

How to Write the Perfect Novel



"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."

Samuel Johnson

How to Write the Perfect Novel

INTRODUCTION - HOW TO WRITE DUMBER THAN YOU ARE OR SHOULD I WRITE A BESTSELLER?

I don't know. Do you think you should write a bestseller?

I'm talking about A Bestseller. You know, like you get in libraries and book shops; that thing that follows a conventional arc, where you get comfort from knowing, just enough, how the story is going to end.

I'm talking about genre and demographics and C groups and optimum sales. I'm talking about book signings and morning TV and book club editions that shrink you and put you in cheap acid-free hardbacks that all end up in thrift shops.

Should you do that?

If you do that, does it mean you're selling out, buying into a slick, facile, easy way of life? Will you be an 'overnight' success, a profound failure? Will they review you in the Sunday Times and talk about your 'influences' and your 'style'? Will they get your literary references and see your contemporary political comparisons? Will your old critics finally see in you "themes of a more general nature", like 'Woman discovers adultery in Surrey, destroying joy in new AGA', or 'Gay politician is blackmailed with grainy black & white but tasteful telephoto images in post', or even 'a coming of age story, both touching and warm'?

If you become that person – and I believe it is a person – what happens to the one you left behind? I mean, let's not get histrionic here, just because you write *Shadfeller & Gibbons, Psychic Detective* or *WOMAN & LOVER*, it doesn't mean you have to let go of 'The Novel of My Genius'. You can keep 'The Novel of My Genius' as your pet project. In fact, you can probably improve on it just by sheer dint of having the money to do so. But you can maybe ever garner clout – anything from using your 'proper' publisher's nous, to convincing them to publish your Great Literary Masterpiece with full fanfare.

Hell, just the act of being the author of *CLOCKFACE BOYS*, that intriguing story of boy skiing wizards, means you may finally bring people to 'The Novel of My Genius', looking for more of your magic.

It's all poetry. Hell, if you were American it would be The American Dream.

But can you do it? You keep thinking yes. Then the next day, no. Sometimes in the same day. An hour.

You really do not know.

So, do you think you should write A Bestseller? Maybe if I tell you it will slow 'The Novel of My Genius' down? It's inevitable. Even given that you only take six months out to write a bestseller, it will probably end up being more like a year, when all is said and done.

And what if it's successful? That year could turn into an indefinite time of truly epic proportions. Like the rest of your life, say, always turning out the new sequel in your *Mouse-Mittens & Dustball* series. (Teen angst bestsellers.)

Do you write A Bestseller?

It has taken on massive proportions in your brain, this question. You have

How to Write the Perfect Novel

nowhere to run with it, no-one to ask, no-one to turn to. Would it be the worst mistake of your life or would it make you? Is it something genuinely threatening or are you just afraid of it because you would have to compete on everyone else's terms? You would have to make concessions, take 'criticism' – i.e. change just about everything about you that didn't fit into mainstream genre literature.

And that could be anything, bottomless.

Could you keep yourself interested enough to write A Bestseller? The publisher's list of things-of-which-you-must-not-speak is the list of things you want to write about. Hell, it is you.

Sometimes you reassure yourself that the things publishers (and your granny) don't like about your work would no longer be a problem. You don't have to write about, or with, those things any longer. You've done that. So, you say to yourself, just keep it to a conventional genre, no going Alice in Psyche-land, and it'll be great. They'll love it.

But part of you just isn't buying that. You have a backlog of stories and novellas that editors couldn't 'get'. You once wrote a novel of The Snow Queen. You didn't complete it and, even more sadly, you threw what you had away, because that was a really good book. It had some fabulous stuff in it.

How do you think a publisher would react to that? No publisher 'no-no's in sight. But what genre is it? Horror? Magic Realism? Contemporary adult fairy tale? Think it would make you rich, successful, acceptable?

Not that you'd write that nowadays. It would be too much going back – been there, done that, got the T-shirt. But what would you turn out, could you turn out?

You find that a very difficult question to answer. Because you're not finished with (or even started) 'The Novel of My Genius', moving on feels odd, like leaping ahead 200 pages in a book and expecting the story to make sense. You don't know what you want to say next because you haven't finished saying this yet.

But who cares, right? I mean, you're a writer; you write. Writers write. Whatever is asked of them. You can tell a story. You know what characters are, how you make them. You know how to sustain a narrative arc. You know what the public want. More of the same. You know what publishers want. More of the same. You know what you should write. More of the same.

Just not your same.

