



Journey Planet 25  
James Bacon, Michael Carroll, Chris Garcia  
~Editors~

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Art Credits

Cover by Michael Carroll

Pages 8, 16, 42, 44 by Darné Lang

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# What is NaNoWriMo? by Michael Carroll

It's "National Novel Writing Month", an annual thirty-day period in which people panic, doubt themselves, forget to eat, and lose sleep, patience and their sense of self-worth... But, on the positive side, it sometimes ends with an overwhelming sense of triumph.

So, yes, National (it's not national, it's international) Novel (the target is 50,000 words which is considerably shorter than what most publishers will accept as the minimum length for a novel) Writing (can't argue with that part) Month (though many professional writers will tell you that the bulk of the work on a novel is not the drudgery of the first draft, but the many months of preparation beforehand, and then the many other months of fine-tuning and editing and rewriting afterwards) has taken place in November since before the turn of the century.

It's a wonderful idea: far too many would-be writers don't ever make it to publication because they fail to grasp the simple concept that in order to be a writer, one must write.

Participation in NaNoWriMo forces the writer—through the medium of guilt and potential self-loathing—to actually apply their bottoms to a chair and their fingers to a keyboard and start writing. And, most important of all, to *finish what they've started*.

The purpose of this issue of *Journey Planet* is to help those interested in taking part in NaNoWriMo to achieve that wondrous goal. See, even if your novel is rubbish—and if you haven't written one before, the odds are fairly strong that it's not going to be a masterpiece straight out of the gate—at least you'll be able to look back at it and say, "I made that."

But if your career as a writer has, to date, consisted entirely of you planning to start your novel "one day," then that day is November 1st.

Because, to be blunt, no one—and I really mean no one, in the whole world—cares one teeny tiny bit about the books you’re “going to write.” They only care about what you *have written*. And that’s as it should be. The book you’ve not yet had time to get around to writing is not a book. It’s at best a daydream.

Have you got the point yet? Yes, I’m sure you have. But just in case you haven’t grasped what this is all about, let me break it down to even simpler terms...

Types of Novels That Might Get Published:

1. *Finished novels.*

Types of Novels That Will Not Get Published:

1. *Unfinished novels.*

2. *Not-even-started novels.*

If this comes across as too blunt, or too hostile, then by all means feel free to stop reading now. Go ahead and curl up in your comfy corner and continue to wistfully daydream about that book you’re going to write one day. Good for you! It’s safer in that corner, isn’t it? You don’t need to worry about impending deadlines or inadequate word-counts or nasty criticism. Why, since you’re pretending that you’re going to write a book, why not go that one step further and pretend that it’s a best-seller, too? Why not grant yourself one of those Important Literary Awards while you’re at it? How about an Oscar to go with it, and a Pulitzer prize? They’ll look great on your imaginary shelf alongside that gold-embossed deluxe edition of your pretend book, and your platinum album, and that natty certificate you received that day when you were elected President of the Universe.

I’m serious. If you’re offended by this then stop writing forever. Quit. Because if you can’t cope with this, then if you ever do manage to get something published you’ll be utterly destroyed when the negative reviews start to come in. Or, and believe me, this is even worse: when *no* reviews come in...When your book is out there for all the world to enjoy, and the world doesn’t give one stinky fart about it. When your friends all verbally congratulate you but not one of them bothers to buy a copy. When your family members badger you for a freebie and then they don’t even read it.

All that too negative for your tastes? Aw, poor you! Here, let me wrap your delicate ego up in lavender-scented tissue paper and safely tuck it away in a snug little hope-chest, protected from all the Bad Things and the monsters of reality.

Or...

You could stop daydreaming, get up off your backside and *write that damn book*. Show me—and everyone else—that you're *not* all talk and no action.

Yes, it'll be hard work. At times it'll be harder than you ever imagined. But when you're done... Ah, when you're done...! When you type those glorious words "The End" at the bottom of the last page... When you know that something exists now because you—and *only* you—brought it into being... That's the best feeling in the world. And you'll have earned it!

So, you lovely people, right now is the time you make the final decision about that book you've been meaning to write.

Because you *can* do it. Oh yes. I believe that with all my heart. You can do it, if you want it bad enough.

It's up to you. Quit now and shut up about it forever, or knuckle down (and shut up about it until it's done).

Your move, sport. What's it gonna be?



# Editorial from James Bacon 2-Time Hugo Winner!

Well, go writing!

Writing a novel is not on my wish-list of things to do: my imagination does not work like that. I would love to be able to, but I am not that good, and sometimes recognising mediocrity is a positive thing.

I often wish some people with great ideas who can actually write fiction could find the time and energy to bash out that novel. Not because I demand it, but because they want to, and just cannot find the wherewithal to do so. NaNoWriMo is like a sort of self-help clinic that helps folk bash out that novel. Now, whether that novel is any *good*...

I used the recent win of a Hugo Award to ask many professionals for contributions. To those who acquiesced I am very grateful for their time and words and work. I've always felt there is a type of covenant between creators and fans in Science Fiction and Comic fandom: one built on respect, mutual appreciation and common interest, and we are just very lucky to have people so generous with their time.

I am rather busy at the moment: work has altered operationally, so there is added workload and responsibility, and I must always focus on being fit and ready and prepared for work. Dublin 2019 is in an exciting phase as we move the bid forward and look to concrete many elements. Nothing is a given, but one makes hopeful plans.

## Journey Planet 25

I am grateful to Mike and Chris for this issue: it is a great idea. I had wanted more fans to contribute, but that proved trickier than I expected and time was against us.

We have some good issues coming up: World War 1, Fan History, Sherlock/Orphan Black, The 21st Century and possibly one that will blow my socks off.

And we welcome contributions, so do get in touch if something takes your fancy - [journeyplanet@gmail.com](mailto:journeyplanet@gmail.com).

1,918. That is how many fans voted for *Journey Planet* first round, and then we got pushed to 2,506 votes in the run off. With 3,818 votes in total, I was astounded and amazed and so grateful. Thanks if you nominated or voted and thanks to my co-editors and all contributors, and Bill Burns who hosts us on [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com) and all who make *JP* what it is.

Winning a Hugo is an amazing thing, and I have to admit an emotional moment. Afterwards I had expected to see *Drink Tank* pushed off the short-list, and I had expected to be angry, but





by then I had spoken to Chris, and you know, won a Hugo, so it didn't hurt as I expected to see it in sixth position, but it was an unusual feeling.

I was disappointed to see *File 770* and *Banana Wings* were not on the short list and want to recommend them to everyone, as well as Pete Young's *Big Sky* (<http://efanzines.com/bigsky/>) which is amazing and so readable. I did expect the 400+ pages about Gollancz would have been a shoo-in, but maybe we need to talk about it more: it is a fabulous fanzine.

Do enjoy this issue, and my thanks as ever to everyone involved

Very best,  
James



## Pros on Prose - Part One

*In preparation for this issue, we compiled a list of writing-related questions and sent it out to a select group of massively accomplished writers. Unfortunately, this project has been rather last-minute – because it’s kind of important that we go to press before November! – so there wasn’t enough time for every author to get back to us.*

*If this issue is a success, and if we have the time, perhaps we’ll revisit the idea next year – giving the authors more time to respond, of course – and receive a whole new bunch of answers.*

*However, those who generously did respond have provided us (and you, our beloved readers) with some fascinating and often quite educational answers... From this, we learn that there is no right way or wrong way to approach any aspect of writing. With one exception, of course: if you want to be a writer, you have to write.*

***Do you plan your novels in detail, or just start with a vague idea and make it up as you go along? (If it’s the latter, how do you know when the book is finished?) If you’ve tried both, which method do you feel yields the best results?***

**Ruth F. Long:** I do a bit of both and it depends entirely on the story. Generally speaking however I have a beginning (usually a character or two in a situation and a setting), the way I think it will end and a couple of things that I want to happen along the way - key scenes etc. And then I make it up as I go along. If I do have a plan I think it’s vital to be aware that the plan will probably change and I don’t need to stick rigidly to it. Often the characters go off and do their own thing, which is when my subconscious is really working and has a better handle on the story and the characters than my conscious mind does. Unfortunately it’s impossible to talk about the way this happens without sounding slightly insane, but basically I say “characters, go and do this thing.” and they say “No, we’re going to go off and do this completely different thing instead.” and it’s better. Yes. Nuts. Told you.

**Liz Williams:** I have to plan, otherwise I get lost and derailed. When my writing group saw my first novel, they said it was like a kung fu movie: lots of people died, there were a lot of explosions and they did not think I knew what was going on. They were right. I am now a planner not a pantser.

**Chaz Brenchley:** My first three novels I plotted out carefully beforehand, and then stuck to that outline - until the end of the third, where the ending I'd devised made no sense to the characters as they'd developed. And then my fourth really didn't have a plot - "gunman snaps in shopping mall" - so I wrote that on the fly. And found that my stress levels went through the roof, but it made for a better book. So that's how I've done it ever since, more or less. I like to start with a title, a first line and a last line, so that I know where I'm going and - as you say - when I get there. A book is a journey, and I like to go hand in hand with the reader, finding out together what lies ahead. Someone once said that being asked to write an outline of a book he hadn't written yet was like being asked to draw a map of a country he hadn't visited. Now I say that, a lot.

