

freelance

Writers do moan about the loneliness of their lives, but most of them seem able to cope with society. It's rare at a publishing party to see anyone skulking in a corner gnawing his knuckles with fear of his fellow man, quite usual to see a gregarious mass tossing Buck's Fizz down its throat and talking about money. One thing writers never seem to talk about is writing.

I've been trying to talk about it recently, going up to Yorkshire last autumn as a tutor on one of the Arvon Foundation's courses at Lumb Bank, and returning this spring as a guest. One thing about the Arvon courses – the people who attend them really want to write. Some people say they want to write, but in fact simply want to publish books. In the time between my two visits, as last winter wore on, and the novel I'm working on went nowhere in particular, I began to wonder if I fell into the second category. I had tried to talk in terms of my own experience to the people on the courses; I kept telling them that the one thing you couldn't do with a book was to jostle it along – not if it was going to be any good when it was finished. You had to be relaxed about the process, and you had to let it take its own time. When you are a child, I said, you are indoctrinated with the notion that if you try and try and try you can accomplish anything but when you are grown up and you begin to write you find that this is not so at all and that it is when you stop trying that you start to succeed.

Winter wore on, though, and nothing much got done. I began to feel uneasy. Perhaps this adjuration to patience was just another element of my lies? I am quite committed to demystifying, as far as I can, the business of writing fiction; to passing on tips. So when anyone asks me how I work I tell them rapidly and in great detail. The trouble is that what I tell them is not true. It is reasonable, it is practical, it is helpful; it just isn't true.

I'm not protecting a secret, or being coy; and it's not so much lies, perhaps, as confabulation. Even as I talk I know I'm making myself up as I go along. Unable to grasp the essence of the matter, I make a series of wild stabs at it, violent gestures to show who's boss. I wonder if I can say anything meaningful about writing fiction, when I know this fact: that if when I am writing a paragraph the telephone rings and I answer it, what I write thereafter will be completely different from what I would have written if I had not been interrupted. Has the process any consistency? Any logic? I can't believe it has. It is inherently ludicrous. Perhaps this is why writers don't talk about how they achieve their effects. They are too embarrassed.

My patient winter leads to ludicrous spring. I am dawdling about, one day, in Selfridges' book department, rearranging the stock a little to promote the work of people I like. I am not thinking about my book; my mind is its habitual blank. I suddenly realize – it takes thirty seconds – what my novel is about and how I can construct it. It is necessary to repair to Ladies' Fashion, where there is known to be a sofa, and write it down. The season's uncertainties resolve plainly and clearly into a half-sheet of A4 paper. All I have to do next is *write* the book: child's play. Perhaps I wasn't lying after all.

I am looking forward to going back to Lumb Bank some time. Simply getting there is part of the challenge. Its situation is remote; you go by Leeds. Leeds railway station has a modest number of platforms but a lot of trains stacked up one behind the other. If you ask, "Does this one go to Hebden Bridge, do you know?" you get a reply like "Well, *I'm* going to Bradford." Is it possible that in Yorkshire people have not realized that trains may go on, after their personal destination? This seems worth looking into.

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