

HOW TO BE AN AUTHOR

THE BUSINESS OF BEING
A WRITER IN AUSTRALIA

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List of acronyms

ABDA	Australian Book Designers Association
ABN	Australian Business Number
ALAA	Australian Literary Agents' Association
ASA	Australian Society of Authors
CALD	culturally and linguistically diverse
CBCA	Children's Book Council of Australia
FAQ	frequently asked questions
IPEd	Institute of Professional Editors
ISBN	International Standard Book Number
ISSN	International Standard Serial Number
LGBTQIA	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, asexual
MC	master of ceremonies
MEAA	Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance
NED	National edeposit
NLA	National Library of Australia
ONIX	ONline Information eXchange
PR	public relations
Q&As	questions and answers
RRP	recommended retail price
SCBWI	Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators
SPN	The Small Press Network
YA	young adult

About this book

A writer who dreams of being published understands that there is more to being an author than getting words down on the page. A writer is a creator but, if they also wish to be published, at least some of the time they may also need to be their own office manager, marketing and public relations person, and perhaps even distributor and bookseller.

In this book, we are going to assume that you are one of the writers who actually writes, rather than someone who only thinks or talks about writing. We are also going to assume that you would like to be published and are keen to receive some industry insights on all the ins and outs of the business of being a writer.

Every writer has their own personality and method, and exists somewhere on the spectrum of introvert to extrovert, orderly to shambolic. Whichever kind of writer you are, we know that across time and with practice, you will come to understand all the wonderful, messy and chaotic aspects of your own creative process. You will participate in the steady accrual of hours at the desk – amassing words, creating poems, stories, novels, non-fiction. And you will understand how writing time can be painful and exhilarating, pointless and purposeful.

How does a writer become a published author? First, maybe, they dare to think of themselves as *a writer*. Amidst discarded drafts and changes of direction, and with a growing understanding of voice and which ideas are big enough to sustain a poem, a story, a novel, every writer begins somewhere. Many writers remember the first thrill of recognition upon sharing their work – of active encouragement, of reading to an audience, of winning a competition, of being published online or in a journal. Many writers begin by writing alone, but along the way find a trusted mentor or a community of writers around them.

We can't help you turn up at the desk to write, but we *can* help you with all the other business of being a writer who is aiming for publication, and we can certainly give you our most useful tips and assist with some perennial pickles.

The questions we answer in this book are ones we have heard in classrooms, on panels and in writing workshops. They are the questions emailed to us or posed while waiting in the queue at the ice-cream van at writers festivals. They are questions about inspiration and choosing a genre, about research and writer's block, about building an author brand and how to know when a manuscript is ready for submission, about how to create and maintain a social media profile and find the right publisher.

In this book, we answer these questions from a teacher's perspective and from a publisher's perspective. Creative writing lecturer Deborah Hunn concentrates on the business of being a writer prepublication, while publisher Georgia Richter looks at the things you need to know after a manuscript has been submitted and accepted for publication.

This book includes tips from Fremantle Press marketing and communications manager Claire Miller, whose role it is to coach authors on how best to present themselves effectively to media and to their audience. It also contains advice from booksellers and self-published authors and other industry specialists.

And you will hear from writers themselves. The eighteen authors who responded to our questions in the 'Ask an author' sections have one, two or many published books to their name. Each started out as someone who wanted to write, and each works hard at being an author. Each has a sense of their own brand, and regularly interacts with their audience. These writers represent many genres – from children's picture books, junior fiction and young adult fiction, to literary and commercial fiction, narrative non-fiction, biography and poetry. However, the questions we put to them were intentionally not genre specific but aimed at drawing out their personal experiences about writing process and practice, and inviting them, as published authors, to share with new writers what they have learned along the way.