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**“No one has ever found a way to publish an  
unwritten novel.”**

**Poul Anderson**

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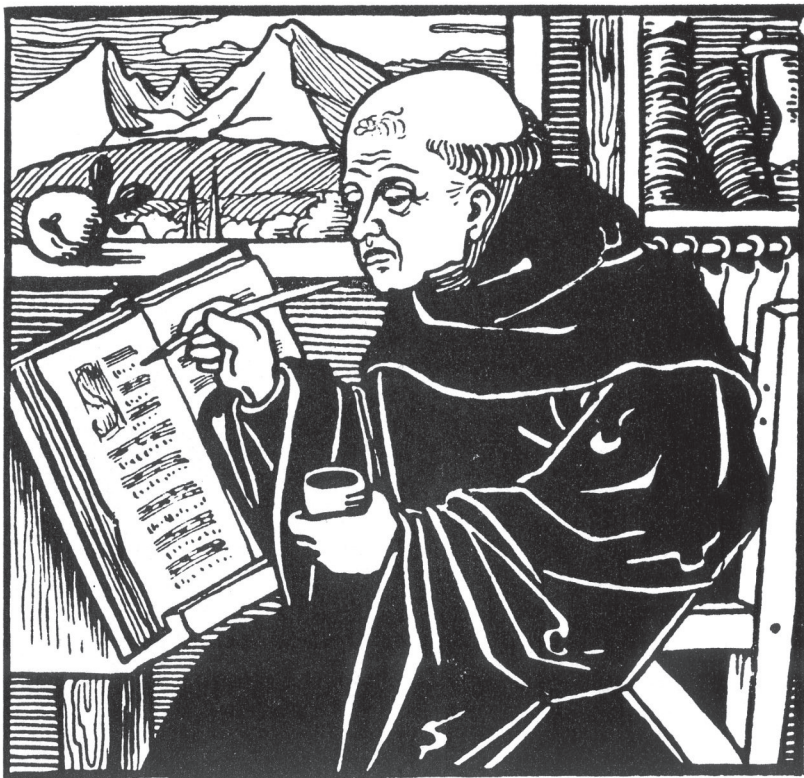
**Gail Carriger:** I obey my outline overlord.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** I once wrote a (short, 80,000 word) novel with meticulous planning. It took ten days. It's never worked for me at any other time, sadly. Planning bores and unnerves me. I tend to start with core ideas, a few events, some known characters and a vague idea of where I'm going... and then just start. The book comes out of the fingers. It can be hard journey that way, and doubtless takes longer than it would with planning, but (a) it just seems to be the way I work, and (b) I do believe you can wind up with more interesting novels, as new things develop and arrive along the way. Holy cow you can have some tough weeks, though. A novel's finished when it's finished. There's a shape that's undeniable.

## Journey Planet 25

**Michael Carroll:** I plan in great detail – the planning takes up about 80% of the entire writing process! I start with the premise (usually one or two lines) and then keep throwing new ideas at it. Eventually a story will begin to form. Then I draw a line under all of that, and start again. For most books, this happens maybe four or five times. Some, though, are a lot more work. For *Hunter* (the seventh novel in my *Quantum Prophecy / New Heroes* series) I started with far too many ideas and it took me about six months to distill them down into a solid story. It was worth it in the end, but that was a tough one.

About twenty years back I gave the “seat of the pants” method a go, just to see what would happen. I started with a vague idea, and, well, the results were not great. The story meanders all over the place for a long time before it actually gets going, and there’s a lot of dead ends, unresolved plotlines and unnecessary characters. The only good thing about it is the ending, which I will one day steal for something else.



**When writing the first draft, how do you motivate yourself to keep going on those days when the blank screen (or page) is just staring back at you and The Words Just Won't Come?**

**Gail Carriger:** Put hands on keyboard, press fingertips down one after another. Something will happen.

**Ruth F. Long:** I set an absolute minimum word count for the day - usually something small like maybe 500 words - and then force myself to write it, even if it's drivel. Once I've got the 500, I generally can keep going and write more. I also bank words from one day to the next. I keep a spreadsheet of word-count so that I can see if I'm behind or ahead. And I repeat the mantras "everyone's first draft is rubbish", "editing comes after" and "you can't fix a blank page."

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Writing a novel is like captaining a ship.

Writing a novel is like knitting a sweater for a unicorn?

Writing a novel is like fighting a cyborg bear!

No, no, and no.

Writing a novel, as it turns out, is like writing a novel.

**Chuck Wendig**

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**Chaz Brenchley:** Do something else, usually, until panic drives me back. Or go for a walk to think things through, if I'm just stuck not knowing what happens next.

**Michael Carroll:** There's a great temptation to finish for the day at the end of a chapter or the end of a scene, but I now actively avoid doing that, because otherwise the next day requires a lot of pondering on the best way to get going on the next chapter. So now I just stop in the middle of a sentence: the next day I know exactly where I am and where I'm heading, and it's a lot easier to get back into the swing of it.

## Journey Planet 25

**Liz Williams:** The prospect of not being paid is a great motivator.... You know, we're supposed to be professionals. Just get on with it and stop being so precious. What if you went into a bank and the clerk said, 'Sorry – I can't serve you right now; I don't feel like it?' You don't get people suffering from Waitress' Block.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** This is my job, how I feed my family and the cats and pay for my app habit. That'll do.



**Your work schedule: do you have set times to write, or just write in the gaps between Real Life stuff?**

**Liz Williams:** I have to write in between, and at the moment, I have to focus on the day job, so I'm not writing very much. That's OK: I like having a day job.

As I was typing this, the cat brought a mouse in, mangled it under my desk, my partner had to get rid of it, the other cat took umbrage and sprang off my lap....it's like this all the bloody time.

**Ruth F. Long:** I write whenever I can. Usually this is in the evening in front of the TV (because I find silence suspicious - I have children) or in bed, but I have been known to write in parked cars, coffee shops, at the kitchen table or in the library. Anyway really. I tend to write longhand and then type it up afterwards, especially early on in a draft, which is great because I just lug a notebook around with me.

**Chaz Brenchley:** This is in the process of shift. My whole day used to be the time I had to write; now it has to be fitted a little around other priorities. But I was never good at working regular hours.

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“Don't be offended if you encounter some good-natured ribbing; the idea of writing a novel in a month deserves to be laughed at.”

Chris Baty

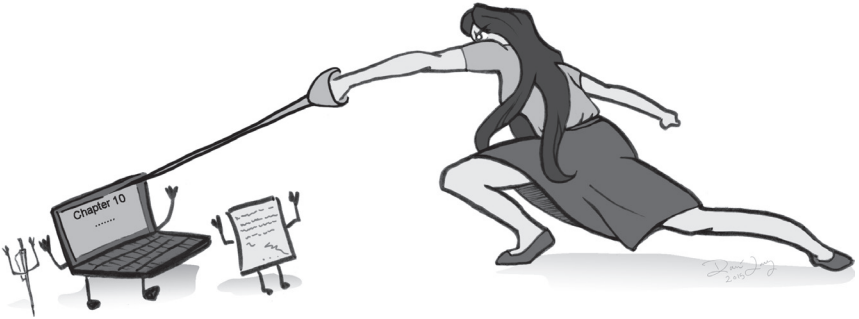
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**Michael Marshall Smith:** I'm extremely lucky in that I've been a full-time novelist for nearly twenty years. During that period, I've been fortunate enough to be able to support my family by writing alone — so it's a job. I get to my desk around nine and work for as long as the muse (and competing forces, like helping with homework) will allow... I also have my iPhone on me at all times, with apps set up to fire off notes to Evernote and other places... Writing is pretty much a 24/7 business in terms of the thought process, but you can't let it take over your whole life. Without a life, you've got nothing meaningful to write about.

**Gail Carriger:** Set times. Afternoons usually from around 2-6pm.

## Journey Planet 25

**Michael Carroll:** I get up at nine and work until my wife comes home from work at about five-thirty then I start again at eleven PM when she goes to bed, and I keep going until about four in the morning. Weekends I take it a little easier: get up at about ten, write until about five, then start again at about eleven PM until four AM. Of course, that's not all solid writing. There are e-mails to write, social media to tackle, fanzines to edit...



**Do you have a daily minimum word-count? If so, how rigidly do you stick to it?**

**Michael Marshall Smith:** No, I don't — and I distrust them (and am weary of writers who constantly post on social media about hitting theirs. So you wrote 2000 words today. Are they any good?) Some days I write thousands of words, other days few or none at all, or may even wind up cutting half of yesterday's hard-won tally. A word count goal can be useful in driving you forward on the days when you don't feel like writing — but can also lead to a lot of words that are merely going to be cut later. And the days on which you write nothing — but gain some insight into where you're going, however small — are far more important.

**Gail Carriger:** 2k a day when I'm on a deadline. I leave myself some wiggle room on the extended deadline in case serious put-out-fire business comes up. If I lose the daily count it's usually the whole day, and I just shift my schedule accordingly. Once I start writing, 2k has become my natural end point. On a writing retreat I've been known to double or triple that, but I can't keep a pace like that up without physical injury to my wrists.



**Ruth F. Long:** I try to make 1000 words a day. I do not stick to it rigidly unless I'm on a deadline. Then it's also a much bigger word-count. It's also very hard to count words when you're writing longhand so the word-count tends to refer to the words I'm typing up after the fact.

**Chaz Brenchley:** I used to have daily targets, that I could keep to - or generally exceed - for weeks, sometimes months at a time. Then I'd go slack for a while. Sprints and staggers, that was my pattern. But I did like to keep a daily record. Probably I should go back to that, but low numbers are depressing when they used to be so high. Metrics should be encouraging, not depressing.

**Michael Carroll:** When I'm writing first-draft stuff, I start off with a daily target of 2000 words, but every day I try to top the previous day's word-count, so by the end I'm doing at least 5000 words per day. My most recent novel took ten days for 88,000 words, though they're not usually *quite* that quick.

**Liz Williams:** When I'm writing, I'm happy if I can knock out 2K. I would rather go a little more slowly and get it right. I have done 10K a day before now but it nearly killed me - it wasn't because the book was late, either. I just felt like it. But I'm paying a physical price now with an arthritic finger.



