

WRITING FICTION

Linda Anderson and Derek Neale

Writing Fiction

Writing Fiction offers the novice writer engaging and creative activities, making use of insightful, relevant readings from well-known authors to illustrate the techniques presented. This volume makes use of new versions of key chapters from the recent Routledge/Open University textbook *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings* for writers who are specialising in fiction.

Using their experience and expertise as teachers as well as authors, Linda Anderson and Derek Neale guide aspiring writers through such key aspects of writing as:

- how to stimulate creativity
- keeping a writer's notebook
- character creation
- setting
- point of view
- structure
- showing and telling.

The volume is further updated to include never-before published interviews with successful fiction writers Andrew Cowan, Stevie Davies, Maggie Gee, Andrew Greig and Hanif Kureishi. Concise and practical, *Writing Fiction* offers an inspirational guide to the methods and techniques of authorship and is a must-read for aspiring writers.

Linda Anderson is an award-winning novelist and is editor of *Creative Writing, A Workbook with Readings* (2006, Routledge). She is Reader in Creative Writing at the Open University and a National Teaching Fellow.

Derek Neale is Lecturer in Creative Writing at The Open University. He is an award-winning fiction writer and is editor of *A Creative Writing Handbook* (2009) and co-author of *Life Writing* (2008, Routledge).

RELATED TITLES FROM ROUTLEDGE AND THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Life Writing

Linda Anderson and Derek Neale

This practical guide covers key life writing skills including writing what you know, biography and autobiography, prefaces, form, memory, characters, and novelistic, poetic and dramatic techniques. *Life Writing* presents never-before published interviews with successful life writers such as Jenny Diski, Robert Fraser, Richard Holmes, Michael Holroyd, Jackie Kay, Hanif Kureishi and Blake Morrison.

ISBN13: 978-0-415-46153-5 (pbk)

December 2008

Writing Poetry

Bill Herbert

Concise and highly useful, *Writing Poetry* offers a clearly written, inspirational guide to methods and techniques of poetry, covering drafting, line, voice, imagery, rhyme, form and theme. This volume presents never-before published interviews with poets such as Vicki Feaver, Douglas Dunn, Gillian Allnutt, Jo Shapcott, Kathleen Jamie, Linda France and Sean O'Brien.

ISBN13: 978-0-415-46154-2 (pbk)

July 2009

Available at all good bookshops

For ordering and further information please visit:

www.routledgeliterature.com

Writing Fiction

Linda Anderson and Derek Neale

First edition published 2009
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2009 Linda Anderson and Derek Neale

Typeset in Frutiger and Times by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Anderson, Linda.
Writing fiction/Linda Anderson and Derek Neale.—1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Creative writing (Higher education)—Problems, exercises, etc. 2. Fiction—
Authorship—Problems, exercises, etc. 3. English language—Rhetoric—Study and
teaching. 4. Authorship—Problems, exercises, etc. I. Neale, Derek. II. Title.
PE1404.A5274 2008
808.3076—dc22
2008028834

ISBN13: 978-0-415-46155-9
ISBN10: 0-415-46155-3

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | ix |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1 Stimulating creativity and imagination: what really works | 5 |
| Develop a writing habit | 7 |
| Postpone perfection | 9 |
| Use techniques to free up your writing | 10 |
| Give yourself patient time | 17 |
| Avoid writer's block | 18 |
| References | 21 |
| 2 Keeping a writer's notebook | 23 |
| The practicalities | 24 |
| Gathering | 24 |
| Growing | 34 |
| Conclusion | 35 |
| References | 35 |
| 3 Character creation | 37 |
| Finding your characters | 37 |