This book looks at the business of being a writer from the very beginning – all the things you might want or need to know, for instance, about the business associated with writing a manuscript, approaching publishers, the editing process, and promoting your work. This book is also designed to be dipped into and consulted as you move into different phases of your own writing practice. If you are contemplating self-publication, we look at this subject specifically in Chapter 5. Primarily though, while much of this book will be useful to writers who would like to self-publish, *How to be an Author* is aimed at those interested in finding a traditional publisher for their work. For further reading,

in Chapter 11 you will find a list of the organisations and resources mentioned throughout the book (and a few more besides), along with the top three resources recommended by each contributing author.

Every writer understands the deep, expanding pleasure of laying down words, the drive to inhabit internal worlds and to create characters, and that almost mystical feeling of participating in a process that can feel close to immortality. And many writers feel the need not only to create, but to share their writing with readers.

If you are one of these writers, then this book is for you.

1. In the beginning

- Writers are readers
- Inspiration and ideas
- Some triggers for creativity
- How to know when there is enough material to begin
- Dedication to the craft of writing
- Establishing a routine
- Choosing a genre
- Finding a voice

A creative writing teacher has frequent encounters with students new to the writing practice. Students often know they want to write, but going about it can seem a daunting task. The role of the creative writing teacher, and the role of this book, is to help you navigate some of the terrain the new writer invariably encounters. In the first four chapters we will address some of the questions commonly asked by new writers as they begin to think about their practice as something to get serious about. A life of writing can be glorious and exasperating, rewarding and confronting. But before we dive in, please remember that your health and wellbeing should always be a top priority. While the business of being a writer can be challenging, none of it should be soul-destroying. At different times in your life, it may be enough just to write and not to publish, or to not write at all: remember that you always have a choice in what you do.

Writers are readers

If writers are the ones who write, they must also be the ones who read. No musician ever composed in a vacuum; no artist ever painted without reference to the art that came before and that is being made around them. If we are lucky, books and stories are some of the earliest artforms we are

exposed to. We listen to books and fall in love with stories long before we begin to dream that we can be storytellers ourselves. For people who are attuned to words and drawn to write, there comes a time when we begin to read consciously, and as if we are apprentices. We begin to ask why masterful prose is so masterful, and why less successful executions of language do not work.

Through reading, we never stop learning about the art of being a skilled wordsmith. Throughout this book, you will hear from writers how important voracious, thoughtful, constant reading is to the writer's craft. So: reading is crucial. As for writing – where does one begin?

Inspiration and ideas

Some individuals appear to hop into writing with ease, knocking out a novel in no time. Is it really that easy? Some of them might be bluffing. Others may just be freakishly fortunate. For the rest of us, writing requires hard work. If you are new to establishing your writing practice, turning up at the desk is one thing, but wondering how and what to put down on the page can be quite another.

Just write is sound advice, and some of the lucky ones do. You may often feel time-poor and the pressure of other aspects of your life calling. If you want to write, you must set these aside, for the time being, and begin.

So, let's start at the very beginning of any writing project – with ideas and inspiration. If you attend writers festivals or listen to author interviews, you will often hear two questions posed by those interested in the writing process. One of these, which we will return to later in this chapter, is about the author's methods or routines. The other question will take the form of something like:

- Where do you get the ideas for stories from?
- What inspired you to write about ...?
- What was the inspiration for that moment in your book where ...?

The answers to such questions are varied – ideas can indeed come from anywhere. While some of what you come across may seem a little daunting (you're unlikely to be sitting atop Mount Everest or chatting over dinner with a Nobel Prize winner anytime soon), a lot of it is comfortably relatable, and will possibly already be part of your everyday life. This may

be so even if you don't yet recognise precisely what shines out or how you can use it. It is that capacity to identify the kernel of an idea that matters, as much as the idea itself.