You need to write someone else's same because your same isn't good enough. Your same is alienating, difficult, ugly. Your same is an absolutely inexplicable mix of unconventional, unpublishable, personal crap with no "themes of a more general nature".

All you seem to have to go on is that you know nothing; that if you take six months, a year, to write your version of Kate Mosse (why, when Kate has done that so gloriously?) or JKR, or Dan Brown or Robert Ludlum, or any other bestseller on the writing planet, you have absolutely no guarantee that any part of you will tick any boxes.

Here is something that lots of aspiring authors do not know. This is the single most important piece of advice you will ever receive about writing. Ignore it at your peril.

How to Write the Perfect Novel

You cannot write up or dumb down. You are what you are. Any author who tells you they write pot-boilers or romances or porn for profit, keeping their 'serious' writing elsewhere, is a lying son of a bitch. An epic two-faced self-deceiver. A coward. For it cannot be done. And any publisher or editor worth his salt will tell you so, to your face.

All the Kate Mosses, the writers of teenage vampire fantasies, the Action Thriller authors, cannot do better than what they are doing. They will not some day write *The Great American Novel*. They are writing to the limit of their capabilities. A reader or critic saying "it would have been a good novel if only he'd..." is completely missing the point. 'He' didn't elevate the novel any higher or dumb it down any lower because 'he' can't.

If you take someone and make them copy the style of someone else they will sound like a parody, unless they think like that person themselves. I sometimes think that's how parodies came about – people trying to emulate others. You do not become a Mills & Boon author, you're 'born' one. And if you are ashamed of that, you're in trouble.

I recently read an excerpt from a historical gay romance (yes, they exist) where the author referred to the character's penis as "boiling in his pants". In the same scene she also referred to it as "rumbling". Now, you would think that you didn't need to point out that penises do not rumble; stomachs do and volcanoes do, but not penises. Likewise penises "boiling in pants" sounds rather savage; at best, as if the hero is over-hot, not erect as she intended.

Let's all sneer at the bad porn author.

Sneer on alone. This woman sells a lot of books in her sub-genre. Unfortunately, but not unusually, she is also a self-righteous little toady, full of vindictiveness towards other authors. She's as bright as a doorknob and as gifted as a teaspoon, and none of this makes a single bit of difference. She still sells books. A lot of books, given the specialised tastes of her field. She's successful and has almost entirely positive reviews on Amazon, simply because she writes for a specific genre that expects overblown, florid descriptions of penises and flower-giving pretty boys.

In short, she writes to the very best of her ability and delivers exactly what her equally discerning readers want, to her equally focussed publishers. She has found her place in life, doing what she loves, very successfully.

But she would be a whole lot happier (and certainly more likeable) if she accepted who she was and stopped torturing herself vis-à-vis the 'professionals' whose status she covets, because her chances of being 'more' than what she is are very, very slim indeed – although Kate Mosse's (*Labyrinth*) I-learned-this-in-my-writing-class description of humid heat "squatting over the square like a malignant Buddha" may entitle her to a sense of hope.

Should I write a bestseller? is the most important question you can ask yourself. If you shirk this task, or attempt to sit on the fence with it, you are doomed to failure – and the world is full of failed authors, it doesn't need one more.

I would say it's the one question I can't help you with, but actually I can. Read through this book, 'How to's...', pastiches and all. If, after you've seen the truths of your favourite genre laid bare, you feel you could never willingly embrace the

How to Write the Perfect Novel

styles & formulae, tell the same story over and over, or feel sure you will be the one to challenge the outmoded genre tricks with diversity, novelty and originality – you are seriously barking up the wrong tree.

By all means follow your dreams to write, but give yourself a break and don't eat yourself up if literary conventions and genre rules are not for you. Don't resent and envy the authors who do it. They may be 'luckier' than you because they are being rewarded for mediocrity, but you are who you are, and it isn't their fault if you refuse to accept that. No-one makes you play outsider, and the world does not owe you a living.

Remember, bestsellers never last unless they cross over into 'Literature'. Where are Alistair MacLean, Barbara Cartland and Hammond Innes now? Who cares? Not on the (current) bestseller lists, and that's all that counts. They are yesterday's flavour, gone and largely forgotten, other than as some showy and meaningless statistics in the Guinness Book Of Records. Fame is even more fickle than wealth, so why get in a twist about what 'they've' got? They won't have it for long, believe me.

The secret is, whichever path you choose, maverick or mainstream, forgive the others who choose to do different. The writer's life is backstabbing enough without you joining in.

So should you write A Bestseller?

Read on, then you can tell me...

How to Write the Perfect Novel

SAMPLE

Copyright Material