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THE CONVERSATION

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How to write a novel – four fiction writers on Danielle Steel's insane working day

May 15, 2019 12.49pm BST



Romance is officially dead. Featureflash Photo Agency

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She might be the world's most famous romance writer, nay the highest selling living author bar none, but there's little room for flowers and chocolates in Danielle Steel's writing regime. In a recent

interview she laughed at the idea of young people insisting on a work-life balance, and has claimed she regularly writes for 20 to 22 hours a day, and sometimes 24. The result: 179 books in under 50 years, selling about 800m copies.

Some aspiring novelists might just have cancelled their entire lives to get on the Steel plan, but many more are probably wondering if it's time to try something less demanding. We asked four creative writing teachers for their perspective:

Liam Murray Bell, University of Stirling

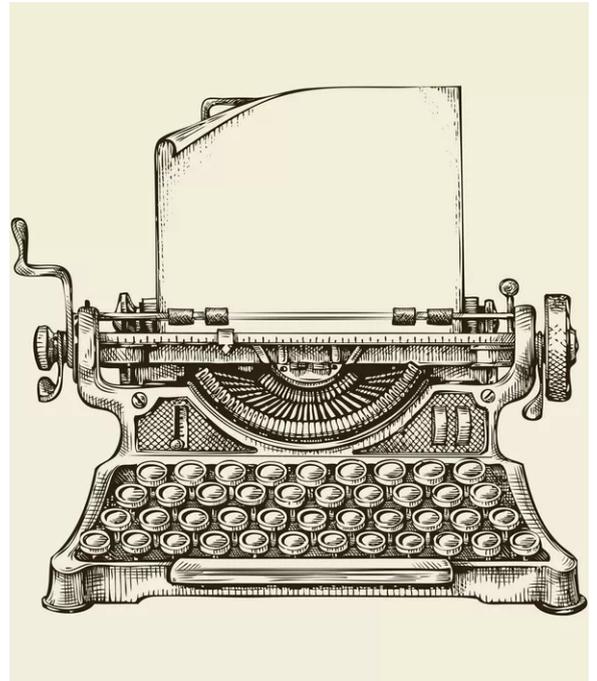
Steel's claim reminds me of the thriller writer Edgar Wallace, who was known to write a novel over the course of a long weekend. He'd retire to his study on a Friday evening and not emerge until the Monday morning, dictating his words to a secretary and stopping only for half-hourly cups of tea. Poor secretary.

The only thing I recognise from that brutal regime is the need for copious amounts of tea. For me, a productive day is four hours of writing. Four hours of focused, uninterrupted time at the keyboard. This morning, I wrote for two hours and managed just shy of 1,000 words. Even that is a decent day; a steady day. To wrestle those hours of writing time free, I'm postponing teaching preparation, leaving my marking until the evening, relying on childcare. Most of all, I'm doing my damndest to ignore emails. When does Steel answer her emails, is what I want to know.

There have been times, on writing retreats or under threat of impending deadline, when I've been known to stretch to six or seven hours. No more, though, because then the words stop making sense and the delete key takes a hammering. I start explaining my plot to the mantelpiece and rehearsing lines of dialogue with the cat. Instead, I go and do something else. It's amazing how often clarity about your writing comes while washing the dishes, trimming the hedge, taking the dog for a walk. The writers I know are full of anecdotes of story ideas scribbled on bus tickets, or pulling over the car to jot down a poem opening by the side of the road.

It's often when I'm out for a lunchtime run that I find myself reflecting on what I wrote that morning or find the thread for a scene to write the next day. Haruki Murakami talks about the similar feats of concentration and endurance required for long-distance running and for writing a novel; each endeavour requiring the person to turn up day after day for months or even years. At the University of Stirling, we've actually formed a research group to look at the links between creative writing and physical activity because so many writers are also keen runners or cyclists or swimmers.

The appeal of Steel's process, then, seems to be that every day is race day. But you can't sustain that. Little and often is my mantra, with every day building momentum. If you manage 200 words today then those are 200 words you didn't have yesterday. That might take you 15 minutes or it might take six hours; either way, it's progress. The aim isn't to get as many words on the page as quickly as possible; the aim is to get the right words on the page, however long it takes.



Going blank again. AVA Bitter

Sarah Corbett, University of Lancaster

I'm sorry to say there isn't a formula for how to write a novel (so don't buy those "how to" books) – only hard graft, staying power, blinding self belief (rescued every morning from the teeth of doubt), and the willingness to meet the devil at the crossroads and outwit him. And to write, rewrite, write, rewrite, write, rewrite ...

Perhaps this isn't very helpful to the beginner; and I have to admit that I'm just finishing my own first novel – after five years. But having taught creative writing for almost 20 years across all genres, here are some things I can say from experience:

- 1) Read other novels. There's no getting round this: you have to do a lot of reading – passionate, engaged and risky – but also the kind where you start to notice, and then investigate how the writer does things. Read lots of different types of books too: be curious, endlessly;
- 2) Practice, practice, practice. Write regularly even if you can only spare an hour in the evening or an afternoon at the weekend. Most writers have other jobs, families, pets, households, and you'd be surprised how much writing gets done in the gaps between other things;
- 3) Work at your technique at every level of detail from sentencing and phrasing to word choice, creating believable characters, immersive settings, dynamic scenes and authentic dialogue;
- 4) Write what saddens/moves/frightens/turns you on; write with the whole of your self and the whole of your senses;
- 5) Join a course, start a group;
- 6) Write because you enjoy it, and you enjoy a challenge;
- 7) Be prepared to tear it up and start again;
- 8) Remember that writing is work, the best kind, that transports and enchants you;
- 9) Keep going...;
- 10) Write your own rules.