Jane Austen, drawing on her own inspiration for novel-writing, famously provided the following advice to a would-be writer about seeking ideas for stories: 'Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on.' Austen's near contemporary William Wordsworth was inspired by his sensory encounters with the natural environment during long walks in the countryside. Another writer of the same era, Mary Shelley, is sometimes thought to have found the genesis of her novel *Frankenstein* in the tragic death of her own infant child and her longing to bring her back to life. Of course, the factors that go into building sustainable ideas are not often singular – Austen too found inspiration in nature and place, Wordsworth built on personal suffering and *Frankenstein* famously draws on the myth of Prometheus, while all three authors were, in differing ways, highly conscious of the philosophical, aesthetic and political debates of their times. Whatever the impetus, each writer was able to catch the potential of imaginative sparks that were present in their own lives and creatively transform them into works that, some two hundred years later, maintain an enduring hold on readers.

Children's author Deb Fitzpatrick notes encouragingly that 'ideas can come from anywhere', but she adds a crucial proviso – 'if we are open to them.' It is essential to be an active and curious observer, alive to significant details and open to the potential for stories that surrounds you.

It is equally important to develop a system for recording your ideas. Because, while that flash of inspiration – the one that comes suddenly as you wait for a train or watch two shoppers fight over the last roll of toilet paper – may seem so extraordinarily unique that you will never forget it, the specifics of such eureka moments can fade easily. In the same way, the potential usefulness of some observations – a line of conversation overheard in a pet shop, the sight of a fire engine on your street when there's no fire – may only provide a springboard when you think about them sometime later. So, arm yourself – whether with a small notebook and pen, a digital memo on your mobile, or a journal to jot your ideas and observations in each evening – and make sure you keep a fresh record.

Some triggers for creativity

Historical fiction writer Natasha Lester says, ‘I’ve learned that inspiration can come from anywhere; it’s a matter of being tuned into the possibility and exposing yourself to other media that might spark ideas.’ Poet Caitlin Maling recommends a life of literary crime: ‘I’m a magpie: I collect and steal things to feather my nest. Or maybe a butcherbird, because what I like to steal is song – I am always listening to the peculiarities and particularities of speech wherever I am. Weird things bring me joy, like the Australianism of shortening words. I try to lean into the parts of language that, for whatever reason, cause pleasure.’

Below is a list of suggestions to trigger creativity:

- Family lore and history.
- News stories.
- Observation of daily life in busy places that are rich in variety of people and activities – shopping centres, public transport, beaches, sporting events, markets and fairs.
- Places and activities – walking, cycling and running can provide a powerful impetus for freeing the imagination into loose associative play. Inevitably we do these things in particular places – whether it’s a park, a beach or just around the block – and this can produce heightened observations or a strong instinctive sense of atmosphere that can prove creatively generative.
- Dreams, desires and fantasies.
- What-ifs – projecting alternative versions or outcomes of events that have actually happened, whether in your own life or those of others. This is particularly useful as an imaginative trigger if you are seeking to add difference and depth when transforming autobiographical material into fiction.
- Ask the question, ‘How would an outsider see it?’ Try to observe the world around you from the perspective of an outsider who knows nothing of places, customs or people that you take for granted. Write some diary entries from that perspective. Don’t worry at this stage about self-censoring: these triggers are just for you.
- Freewriting – an exercise for writers seeking to generate a flow of ideas. The aim of freewriting is to write quickly, without censorship or judgement, as spontaneously and loosely as possible, without concern

for logic but being open to dreamlike wordplay and association. It works best if you set a relatively short time limit; a prompt can also be helpful (such as the first object you see; a word or sentence chosen randomly from a book). Freewriting can break through the constraints of judgement or self-criticism that can stifle imaginative play essential to the early generative process.

Don't be hard on yourself if you are seeking story material but feeling low on inspiration and unable to produce impressive work like glossy rabbits from a hat. Sometimes a pause occurs because your mind is still working something out and, providing it's not a precursor to procrastination, if you leave the page you're sweating over and instead spend an afternoon gardening, taking the dog for a walk or playing computer games, you may well find an idea asserting itself when you least expect it. The creative mind is extraordinary in this way.