| | | |
|----------|--|------------|
| | Developing your characters | 40 |
| | Author interview | 45 |
| | Portraying your characters | 49 |
| | Character and plot | 59 |
| | References | 60 |
| 4 | Setting | 63 |
| | Setting and character | 64 |
| | Setting and emotion | 65 |
| | Setting and plot | 66 |
| | Real or invented places | 72 |
| | Author interview | 76 |
| | Conclusion | 82 |
| | References | 82 |
| 5 | Point of view: trying on voices | 85 |
| | First-person narration | 88 |
| | Author interview | 90 |
| | The narrator's voice | 92 |
| | Form of narration | 100 |
| | Conclusion | 103 |
| | References | 103 |
| 6 | Point of view: degrees of knowing | 105 |
| | Third-person narration | 105 |
| | Some unusual points of view | 117 |
| | Voice: tone and attitude | 123 |
| | Conclusion | 127 |
| | References | 128 |
| 7 | Showing and telling | 129 |
| | What are showing and telling? | 129 |
| | Showing | 132 |
| | Telling | 136 |
| | Dialogue and stories | 140 |
| | When to show and tell | 154 |
| | References | 155 |

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------|------------|
| 8 | Structure | 157 |
| | What is structure? 157 | |
| | Author interview 157 | |
| | Dramatic action 159 | |
| | Time 163 | |
| | Bringing the parts together 175 | |
| | References 175 | |
| 9 | The story and the reader | 177 |
| | What sort of story? 177 | |
| | Author interview 178 | |
| | Genre and the reader 194 | |
| | Genre and the writer 197 | |
| | Writer, reader and story 199 | |
| | References 199 | |
| | <i>Index</i> | 201 |

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

The publisher and authors would like to thank the following for permission to reprint material under copyright:

Extract from 'The Dream', Anon, taken from N.J. Dawood (trans.) (1973) *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, London: Penguin. Translation copyright © 1995 by N.J. Dawood. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

Extract from Lindsay Clarke, 'Going the Last Inch: Some thoughts on showing and telling' by Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (eds) (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, London: Macmillan. Copyright © 2001 by Lindsay Clark. Reproduced by permission of PFD (www.pfd.co.uk) on behalf of Lindsay Clarke.

'I could see the smallest things' from Raymond Carver (1985) *The Short Stories of Raymond Carver*, London: Picador/Pan Books. Copyright © 1985 by Raymond Carver. Reprinted with permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

Extracts from 'Pigeons at Daybreak' by Anita Desai (1978) *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*, London: Penguin. Copyright © 1978 by Anita Desai. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Extracts from 'Writing Short Stories' by Flannery O'Connor (1970 [1957]) *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Sally and Robert Fitzgerald,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

eds), New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Reproduced by permission of PFD (www.pfd.co.uk) on behalf of Flannery O'Connor.

Extract from 'The Dying Room' from Georgina Hammick (1986) *People For Lunch*, London: Methuen. Reprinted by kind permission of the author and The Sayle Literary Agency.

Extract from Raymond Carver (1986 [1982]) *Fires*, London: Picador. Copyright © 1982 by Raymond Carver. Reprinted with permission of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

Extract from George Gissing (1983) *New Grub Street* (John Goode, ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press. Copyright © 1993 by John Goode, Chronology of George Gissing © 1992 by Stephen Gill, Updated Bibliography © 1999 by David Grylls. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

Extract from W. Somerset Maugham (2001) *A Writer's Notebook*, London: Vintage. Reprinted by permission of A.P. Watt Ltd on behalf of The Royal Literary Fund and by kind permission of the Trustees of the W.S. Maugham Estate.

Extract from Susan Minot (2000) 'The Writing Life'. Copyright © 2000 by Susan Minot. Originally appeared in 'Book World', *The Washington Post* (16 January 2000). Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchardt Inc. on behalf of the author.

Extract from Bernard MacLaverty (1983) *Cal*, London: Jonathan Cape. Copyright © 1983 by Bernard MacLaverty. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd, and of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Extract from P.F. Kluge (1996) *The Biggest Elvis*, London: Vintage. Reproduced by kind permission of The Random House Group Ltd and the author.

Extract from Jed Mercurio (2003) *Bodies*, London: Jonathan Cape. Copyright © 2003 by Jed Mercurio. Reproduced by permission The Random House Group Ltd, and of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Extracts from 'Mary Adare' and 'Sita Kozka' from Louise Erdrich (1987) *The Beet Queen*, London: HarperCollins. Copyright © 1986 by Louise

Erdrich. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, and of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd

Extract from J.M. Coetzee (1991) *Age of Iron*, London: Penguin. Reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates Limited.

