ON WRITING YOUR FIRST NOVEL

The Journey of a Wannabe Novelist

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ADVENTURES
IN WRITING

ONE

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021, I thought it would be a good idea to write a novel—a middle-grade, science fiction children's novel called *Diary of a Martian*. I started writing this book (*On Writing Your First Novel*) at the same time because trying to write just one book at a time clearly wouldn't be difficult enough.

When I started writing *On Writing Your First Novel*, I was about 20,000 words into my novel. By the time I finish this book, I will have finished writing *Diary of a Martian*, which will be around seventy to 80,000 words.

On Writing Your First Novel is about the journey of taking an idea and developing it into a finished novel. Ever since I was in my early twenties (I am forty-six at the time of writing), I liked the idea of writing a novel. I had plenty of ideas, but I kept putting it off. There were many reasons, which I will go into in Chapter One, but looking back, delaying writing is one of the few regrets I have. It's easy to say in retrospect, but some of my reasons for delaying, which felt valid at the time, seem silly now.

I hope I can spare you the same regret and give you back many years of writing.

What Not to Expect from this Book

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of books on the craft of writing novels. I know, because I have read many of them. A lot of these books follow a similar pattern. A chapter on 'show, don't tell'. A chapter on characters. A chapter on scenes, world-building, conflict and so on. These are all very important subjects, and I recommend that you read some of these books. But you won't find that pattern in this book.

What to Expect from this Book

In this book, I am going to talk about the process I went through to plan and write my novel. I will discuss the challenges I faced and how I overcame them. I am not perfect, and *Diary of a Martian* is my first novel. I will make mistakes, but I wanted to document what I learned. A lot of what I write in this book is my opinion. This isn't a step-by-step how-to guide. You may agree with what I say or you may not. If you don't, that's fine. Just treat what I say as an alternative viewpoint. Alternative viewpoints are still useful to read about, even if you disagree. In either case, I thank you for reading.

Previous Experience

I should declare that I have written and published several nonfiction books, so I am not new to writing and publishing, although novel writing is new to me. I have published some of my books through large publishers, and others I have published myself.

Writing a nonfiction book is different from writing a novel. The types of nonfiction books I write are instructional, where I am teaching the reader how to accomplish something. When working with a traditional publisher for nonfiction, you write a detailed outline of the book and provide a writing sample, after which, the book gets commissioned, if you are lucky. Once you have signed the contract, you write the book to an agreed schedule.

Writing a novel is different. No publisher is likely to sign up a book on an idea alone—not unless you are a celebrity with a vast audience. When you write a novel, you complete the book, perform several revisions, hire an editor and, once you are finished, try to find an agent who will then try to sell the book to a publisher. You can, of course, publish the book yourself, which I talk about near the end of this book.

These steps might make it sound easy, but writing a novel is hard: very hard! Much harder than the nonfiction books I have written. Your plot must be fun and engaging. Your characters need to be likeable and convincing. The setting and world-building need to be rich and imaginative. As the writer, you need to hold so many details in your head—or written down—to ensure the entire story makes sense. I can honestly say that writing my first novel has been the most challenging project I have worked on in a twenty-eight-year career, but it has also been one of the most rewarding.

What Took Me So Long?

The desire to write a novel has lingered with me since my early twenties. I had plenty of ideas, but I procrastinated. When I was at school, written English was never my forte. In fact, I hated English lessons. We read books I didn't like and wrote essays on subjects I found boring. I was also quite stubborn and didn't give much attention to subjects I wasn't interested in. It didn't help that my English teacher and I didn't see eye to eye. Looking back, I think there's a good chance that I was the problem and not the teacher.

Though I enjoyed reading novels as a teenager, I didn't read as much as I should have. Instead, I was out with my friends or playing video games. After I finished university, started my career and settled down in my early twenties, I started reading more books again: science fiction, fantasy, spy thrillers, horror. I enjoy most genre fiction novels, though I'm not so keen on romantic fiction or literary fiction; they are just not my thing.

