The editor is employed by the publisher, not by the author. A good book is not always a marketable one - at least, that is how it seems to some writers. And an editor is not a free agent. She (or he) might believe passionately that your book deserves a six-figure advance and a huge marketing budget, but it isn't in her power to provide it for you. Inevitably, she reads your book with different eyes. Even if the book has been commissioned, so the publisher has a commitment to take it - and I'm in that fortunate position now - it must be hard for her to lose herself in the story. She has so many things to think about. How will this title fit in with the rest of the publisher's list? How will she sell it to the marketing people? What sort of branding should they go for? What sort of jacket?

And yet having a supportive editor can make a huge difference to an author, both creatively and in the practical business of profile raising. I'm remarkably free of cynicism after 20 years in the business. I've trusted the editorial judgement of the majority of my editors; they've been enthusiastic, literate and often powerful advocates within the publishing house. *Raven Black* entered the consciousness of a lot of people simply because my editor talked about it to whoever would listen. She was honest enough before I signed the contract to say that there would be little marketing budget - my previous sales couldn't justify it. However, she said she would do everything she could to bring it to notice. And she did. She e-mailed the first chapter to every rep in the company, talked to sales managers for Canada and Australia and brought it to the attention of the person responsible for submitting books for prizes.

When giving feedback after reading a new novel, a good editor is honest about the flaws but aware that this is a desperately insecure time for the author. After spending a year with a book most writers are ready to move on to the next project. They don't want to spend time responding to pages of detailed suggestions, and even the most minor criticism can seem like a personal insult. It can't be an easy job to keep the writer on board, yet

the editorial process must be collaborative. It must be very difficult to suggest to a famous writer, especially one who generates lots of income for the publishing house, that his (or her) script is less than perfect. I'm certain that my books are much better after my editor and I have worked on them together and I appreciate her tact and attention to detail. It seems unfair that the creative input of editors goes largely unrecognized.

The big day: publication

As publication day approaches, publishers often produce proof copies, which go out to reviewers and buyers for the major retail chains. Reviewers are unlikely to use limited newspaper space to slate books, unless they've been hugely hyped in advance or are by big-name authors, so any comment is usually positive and a great boost to confidence. I'm not sure how many people go out to buy books in response to a small review in *The Observer* or *The Times Literary Supplement*, but good notices make a difference to an author's standing within a publishing house. A glowing phrase can be selected to go on the front of the paperback edition. Scouts for foreign publishers can pick them up, and translation rights can boost an author's income considerably, even if the individual advance is relatively small.

Then comes publication day. There is a launch, if you're lucky or willing to organize it for yourself: cheap wine in a local bookshop and an audience of friends and family bullied into attending. Before I was published I imagined launch parties as magnificent occasions - champagne and canapés and queues of fans waiting to have books signed. The reality has never lived up to the dream, and recently I've arranged to launch my books in libraries. The Shetland launch of *Raven Black* was a joy, thanks to the great staff in Lerwick Library. My editor flew up from London to join us and we used actors from the local youth theatre to provide authentic voices for the readings. For me it was a chance to catch up with old friends - a couple had come from Fair Isle for the event. For the library, it provided an opportunity to attract new readers and to present a different image to the community.

Libraries and why we love them

Publishers have only just come to realize the potential for sales and for raising the profile of their authors through libraries. Even in recent times, there's been woeful ignorance about what goes on there. If more publishers actually became library members instead of relying on review copies and

freebies for their reading material, perhaps the status and funding of the public library system would improve. If people who can afford to buy books now don't join their local library, when they're old or poor there won't be much of a service for them to enjoy.

I have the impression that libraries are also under-valued by publishers in the US. A couple of years ago I visited Malice Domestic, a huge crime convention held every year in Washington DC. Because I was interested in how reader development worked in the US, I arranged a visit to a library in Arlington, near the conference hotel. The staff were enthusiastic, committed and full of ideas. They organized a number of reading groups for people of different ages, interests and ethnic backgrounds. Their readers would have been fascinated to meet the authors at the convention and attend the discussion panels. However, nobody had invited them or even thought to tell the library that it was happening. The result was that most of the sessions involved writers talking to other writers: no new readers and not many sales.