Extract from Pat Barker (1998) *Another World*, Harmondsworth: Viking (Farrar, Straus & Giroux edition, 1999). Copyright © 1998 by Pat Barker. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd, of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and of Aitken Alexander Associates Ltd.

Extract from John McGahern (1983) *The Dark*, London: Faber & Faber. Copyright © 1983 by John McGahern. Reprinted by permission of A.M. Heath & Co. Ltd.

Extract from 'Girl', by Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River*. Copyright © 1983 by Jamaica Kincaid. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and of The Wylie Agency, Inc.

Extract from Rick Moody (1997) *Purple America: A Novel*, London: Flamingo. Copyright © 1997 by Rick Moody. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown & Company, and of Melanie Jackson Agency.

Extract from Andrew Miller, *Oxygen* (2001) London: Sceptre. Copyright © 2001 by Andrew Miller. Reproduced by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, and of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.

Extract from Tim Lott (2002) *Rumours of a Hurricane*, Harmondsworth: Viking (Penguin Books, 2003). Copyright © 2002 by Tim Lott. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd, and by kind permission of the author and Aitken Alexander Associates.

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright holders. The publishers would be pleased to hear from any copyright holders not acknowledged here, so that this acknowledgement page may be amended at the earliest opportunity.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Linda Anderson and Derek Neale

One of the most daunting essay titles about writing fiction is ‘Do You Have What It Takes to Become a Novelist?’ It was written by John Gardner, who was, in fact, a great enabler and teacher of aspiring writers. But his title echoes exactly the kind of self-questioning and doubt that can hinder writers. Do I have enough talent? Enough time? Adequate life experience or education? Anything new or important to say?

Here’s what Virginia Woolf said: ‘What one wants for writing is habit’ (quoted in Sher, 1999, p.18). This is a soothing prescription and it also happens to be true. That is why we begin this book with two chapters designed to help you get writing routinely and effortlessly. You will learn how to find those subjects that really interest you and how to start developing your material in a writer’s notebook.

After this preparation period, we launch into a comprehensive guide to narrative craft with chapters on character, setting, point of view, showing and telling, structure, and a culminating chapter that explores genre, appropriate length, story types and the importance of the reader.

Writing Fiction is the work of two published authors who are also experienced writing tutors. We have designed and produced popular writing courses for the Open University and have taught the subject at Lancaster University and the University of East Anglia, which are both famous as producers of published writers.

This book features new versions of all relevant chapters from our acclaimed Open University course book, *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings*, which is used in many university and college courses and has achieved worldwide sales. We have revised the chapters specialising in fiction to integrate short illustrative readings. We also include extracts from interviews we have carried out with leading novelists about their personal approaches and strategies. Maggie Gee, Andrew Greig, Stevie Davies, Hanif Kureishi, and Andrew Cowan share successful methods from their own practice.

The book's method is highly practical. It is designed to help you generate your own abundant stack of material in response to suggestions and exercises. The keeping of a writer's notebook is a key strategy and should be begun early on. Your notebook is where you can store your observations, responses and experiments – it acts as a spur to both imagination and commitment. Each chapter of the book contains several writing exercises. Their purpose is to give you immediate practice in whatever aspects of writing are being discussed. They are not tests – they are meant to be enjoyable, doable, sometimes provocative or challenging. If you dislike an exercise, try it anyway. Sometimes irritation or resistance can mobilise creativity in surprising ways. You may find that some exercises will deliver more than an addition to your repertoire of techniques. You may come up with the seed of a narrative, some fictional character who will lodge in your imagination, some scene that will start to suggest a whole story, or a personal memory that you can use in a new way. In these cases, the exercises are a scaffolding that falls away to reveal new work. The book contains a few exercises which are involved with producing longer projects but the majority of the exercises are designed to take between 10 and 45 minutes. If you enjoy a particular exercise, you may want to devote more time to it or return to it and try out variations. If you find yourself working on an exercise for several hours, rejoice – it's no longer an exercise but on its way to being a story or chapter.

