

From Start to Finish: A Journey in Novel Writing



Written by Icoi Johnson

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Learning to write a novel is nothing like learning how to ride a bike. No one pushes you from behind as you try to steady yourself on the bike (though many writers choose to go that route with self-teach books and one semester, novel writing courses). Not to say that this isn't the best route to go, but I think that the road is much easier to travel when you first try to travel it alone. John Gardner, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for *October Light* says that it also helps if, "a person was suffering a bit from some psychological wound or was driven to try to change the world or himself."

When it came time for me to do some research for this paper, I thought it was finally time I checked out a book or two on how to write a novel. I had long avoided these books like the plague, worried that their advice would go against my own personally acquired knowledge. But surprisingly, after reading through the books, I was pleased to learn that I had done just about everything according to their suggestions...and all on my own.

So what did I learn about novel writing that these professionally written books thought I should know?

Getting Started

Writing a novel can, and sometimes do, take forever. I've learned that lesson the hard way. In November of 1999, while still in high school and attending a young author's writing conference in Wisconsin, I remember hearing an author of children's

books speak about how it took her seven years to get her first novel published. I was

appalled by this confession. As I was presently finishing up on my own second novel, and hoping to get it published within the next year or so, I was upset to learn it could take as many as several years to become a published author. Being young and ambitious, I thought I would prove to myself and to others that it was possible to become published in a much shorter period than that, but five years, five drafts, and one final edit later, I am nowhere near getting published, and will probably either join or succeed that seven year mark. I was more surprised than anything when I realized this, and even more surprised when I discovered I wasn't a bit disappointed by this fact. Now five years older and wiser, time has taught me that you get there when you get there, and there's no sense in rushing perfection. And also, I've come to understand exactly why it takes many writers so long to complete and publish a novel.

"A lot of people have the ambition to write novels," says Stephen Coonts, author of the best-selling *Flight of the Intruder* and *The Minotaur*. "But what the average reader doesn't understand is the sweat, blood and tears that go into doing it...A Novel is not just something about which you can say, 'Okay, I'll write four pages a day and in one hundred days I'll have four hundred pages,'" Coonts says. "It doesn't work that way. You may write for a week at four pages a day and then

have to throw it all away because you see it didn't work. So you have to go back and do it again, and so the one hundred days becomes two hundred or three hundred or four hundred."

There's also the issue of laziness and procrastination. For me, novel writing, like all other writing, is 90 percent laziness and procrastination, and when I search back for

answers as to why my book is still five years in the making, I can remember all the countless times when I just didn't feel like writing. Often I would lose my drive and go days, weeks and even months without writing. Those were always hard times, because while a part of me wanted to write, another part of me refused to do it. But over time, I discovered there was one definite way to keep that drive in acceleration. Coonts summed it up as: "the only way to get anything done is to set up a regular writing schedule $\frac{3}{4}$ and stick to it."

For myself, I work every afternoon for an hour a day starting at one o'clock. In the beginning, I started with more hours, but as my novel's needs and lifestyle changed, so did my schedule. This is another big reason why writers have such a difficult time completing their works $\frac{3}{4}$ time. With part-time work, school, or family responsibilities, there are just not enough hours in a day in which to write. Some writers declare that they will only write during spare time, but spare time is not a definite time, and it can be used for almost anything. I have lots of spare time. I often spend it watching TV, listening to music, or searching the Internet, not reading assigned class texts or working on my novel like I should. And that's why it's suggested you set aside a specific time for writing, to keep you dedicated.

Story Ideas

I wouldn't recommend anyone who doesn't already have a story idea to attempt to write a novel. Anyone who believes he can simply sit down, think up a story, and write it, doesn't plan to succeed. And such an endeavor is a waste of the writer's time as well as the countless family, friends, co-workers and editors who will be subjected to reading

such material. Great ideas aren't made, they're born, and most people who often do think about writing a novel usually have had a story in mind for a long time.

There are many different ways to began the process, but the most highly recommended is outlining the novel first. "You don't really need a page-for-page outline," says Gerald Petievich, author of *To Live and Die in La*, *Shakedown* and *Earth Angels*. "But you have to know the events that are going to occur, where the books' going. Writers who say they make it up as they go along are fooling themselves."

Up until last year I never outlined my novel. While I had plenty of notes and ideas on how it would unfold and end, I often fooled myself into thinking I could make it up as went I along. And it showed. It wasn't until I took a course in young adult fiction writing that I learned the benefits of outlining. I chose to use the method of chapter outlining, which is always fun to do, and now I can't even fathom writing another novel without outlining it first.

The following is an example of a chapter outline, taken from chapter one of my own novel:

Chapter 1 The Sullivan Orphans

Madallion (12) and Jason (9) Sullivan have been raised by their paternal grandparents since early memory, but when their grandmother, the last surviving grandparent dies, the siblings are split up and put in foster care. Jason immediately goes to live with a nice family, but Madallion is forced to wait awhile. First she is put in a girls group home (this event is only mentioned, not told in detail) before finally being placed with Joban and Penelope Hall.

$\frac{3}{4}$ The story opens in Naperville, Illinois with the children sitting outside a church one hot June Saturday as the funeral for their grandmother has just ended.

You probably noticed that at the end of the short synopsis I added a sort of afterthought. Many of my chapter outlines were accompanied by these afterthoughts, bits of information that I wanted to include in the chapters. And since they were neatly composed and assembled on paper, it was relatively easy for me to refer to them, add new information by long hand, and check-off information that I included in the chapters as the novel proceeded forward. And contrary to belief, outlining the novel first does not limit the creative aspect of the writing. "If your creative talent is working correctly, it will pull (the plot) along in the way it should go," Petievich says. "Our subconscious mind really rules in a creative endeavor. So if it starts to change, don't try and force it back into some sort of dogma that you've established."

