

Feb 2012 Q&A: Fiction

This is a transcript of the audio Q&A, edited slightly for easy reading!

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/qas/feb2012

Hi, I'm Ali Luke, this is the February question and answer session on fiction for the Writers' Huddle.

So we had loads of great questions in this month and I'll be creating some extra resources for some of them but for now I want to make sure everyone gets at least a brief answer to what they asked.

Bill: College and Development as a Writer

I'll start off with Bill who wanted to know about **my college and grad school experience and what had helped me most in my development as a writer.**

Undergraduate Experience

So, for those who don't know, I studied English Literature as an undergraduate and the way that the system works here in the UK is that we don't really have majors and minors we just study one thing – so I studied English Literature and that's it, for three years, and it was a fantastic experience.

I studied at Cambridge university which has a very broad course, ranging from Middle English (so things like Chaucer and *Gawain and the Green Knight*) to stuff that's been published in the last few years (contemporary fiction). It really broadened my horizons as a reader and I think that's actually been one of the most helpful things for me as a writer just to read a massive range of different literature.

Some of the things that I enjoyed best were:

- Doing the Middle English, particularly *Gawain and the Green Knight* which is a really great poem – best to read it in a translated version because the original is quite tough to understand.

- We worked on some Greek tragedy as part of a whole section on tragedy.
- I really enjoyed the 18th century novel cause that was when the novel form was beginning.

So loads of stuff, some of it probably a bit geeky, but it's all fed into my own development as a writer and I can often see themes in my work are coming from some of the stuff I read as an undergraduate.

Graduate Experience

And then as a post-graduate, I studied at Goldsmiths in London, creative writing, over a couple of year's part time and that was a very different experience.

It was a much less academic course than Cambridge but it was a really good chance to develop my work with other writers. **We did a lot of workshopping which was extremely helpful because you get specific feedback.** I had some really good tutorials with Francis Spufford, who is a fantastic writer, and that really helped me to hone my craft there. And when I looked back at the stuff I had written at the start of my time at Goldsmiths, the improvement was dramatic, so it was a really good experience.

Bill: Useful Writing Exercises

And then Bill wanted to **know what writing exercises I found useful and do I still do any?**

A couple of things that I picked up from Goldsmiths was to keep a writing journal – to write a bit about how my writing was actually going, maybe before or after a writing session. That's been useful: I don't do it all the time but I do it some of the time, especially if I am struggling with my writing.

Another exercise that we did was to picture the scene before writing about it so imagine what you can see and hear and what the characters are going to do and then start writing.

To be honest, we didn't do that many exercise though, it wasn't a big part of the course. We had a few as warm-ups in class and stuff, but for the most part we just got on with short stories or novels.

Graham: Getting Plot Inspiration

The next question is from Graham who wanted to know about getting plot inspiration and how I do that and where story ideas come from.

Like I was saying in answer to Bill's question, a lot of my ideas come from what I have read. So it's not like I pick a specific idea from a specific text, but overall **there are themes from what I've enjoyed and read that come out in my work as a writer**. This happens with something I've studied in particular – when I have gone into the text in a bit more depth than just reading it casually.

Sometimes I get ideas from a writing prompt. Sometimes I want to enter a competition and then the idea is inherent in the competition topic.

Ideas can honestly come from all over the place and I find that mine work best when there's something about them that I really care about and something that really touches my own interests as a writer.

Graham: Keeping Track of Characters as a Novel Develops

And then Graham's next question was about keeping track of all the characters in a novel as it develops so that you don't make mistakes with continuity.

One thing that I did with my novel Lycopolis was to deliberately keep the cast of characters pretty minimal. I've got quite a lot of main characters in that novel, but I don't have many secondary ones who actually play a role, so I didn't really need to keep track of lots of characters who only pop up two or three times in the book.

Something else that helped was to have a spreadsheet where I tracked all the different chapters, whose point of view each chapter was from, what the characters were doing in each chapter and so on. That helped me work out

who was where, when and maybe which characters needed to have some extra material or where I needed to make some changes.

I also had a document for each of the main characters which I wrote at the very start of the writing process, so before I even began working on the novel itself. Those documents had information about the character background and about who they were and how they behaved, and a lot of that did change in the writing but at least it meant I had a sort of starting point. I could go back to those documents and check that I had kept the character in line with what I'd originally intended – or at least that I had made deliberate choices if I hadn't.

But I think the other thing to say is that **mistakes are almost inevitable if you are working on a really big project like a novel**, especially if it takes you several years.

One of the most useful things you can do is to read through the whole of the novel once you have finished it because then it's much easier to spot when a character's eye colour has changed, or you've had a character undertake some journey which should really have taken three times as long, or their behaviour is inconsistent or there's some other problem.

Graham: Using Adjectives and Adverbs

So, Graham's next question was – he phrased it like this – *"If adjectives and adverbs are so bad, why did God invent them?"*

And I think it's a good question, because as writers of fiction we are often told to avoid using adjectives and adverbs and it can be hard to see why or to understand when it is okay to use them.

In case you're not familiar with the terms, an adjective modifies a word, so it's something like *red* or *cold* or *friendly*. It usually modifies a noun. Adverbs modify verbs, so they are words like *quickly* or *happily* or *angrily*.

The argument against using adjectives and adverbs in your work is that they can weaken the sentence.

So if I wrote the sentence –

John walked quickly across the room.

– it's okay, it tells the reader what is happening but there is lots of other ways to say "*walked quickly*" and to use a strong word, so I could say:

John strode across the room or

John marched across the room or

John stormed across the room

... or something that perhaps gives a slightly clearer impression to the reader of what exactly John's mood is at the time.