## Journey Planet 25

***Do you worry about creating a highly-polished first draft, or just barf it out onto the keyboard and keep going (like I do) and then clean it up later?***

**Gail Carriger:** As Mur Lafferty has it I “give myself permission to suck.” The point is to get the words out, I can always fix them later. For me, the hardest part is actually writing, so I make it as easy as possible for me to just get those sentences down one after another.

**Ruth F. Long:** Barf. Everywhere. it’s utter rubbish. I’m a third of the way through a first draft at the moment and it is laughably bad. So bad in fact I’m already thinking about ways to clean it up but I need to finish it first.

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“So Writer, you’re trying to write a novel in 30 days. Has anyone told you you’re crazy yet?”

James Patterson

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**Chaz Brenchley:** I grew up in the days of actual typewriters, and I hated having to retype over and over, so it was always my habit to try to get it right first time. I still have that. it’s hard to learn to be sloppy.

**Liz Williams:** I’d prefer to have a reasonably presentable first draft: I don’t want more than about 4 re-drafts.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** I used to worry about first drafts, and still want them to more-or-less stand up, and be of a quality when it comes to prose. But I’ve definitely learned not to get too tied up in making it good. That work can only really come later, when you know what you’re dealing with — especially if you work in a rather unplanned fashion, as I do. Of course you want the draft to represent you, and to convince and inspire: but there’s not point spending an extra month polishing paragraphs of prose that you may end up choosing to cut. Also, though a novel is nowhere near as collaborative a process as screenwriting, you’re still going to wind up taking some direction from editors. The bottom line, as the old newspaperman adage goes: “I don’t need it perfect. I need it Tuesday.”

**Michael Carroll:** Most of the time I just barf it out. Because I plot so tightly, I always know exactly what's coming up. I'm the self-acclaimed world's fastest and worst typist – by the time I get to the end my documents are covered in so much red that they look like I been coughing blood all over the screen. The polishing process happens after the first draft: that usually takes a couple of days.



## Journey Planet 25

**What slows you down? (We're looking for anything and everything here that blocks the flow of words getting to the page: trying to come up with the ideal names for characters, messing about on social media, just one more game of Minesweeper, phone calls from well-meaning friends and relatives, answering e-mails, "another quick cup of tea and then I'll start", adorable cat videos on YouTube... anything at all! Even fanzines.)**

**Liz Williams:** Well, what slows me down is the fact that my career is more or less dead in the water. This is as it is: I've had a good run at it, and more books published than most people ever achieve. However, the reality of the situation is that it no longer pays much money and I have to concentrate on something that does. I'm no longer writing a couple of novels a year and I can't see that happening again until, and if, I am able to retire. I'm working on a handful of short stories and that's it. C'est la guerre.

**Ruth F. Long:** I am a master procrastinator. My family is usually very happy when I'm writing and get stuck because then I bake all the cakes. Life often gets in the way - there's always things to go to, people to collect from A and drop to B, another episode of *Downton Abbey*... Sometimes however, those blocks are needed - when I'm writing I need time to let the ideas percolate. If I am stuck on something it's usually because I need to mull over what just happened and figure out how this effects (ie. totally changes) the thing I laughingly called "the plan" earlier. Pauses can be healthy as well. Often I switch to another project and work on that for a bit if I have the time.

**Chaz Brenchley:** All of the above (well, except the phone-calls; my friends are tolerably well trained). The future has apparently been designed expressly to stop me working. Used to be that once I was actually at the keyboard, work was all there was; now everything else happens in the same place, which is just unfair.



**Michael Carroll:** E-mails, Facebook and Tumblr are my real nemeses when it comes to getting the work done: I tend to close those tabs on the browser because they're just too distracting. Another big distraction – though not a bad one – is having a brand-new idea in the middle of a book: I used to keep my “ideas” document open while I was writing so I could jot down the new idea, but I stopped doing that because I'd find myself focussing on the new idea instead of what I was supposed to be doing. Now, I just ignore the new idea. If, after a day or two, it's still niggling at me, then I know it's a good one and it deserves attention.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** I find it's best if I try to dive straight in, first thing in the morning, and so only take a few minutes to answer emails that are essential and/or from my best mate — and then get working. The truth is that if I'm focussed, nothing on earth is going to derail me. If I'm not, then everything can. As most of the time I'm somewhere in between, I use Freedom on the Mac to block out all social media sites and other diversions from 8am - 5pm. If needs be, I can handle that stuff on my phone. I need the outside world to go away as much as possible, so I can sink into the inner one.

**Gail Carriger:** Last minute interviews with fanzines.

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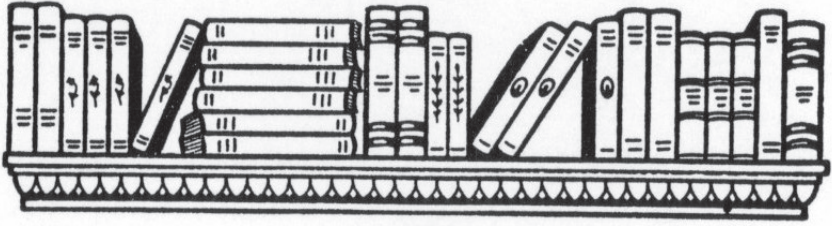
“Whether you think you can or you can't doesn't matter at all; give it a shot, and you'll find out which is true.”

Chris Garcia's Litany Against Boredom

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***What keeps you going? (Again, anything: sense of accomplishment, thoroughly enjoying the story, rampant poverty, determination and/or bloody-mindedness, giant ego, minuscule ego that needs to be nurtured, overwhelming desire to “get this one out of the way so I can get started on the next one” - that sort of thing!)***

**Chaz Brenchley:** Again, all of the above. Especially the giant/minuscule ego thing: who knew one could have both at once?



**Ruth F. Long:** All of the above really. I love my stories and my characters. I love getting to the point where they do just leap off on their own adventure leaving me clinging on behind them scribbling down what's happening as fast as I can. it's exhilarating. I love feedback from readers, especially younger readers because they are the hardest to engage (seriously, if you haven't hooked them they'll put down the book, never pick it up again and never tell you why). I am very fond of praise. ;)

**Michael Carroll:** Money! Fame! Adulation! No, writing gives very little of any of these – I write because I have an unquenchable urge to entertain an audience. I don't know if that's an ego thing as such, because I don't want to be famous or publicly adored, but I do want them to enjoy what I write. For me, fame is not the goal of success: it's the *price* of success.

**Liz Williams:** I write these days because I like it, but I also like quite a lot of other stuff and have almost no spare time, so writing is very much as and when, as I outline above.

**Gail Carriger:** I operate on bribery: chocolate each day I make my word count, sushi when I finish a rough draft, shoes when a new book comes out. As a result I'm getting love handles, mercury poisoning, and a vast shoe collection.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** The need to provide is a big motivator. Also, I care about the ideas, and the characters. The story, too, but it's those other two factors that keep me engaged. Plus, yes, that illusive and (before you start working on it) utterly perfect idea that you're going to work on next... like cats, writers are always the wrong side of the door.

**Roughly, what's the time-line of your average book, from idea to outline to first draft to polish? How many drafts do you do? Do you tend to cut more or add more in subsequent drafts?**

**Chaz Brenchley:** There was a shortish period of time where I could say "it takes a year to write a book". So I started saying that. Immediately, my next book took two years, and the one after that six months squeezed in around major other lifestuff. So I stopped saying the thing, which is just as well, because it's never been true since. Ideas can hang around for decades, and still stay fresh; first drafts can be slow, painful creatures or they can shoot out in ten weeks in more or less the same state of completion. I have a novel I've been writing for the last three years and it's nowhere near done. I never do that, except apparently I have.

Almost always, second drafts are all about the cuts. I tend to put everything in first time through, on the grounds that I might need it later. Then I cut away everything I didn't really want.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** I'll do as many drafts as it needs, basically. Most books it's two of three — some, like the bastard I'm hacking through at the moment, many more, plus some epic rewrites. Some books stroll into the world. Others have to be dragged in kicking and screaming. I aim to cut at least 15% between first and second draft: there's always so much fluff left over from when I'm feeling my way, and I tend to over-write the first third. Timespan... I like to get from start to finish in 8-9 months. Many have been shorter, others much longer.

**Ruth F. Long:** It entirely depends on the story itself. Some take a long time to draw out. Some of them come almost fully formed. I had one I wrote in a couple of months and others that have taken years. I think I tend to add more with successive drafts - more detail, weaving in more background and research, refining the language. But sometimes I'll have to slice out entire scenes.

**Liz Williams:** I could do a novel in 10 weeks if uninterrupted, but most took 6-8 months.

## Journey Planet 25

**Gail Carriger:** 4-5 months writing rough draft then 1 month editing (2 preferred, if I can wiggle it). I hand in after 7 drafts:

1. The completed first draft distinguished from the rough as it is fixed visually for a review, broken into chapters, checked for length and pace, and generally tidied up.

2. A TK pass to fix all the missing parts and do all the research I didn't have time to do while writing the rough. Double check outline and "don't forget to add this" notes.

3. A consistency and flow skim read pass. Check against world bible and wiki.

4. A tight read and typo pass before which manuscript is changed to a new font so I catch more on the reread.

5. A print out and red pen pass.

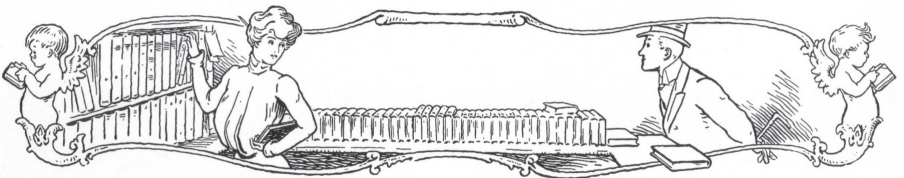
6. The re-enter and cross check pass.