A friend and best-selling author has a similar complaint: 'Each time I visit America I'm sent on the circuit of specialist bookstores. I meet the same readers every tour - and they would have bought the books anyway. Why don't they fix up some visits to libraries, so I could develop a new readership?'

Author events work very well in libraries in the USA. In the 1990s crime writers Peter Lovesey, Liza Cody, Paula Gosling and Michael Z. Lewin took an entertainment called *Murder We Write* on tour there. They're all great performers and they must have pulled in a new audience for their books. My husband and I stole their idea and put together an illustrated talk called *Murder on the Wildside*, taking a look at the places which have influenced my writing. We travelled round Massachusetts with a box of books in the boot of our hire car and spoke in nature reserve visitor centres, bookshops and libraries. Readers like the fact that a writer makes an effort to meet them. And, on a practical note, libraries usually pay fees! I sold a lot more copies than I would have done at a regular bookshop signing.

The attitude of publishers to libraries has changed dramatically in the past few years. There are still misconceptions and false expectations, but there's a new realization that library staff have enthusiasm, product knowledge and a passion to promote a wide range of titles. Without libraries there would be a tiny market for first-time authors, short fiction and novels in translation.

New partnership projects have developed. For example, Kirklees Libraries regularly invites sales managers from Pan Macmillan and Bloomsbury to meet librarians and the reps pitch new titles to them. This has worked well on both sides. Librarians pick up proof copies and learn more about how the industry works. Personal contact means that they hear in advance about which authors will be on tour in their area, and the first-time novelists who would be delighted to talk to reading groups – even without a fee. Publishers have a more realistic view of the potential of the library market, and the scope for promoting books and authors who would never find a place on the shelves of the major retailers. A planned pilot project will develop this approach in the north east of England.

Engaging with readers

In my experience most writers like engaging with their readers, and even if they're shy and reclusive they can see the value of developing a discussion with them. Until recently the only way a writer would meet readers was at a literature festival or a bookshop signing. Literature festivals can be intimidating for the general reader and for the writer, and there's nothing more depressing than sitting in front of a pile of books in a shop, watching customers who are determined not to be persuaded to buy scuttling past.

Now, perhaps because libraries have made a determined effort to bring writers and readers together, there is greater opportunity for engagement. The expansion of reading groups has meant that reading has suddenly become a more social activity. People are happy to talk about books. Things have moved on since a publicist told me that she was always being bothered by reading groups: 'Such a nuisance, darling!' Today, I think she'd realize that a reading group meant multiple sales and treat the organizer with more care. There are reading groups everywhere: workplaces, bookshops, bars and people's homes.

As part of the *Inside Books* project organized by the reader development consultancy Opening the Book, I have set up reading groups in two prisons. The response of the offenders shattered a lot of the stereotypes I'd held before I started. Some of the men in Preston Prison loved Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, about a young Asian girl growing up in the West Midlands (Syal, 1997). The women in Low Newton Prison in County Durham were more predictable, bowled over by Chrissie Glazebrook's *The Madolscents* (Glazebrook, 2001). We arranged for Chrissie to come to

the prison to meet the women, and it was a moving encounter for everyone concerned.

From the prison project I moved straight on to becoming reader-in-residence at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. The reading groups we set up there attracted quite a different set of readers, but they were equally enthusiastic.

In subsequent work as a reader development officer, I have been frustrated by the fact that there is no way to tap in to the reading groups who meet privately. We need a database of reading groups, so when an author is doing an event in a library we can send a personal invitation to every group in the area. Many library authorities organize readers' days - this is an informal festival of books which puts the reader right at the heart of the event. Every writer I know enjoys attending these events. It would be good to bring all the independent groups together to share enthusiasms and reading passions.

The internet has opened up communication between readers, and between readers and writers, in an exciting way. Some publishers are better than others at developing their websites and understanding what readers are after. Most authors now have their own websites with a contact e-mail address, and many writers' blogs talk about their favourite books as well as work in progress. One American reader recently e-mailed me to say she was part of an e-reading group with 800 members. The British Council has a reader-in-residence who facilitates an e-reading group with members from all over the world. When she was working for Kirklees Libraries, poet Rommi Smith started an online group for lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual readers. Again, it would be terrific to have a database to make it easier to find a group to suit the individual. It's hard to know where to start, otherwise, especially for the techno-phobe.