A place where I do think it's useful to avoid adverbs, not perhaps every single time but as a general rule, is when you are describing the way someone spoke. If you say "*shouted angrily*" ... really it should be clear from the dialogue that the words were angry and you don't need to say *angrily* as a modifier for *shouted*.

And be careful if you are using adverbs in a slightly redundant way so saying that someone *smiled happily* is unnecessary because normally when we smile we are happy.

So when is it okay to use them? **I think adjectives and adverbs can be handy when you are describing something or someone** so it would be hard to imagine having a whole description without using any adjectives, for instance. You might be describing the colour of someone's hair or the style of their clothing and in that case it's okay.

I find with both adjectives and adverbs that it's useful to go back once I have written something and see if there are any words which that frankly aren't really necessary. Normally, if you can cut out an unnecessary word, whatever type of word that is, it will make your piece stronger.

B.: Writing About Villains

So, B. asked a question about villains, saying that: **“In my novel I am writing I have a character I can't stand to the extent that I don't even like writing about him and because of this I've got myself a wee bit stuck – where to from here, do I make him a bit likable enabling me to carry on, and should horrible characters have an endearing side to them?”**

This is a good question, I think, from the point of view of your task as a writer and from the point of view of your readers enjoyment of the novel.

Characters rarely should be black and white – so normally you don't have a villain who is completely and utterly villainous and has no redeeming qualities or excusing factors whatsoever and you don't have good characters, protagonists or heroes who are whiter than white and never put a foot wrong and are sort of superheroes.

Shades of grey are interesting. It's interesting to have good characters who sometimes do the wrong thing or who have some character flaws. It's good to have villains who maybe don't exactly have *excuses* for the way they behave, but they do have reasons, and there is perhaps some potential for us to sympathise with them ... or to even find them slightly attractive, that often happens with villains, especially the good-looking ones, depending on your genre.

Personally as a writer, I quite like writing bad characters! I think it's a good chance to explore a different side of me or possibilities ... you can really have a lot of fun if you want to in writing characters who are less than good.

As a novelist, it's useful to have characters who are on the villainous side of things because it tends to create more conflict and problems for your other characters and it gives your hero's a chance to shine. Sometimes you have a main character who is a bit weak or passive, but when faced with the villain in the novel they will actually stand up for what they believe in.

To answer Bee's question on how best to continue: I think one thing to do is to **ask why the villain acts like he does** because very few people just set out to be

evil. They usually have their reasons, no matter how misguided those reasons are.

So perhaps this character is just really selfish and he doesn't care about what other people think or how they feel but there probably will be some people in his life that matter, like family members or a friend.

You might want to give him some likeable qualities, but he doesn't necessarily have to become endearing. It might be important that both you and the reader can see why he's behaving the way he is, and whether that's because he has been badly treated in his time as well, you know he's suffered at the hands of somebody else or whether there is something wrong with him he's just a sociopath or a psychopath or something, or whether there are reasons within the society in which this character is in that makes them behave this way.

The thing to remember overall is that you are the author and are in control and if you don't like something that you have written, you can re-write it. You can go back and change the way a character behaves, right from page one, but usually the best way to do it if you need to re-write a character is to start from where you currently are in the text and go forwards, and then you can go back at the editing stage and make some changes.

Jam: Switching from Technical to Creative Writing

Jam had a question about **switching from technical writing to creative writing and asked if there is a technique which will make it easier.**

I think it is a tough switch to make and a lot of the people who I have worked with as a coach have found this quite difficult, going from maybe business writing (rather than technical writing) or academic writing to a more creative form. And I don't think there is any one technique that makes it easier, but **it does get easier the more you do and it does become more natural.**

So something you can do if you are struggling to write a short story is to add in some dialogue or action or description and just really focus on those elements

that make it fiction rather than a non-fiction piece. **Read plenty of fiction as well** – so see how other authors put together their short stories and how they've achieved particular effects.

And when it comes to choosing the right words or finding the right tone, it can take time to really find your voice as a fiction writer. **Try and write in the voice of a character**, so you might want to try writing in the first person and maybe try a character who is quite different from yourself so a very different age or a different background and create a voice for them and write through them. It might not come out perfectly the first time but it can be a good way to explore different kinds of writing creatively.

Jam and Maggie: Show Don't Tell

Both Jam and Maggie asked about the *show don't tell* rule in writing, so Jam wanted to know a good exercise to practice being more descriptive when writing, and I think Maggie was also concerned about the *show don't tell*.

When you get writing advice that says "*show don't tell*" they mean **make a scene for us**. Describe something through a character's eyes, show the reader what is happening – so give visual details or give sounds or have dialogue rather than just telling us things.

Here's an example. If I said "*John was always short-tempered*," that's telling you, whereas if I wrote a scene that showed John being short-tempered with people – without necessarily using the word *short-tempered* at any point – that would be showing you John's behaviour.

When you are being descriptive, which Jam was specifically asking about, it's okay to have some level of telling, sometimes you just need to tell the readers what's in a room or what something looks like. **A good way to make that more interesting is to show it through a particular character's perspective** because different characters will pick up on different things, they'll describe things in different ways.

What seems to one character like a well furnished or well decorated house might seem tacky to somebody else. Maybe one character likes minimalism

and another character finds it cold or off-putting. You can actually do some characterisation through description, so that can be a good opportunity to not only tell us what is there, but also show us how a particular character thinks or behaves.

Something that I know I tend to fall into by mistake as a writer is **showing something and then telling the reader** so having a character say something and then telling the reader what that means in terms of that character: they're a control freak or they're angry or whatever that is. That's often really not necessary because the reader will infer a lot from things like dialogue and from the way that characters move and the way they are described by you as the author, so **don't be afraid to leave things a little bit open for the reader to interpret.**

So, that's all the fiction questions. I'll be doing another Q & A next month so please do leave your questions in the forums and I hope to see you around there.