7. Read-out-loud and tone check pass.

This is ideal, I don't always get to break them into that many passes.

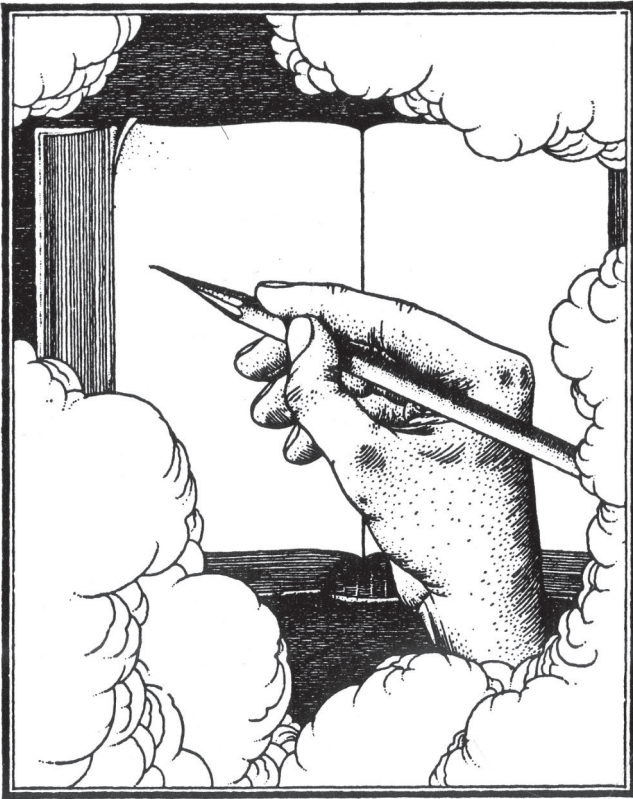
Then I hand in to my editor and my beta readers at the same time. My editor's turn around is usually about a month, usually at least one of my betas can match her. Then I gather all the corrections and make long form check box fix-it notes in chronological order. I have about a month to do those edits. (Sometimes, I do the read-out-loud tonal pass - see Draft 7 above - at this point.) Hand that in. Then it comes back for copy edits, those usually take me about two weeks. Then proofs, that's usually under a week whether I like it or not.

I'm on an accelerated publication run for my adult stuff so it's usually about six months to publication from my final hand in. Barring any crisis or medical emergency: that works out to about one year from start to finish for a 100k novel. YA is a whole different operation as it doesn't take me as long to write but the publication process is extended, so it can be more like two years from me typing "chapter one" to the book appearing on the shelves.





**Michael Carroll:** Anywhere between four and eight months to develop the outline, about three weeks to write the first draft. Then there's a further week to give the first draft a polish and let it sit on its own for a while, before I dive in for the second draft. That's always fun: the second draft will typically be about five thousand words *shorter* than the first one. That takes about two weeks. Then the third draft takes about the same, but this time the word-count creeps up again. That's the one that goes to the editor. Depending on her or his reaction to that, I might spend another month writing the fourth draft.



# How I Wrote My Unwritable Novel - And Why It Haunts Me Still By Chris Garcia

The title was simple - *5000 Dollars-A-Plate*. That was the last simple thing. It came out of my love of Danish film, slapstick satire, political comedy, and general needling. It came to me one afternoon in 2001 or so, and has never left that little part of my brain that is reserved for your deepest held regrets and recipes for good curries. It was such a simple story. Well, it was simply hyper-complex in a way that felt simple to me. I wanted to write it so bad, first as a screenplay, which I failed at in 2002 and 2004, later as an audio drama (2006-07), and finally as a novel (2007 and 2008). None of them took, and I spent hours and hours mapping, and re-mapping, character sketching, and scenario plotting. There was a framework in place, and I felt like all I had to do was sit down and nail the words to it like sheetrock.

It weren't so easy. No... it weren't at all!

The story as I envisioned it - a Young man from a rich and powerful family, Christian, turns thirty, is horrifically depressed and is convinced by his sister Christina, who controls the family fortune, to see a shrink. He uncovers years of sexual abuse at the hands of his father, and after watching the Danish film *Festen*, he decides to confront his father in a public way. His father is running for the Senate, and hosting a gala from the family mansion. Christian plans on disrupting the gala and exposing his father. Christo, the youngest, is in charge of taking care of Christina's twins while the gala is being set up. Christina is managing her father's election campaign, and as people arrive, she is trying to keep Christian away from her father, corralling all the people who are attending the event,

keep her Mother from drinking herself into blood alcohol poisoning, as well as make a deal to sell the movie rights to her father's rise to glory.

See, simple, right?

Or it would be if that was all there was. Being me, my thoughts all start to bounce off each other, and characters exploded, in both number and strangeness. There was the hired assassin who is being paid to kill one of attendees, and who infiltrates the party by posing as a newspaperman he kills at the beginning of the novel. There's the couple who are called "The Lesbian Wing of the Republican Party," the host of a cable news talk program (Lindzee) and her mid-level movie star girlfriend, Cippa, who happen to have broken up months before, but have to keep pretending to be together as a part of the Family Values touted by Lindzee. There's the washed-up comedian who is hired to host the party. There's Christina's twins, Maggie and Lucas, who are always up to no good and who worship at the altar of their youngest uncle. There's the Hooker with a Heart of Gold. There's a butler who writes poems that go on every plate at dinner. There's a former Mafioso who also happens to run a major software start-up. There's a mountain lion who has been stalking the grounds. And on and on.

I counted a total of 34 characters who had individual storylines. 34.

In all honestly, it wasn't just *Festen* that inspired it. It was reading David Foster Wallace (and gosh, do I miss him! Such a good guy) and watching a lot of Robert Altman films (particularly *Nashville* and *Pret-a-Porte*) and thinking a lot about politics. There was something here that would not let my brain go, and it pointed and niggled and kept me up at night. Not every night, but enough that I think it provided some of the reasoning for my CPAP.

I needed to write this, but my attempts had all failed. I needed to get it out of my head and on to paper. After my last attempt, I really believed that it was unwritable. The story had too many moving parts, and I was not nearly a good enough writer to keep them at the appropriate distance so that when they began to collide, it was neither too obvious or too jarringly unexpected. On my second screenplay attempt, I created a 3x5 card with each major moment of plot happening. The stack ended up being almost 4 inches thick. This was impossible. I had created a monster I could not tame, but the only village it would attack was my own brain, so everything was OK.

## Journey Planet 25

Enter NaNoWriMo 2012.

I had done NaNo in 2005, won easily, in something like 3 days. I followed that up with three more wins, including a NaTriWriMo (National Triology Writing Month) that was epic, even by my standards. I think I took 2010 and 2011 off, but in 2012, I needed something. I really needed to write a novel. I didn't know why, I still have no idea, but I had to. On the night of Halloween, after I dropped Evelyn off from trick-or-treating, I headed over to the Denny's where I wrote so many *Drink Tank* and *Journey Planet* articles over terrible breakfasts or burgers. Every year, they have a 'first hour' write-in, so I figured I'd attend. I sat down and I had my stack of cards with me. I'd toted them along after at least three moves. It was meant to be! This would be where I would get EXACTLY what I mapped out on those cards out into the world! Glory would be mine! The world would know the names of all my characters.

The clock ticked down. There were about 50 other people in the room, each with some sort of computer or word processor. No one was out-right writing their novels, which was a little sad, but understandable. There was a big clock, and when it got down to ten seconds (exactly as the waitress brought my third basket of fries), we all counted along.

10  
9  
8  
7  
6  
5  
4  
3  
2  
1

And the keyboards started click-clacking furiously. Especially mine. And I wrote the first scene right then and there, my fries cooling before I could even get a nibble of one - “

**“Welcome to the Domain Hotel! I’m Carla, what can I do for you?”**

**He didn’t feel a greeting like that was appropriate to 9am on a Wednesday.**

**“Checking in,” he said, “James McCleary.”**

**Carla kept smiling at him, somehow knowing exactly the keys to hit to check the status of his reservation.**

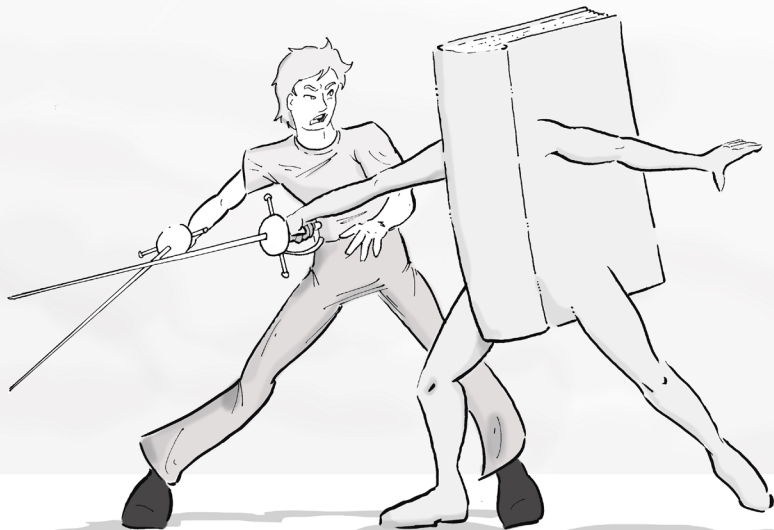
**“We’ve got you in for just the one night, no?” Carla had not looked at the screen.**

**“Right.” James would have taken off his glasses, but he still suffered under the delusion that they made him look more like a writer.”**

Now, you read that, and there’s nothing really there, right? It’s fluff. Absolute fluff. Why would this portion make the cut when I edited it down, and thus why did exist in this draft? The answer is “Forget it brain, it’s NaNotown!” The fact is, you’re operating at warp speed, so unless you’ve got a metonymic ability to maintain discipline, things are gonna check, flip, move on you.