This book is appropriate for use on courses or by writers' groups or by individual writers working alone. It is suitable for aspiring writers who have begun to try things out as well as for more experienced writers who want to deepen their skills or seek new directions for their work. It may be worked through sequentially or used as a resource book for both writers and writing tutors to dip in to as needed. If you are a writer working on your own, you may wonder how to gauge the effectiveness

of your writings. The discussion sections after each activity give some guidance on how to review what you've done. Put your work away for a while, and then read it with fresh eyes.

The most important aim of *Writing Fiction* is to help you to discover and nurture your individual voice as a fiction writer. In each chapter you will find lots of advice about writing but you do not have to take it. There are no 'rules' or prescriptions. There is no 'right' way to carry out the exercises, only your own best and truest way.

When you have mastered narrative craft, you will find yourself moving deeper into your stories with greater ease and excitement. Familiarity with technique can free you to enter unexpected territory more quickly – those moments of strangeness and newness or sudden insight that make the act of writing so thrilling and rewarding. Charles Baxter describes this experience as 're-cognition' – knowing something afresh:

It's like that moment when, often early in the morning, perhaps in a strange house, you pass before a mirror you hadn't known would be there. You see a glimpse of someone reflected in that mirror, and a moment passes before you recognize that that person is yourself. Literature exists in moments like that.

(Baxter 1997: 49, 50)

This is an eloquent reminder that fictional truth emerges from the realm of the unconscious rather than from technique and intellect alone. Techniques are essential but they are only a means – the gateway, not the destination. We hope that working your way through this book will increase not just your technical range but also your imaginative reach.

References

- Baxter, Charles (1997) *Burning Down the House: Essays on fiction*, Minnesota: Graywolf Press.
- Sher, Gail (1999) *One Continuous Mistake: Four noble truths for writers*, London: Penguin Arkana.

This page intentionally left blank

Stimulating creativity and imagination: what really works?

Linda Anderson

Writers speak a lot about the ‘blank page’ – usually the daunting emptiness of it or, sometimes, the lure of it. How do writers get started afresh each day, facing the pristine pages or the empty screen?

Let’s look first at two opening sentences. These are the habitual starting points used by two novelists at the beginning of their daily practice. One of the novelists is a fictional character and the other is a real living writer.

Can you guess which sentence was written by an imaginary character and which by an actual author?

One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horse-woman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

The first sentence is one version of the constantly reworked opening of a novel by Joseph Grand, a somewhat comic figure in Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1960 [1947]), which explores the impact of an outbreak of bubonic plague on the inhabitants of the imaginary town of Oran. Joseph Grand is an aspiring novelist who devotes all of his spare time and energies to writing. He is impelled by the dream of a publisher reading his

work and being so thunderstruck that he stands up and says to his staff, 'Hats off, gentlemen!' (Camus 1960 [1947]: 98), which conjures the faintly surreal vision of publishers sitting in offices wearing their hats. But Grand can never progress beyond his first sentence. He worries at every detail of it, ponders the derivation and meaning of words, frets over the tastefulness, the rhythms, the factual accuracy. Is 'sorrel' really a colour? Are there really any flowers in the Bois de Boulogne? He makes minor alterations, never satisfied. And of course, the sentence doesn't work – we see the writer's fussy effort more than the scene itself.

The second sentence is the well-known line which uses all twenty-six letters of the alphabet. In volume two of her autobiography, New Zealand writer Janet Frame (1984) describes how she started her daily writing sessions by typing this sentence repeatedly when she was creating her first novel. After a long period of hospitalisation during which she endured over two hundred electro-convulsive shock treatments, 'each the equivalent, in degree of fear, to an execution' (Frame 1984: 112), she was living in the home of Frank Sargeson, an established author who took her under his wing. Each morning she went into a garden hut to write, while her mentor pottered about outside, tending his plants. Desperate to appear gratefully industrious she would type that line, alternating it with 'Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party' (Frame 1984: 144). There was no 'theory' behind her strategy – she was acting out of timorousness and embarrassment. But it worked. She was safely at her desk, tap-tapping away. Eventually, the self-consciousness gave way to absorption; the mechanical lines to real work.

