

Short Cuts

Iain Banks did it in six weeks, Joanne Harris in a few months, while Donna Tartt, famously, took 10 years. **Sarah Broughton** found out what it's like to write a novel in just *three days* and asks whether we should be less precious about getting on with our writing.

At roughly the same time as Iain Banks was describing how he wrote his latest novel, *Dead Air*, in just six weeks, I was preparing to take part in a 'Three-Day Novel Writing Contest' run by Canadian publishing company Anvil Press. Our circumstances were slightly different - Banks became a million selling novelist with his first novel *The Wasp Factory* nearly twenty years ago and has been relentlessly productive ever since. I, on the other hand, have been struggling to complete my first novel for longer than I'm prepared to admit, albeit with encouragement from a publisher and an agent. Just to make life more complicated, I decided to start from scratch, ignore the several drafts and 40-odd thousand words of my first book, and see where a blank page, no ideas and 72 hours of continuous creativity would lead me.

The issue of just how long one should take to write a novel has always been a thorny one. The hype around Donna Tartt's recently published second novel *The Little Friend*, appeared to focus more on the 10-year gap between her first and second novel, with reviewers taking the line of 'was it worth the wait?', rather than concentrating on the book's own merits. Tartt herself points out, somewhat wearily, that she simply "writes slowly". *The Secret History*, her first book, took eight years. "If I could write a book a year and maintain the same quality, I'd be happy". She is far from unusual - Joseph Heller left it thirteen years after *Catch-22* before publishing

Something Happened in 1974. Jeffrey Eugenides, author of *The Virgin Suicides* spent nine years writing his next book *Middlesex*, and both Margaret Mitchell and Harper Lee *never* got around to publishing a second novel.

Iain Banks is at the other end of the spectrum. Since writing *The Wasp Factory*, he has settled into a routine of writing for a highly disciplined three months and then taking the rest of the year off. In less than 20 years he has published 11 mainstream and eight science fiction novels. When asked once whether he felt he had a responsibility to his talent to take longer to craft his work he replied, “In theory, I like the sound of this as a concept but I haven’t managed to get it embedded into my consciousness”. In the context of this level of productivity, writing *Dead Air* in just six weeks is less staggering, although, Banks isn’t certain he should publicize the fact. “Obviously that means it was dashed off in a moment of nonsense, and it can’t be a real book,” he says wryly. “It was a very conversational book, and that made it easier, but I’d also had a year off, so I was coming to it fairly fresh.” Banks is sanguine about his level of productivity, “I always find it extraordinary that I get accused of being prolific - I don’t do anything else, I don’t review, I don’t do journalism, I just write a novel now and again.”

After writing five of them, Julie Myerson knows that each novel takes her an average of two years. As she approached her fourth novel, she decided to try and speed up the process. She worked out that during the two year period, “ a year and a half is spent groping around” with the final six months being “incredibly prolific” (she can write a third of a novel in six weeks and a quarter of it in two weeks). Her method is always the same “I start by telling everyone I’m writing a novel and then I sit around for six months writing really embarrassing stuff – just like everyone else!”

Before beginning the novel that was to become *Laura Blundy*, she attempted to bypass the ‘groping around’. For the first time she prepared a detailed plan in advance but, as soon as she started to write, she ignored the plan completely and – reverting back to her usual method – started from scratch. It remains the novel Myerson is happiest with and she thinks that forcing herself to think about the process was extremely useful. Having examined whether or not she was “simply wasting time” she came to the conclusion that the gestation period is vital because, “You build up the detail and sense of reality about a novel - it’s like being on a film set - you go into that world every day and it becomes increasingly believable, it’s hard to think how you could shorten the process and still create that level of detail”.

It’s difficult to ascertain whether the practice of ‘speeding up’ inevitably changes the style of writing and whether this is a desirable goal in itself. Joanne Harris wrote her most acclaimed novel, *Chocolat*, in just four months and it has been described as the most ‘organic’ of her novels to date. Harris admits, “It was a first draft, and it was a short book. I don’t usually write that fast, but I was kind of on a roll with that one.” On the other hand, one review of Banks’ *Dead Air* concluded that it ‘has the feel of a story hastily cobbled together from a year of headlines’ and that further editing could have ‘tightened up the prose’ - not so much ‘organic’ as ‘unprocessed’ then. In other words perhaps, whatever pace you write at, as Julie Myerson believes, “you’ve got to give yourself time to jettison stuff.”.

Unfortunately, for some writers, time is not always on their side. Martin Amis thinks the pressure on writers today is far greater than it was in the past. “In my day, when literature was a minority interest, there was no pressure from outside. I didn’t give an interview until my fourth novel. For first time novelists who make a

splash the pressure is considerable.” Maggie O’Farrell built a huge following with her debut *After You’d Gone* and published her second, *My Lover’s Lover* two years later. “I’ve written three novels quite quickly (her third is due for publication in 2004) and I’m sure there is a point where you have to stop and take stock - I don’t think you can go on at that rate, so I’m expecting not to!” The principle being - whether you write quickly or slowly, whether you’re an Iain Banks or a Donna Tartt, as O’Farrell comments - “It’s good to stop – if you’ve got nothing to say, you shouldn’t be saying it”.

And as for me - my three-day novel experience resulted in a 56-page ‘novella’ entitled *The Incredibly True History of Tracy Lycett*. The most interesting aspect of the whole experience was how liberating it was. Twenty-four hours in I felt seriously intoxicated, my pen loosened and my thought process became distinctly cavalier. By the time I written my way through the 48-hour mark, I knew I could have written anything (anything that would get me through the night anyway!). Seventeen thousand words later I was ecstatic - I’d not only survived the experience, I’d amazed myself with my productivity and was convinced that I’d discovered a new way of working which would result in novels coming out of my ears at a rate of knots, so to speak. That, of course, was only the euphoria talking – six months on my snails pace has returned and I now crawl along as slowly as I ever did, whittling away at each and every word before I commit it to paper. In times of extreme stagnation, I comfort myself with the thought that, if I wanted to, I could be less precious, I could write faster *but* I would produce a completely different book. Well, there’s always next year’s ‘Three-Day Novel Writing Competition’ ...

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Read [*The Incredibly True History of Tracy Lycett*](#)