Like the names.

Christian in every one of my notes, the name I’d had for him since the idea popped into my head in the days before the Towers fell and YouTube rotted my brain, was now James. No idea why. None. It just was. There was no justification other than this is what happened at the moment, and NaNo is almost entirely about the Moment.



## Journey Planet 25

I kept writing. I wrote that first scene, taking a chomp of terrible french fry every time I felt that I had blundered. I finished the basket by the time I got to the phone call from Christian/James' shrink. A couple of thousand words, well after 130am on November 1st, and I had pushed the button on the story I'd been dying to tell for more than a decade.

I powered through twenty-five thousand words that first day. I didn't sleep, and I was lucky enough to have folks who would feed and water me. I took a bath, and that was the only time I wasn't in pajamas. I wrote and I came up with new storylines, brought in characters, each introduction to the story feeling like that moment in a sitcom when a formerly established character returns for an appearance after a season or two away. There was Lindzee (now re-named Amanda) and Cippa (now renamed Hilary), only the scenario was entirely different, and the writing of their introduction so muddled as to be barely readable -

***“This exchange, as simple as it seems, represented the most words to pass between Amanda Neal (8pm Easter/Pacific on CNN) and Hilary Evanston Berkley (Current exhibition showing at the deYoung Museum, separate admission required) in nearly three months. That record was set seven minutes after Amanda had kissed Celia (Appearing in Shear Madness at the Kennedy Center) good-bye after their first night at Amanda’s. Amanda hadn’t even been informed that Amanda had taken-up with a new lover, no less was bringing her over for the night! Hilary, for her part, had gushed every expletive she knew upon Amanda. Amanda, in return, had tried to remain logical and point out all of the problems that bringing another woman over to the apartment would present. Hilary, when she began thinking more clearly, unleashed an entire wave of new, more creative expletives onto Amanda, who again tried to reposit with logical, calm, rational arguments. This lasted some thirty-eight minutes, until the very moment that if Amanda had not run out the door she would not have been able to make it to Foggy Bottom stop, then over to her studio for her show. As it was, this was one train later than she preferred, but it would have to do as sometimes personal matters do have to be given some measure of priority.”***

See, terrible, and that was fine. It was out. I had only made it that

far on one of my other attempts, and now, I was powering through it. I was bringing things out of me. I even wrote a few paragraphs that I was proud of -

***“The first serious fight was the one about wanting to move to the country. There were lovely parts of Virginia not an hour outside the city. Or Maryland, even so close as to be on the Red line! That fight had been rough, and the weeks after rougher. They went to the Republican convention in New Orleans, where Amanda worked the floor, and Hilary, back in the hotel, was worked on the floor by at least seven different women. So very different were their priorities.***

***That little incident only came out during the break-up battle seven months ago. Hilary was tired of playing second fiddle and living in the SnoGlobe that would someday slip from Amanda’s fingers as she lay dying. Amanda was having trouble understanding the problem; wasn’t she always there for her to kiss in the morning? Hadn’t she always made sure that the photographers got good shots of Hilary at every event, even when she wasn’t dressed to the standards of the organizers? Hilary had mentioned her time with CythiaJenniferMarshaJenniferOmaraShelJennifer as the final nail, but Amanda tacked the forgiveness route. Hilary then announced that it was over and she was leaving.”***

I’m no wordsmith, but I had some moments. I wrote convoluted portions of a convoluted plot with convoluted characters. The Twins became a pair of kids separated by a year, who had a huge following on Twitter. The youngest son became Benjamin. The daughter - Mary. The Twins - Kennedy and Aisla. The entire scenario was roughly the same, but really, it didn’t feel the same. It was flowing out of me in a way that it never had on any of my other attempts. The pressure of a deadline, and making it half-way my first day, really seemed to help me get it all out.

Days pass, and I wrote. Every moment I could, I wrote. I wrote during lunch, I wrote when I was over at Linda’s, I wrote at Denny’s, at Starbuck’s, in bed, at work. Things went more slowly, but there was still wordage being produced. All my characters came to the page, and a few extras I had not anticipated. It was so much fun. I even wrote a couple of sex scenes, and one of ‘em was actually half-decent!

## Journey Planet 25

And then I reached 50,000 words.

That's the point of NaNoWriMo, right? You reach 50K words and you're done. Finis. Fin. Fi. F. . That's what you did this for, and in my case, I hadn't even made it 1/3 of the way through my cards. We hadn't reached the most important portions. Christian/James hadn't attempted to confront his father only to be blocked by Christina/Mary's brilliant interference. The Mountain Lion had only eaten one gala attendee. The Kidlings had not even once snuck a piece of foie gras! SO much was missing!

But I was done. I had never gotten anywhere near this far into the story, and now, now I had made my bones, completed my task... if I defined it as winning NaNoWriMo.

And that's what I did.

You see, the story was bigger than a NaNo, it was a MeGa, maybe a GiGa. It was giant, and I had made it through to the point where I could call myself a winner, and I had done it by writing the unwritable novel. Well, starting to write the unwritable novel. That was a win. Sure, it was full of typos, sentences that seemed to start or stop without a piece of punctuation. This was not a smart novel, it wasn't a deep novel, it was somehow both Vonnegutian, without actually being funny, and Dickensian, without actually getting a penny a word. It was a strange and confusing and poorly written and overly thought-out, oh, and since you ask, yes... it was just terrible. That's not a bit of self-deprecation; it's hard core fact. National Novel Writing Month is about getting it out, and that's what I did. I crapped out an awful piece of writing in November, 2012, and I have 0 regrets about it. Goal-setting helps make things easier; proving that you can do what so many other people are also trying to do makes it fun.

And it was so much fun. NaNoWriMo gives you permission to not only be bad, but to have fun being bad. It would be infuriating if you had to produce 50K good words. I would feel so pressured, but without any pressure, well, you can write a novel that pushes buttons, checks boxes, and just stinks up the joint.

But you'll keep writing. You'll keep writing because you're having fun.





About three months ago, I wrote the final segment of *5000 dollars-a-plate*. It wraps it up nicely. James gets shot when Mary bumps into our assassin as he tried to kill the Candidate's best friend while her brother steps up to try and confront their father for his years of abuse. She drags him off, explains that she had hired an actor to play his shrink and report to her everything he says, but the actor started trying to actually help James, and since she knew what was happening, she had been playing spoiler the entire time. She basically tortures her injured brother telling him that she was just as abused as he was, that if she can make their Dad into a Senator, she can write her own ticket out of there, never see her Dad again, and then he can expose him all he wants. As they finally take James away, the press arrives and stick a camera and mic in his face -

*"James, are you alright?" asked Amanda, Hil's hand in her free one.*

*"It wasn't bad."*

*"What do you have to say about the attempt?" Amanda followed-up.*

*"My father, this family, MY family, we're tougher than this, stronger than this, and when Dad goes up Capital Hill, those that tried to destroy him will curse his name, because he'll be the greatest Senator in the history of this state."*

*And Mary smiled. That speech could not have moved more votes if she had written it herself."*

Like I said - terrible, but on paper, and that puts it ahead of so many of my other projects.

# Do the Write Thing by Michael Carroll

*A note from the author: This article was originally written in 2008 as a reaction to an on-line conversation with a would-be writer who seemed to expend all his energy on coming up with excuses not to write. The article's been featured on my website ever since, and a goodly number of people (writers and teachers) have told me that they've found it useful in motivating themselves and their students.*

A lot of people over the years have asked me about writing. Actually, in most cases what they've said is, "I've always wanted to write."

My internal reaction is usually, "So?"

Y'see, I too had always wanted to write. Oh yes. Always. Until one day I decided to trade "wanting to write" for "writing." Wanting to write won't get the words down on the page. Writing will.

If you're still not sure what I mean, replace "write" with "swim" and it should become clearer... If someone was constantly telling you that they'd always wanted to swim, but somehow they hadn't ever actually lowered themselves into the water, then the chances are you'd think they were nuts.

It's the same with writing. You want to write? Then write.

There are always plenty of reasons to *not* write. Can't think of any ideas. Haven't got the time. I'm not good enough. I'm still only learning. I can't find my pen.

Let's look at those reasons one-by-one:

## Can't think of any ideas.

Really? You're a human being and you can't think of any ideas? Rubbish! Of course you can. Ever told a lie? That's fiction. Ever found yourself wondering "What would happen if...?" That's also fiction. Remember the other day when you were expecting an argument with someone and in advance you ran the conversation in your head so that you'd be more prepared? "If he says this, then I'll say that..."

You want ideas? Look around you. Read the newspapers. Talk to your friends and family. *Listen* to your friends and family. Think of a story you read recently but didn't really like – there's an idea right there. Rewrite the story the way you would have told it.

Pick a scenario at random and imagine that some terrible thing has happened. Now imagine a way out of it.

Imagine what you would be like if you were evil. (Or, if you already *are* evil, imagine what you would be like if you were good.)

What would you be like if you were someone else – someone you know? What if you got into trouble for something you didn't do? What if you got into trouble for something you *did* do? What if someone asked you to do something that went against your nature? Say you had no choice in the matter. How would you react? How would you get out of it?

Read the first half of a story, put it down and write the second half of the story. Now go back and write a completely new first half to fit your story.

Go to the library, pick any book at random and open it somewhere in the middle. Write down the first line of dialogue you see, then go home and write a story that begins with that line. Now write a completely different story that ends with that line.