As I read more books, ideas for my own stories emerged. I've always had an active imagination and loved the thought of writing my own stories. Some people want to be rock stars. To

me, being a novelist seemed more fun. Still, I had many excuses for not starting, many of which I now regret. Hindsight can be great for uncovering regrets.

Intimidated by Other Books

One problem when wanting to start a creative endeavour is that it is easy to compare your ideas to those of others. Whenever I picked up another author's novel to read, I was always struck by how flawless it seemed. The plots were well thought out. The grammar seemed perfect. The quality was high. It was intimidating! How could I ever do the same?

What I didn't understand at the time was the process an author goes through to write a novel. I had attempted to write short stories before, and although I was pleased with them, the writing didn't seem as good as what I read in other novels. Maybe I just didn't have the skills to produce something of the same quality? My short stories were shelved as first drafts.

If I had done my research, I'd have learned that an author will write a first draft and that draft will not be very good. They will then do a full revision. Then they'll do another and another. This revision process can go on and on until the author has a draft they are happy with. This revised version is the real first draft. Even at that point, the book is not finished. If the author has signed with an agent or sold the book to a publisher, the manuscript will then undergo a further series of revisions with a professional editor.

Once the publisher's editor has finished, there is a final stage of revisions, which consists of the copy edit and proofread. Your book may go through ten to fifteen revisions before it is published and in the hands of your readers. No wonder published novels are of high quality! The text has been revised, tweaked and moulded over a long time to reach that level. So,

of course, my first draft stories didn't seem as good. I hadn't gone through the entire process.

Worried My Ideas Were Bad

I thought my book ideas were good, but I think everyone thinks that. What worried me was what other people might think of my ideas. People can be cruel. You just need to look at reviews on Amazon to see that. Even for popular books, the one- and two-star reviews show that people can be very nasty, especially when hidden behind online anonymity.

Being criticised is scary. Nobody likes it. But now that I am older and a little wiser, I am not so worried about it. If I get a negative review for something, and there are lots of other positive reviews, then I just assume that the book wasn't to someone's taste. I now believe that if you do the best work you can, go through the revision steps, use a professional editor, and take their advice, the product you put into the marketplace will be good. If someone doesn't like it, well, that's on them.

As I mentioned before, I have released some nonfiction books and have practical experience with all the steps I've mentioned. I went through all the steps related to revision with my nonfiction books and released the best books I could. I know they are good, and the reviews are mostly very good. So, while the occasional negative review still hurts, I have learnt to brush them off. If the reviews are not offensive, I try to learn from them.

Scared by the Amount of Work

When I was younger, I was a little intimidated by the amount of work required to write a book—and that was just to get to the first draft stage. I liked the idea of having written a book, but it

seemed like so much work. As someone once said to me, 'you want to reach the destination, but you don't want to undertake the journey'.

I will bet that this is a common problem for anyone looking to tackle an enormous project like a novel. As a young man, I was not experienced in planning a large project. With over twenty-eight years of industry experience working on huge software development projects, I now tackle a book project like any of my former corporate software projects: with lots of planning and breaking the project down into smaller pieces. It's like the joke, 'How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time'. That is so true.

Take this book, for example. I am attempting to write this while writing my first novel. I have a big head start on the novel, but it probably seems crazy to write a second book at the same time. Well, it's not that bad. I spent a month planning what I wanted in this book. I came up with a chapter plan that mapped out what I wanted to say. Then I went through each chapter and outlined each subheading. Once I had done that, as I started writing each chapter, I would make notes under each subheading to make sure I was clear about my message.

Thanks to this planning, I knew what I wanted to write ahead of writing the actual book. This is a linear nonfiction book. Outlining books like this is not that hard. I know that because I have the outline open in front of me. Outlining a novel is much harder, and I will cover that later in the book. Take this chapter, for example. You will notice I split it into subheadings. Each of those headings started out in rough note form and then, over the space of a few days, was filled in.

I did not write this book in one go. I did a little each day: not much, maybe 200–500 words on average, sometimes over a thousand, if I was in the zone—just chipping away at the text and following the outline. I put a higher priority on the actual

novel, but, on some days, if I was stuck and wasn't sure how to tackle part of the story, I would stop and jump across to this book for a while. The very act of doing something else would help me get unstuck with the story, as I left my brain alone to process the problem in the background. Likewise, if I was stuck on this book, which happened from time to time, I had some short story ideas to chip away at.