So how did I write my novel? Slowly – I published two poetry collections in the same period, did a lot of teaching and saw my son through his GCSEs and A-levels – and with a lot of gutting and rewriting; begging more experienced friends to read it and give me their toughest, most honest advice, and then acting on it, even when it meant radical cuts and changes.

Mine is a literary novel - about family, home and shame - but with a psychological twist. The character and her story came to me all in one go on the train home from Manchester after an unsettling encounter in Waterstones, and since then it's been a process of excavation, as if the novel already existed somewhere in the world, and I just had to keep uncovering it, slowly, layer by layer. I'm still adding scenes, taking others away, fine tuning every line. I'm still working out the best way to tell the story, but I know I'm nearly ready to let it go because the next one has already arrived.

Edward Hogan, Open University

For his 2016 book *Rest*, the writer and Silicon Valley consultant Alex Soojung-Kim Pang collected the routines of creative people throughout history. From the habits of writers such as Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and Alice Munro, he concluded that four hours a day is optimum, and you need to wake up early. Trollope rose at 5am each morning (a servant brought him coffee at half past), and wrote until 8.30am, before going to his job at the post office. On that schedule, he published over 40 novels.

As a writer with a family and a full-time job, I currently follow the 5am method, though I make my own coffee. In theory, this “little and often” approach seems straightforward: if you write 500 words a day, you’ll have a first draft in months. But it isn’t that simple. My first novel took eight years, but my third was pretty much done in 40 days. Writing requires two states of mind: you need the researcher’s brain, the clear-thinking editor’s, but you must be open to the dark mess of creation, too. My routine changes, because I haven’t figured out how to do it yet. When I do, I’ll probably quit.

I’m interested in Steel’s way of working. That sort of immersion, favoured by Kasuo Ishiguro, and Jesse Ball – who claims to write his novels in as little as six days – allows them to retain the vitality of the initial idea.

Paul Sheldon, the author and narrator of Stephen King’s *Misery*, describes “falling through a hole in the page” when writing. Maybe that’s the sort of compulsion that Steel experiences, and it’s refreshing to hear her address the physicality of the process. Writers are reluctant to talk about the (rare) sensation of extreme focus that results when they become possessed by their work. Rambling about raised heart-rates, losing track of time, and being “in the zone”, can make writing sound like a cross between yoga and golf.

The writer’s routine is where practical concerns meet the more ephemeral subject of inspiration. You have to decide what kind of writer you want to be. Jenny Colgan produces two books a year, and this involves hitting deadlines so that her novels appear around Mother’s Day and the Christmas season. Writing is work, the daily pursuit of a word count. For Hilary Mantel, that sort of regularity is alien. She talks about “flow days” when she has no idea what she’s written until she reads it back. But both writers are at their desks, daily.

The act of writing can be exhilarating, but it’s mostly quite difficult. Then again, it’s not like going down the pit. So if you want to write a novel, and find Steel’s method unappealing, let me refer you to the celebrated and prolific children’s author Jacqueline Wilson, who writes for about half-an-hour a day. In bed.

David Bishop, Edinburgh Napier University



Kazuo Ishiguro. Wikimedia

Steel's regime sounds extreme, but if that works for her – so be it. Every writer has their own unique sweet spot, a time and place where they can produce words that will be ready for reading one day. The trick is finding your personal approach, and also recognising it might not suit every project.

Some people say you must write every day to be a writer. Perhaps, but writing is not simply the act of typing words on paper or screen. There is so much more that goes into creating narratives from your imagination. Reading widely is often the sign of a voracious writer, though there is always the danger of a project being infected by the style or substance of whatever you happen to be reading at the time.

It's also a myth that you need to write a certain number of words in a session. Some writers do benefit from a daily or weekly target, but others prefer to devote a fixed amount of time to writing, and trust that the words will come. Feeling guilty for not matching another writer's productivity is certainly not good for your mental health. Besides, quantity is no measure of quality. I once had 600,000 words published in one calendar year, but they certainly weren't my best work.

The act of not writing is just as important as writing. Never underestimate the importance of staring out of a window or going for a walk. All too often the knottiest story problems can only be untangled by getting away from the desk. If all else fails, try going to sleep and letting your subconscious do the heavy lifting. It's amazing how often the resting mind can resolve a problem your active thoughts couldn't fix.



'Where did I put that dog?' Everett Collection

For most writers, finding the best way to write a novel is trial and error: experimenting with different systems until they discover one that chimes. Some writers craft detailed plot outlines as a narrative safety net; others prefer a journey of discovery that could mean wholesale rewrites later. Some work in total silence; others need background sounds such as music. An idea to spark your imagination is necessary, along with a trajectory to follow – but what happens next is up to you.

Steel has a sign in her office that reads: “There are no miracles. There is only discipline.” To be a writer does not require 22 hours at a desk each day, but Steel is right that there are no miracles, either. If you want to be a writer, you have to write – however you do it. That much is inescapable.

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