Keep a diary. Write in it every day.

Keep a notebook. Write down every idea you have, everything you've thought of that might be a good story, or a character name, or a line of dialogue, or just a cool phrase you want to use.

And all that's just for starters... There are ideas all around you, all the time. A writer learns to recognise them, twist them around, exploit them, look at them from every possible angle.

Accept nothing at face value. If someone tells you an interesting fact, think about it from their point of view. What's their motive for telling you? Why did they choose those particular words?

## Journey Planet 25

Are they trying to manipulate your feelings and opinions, steer you around to their way of thinking?

Yes, of course they are. People do that all the time. I'm even doing it to you right now.

A writer learns to put himself or herself in other people's shoes, to see a story from every viewpoint.

### **Haven't got the time.**

Remember last week when you spent an hour or two watching television or playing computer games? Why did you do that instead of writing? Because it's easier, that's why.

Set aside one hour every day to write. One hour. That's not much time at all. And during that hour, write. Don't do anything else. Don't allow yourself to become distracted. If something interrupts that hour, then make up the time as soon as possible.

Never, ever, say to yourself, "I'll do twice as much tomorrow." Because you won't. Do it now.

Don't feel like it? Do it anyway.

*Really* don't feel like it? Well, that's tough. Do it.

"I can't do it today because I have exams, and a ton of homework, and I have to wash the dishes / car / dog / carpet." Aw. Shame. My heart goes out to you. Write.

Do you see what I'm getting at here? A writer makes the time to write. The universe is not going to just present you with a useful slice of extra time every day in which to get your writing done. You have to find that time for yourself.

I wrote a dozen novels, three times as many short stories and hundreds of articles when I was also working full-time. How? Because I made the time to write. It wasn't always easy – in fact it was almost never easy – but I did it anyway.

Picture yourself one year ago. Think back to the stories you wanted to write then, but you haven't written them yet. It's not a nice feeling. Now picture yourself one year in the future. Be honest: Have you written those stories yet? Any of them? Even one?

If you haven't written them in the past year, what's going to change in the coming year that'll help you get the stories written?

Well, something will have to change if those stories are ever going

to be written, correct? And that something is you. Because you don't really have any control over anything else.

As a friend of mine once said, "If you only do what you've always done, you'll only get what you've always got."

So if you spend all your time talking about the books and stories you're going to write, then you might as well give up on the idea of being a writer because you're not going to make it.

But if you divert the time and energy from "talking about writing" into "writing" then, eventually, you *will* make it.

### **I'm not good enough.**

That's the wrong attitude. If you don't think you're good enough, then you're never going to be. You have to believe that you *can* do it, because it's only that belief that will keep you writing long enough to learn how to do it.

Look at it like this: You're right.

If you believe you can't do something, you're right. If you believe you can, you're right.

At the most basic level writing is only words. You already know the words – you're not expected to invent new ones. All you have to do is put the words down in the correct order. And the more you write the more you learn what the correct order is.

Ever meet one of those people who just can't tell jokes? Someone who can ruin even the funniest gag? And I'm sure you've met at least one person who can have you rolling around the floor laughing at stuff that isn't really that funny?

Comedian Frank Carson's catchphrase is, "It's the way I tell 'em!"

He's right. Some people are naturally good with words and timing. Others aren't. But it's a skill that can be learned by most people – if they're willing to put in the time.

Take this example:

*I knew the house was haunted the minute I walked through the door. Even though I couldn't see it, the ghost of the old man was still present. There was a chill in the air and at night the windows rattled even when there was no wind.*

It's not particularly scary, is it? Now read it again, carefully. Examine the words I've used, the way I've put them together.

## Journey Planet 25

“I knew the house was haunted...” Well, that’s a signpost: Look – a haunted house! Prepare to be terrified!

We don’t need to put up signposts. The readers should *discover* that the house is haunted – it’s not good enough that we tell them.

And there’s a ghost too. We know there’s a ghost because the narrator told us so.

He also tells us there’s a chill in the air and that the windows rattled “even when there was no wind.”

That is the key thing about writing. Show, don’t tell. Allow the reader to experience the events, rather than just read about them...

*I placed my hand against the rough surface of the heavy door and it opened easily and silently on hinges that probably hadn’t seen oil in a hundred years. I stepped through, into the darkness and the musty smell of old, damp timber and decomposing carpets. The heavy, still air clung about me like a shroud, and I struggled against the urge to turn and run and never look back. But I couldn’t do that. There was nothing here. I knew that. The old man was long dead. All that remained of him was his decaying home.*

*As I climbed the stairs – each footfall a solid, deadened thump on the bare boards – I told myself that it was only the dust in the air that dried my throat and made me want to swallow.*

*A thick mass of cobwebs blocked the door to the master bedroom and I tried not to think about what had created them as I pushed my way through, the strands clinging to my hands, sticking to my hair. I didn’t like spiders and I reassured myself that it was only a trickle of sweat running down my back, and nothing else.*

*The bedroom was empty, as I’d expected. In the old days, it was customary to burn a bed in which someone had died. But only the bed. Not the room itself*

*The windows had been shattered long ago, the lace curtains now age-yellowed and scarred with holes and tears. The flaking wooden shutters banged gently as though played with by a light breeze.*

*But the curtains did not move.*

Okay, so that’s all a bit over the top (and probably quite a bit over-written), but compare it with the first example. Both examples relate the same events, but the first one tells you what’s going on. The second one allows you to experience it.

The second example doesn’t say that the house is haunted, nor does it say that there’s a ghost. Both are implied, but never said.

Look at some of the words I've used: "darkness", "decomposing", "shroud", "struggled", "dead", "decaying". And that's just the first paragraph.

There are countless ways of using words and phrases to give a story texture and atmosphere. So experiment: do what I've just done and write a short paragraph, then expand it, add layers to it. Smells, sounds, taste, touch – all the ways we experience the real world.

The final two sentences are an example of how to pace the text. By placing a line-break between the sentences, I've made the second one more important. Suppose that I'd left them as one sentence...

*The flaking wooden shutters banged gently as though played with by a light breeze, but the curtains did not move.*

Not nearly as disturbing, is it? Breaking up the sentence gives the reader time to pause, time to take in the first part. Then the second part takes on a deeper meaning: the shutters are moving but the curtains aren't. We've already established there's no glass in the windows, so it's not the wind that's causing the shutters to move.

And for a complete turn-about, you could go back to the first sentence of the first example and change it to this:

*I knew the house was haunted the minute I walked through the wall.*

### **I'm still only learning.**

Let's go back to the swimming analogy: if you want to learn how to swim, you're going to have to get in the water at some point, and the sooner the better.

A good number of would-be writers never get around to writing because they're too busy attending their "Creative Writing" classes or reading their "How to Write" books. There's nothing wrong with those classes or those books, but they're not a substitute for writing.

There has never been – and there never will be – a champion swimmer who spends all of his or her time reading about swimming or sitting in classes learning the history of swimming or all the names of the different styles.

By all means attend the classes and read the books. You will learn a tremendous amount about writing from them. But classes and self-help books are tools. Like all tools the only way you'll master them is by actually using them for their intended task.

## Journey Planet 25

In a similar vein to this, some people put off writing because they believe they don't have a strong enough basic knowledge of grammar or punctuation, or they have a poor vocabulary.

The latter is easily solved. Buy a dictionary and a thesaurus. Next time you encounter a word you don't fully understand, write it down in that little notebook you always have with you (and you do always have a little notebook with you, don't you? If not, why not?). Look up the word first chance you get.

As for grammar and punctuation... Learn from other published works. Go to your local bookstore and check out the school books – there's bound to be a kids' book on basic grammar and punctuation. Can't find one? Ask the assistant for help, that's what they're there for. Too embarrassed to ask? Well, get over it.

There is another approach... It's less useful in the long run but it'll keep you writing: If you don't know how to use a particular punctuation mark, then rewrite the sentence so that you don't need it. If you're not sure what "discombobulated" means, use a different word.

Stuck because you can't think of how to write down what you want to say? Just write it down as clear as you can and then move on – you can always change it later.

### **I can't find my pen.**

No, this isn't a joke excuse for not writing. People genuinely do come up with stuff like that – and worse. Someone once told me that he intended to begin writing his novel as soon as his wife was able to remember the name of the shop in which she'd seen those really good notebooks.

That guy is never going to be a writer.

The dog needs to be walked. The cat needs to be fed. I have to study this for school. I need to have a bath. My toe hurts. My eyelashes are the wrong colour. It's raining. It's sunny.

All of these great excuses boil down to one simple thing: I don't want to write.

And that is the crux of the matter. A lot of people want to have written, but they don't want to write.

They want the result without putting in the work.

Now, it would be a lie to say that "proper" writers love the work



more than the result. Most of us don't. We wake up in the morning and think, "Gaah! Got to get this blasted book written!" And we blearily trudge to our computers, switch them on, and start working.

Those last three words highlight the difference between writers and non-writers. Even when the going is tough and the story isn't working out quite the way we want, we sit down and we write.

### **This is the summing-up part:**

If you've read this far and you haven't been put off the noble art of writing, then good for you. There's a chance you're going to make it!

Read books, especially books that are outside your preferred genre. If you want to write a western, read romances, and horror, and science fiction. Read the classics. Shakespeare, Dickens, HG Wells, Austin, the Brontes, Twain, Graham Green, Oscar Wilde... Don't just read westerns: you won't discover much that you haven't already found.

Never dismiss a genre because it's not what interests you. That sort of closed-minded approach will only teach you how to create the same stories over and over. Sure, there are plenty of writers who have no interest in anything other than their own genre and some of them are quite successful. But they are greatly outnumbered by the unsuccessful ones.