Frame's opening lines didn't matter at all; Grand's mattered far too much. The portrayal of Grand is exaggerated for satirical effect, of course, but he does show traits and motivations recognisable to many aspiring writers. He is ambitious and eager for success. He is also dogged by a paralysing perfectionism. His soaring ambition and crippled creativity seem to go hand in hand. Ambition and high standards are important, even essential at certain points, but they can obstruct and deaden writers in the production stages of work.

A researcher into creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996), warned that artists must not start wondering how much their work will sell for or what the critics will think of it, not if they want to 'pursue original avenues'. He found that 'creative achievements depend upon single-minded immersion'. He introduced the concept of 'flow', that state of

timeless-seeming happiness and concentration which comes when one's whole attention is absorbed.

Virginia Woolf has described this inspired state memorably:

I walk making up phrases; sit, contriving scenes; am in short in the thick of the greatest rapture known to me.

(Woolf 1953: 115)

The question for many writers is how to get to the 'rapture' without having to go by way of resistance. Some lucky people never have a problem but many will recognise this scenario:

You sit down to write and then run the gauntlet of self-sabotage: 'must have another coffee/wasn't that the phone ringing/should really check the electricity meter/maybe pop down town briefly/that three for two offer in the bookshop won't last forever/maybe ought to read something just to get the engine going/you'll never be a writer, anyway/who do you think you're kidding . . .'

It may be comforting to know that even the most famous writers can be assailed by doubts and inner saboteurs. Here is Vladimir Nabokov:

Just when the author sits down to write, 'the monster of grim commonsense' will lumber up the steps to whine that the book is not for the general public, that the book will never – And right then, just before it blurts out the word s, e, double – l, false commonsense must be shot dead.

(quoted in Boyd 1991: 31)

How can we slay these lumbering monsters or at least shut them up? Let's explore some practical strategies commonly used by established writers.

Develop a writing habit

'Excellence is not an act, but a habit.'

Aristotle, quoted in Sher 1999: 8

Think again about Janet Frame's procedures. She established a habit of writing. Some new writers think that the correct thing to do is to wait for inspiration. They fear that if they try to write in a down-to-business mood

or at routine times, the writing will not take flight. But inspiration will not reliably hunt you down at the supermarket or even on some idyllic country walk. Even if it did, you would need some practised skills and discipline to make the most of it. Court inspiration; make yourself available. Inspiration comes most often through the habit of work, unexpectedly, in the form of sudden ideas, ways and means, wonderful words and phrases, and sometimes complete breakthroughs. Kenzaburo Oë, Nobel prize-winning novelist, said that it is 'accumulated practice' which enables the writer to 'reveal a landscape no one has ever seen before' (quoted in Sher 1999: 16). Writers practise regularly, just as musicians play and artists sketch.

Perhaps you're wondering how you could possibly fit regular writing practice into a busy life? In his essay, 'Fires', Raymond Carver, 1986 [1982] describes a decade of struggle to write while 'working at crap jobs' and raising two children. The essay is about his 'influences' as a writer but he subverts the usual listing of beloved books and revered authors. For him nothing could be more powerful than 'real influence' – the grinding daily responsibilities that obstruct literary work. He describes a Saturday afternoon spent doing several loads of washing in a busy laundromat. He exchanged sharp words with a customer who objected to the number of washers he'd had to use. Then he was waiting with his basketful of damp clothes, ready to pounce on an available dryer. After half an hour, one finally came to a stop and he was right there. But a woman appeared, checked the clothes, found them not dry enough and inserted two more coins. Frustrated to the point of tears, Carver had this revelation:

At that moment I felt—I knew—that the life I was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers I most admired. I understood writers to be people who didn't spend their Saturdays at the laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children. Sure, sure, there've been plenty of writers who have had far more serious impediments to their work, including imprisonment, blindness, the threat of torture or of death in one form or another. But knowing this was no consolation. At that moment—I swear all of this took place there in the laundromat—I could see nothing ahead but years more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity.

