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The Author At Foyles

“The problem with a second novel is that it takes almost no time to write compared with a first novel. If I write my first novel in a month at the age of 23 and my second takes me two years, which one have I written more quickly? The second, of course... The first took 23 years and contains all the experience, pain, stored-up artistry, anger, love, hope, comic invention and despair of a lifetime. The second is an act of professional writing. That is why it is so much more difficult.” Stephen Fry

Blimey, when you put it like that, Stephen, then what the hell was I doing even trying to write a second book, under contract, in the year following the publication of my first novel, especially given it was published when I was 43? Well, writing is a vocation, it's something I've always done, almost entirely 'under the radar' of publishers, readers and reviewers, so there isn't a desire to ever really stop, and I'm sure most writers, published or unpublished, would say the same. But how did I go about writing that 'difficult' second novel?

Well, I knew I needed to stick to my tried and tested routine of writing a thousand words a day, applying everything I'd learnt about structure to the manuscript as it grew. Also, perhaps most importantly, I needed to create characters I cared about who could become real enough to start walking and talking and make spontaneous, surprising decisions that would make the story interesting to write. But even before the difficult process of writing started - of staring at the screen until your forehead melts and your fingers begin to type - I needed an idea, a kernel from which the story could grow. My publisher, Simon & Schuster gave me *carte blanche* to write pretty much anything I wanted as long as it was YA. It was a great position to be in but the more I thought about it the more I felt trapped in the gilded cage of a publishing deal - What idea should I pick? Should it complement the first book in some way? How could it improve on the first book? Would I just repeat all the things I'd said in the first book? Was I really a writer when it came down to it who could write another book at all? What if the publisher doesn't like what I write.....a-n-d.....s-o.....o-n.

It seemed to me early on, that in terms of a writing career, having your first book published is like receiving a ticket to a really exclusive party, with the second book being an invitation to actually perform at said party, with everyone watching on expectantly.

One author and avid book reviewer (Abi Elphinstone @moontrug, author of 'The Dreamsnatcher') has mentioned to me that it might be better to write your debut as the first book in a series because it means you already have characters to work with in the second novel. I can see the logic in this. Such a situation immediately addresses a lot of the issues I had with how to go about writing a second stand-alone novel.

There wasn't just a creative element to wrestle with when tackling a second book. Another huge factor was having a novel already published and watching it trying to survive out there in the world as reviewers critiqued it in public, sometimes nicely and sometimes not. Poor reviews hurt, believe me - almost as much as not being reviewed - and it's hard to get over them at first. (NB My trick was to re-read the good ones as an antidote.) The bad ones put doubts in your mind about whether you can really write as well as you thought, making that 'difficult' second book suddenly a little harder to get to grips with.

But reviews and comments also raised the more exacting question for me of: Who was I writing for? (Remember that the first book only ever has an imaginary audience until agents and then editors start to read it.)

Ultimately, I like to think I always write for myself (even under contract) so I can put all my heart and emotion into it. This makes writing novels a very personal exercise for me, rather like writing a journal or diary. I am sure this is the case for lots of other writers, which is why I think books inevitably betray novelists' inner selves to readers and reviewers even if they are hidden behind the opacity of plot. It's quite a wrench to put that out there for public consumption, a fact which dawned on me more and more the longer my first book was out and being read. To my mind one of the most notable comments about this issue of personal exposure comes from J.D. Salinger who wrote *Catcher in the Rye* (published in 1951 and possibly *Book Zero* for all western YA novels). He was known for being reclusive and for not publishing many books. Perhaps this comment to the New York Times in 1974 helps us to understand why his published output (there are rumours of lots of unpublished works to be published posthumously at some point) was so small: "*There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It's peaceful. Still. Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure.*" (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/13/specials/salinger-speaks.html>)

If writing is a joyful yet personal exercise for me, like it was for Salinger, then writing and publishing a second book - when the first one has been written without the pressure of knowing that people are ever going to read it - raises some questions: Why am I actually doing this and what is the point? What does it mean to be a novelist? Who am I writing for and should I care about what anybody else thinks? Should I be having my work published if I do care about that?

I have no doubt these sorts of questions will continue to chunter on in the background as I continue to try and write more books.

There is also the practical problem of trying to write that second book whilst simultaneously having to promote the first, published one. Your writing time becomes more precious because you have to juggle more things alongside it such as writing blogs, articles, extra material like short stories as promotional items, doing interviews etc and meeting readers and booksellers. It's exciting and humbling to do (I know I am very lucky to be doing it) but it can be time consuming.

Furthermore, your mind gets stretched because you have to answer questions about a book that everybody is reading now - although it's a story you finished a year ago - whilst you're trying to write something new. One question that readers and interviewers always seem to ask is: "*Where do your stories and ideas come from?*" (It comes up every time!) When I grit my teeth and smile and try to answer this, the inner me is really saying: '*Well I haven't a bloody clue so mind your own business and thanks very much for asking when I'm trying to come up with a new story.*' As a writer, you know that you don't want to look too closely into the crucible of creativity inside you, where ideas are made, for fear of making the process that goes on deep in the folds of your brain suddenly stop.

A further practical issue that begins to self-generate as your first book is being read and reviewed and bashed about in the blogosphere is that you, the writer, are being compartmentalized as a '*this or that*' type of author. Being defined is important in relation to

the second book because publishers want to be able to build on the perception of you and your first book, making the business of 'selling' easier. In essence you're starting to become a brand and it's easier for agents and publishers to evolve you (pigeonhole you?) as a certain type of author whose books sit on the bookshelf appealing to a certain type of reader. How far you push against that or stick with it as a newbie author when you're not very well known and trying to find a place somewhere in the market which is full of lots of fantastic writers already, needs some thought. So, there is a game to play when writing that second book, one with certain unspoken rules.

Gosh, then, it's a wonder I wrote a second book at all! Well, not really, it's been a blast, a creative challenge, and I am extremely grateful to my publisher for even giving me that chance. I really hope people enjoy the new book.

My parting shot is this as you're perusing the bookshelves (both cyber and real) for something to buy this summer and beyond. Give a thought to all those UK YA novelists with their second books coming out soon or which have already come out - my contemporaries as it were - like @NonPratt, @ClareFurniss, @grgemin, @RosieRowell, @dark_fell, @SallieGreen and @cjflood_author *et al.* I take my hat off to all of them. Like I said at the beginning, writing is, despite being difficult for all sorts of various reasons, a vocation, a calling. You just get on and do it however you can and whenever you have the time.

Will writing that third book be easier for me? Well I'll have to wait and see I guess. Nobody ever seems to mention that tricky third book. It seems by then you should be in the flow, that this writing lark should be easy.....Hmmm.