A writer must learn to adopt a wider view of the world. And to do that, he or she must be immersed in that world. So part of your training is to get out there, have a life, make friends and enjoy yourself. Don't completely isolate yourself from the real world because you need to get some writing done: the writing should reflect your life, not be your life.

There is an old saying: "Write what you know." Well, that's a good place to start, but that's not where it ends. You should also write what you *don't* know, and learn it as you go.

You can't really appreciate a sculpture by looking at a photograph of it. You need to move around, duck up and down, tilt your head left and right, lean right in and step way back.

Likewise, when writing a story you need to think like a sculptor. Craft the whole thing, not just one side of it, not just the bits that people see at first glance. Add details that might not be noticed without closer examination.

It sounds like a lot of work, and there's a good reason for that. It is

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a lot of work. But Michelangelo didn't create his David by scribbling the words "A muscular guy with his naughty bits hanging out" on a slab of marble.

He studied anatomy, learned how to use a chisel. Spent years practising. Knew what he wanted to create before he started.

That slab of marble could have been used by anyone else, for any other purpose. Michelangelo could have used a different piece of marble to create his masterpiece.

The marble itself isn't what makes the statue great. It's what he did with it.



## Pros on Prose - Part Two

**Care to share any nuggets of wisdom you've developed yourself or nicked from other writers that have helped? (Example: Bob Shaw once told me that he'd read a very old pulp novel in which the main character was described thus: "He wasn't very handsome, but girls liked him anyway." Bam! Instant reader-identification right there!)**

**Ruth F. Long:** Using all the senses in description is an oldie but a goodie which really helps you get into the point-of-view of the main character. And mainly to just keep writing and fix things later. I also eavesdrop on teenagers on public transport. This is not difficult.

**Gail Carriger:** Pace isn't about plot, it's about tension. Although plot certainly doesn't hurt.

**Michael Carroll:** Give your main characters names that start with different letters: that makes it easier for the readers (and the writer!) to distinguish between them. Also: If you're not sure how to tackle a particular scene, skip it and move on to the next one: a lot of the time you'll realise that you didn't need that tricky scene anyway.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** The nearest I've got concerns blocks. If you find you're banging your head against a book, unsure of what to do next, it may not be a problem with where you are right now. I suspect it often means that some part of you is fundamentally unsure of the overall shape or conception, and doesn't feel comfortable. Stepping back is often the way forward.

Also, write to please yourself — because no-one else will ever spend as long with the book as you will, and you're the only person who's guaranteed to read it.

**Chaz Brenchley:** Fiction is friction; it's what happens at the margins, where one [thing] is rubbing up against another [thing].

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**Liz Williams:** I'm a worldbuilding sort of writer, so I tended to focus on that. And on using my imagination, which is considerable.



**What advice do you give to those who, upon learning that you're a writer, tell you, "I've always wanted to write a book."**

**Liz Williams:** I tell them to fuck off. No, of course I don't, because I'm British, so I adopt an expression of great insincerity and feign interest before slinking off to the bar, because this always seems to happen in a pub.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** So write one, dude. Well, if I like the person, I'll try to be a little more helpful... telling them not to rush, to try to do a little every day, a few tips on technique and praxis and so on... but the bottom line is that if you want to write a novel you just have to sit down and write the damned thing. Lots of people are capable of writing a book. Writers are the people who go ahead and do it, and then do it again and again.

**Ruth F. Long:** "Ooo, you should totally write it then!"

**Gail Carriger:** I usually give them a big smile and say, "And I've always wanted to be a drag queen. How do you feel about the stage name Battenburg Buwanza?"

**Chaz Brenchley:** I never offer advice unless I'm asked, and even then it has to be wrenched out of me. I don't consider myself a good model, nor my process something I can comfortably offer to others as a helpful way to do things. I've been writing fiction so long, I really have no idea how I do it.

**Michael Carroll:** I said that exact thing to Michael Scott when I met him in October 1991: "I've always wanted to write a book!" And his rather abrupt but totally appropriate reply was, "Well, why *don't* you?" I didn't have an answer to that. I realised that there was no answer. At least, not a good one. The truth was that I hadn't written a book because I'd been lazy. I'd spent years talking about writing instead of actually writing. So now I generally use his reply when confronted with the same statement. Some people are offended, as though I'm insulting them, but in others I can see the light dawning in their eyes. Books come into existence because writers write them, not because would-be writers want to have written them.

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"Dear Sir or Madam, will you read my book?  
 It took me years to write, will you take a look?  
 It's based on a novel by a man named Lear  
 And I need a job, so I want to be a paperback writer"  
 Paperback writer - The Beatles

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***If you read an amateur manuscript and it's rubbish, is it better to gently steer and encourage the writer or just tell them the brutal truth?***

**Chaz Brenchley:** Both those things. Start with cards on the table, "this is unpublishable because [reasons]" (and hope these days to be persuasive enough that they don't just flounce off and stick it up on Amazon anyway; "unpublishable" doesn't mean what it used to mean), and then do the nurturing tutorial "let me tear this apart for you, with love" thing that sends them heading off to do a second draft.

**Gail Carriger:** This is why I don't read by request. I'm too mean for the first and too scared for the second.

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**Ruth F. Long:** I would always be inclined to be gentle and encouraging. I always try to find positives as well as the negatives. However, I wouldn't lie about the negatives.

**Michael Carroll:** The truth is always best: I point out what they've done wrong, but I also try to show why those things are wrong. A couple of years ago I read a friend's manuscript and returned it to her with the first five chapters – about four thousand words – condensed into a two-hundred-word paragraph. She was furious with me for about a month, then she got back in touch and said, "Yeah, I see what you mean now."

**Michael Marshall Smith:** That depends *why* it's rubbish. If it reveals that the person has no clue about people or story or grammar (if you don't have the dedication to learn how to use an apostrophe, you won't have enough to keep writing books), or is writing for the wrong reasons — they think that by writing a thin copy of whatever's in vogue at the moment, they'll suddenly get rich and famous — then sure, I won't be much of a cheerleader. But if it reveals genuine desire, and dedication, and a hint of talent (whatever that is) and is marred only by lack of experience in either prose or structure, then I'll do what I can to help them on their way... in so far as I have any clue on how to write.

**Liz Williams:** It's best to steer them away from the prospect of mainstream publishing. However, the last thing I thought was unremitting crud scored a six-figure advance, so what do I know?



**Would you write a book for no money because it's a story you really want to tell?**

**Michael Marshall Smith:** Absolutely. But it would have to wait for its slot. I know this sounds unromantic, and I care very, very much about what I do — but if it's not actively supporting my family, then it's just 'art', and art has to wait its turn.

**Ruth F. Long:** In a sense I always write books for no money because I usually write them before I sell them. Only *A Hollow in the Hills* was written under contract so far (fingers crossed for many more!). But this means I'm always writing the story I want to tell. Would I publish it for free? That's another question.

**Chaz Brenchley:** Have done. Tho' I did sell it after.

**Gail Carriger:** Yes. And I have. And I probably will again.

**Liz Williams:** Not at the moment, because of pressures of income and time. My mother stopped being published in the 80s, but still writes for the fun of it. She is retired: I will probably do the same thing if I stop working.

**Michael Carroll:** Yep! For the first few years I wrote because I believed that "*this one will be the big one, the one that makes me rich and win all the awards!*" But that's never happened so now I generally just write what I want to write. If they're successful, that's a bonus, but it's no longer what drives me.



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**Would you ghost-write a book for someone more famous, knowing that they'll get all the credit and you'll only get a pile of cash? (Have you already done so?)**

**Gail Carriger:** No.

**Liz Williams:** If it was paid well enough, certainly.

**Ruth F. Long:** How big is the pile of cash? Can we get specific about that? ;) I don't know. It would depend on their story. I might. I don't know. Cash is nice, but as I said before I am very fond of praise. However I cannot pay bills with praise.

**Chaz Brenchley:** Apparently not. At least, I never have, and it's an avenue I've never pursued, though I have friends and contacts who could have chased such gigs. Hunh. I have limits. Who knew?

However, it would now take me 3 days to earn the money my last novel was given as an advance. No contest.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** Writing's the only skill I have. If/when I became really up against it financially, sure, I'd ghost something and take the money. I haven't yet. Nobody's ever asked.

**Michael Carroll:** I have done that. Contractual obligations forbid me from going into any detail, so I shall say no more. Except that the pile of cash was not a *big* pile, but it was better than no pile.





**Finally, and most importantly for this issue, what are your thoughts on the National Novel Writing Month? Good idea? Bad idea? Never heard of it?**

**Gail Carriger:** Always seems like a lot of fun but November is a stupid month to do it in.

**Ruth F. Long:** I think it's a brilliant idea. I've never managed to do it properly because I'm usually tied up with ongoing projects but it's a super way to focus and to train yourself to write under deadlines. I usually join in informally and use it to boost my word-count.

**Michael Carroll:** I have mixed thoughts... Do we need more novels in this world? Well, I dunno... I've not yet read all the ones that we already do have! NaNoWriMo will give many would-be writers the impetus to actually produce something (instead of just bloody talking about it all the time), and certainly *some* of those people will go on to become excellent writers. The vast majority of books created through NaNoWriMo will be mediocre at best and will never reach the public. But does that mean those books should not be written? No! *Every* writer is rubbish at the start, so we all have to get the bad stuff out of our system before we move on to the good stuff. You can only get *better* through practice, not worse!

**Chaz Brenchley:** My thoughts? Are shifting, apparently, like everything else. I used to think it was a terrible idea: how can you write a good book - or, hell, a decent book, a respectable book, any kind of book - in a month? And how is 50K even a book, anyway? That's not anything: too long for a novella, too short for a novel. And pity the poor agents and publishers, getting deluged in December...