You will also find that the sources for your ideas and inspiration will change over time, reflecting different phases in your own writing and life, and also changes in subject matter and genre. Caitlin Maling, for instance, recalls:

When I started out, I wrote pretty consistently about myself, often about things or experiences I was having trouble processing. I used to feel that poetry came from a deep well of language and emotion, but as I kept writing, I (thankfully) stopped having enough trauma to fill my writing and I had to find other ways to write. It was interesting for me to learn that my writing impulse was actually separate from this font of emotion. I still use writing as a way to filter and understand my experiences, but I've come to believe that good poems are always doing more than this, particularly in the relationship they form with language. I altered the questions I was asking in my poems: instead of them being questions about myself, I tried to write from asking questions about the world. I write a lot about places and the extra-human world.

Remember that there is no one-size-fits-all template: you need to find what works for you.

Ask an author: Where do you find inspiration or ideas?

Brigid Lowry says:

They say that everyone who has survived childhood already has enough material to last a lifetime. One's own life and experience provide an abundance of good raw material. I have found this to be true for writing memoir fiction, essays and poetry. It no doubt applies to writing plays and film scripts, too, although I have never written either of these.

Other people's lives are also rich material. It pays to be interested, and ask people things. How did you feel about leaving home? Who do you like most, your mother or your father? What is your biggest regret? Have you ever made cheese?

Travelling is a good way to produce ideas. Living a full life and having interesting adventures has many benefits, including providing seed material.

Ideas are not hard to find, actually. They can be found on the street, in the park, at bus stops, in cafés, at railway stations. Further sources include but are not limited to the following: overheard conversations, strange things children say or ask, newspapers and magazines, and dreams.

Sometimes God or the universe magically channel material into my brain. Ideas arrive, inexplicably, often at the oddest times, which is why a writer should always carry a pen and a notebook. (Margaret Atwood advised carrying two pencils in case one breaks or you can't get to a pencil sharpener.) Who knows where these lucky ideas come from, or why they arrive just at that particular moment. Creativity and imagination are mysterious.

Deb Fitzpatrick says:

Inspiration and ideas for my novels come from a variety of places. Sitting at a café people-watching is a great place to start. Sometimes, the experience of watching a film or reading a book can make me feel incredibly creative and motivated to write; other times, simply walking through streets lined with homes, wondering what might be happening beyond those front doors is enough. I also do a lot of walking in bushland and along the coast, and find this very creatively 'opening'. I love weaving these landscapes into my writing.

I've had some of my clearest ideas, though, from real-life events I've heard about on the news. I'm a news addict and will watch or listen to several (choice) news services every day if possible. The tragic death of an experienced glider pilot in the Stirling Range National Park in 2011 was one such story; I simply couldn't get it out of my head and it formed the basis of my novel *The Amazing Spencer Gray*. Western Australia's deadliest natural disaster, the 1996 Gracetown cliff collapse, was something I wanted to explore creatively in my adult novel, *The Break*. And a story I heard on the news while driving my car, about a young child left on a Sydney family's doorstep, is at the heart of *At My Door*.

Of course, like many writers, I blend my fiction with a good dose of the personal – camouflaged where necessary! If I write anything that has happened in my own home with our kids, I always make sure they read it and have the opportunity to ask for changes.

Natasha Lester says:

These days, I usually find my inspiration in the research I'm doing for another book. I'll find a fact or an event that will seize my imagination, but it won't fit in the book I'm currently writing. For example, when I was researching *The Paris Seamstress*, I came across the story of *Vogue* model turned war photojournalist Lee Miller. Her life fascinated me, so she became the inspiration for the main character in *The French Photographer*, my next book. I also find my ideas in newspaper articles, podcasts, movies, television programs, books, art galleries; lots of other places.