(Carver 1986 [1982]: 33)

It can be consoling to know that most writers have to contend with obstacles to their work. Do you identify with any of Carver's difficulties? Or do you have your own problems? Make some notes to yourself about how you might be able to surmount any practical obstacles to your writing.

Can you carve out some time each day, even if it's just half an hour? It's the constancy that counts, the building of a habit, rather than the length of actual time you are able to spend each week.

Include consideration of times when you cannot actually be at your writing desk but can mull over and progress your ideas, or figure out ways of expressing some things. For example: late at night; when you're travelling by bus or train or even while driving (but don't take notes without stopping the car!); in the bath; in the middle of a boring meeting; during lunch breaks at work; in supermarket queues. In this way, you can keep the momentum going between your longer sessions. Start experimenting to find whatever suits you in terms of allocating time.

Experiment also with special rituals and different locations for your writing. Will it help if you play music? Stick inspiring mottoes on your computer or wall? Have a little shrine of favourite books propped on your desk? Where is the best place for you to write? Proust wrote in bed in a cork-lined chamber. Roald Dahl lay on the floor of a garden hut. J. K. Rowling wrote the first 'Harry Potter' in an Edinburgh café. Find out what works for you.

Postpone perfection

The poet Louise Bogan once used the haunting phrase 'the knife of the perfectionist attitude' (quoted in Olsen 1980: 145). Perfectionism can kill writing, cutting it dead as it tries to emerge. There is a time for perfecting writing and it is not at the outset. Remember the hopelessly stalled Joseph Grand.

But what if you find it painful to produce clumsy, ineffective sentences? You should understand that all writers, even the most experienced, can write badly. The gift of writing is a power that flickers – everyone has mediocre days as well as magical ones. Try to cultivate an attitude of curiosity. As Flannery O'Connor said: 'I write to see what I say' (O'Connor 1990 [1971]: ix). Don't expect everything to be fluent or valuable. Virginia Woolf wrote about finding the 'diamonds of the dustheap' in her daily output (Woolf 1953: 7).

Most successful writers have a high tolerance of raw, messy first drafts and of a series of imperfect subsequent drafts. They know that stamina, the ability to stick with a piece of writing until it emerges as the best they can do, is as important as whatever talent they possess.

For example, Canadian writer Alice Munro said in a *Paris Review* interview that she has 'stacks of notebooks that contain this terribly clumsy writing' (Munro 2007 [1994]: 407). She described how she reaches a point in about three quarters of her fiction when she thinks she will abandon the particular story. Days later, she will suddenly see how to write it. But this only happens after she has said, 'No, this isn't going to work, forget it' (Munro 2007 [1994]: 407).

This kind of struggle is typical. One of the most prolific writers alive today, Joyce Carol Oates, is often thought of as an 'effortless' writer because of her vast output: over eighty books including novels, short story collections, poetry and essays. But she says: 'When people accuse me of writing easily, I can't imagine what they mean.' She writes by hand, starting stories countless times, making comments as she goes, often producing as many as a thousand pages of notes for every 250 printed pages (in Arana 2003: 11). The 'secret' of good writing is rewriting.

The most empowering right you can give yourself is the entitlement to write roughly, uncertainly, even badly.

Writing a first draft is like groping your way into a darkened room, or trying to catch a faintly overheard conversation. It is only when you have some kind of scaffolding down on the page that you will begin to glimpse the ultimate shape of your narrative.

Use techniques to free up your writing

The poet Paul Muldoon advises new writers not to think of themselves primarily as writers but as receivers (Open University 2004). The writer acts as a kind of medium or channel, catching the words and organising them. You stay alert and 'listen' instead of bracing yourself for some hard test. If you cultivate an attitude of curiosity, trust, and receptivity towards writing, it will flow more easily.

There are several techniques that can help with this. They are often referred to as methods for 'harnessing the unconscious mind'. The idea is that our conscious mind contains only a fraction of our selves and we need to tap the huge fund of ideas, images, memories and emotions that