By focusing on just a little at a time, before you know it, you will have completed that gigantic project. I experienced this first-hand with one of my nonfiction books, a business and entrepreneurial book called *The Path to Freedom – Starting a Business for the Reluctant Entrepreneur*. The final manuscript was 150,000 words. That's an enormous book. But I applied the same principle to that book as to this book: detailed outlining and working on a small piece at a time. The book took eighteen months to write, but I wasn't daunted by the size of the project because I had broken it down into much smaller pieces. I believe that if any project scares you, you haven't broken it down far enough.

Busy Learning Software Development

Like most career-minded professionals in their twenties, I was trying to build up my job skills, which, for me, were in software development. I started my career in the video games industry and, after eight years, moved into financial services as a software developer and then through the ranks as a leader. My career wasn't writing novels—that was just a dream, though a nice one to have.

Even though I have regrets about not starting a novel earlier in life, I don't have regrets about focusing on my career. You need the career to help provide for your family, put a roof over your head and make sure everyone has what they need. Building

a stable career is very hard, so while I include career building in my reasons for not starting a novel, this one is justified.

Starting a Family Took Up My Time

I don't regret building up a decent career, and I also don't regret having children. I have two: Amy, and Daniel. If you are reading this and you have young children, then you'll agree that they are fun, yet very tiring. Bringing up children is exhausting. My wife and I found two children hard work. Anyone who can raise three or more deserves a medal.

When you find a little spare time as a parent and want to write or take part in some other creative exploit, you may be tired and uninspired; I know I was. This constant level of fatigue also contributed to not wanting to start a novel. All the other reasons I stated in this chapter were the primary reasons, but being tired with children was the perfect excuse, and one with which I don't think anyone would argue.

Now that my children are a little older, they are not as demanding. We do lots of activities as a family, but they also want to play with their friends, have sleepovers, play video games and so forth, so my wife and I find we have more time for activities together and our own projects. As a little motivation for parents of younger children, it gets easier, I promise.

Key Takeaways

This chapter, which was quite personal to me, explained why I delayed creative writing for so long. Most people act more quickly. I know many people now who are much younger than I and are prolific writers. The key takeaway here is that if you find yourself making excuses for not writing for any reason— not just those I described—then your best bet is to start writing.

I began with short stories, as they are self-contained mini projects.

Don't worry about quality while drafting. Just write, and always try to finish what you start. The result doesn't have to be great. First drafts rarely are. But once you have that first draft, you have something to work with, to edit, experiment with, knock into shape. As the saying goes, you can't edit an empty page. It may be many months before you tackle the story again, but eventually you will reach a result you are happy with.

Now you know why I put off starting my novel for so long. Perhaps you have read this chapter thinking that these are just excuses for inaction. You would be correct; they are. That's why many are regrets.

So, what changed? What made me stop procrastinating and start working on this novel?

What Changed?

The year 2020 started off like any other. I was running my business and creating online training courses. Life was good. Then, in March, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the whole of the United Kingdom—like many other countries—went into lockdown. Like many people, I had to get used to working from home while trying to home-school two children.

As the pandemic raged on, I wanted to turn my hand to something different from my work as a distraction from everything going on around me. Home-schooling was stressful, especially when fit in around work. I needed something fresh and exciting to focus on and help me deal with the new daily routine.

I started my career working in the video game industry in the late 1990s and stayed in this field for many years. Early in the pandemic, I thought it would be fun to work on a small game engine. I did this for a few months, and it *was* fun. But the problem is that, to create anything meaningful in video gaming,

you need the help of many other people, such as visual artists and designers. In the midst of a pandemic, doing anything that involved working with anyone else just didn't seem like a good idea. People couldn't meet up in person, and even if someone agreed to work on a small lockdown project, they would most likely be distracted by the pandemic; I wouldn't blame them.