The idea for one of my earliest novels, *If I Should Lose You*, came from a newspaper article I read about donor coordinators: nurses who have the incredibly difficult job of caring for a patient on life support while at the same time discussing the possibility of organ donation with the patient's family.

The idea for *The Paris Seamstress* came partly from the movie *Dior and I*. When I was watching the movie, I suddenly had a very vivid picture form in my mind of a mother and daughter working together in a Parisian atelier. The other part of the idea for that book came from a podcast about the growth of the ready-to-wear fashion industry in Manhattan during the 1940s after France was occupied by the Germans and Parisian fashion was no longer accessible to the world.

And Brendan Ritchie says:

I generally avoid actively searching for inspiration or sitting down to think of ideas for writing. Instead, I just try to stay open and receptive to what is happening in the world around me and to recognise when something starts to tug at my subconscious. I had a long list of what I thought were very workable ideas for a debut novel, all extracted from regular sources such as newspapers, memories and anecdotes, but stumbled on the idea that eventually sparked my novel while watching a band play at a music festival. A more recent idea came thanks to a Qantas commercial on television, another while thinking of the route I would travel to arrive at a town in the South West. Each of these experiences reminded me that the relationship between a writer and their body of work is often mysterious and fluid.

Writers regularly talk about how their mind is subconsciously working on creative problems while they're away from their work. A complicated narrative issue can seem impossible to solve while sitting at the computer, but somehow the answer manifests while walking the dog or preparing dinner. Perhaps there is something to be taken from this in relation to ideas and inspiration. Many writers are inquisitive by nature, so giving free rein to this trait and living a life away from the desk seems like a viable way to encounter the kernels from which a novel may be born.

How to know when there is enough material to begin

The short answer to this is: you will not know until you try. And, as we said in the introduction to his book, we assume that writers are the ones who have a drive to write and will turn up at the desk no matter what. This doesn't mean that turning up is always easy. Procrastination can be self-doubt in sheep's clothing. So can the sense that one does not yet have enough material to begin. But ultimately, the only way to know whether you do or don't have enough material is to start writing.

The fascination with ideas and inspiration is understandable given that without these all-important seeds, a story cannot begin to grow and thrive on the page. Remember, though, the seeds themselves are not the full-grown tree or even the sapling; once you have an idea, you still have plenty of work to do.

Fiction, poetry and life writer, Brigid Lowry observes:

I find that I can trust life to provide ideas. Getting them is not the problem. Remembering them and turning them into something worthwhile is another matter. One can help ideas germinate by minimising distraction and by showing up at the desk every day.

Nonetheless, at some stage, you may be required to assess the worth of material collected and what is required of you to move into the process of writing. In the following chapter, we will look in more detail at the nuts and bolts of research and planning, but for now let us consider how a writer can ascertain whether the material they have collected is worth investing precious time in.

As a journalist, Anne-Louise Willoughby was trained in assessing the weight and merit of her material. It is a practice she has carried into her own writing:

I think I am always unconsciously switched onto high alert for a story. Inspiration comes in the moment that I engage with an interesting person – something resonates and begs to be explored. But what can be just as challenging as trying to find an idea is actually being able to determine if the idea has legs. Can it carry the weight expected of an extended work, as opposed to an article?

I have always travelled and I am naturally inquisitive. I was introduced to the subject of one of my projects, a cowboy then in his eighties, by friends in the country near San Antonio, Texas. I knew that he was a legend in the region, but also reticent. His unassuming nature and charismatic smile immediately told me that a story was quietly sitting inside him, waiting to be told. Getting closer to discovering if the idea is worth pursuing is all in how you talk to people you want to get to know. Don't scare them off by getting excited and making big statements about the book you're going to write. Building trust is paramount. To start with, it might be slow going, and you might just find it was not a great idea after all! But don't give up straightaway; listen to your instinct. If the hairs on the back of your neck won't lie down when you think about your idea, you can be pretty sure there is something to tackle.