That dogma, meaning the outline, is not there to hamper your creativeness, only to help guide you along. I often strayed out of the boundaries of my chapter outlines. Sometimes I included information that I didn't even know would be of importance to the novel. But I never fought against it, knowing it was for the best. The chapters always blossomed by their own right.

When struggling to find ideas, another piece of advice you might frequently receive as a writer is 'write what you know'. "Scratch the surface of any writing course and somewhere in the lectures or reading you are bound to come across advice to 'write

what you know'. Most of us look for something unusual we might know a lot about $\frac{3}{4}$

sailing, a serious car accident, and alcoholic parent, beauty contests, a tornado, diamonds. These subjects are fine if they are really in your blood, but what if you have had a rather normal family, no catastrophic events, and no unusual hobbies or achievements? Where do you begin then?"

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, author of *The Craft of Writing the Novel*, recommends starting with yourself. I recommend starting somewhere else. If you can perceive that your life and surroundings are uninteresting, then what makes you think that your personal self, as an individual, will be any different? My advice is to write what you've always liked. Writers are always readers first, so it makes sense to start in an area that you frequent as a reader. If you're heavy into mysteries, then write mysteries. If you love sappy love stories, write a romance novel. I like

children and young adult fantasy and science fiction, so I write about that. Straying out of my genre of interest would be pointless, because there's just not enough creative juice in the world to inspire me to write a romance novel. Once you find your idea (and hopefully the drive to write it), you'll probably find ideas jumping at your from every direction. "As you work on your novel, there are going to be many ideas that come to you at odd times, and it will be helpful to keep notebooks handy $\frac{3}{4}$ a large one with compartments for maps, articles, and newspaper clippings, and a smaller notebook to carry in a pocket when you are not at home to jot down that phrase that strikes suddenly, that line of dialogue, that description of field, the subplot that just occurred to you." If you're like me, you'll probably find yourself with more than one notebook for storing ideas for your novel. While not necessarily full, these notebooks were usually the only ones available when I lost track of my old ones. Eventually, I located all my notebooks and compiled them together in a single folder, and I never left home without the presence of a mini-notebook, which I used to record spur-of-the-moment quotes and quirky names.

Story Classification

Every story I have ever written has always been character driven, so it was no surprise to me when a writing instructor commented on this even before I understood what character driven was. The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing says there are four factors for classifying a story: milieu, idea, character, and event.

Milieu: the world surrounding characters...the surrounding cultures the characters emerge from and react to.

Idea: the information that readers are meant to discover or learn during the process of the story.

Character: the nature of one or more of the people in the story...usually leads to or arises from a conclusion about human nature in general.

Events: everything that happens and why.

You really needn't concern yourself with these four factors in developing your book. The novel takes on a life of its own, and forcing it in a different way may make you feel uncomfortable and unsure of your story. These four factors are really meant to give you some idea about where your novel stands in terms of classification.

For example, my own novel, which I mentioned above is character driven, is summarized by the handbook as: "The character story emerges when some part of a character's role in life becomes unbearable. A character is dominated by vicious, whimsical parent or spouse; an employee has become discontented with his job, with growing distaste for the people he works with; a mother is weary of her nurturing role and longing for respect from adults...the impossible situation may have been going on for some time, but the story does not begin until the situation comes to a head $\frac{3}{4}$ until the character reaches the point where the cost of staying becomes too high a price to pay."

My novel, about an orphaned, 12-year-old girl who is separated from her brother and forced to live with an abusive foster mother, fits perfectly into that category.

While the factors tend to overlap, which is also the case with my novel, it's obvious that it is primarily rooted in the category of character.

Names

One aspect of the novel people tend to not take seriously is the naming of the characters. "When choosing names, it is easy to fall back on stereotypes. You should research the names of characters carefully...avoid naming them exactly what your reader would expect."

If your novel is based in fantasy, such as mines, names can be very important. Names can hold the secret to a character's past, revealing to them an unknown destiny or birthright. I'm not satisfied with average, overused and outdated names for major characters. Such names I only use for minor characters. I find I can never move forward in a story without first establishing a suitable name for my characters, and as is the case with my current lead character, a child named Madallion, the importance of her name, which means the light of the moon, plays a big part in the development of the five-part series.

Meanings

When everything is all said and done, what will want your readers to take with them from your book? What kind of meaning do you want them to perceive from it? Hate to break it to you, but it's probably not anything you might intend.

"When we write a novel, we are inviting the reader to be part of the experience because, in the final analysis, the book belongs to the reader; the novel's meaning is whatever he may make of it...The character who was dearest to the author's heart may seem selfish or vacillating to the reader. But readers are as entitled to their interpretation of the characters and events in the novel as the author is to his."

This also rang true for me a couple of months ago. When I let a close friend read my novel late last year, I was shocked when she told me that one of my favorite characters, someone I had sculpted tediously to be a sort of mentor for my lead character, came across as a cold, uncaring brat. Of course, that was not what I intended (or wanted) her to think, but it certainly was a wake-up call as far as reader's interpretations of my work.

Conclusion

No matter where you are in your writing career, novel writing can be a rewarding experience. Even if nothing ever comes of your work, you can always look forward to sharing it with your children, as I one day hope to do. But if you're prepared to go the long haul, be prepared to do even more work, because if you believe your job as the writer is over once the novel is completed, you'll find that you're only "fooling yourself."

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