I have always enjoyed creating and building things. Computer code, music, video editing, cooking. I like it all. Creativity makes me happy. So, I wondered. How could I continue to fuel this creativity with the constraints of the pandemic? What could I do that doesn't require anyone else to be involved, that is challenging enough to be satisfying and could have a result I can share with the world? It didn't take me long to think about creative writing. I had already written and published nonfiction books for my work, both through traditional publishers and independently. And, of course, that early desire to write a novel hadn't entirely disappeared.

I hadn't entertained the idea of creative writing for at least seven years. While I had the regrets I discussed in the previous chapter, I wasn't sitting around thinking about my desire to write a novel. I was busy with other aspects of my life and career. However, the pandemic opened an interesting opportunity for me. Creative writing was something I could study and practise that required no input from anyone else, which was a benefit when the world was locked down. I got straight to work, ordering books on writing and watching courses online.

This new desire to learn about writing transformed into another higher-level goal: to leave lockdown better than when I went in. I was going to study and practise a new skill to open new and fun opportunities later. I already had some sense of how difficult this writing process would be, compared with writing and publishing nonfiction books. I expected a novel to

be much harder as there are so many more aspects to monitor, such as plot, subplots, characters and their motivations and world-building. I decided that writing short stories might be a good place to start. Short stories meant I could practise writing well-crafted and formatted prose but on a smaller scale than a novel and with a project that's easier to complete. With the pressures of lockdown in place, narrowing the scope felt like a good idea.

One of the first decisions I needed to make was: What was I going to write, and for whom? I knew what I didn't want to write: romantic stories. I also didn't want to write literary fiction; some of those books make my head hurt. I wanted to write stories that were easy to read. Genre fiction is sometimes accused of not being literary enough, but I'm fine with that because, when I read a book, I am reading for fun, and commercial genre fiction books are fun. I always enjoyed science fiction, fantasy, horror and thrillers, so doing something in one of those genres made sense.

Partway through the lockdown, I came across an advert on Instagram for an online video training site called Masterclass, which is a service that produces training courses by celebrities and experts in a field. What attracted me to the site was their courses by authors. Their platform included authors like Neil Gaiman, Margaret Atwood, James Patterson, David Baldacci, Dan Brown and R. L. Stine. I watched all the classes with famous authors over the space of a few weeks in the evenings. Each course was insightful, but the one that grabbed my attention the most was by R. L. Stine, the creator of the Goosebumps and Fear Street series for children and young adults.

In one section of the course, Stine talked about writing for middle-grade audiences, which is a reading age from nine to twelve years old. He said something that caught my attention.

Stine stated that, in this reading range, many readers are developing advanced vocabularies and a higher reading ability. Readers in this age group are also very good at suspending disbelief and enjoying a story, no matter how weird and wacky it is. In Stine's opinion, this is the last age group in which you can have a lot of fun with the stories.

I figured that I should look at targeting middle-grade science fiction and fantasy. I started reading around the subject and came up with ideas for a few stories. My first story was about identical twin sisters who use their identical appearances to hatch a plan to cheat on a test at school. I wrote another story about a boy who travels back in time with his dad's time machine and teaches prehistoric people how to light fires and about what had happened to society when the boy travels forward in time again. In 2020, I wrote nine short stories and was very pleased with them.

Focusing on short stories helped me learn how to format prose. As each story was short—fewer than 4,000 words—I had a sense of completion with each project, which was very satisfying.

Key Takeaways

Creative writing is a fantastic way to work on a project that doesn't require the help or input of anyone else, apart from at the editing and proofing stages at the end of the project. I know this goes counter to most productivity books that talk about the importance of collaboration and teamwork, but sometimes it's just nice to work on something by yourself. It's yours. You own it. During a lockdown and a pandemic, this felt more important than ever.

Stretching yourself to learn new skills is very rewarding. The

journey of learning a new craft or hobby, like creative writing, can be just as fun as the actual writing itself.

When beginning any creative project that you are inexperienced with, starting small is a benefit. In my case, I spent a while with short stories before even attempting to write a novel. The practice of writing short stories was fulfilling. Even while writing a novel, I still write short stories.