Writers as performers

Most poets understand the importance of performance. Novelists find the process less natural - how can a small piece read aloud convey the flavour of a work 300 pages long? Recently, though, groups of writers have come together to take their work into libraries, colleges, festivals and bookshops. I belong to a group called *Murder Squad*. Since forming seven years ago we've been imitated, and now a number of bands of crime writers travel around the country promoting their books and the genre in

general. Recently a group of fantasy writers have done the same thing - they go by the wonderful title *The Write Fantastic!* And a group of literary writers in West Yorkshire have toured with a performance called *Four Fathers*.

Murder Squad was the brainwave of Wirral crime writer Margaret Murphy. Her novels were getting good reviews, but these weren't being translated into good sales. Like other mid-list authors, she found that her publishers had a very limited marketing budget for promoting her work. So she pulled in six other crime writers who lived and worked in the north of England, and the group was formed. We've put together a brochure - three editions now - and have published an anthology of short stories and recorded a CD. Mostly, we get out to where readers are and talk about the deadly pleasures of crime fiction. There are several benefits to being part of a co-operative like *Murder Squad*. Writing is a lonely business and it's great to have the support of other members. I particularly value the advice of Martin Edwards, who edits the annual Crime Writers' Association anthology, when I'm writing short stories. And it's much easier to turn out to a gig in a bookshop or library with a friend. Apart from anything else, there's someone to go to the pub with afterwards.

The Harrogate Festival

In 1999, during the National Year of Reading, I was appointed reader-in-residence for three library authorities in the north east, and since then I've been straddling the worlds of reader development and writing. These interests come together brilliantly at the Harrogate Crime-Writing Festival. Harrogate is different from anything that's happened before in the UK, or perhaps in the world.

America has crime conventions, where readers and writers get together in the same hotel, share meals and drink together in the bar. To be truthful, most of the people there are either writers or aspiring writers. That doesn't make the event less enjoyable, but an awful lot of self-promotion goes on, and even during the panels the discussion can be sacrificed to authors plugging their latest books. The UK doesn't go in for conventions much, except in the worlds of fantasy and horror. Here we have literature festivals instead, and they're a bit different. Authors are still plugging their books, of course, but they're slightly more subtle about it. And because an author has to be invited to attend a festival - and can't pay to appear on a panel - there are fewer writers around. There's probably some socializing with

readers at the end of the day, but it's not like a convention where everyone's staying in the same place.

Harrogate brings the best of both institutions - convention and literature festival - together. The festival is held in an hotel, so writers and readers can meet up in the bar, and occasionally go straight from there into breakfast. There's the same buzz of shared experience you get at a convention. However, authors are invited to attend well in advance and are even paid a fee. Competition to appear is fierce, so the panels are usually well prepared and interesting. Since the Harrogate Festival started I've been reader-in-residence there. My role has been to bridge the gap between local readers (and readers from all over the world who join us) and the festival.

The run-up to the festival in July usually sees me out in the community. I've run writing workshops in local schools, hosted a murder mystery in village halls, travelled with mobile libraries to talk about visiting crime writers and (my favourite) set up reading groups in pubs in the Dales. The aim of this activity is to encourage local people to come to the festival proper. They don't have to be there for the whole weekend - it's possible to book for a single event. And we've developed the tradition of a Saturday lunchtime reading group. This is a free session for readers only. Authors are welcome, of course, but only as readers and not to talk about their own books. Each session has a theme. We've done European crime in translation, short fiction, and books by independent presses. In the first year a dozen people turned up; last year there were 80 of us and we had to split up into four groups. In 2007 we returned to look at 'golden age' crime fiction and its influence on contemporary British detective stories.

Conclusion

So, reading is where I started, and the celebration of reading is still a big part of my life. It informs my writing, and when I get together with friends we talk about books, and it provides part of my income. There are worse ways to earn a living. There must be a close relationship between those who work in reader development, publishers and writers. We all share the same goal - to encourage a passion for reading and a more adventurous approach to promoting books. The declining choice in high-street shops means that libraries play a vital role in providing reading choice. It's in the interest of the publisher and the author to support this work.

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