Etc. I'm much more relaxed now. Indeed, I'm happy to cheer from the sidelines, tho' I still don't plan to join in. Anything that helps people write, I'm all in favour of. Writing is a good in itself. And "don't get it right, get it written" is a venerable piece of advice, even if it's not my own.

**Liz Williams:** I've never been in a position to commit to it, but I think it's a good thing: I have students and friends who have achieved a lot through it, and it provides people with a framework in which to move forward. I recommend it to creative writing students.

**Michael Marshall Smith:** It's not something I know much about. I mean, I've seen stuff on social media, but that's it. To be honest, I'm sure it's a great and valuable and worthwhile incentive for some people, but for others it strikes me as like those people who insist on using #amwriting tags... Nobody uses #amplumbing, do they. There seems to be this idea that writing a novel is something everyone can do, if they just put their mind to it, and that it's also a basic human right. It's not. It's a job, and a calling, and can sometimes feel like a life sentence. As Lawrence Kasdan said: "Being a writer is like having homework every night for the rest of your life." If you want to write, then get on with it. In private. The rest of the world doesn't need to know, and honestly doesn't care.

And if you're looking for constant affirmation, I'm afraid you're in the wrong business ;-)

### About the contributors:

**Chaz Brenchley** has been making a living as a writer since he was eighteen. He is the author of nine thrillers, most recently *Shelter*, and two fantasy series, *The Books of Outremer* and *Selling Water by the River*. As Daniel Fox he has published a Chinese-based fantasy series, beginning with *Dragon in Chains*, as Ben Macallan, an urban fantasy, *Desdæmona*. A British Fantasy Award winner, he has also published books for children and more than 500 short stories in various genres.

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**Gail Carriger** writes comedic steampunk mixed with urbane fantasy in three series: two adult, the *Parasol Protectorate* and *Custard Protocol*, and one YA, the *Finishing School* series. Her books are published in eighteen different languages. She has twelve New York Times bestsellers via seven different lists (including #1 in Manga). She was once an archaeologist and is overly fond of shoes, hedgehogs, and tea.

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**Michael Carroll** is the author of thirtyish books, including the *Quantum Prophecy* series of YA superhero novels and – among other things – *Judge Dredd* and *DeMarco, P.I.* for 2000AD and *Jennifer Blood* for Dynamite Comics. He once wrote a bunch of romance novels under a female pseudonym because he was young and needed the money. He is no longer young, but still needs money.

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**Ruth Frances Long** writes YA fantasy such as *The Treachery of Beautiful Things*, *A Crack in Everything* and *A Hollow in the Hills*. In 2015 she won The European SF Society Spirit of Dedication Award For Best Author of Children's Science Fiction and Fantasy. As R. F. Long she writes fantasy & paranormal romance such as *The Scroll Thief*, *Soul Fire* and *The Mirror of her Power*. She lives in Ireland and works in a library of rare, unusual & occasionally crazy books.

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**Michael Marshall Smith** is the author of four highly-acclaimed novels, or eleven if you also count the thrillers he's published under the name Michael Marshall, as well as six collections of short stories. His first novel, *Only Forward*, won both the August Derleth Award for Best Novel in 1995, and the Philip K. Dick Award in 2000. He is also the originator of *The Gist*, a novelette first written by himself, then translated into French by Benoit Domis, then translated back into English by Nicholas Royal.

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**Liz Williams'** first two novels, *The Ghost Sister* and *Empire of Bones*, were nominated for the prestigious Philip K. Dick Award, as was her fifth novel *Banner of Souls* (also shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke award). Liz is also the author of the *Inspector Chen* series, which to date is comprised of six novels, the *Darkland* and *Winterstrike* series, and a collection of short stories: *The Banquet of the Lords of Night*.

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# Getting it Done

by

## Michael Carroll

Every writer has her or his own methods for transferring a story from to page, so I'm certain that many will disagree with some (perhaps all) of what you'll find here. (That's cool. In fact, I welcome such disagreement: the chances are high that I'll learn something new and useful.) So it's not the intention of this article to present a definitive One True Method, because there *is* no One True Method – this is just what works for me. Over time, you'll discover or invent your own methods...

If you're going to make it as a writer, you'll need to set aside some time to write every day. Yes, that can be hard if you've got something else that takes up a lot of time, like a job, or school, or family commitments. But writers write, remember? It ain't gonna write itself.

Let's say that you can only spare three hours per day to write (averaged over the entire month, of course). With November traditionally having thirty days, that gives you ninety hours to write 50,000 words. Or 555.55 words per hour. Or 9.26 words per minute. That's not going to be easy if you've never before written so much, but it's doable. Oh yes. And you *can* do it!

#1. Know your ending before you begin.

If you start writing with only a vague idea of where the story is going, then there's a strong chance that you'll either run out of steam at some stage (the dreaded writer's block) or you'll end up with huge chunks of the story that don't go anywhere (the even more dreaded "I've just wasted four days writing this scene and it could all be replaced with

a single paragraph” scenario). So plan your work. You can do this *before* NaNoWriMo starts, so that you’re all set to begin on November 1<sup>st</sup>.

## #2. Know your beginning before you start writing.

Some teachers of writing say that your tale should open as near to the ending as possible. That’s an interesting approach and it does often work, but you don’t always want your tale peppered with flashbacks and exposition, so it’s best not to assume that you *must* adopt that approach. What *is* important is that you’re not writing for yourself. You’re writing for your readers. They care not a jot how hard the book was to write. All they want is to be entertained. So a good, strong beginning is vital. In other words, don’t bore the readers before they get to the end of the first chapter. More on beginnings later.

## #3. Eliminate distractions.

If you think you can get the book written in a busy Costabucks or other location infested by members of the public, then good for you. Even gooder if you’re actually right about that. But what if you’re wrong? Writing 50,000 words in thirty days requires a lot of concentration, so why make it even harder by adding in potential distractions? Unless you’re more interested in looking like a writer than in actually writing anything, you need a peaceful environment. Turn off the TV and radio. If you must listen to music while you write – perhaps to drown out the chainsaw noises and screams from the apartment next door – then pick music that has no lyrics (so you won’t be tempted to sing along, nor will you find yourself wasting time by looking up the lyrics of those songs you’ve never quite been able to fully understand), or tune the radio to a news channel that’s in a language you don’t know, and keep the volume pretty low: it’ll act as white noise and allow you to focus.

## #4. Eliminate “vital” distractions too...

Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, whatever... They are *not* your friend while you’re writing. And I know that many of you use NaNoWriMo-related websites and message boards to chat with others about your work; that’s all very well in the days running up to November, but consider this: if you spend half an hour checking on the progress of your fellow participants, that’s time that could be spent adding a couple

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of hundred words to your story. Multiply that by thirty days, and you're looking at several thousand words: a good chunk of your novel. So shut down your web browser, or at least close the tabs containing any time-sapping websites. Switching back to Facebook every time it pops up a little "(1)" on your taskbar is not going to help you maintain focus: you don't actually need to know that your friend Marcy likes someone else's post about kittens. Likewise, that oh-so-cool smartphone of yours has got to go on silent mode, preferably in another room, and buried under a cushion, while you're writing. Seriously, if you can't go for two hours without checking your phone then you are *not* going to get the book done. Don't believe me? Then answer this: how many times have you checked your phone since you started reading this article? If the answer is anything other than zero, then you really need to wean yourself off it.

### #5. Prepare your physical environment.

Before you start, make sure that you have everything you need so that you don't waste writing time by looking for it. You'll need: a comfy chair in a quiet environment, your writing equipment (a computer, in other words: you could use a typewriter or even write your book by hand, but again that's just making things harder for yourself), whatever beverages or foodstuffs you prefer when writing (get them ready in advance), pen and paper (to jot down notes), no thesaurus (if your word-processor has one, fine; if not, hide your physical thesaurus because you're not going to need it – more on that later), an empty bladder (go for a pee before you start), and none of the distractions listed above.

### #6. Start writing and do not stop.

Losing time pondering on the exact way to phrase something? Just write it down as clearly and simply as possible and keep going: you can always come back to it later. Put a marker in the text to remind you: I find that [square brackets] are pretty handy for that. Stuck thinking up character names? Call them easy-to-type names Mary or Bob or Sally or Joe and keep going. Your word-processor has a Search and Replace function: later, you can always change "Mary" to "Evangeline" or whatever name you feel is appropriate for her character (hint: my website as a free Name Generator utility!). Typos? Unless they're so bad the word is incomprehensible, ignore them and keep going. You're up against the clock

here. Just vomit the book out of your system and onto the keyboard.

#7. Every day means every day.

“I’m exhausted; I’ll do twice as much tomorrow.” Nope, you might have the best intentions in the world, but that almost never works. You don’t know what other distractions tomorrow will bring, so get it done today.

#8. Keep notes of any changes to your characters or locations.

If you have an ensemble cast or lots of minor characters, it can be easy to lose track of each character’s status. If your baddie has named henchmen, make a note of when each one is killed or otherwise incapacitated. If your heroine gets shot in the arm, write that down too, as a reminder that she no longer has full use of that arm. If your character spends the first chapter painting her bedroom, make a note of it: later, you can have someone else mention the new paint – or even the *smell* of the paint – as a way to solidify the scene. If someone travels from point A to point B in his car, then a quick note will make sure he drives home instead of taking the bus. Even the very simple stuff counts: if you make a point of mentioning that your hero is wearing a tie, don’t have him later remove his shirt by pulling it off over his head without first loosening his tie. That one might not be that big a deal in the grand scheme of things, but you can bet your readers will notice it!

#9. If December 1st comes around and you’re still not finished... then keep going.

Yes, you’ve missed the thirty-day deadline, but if you just abandon your book now then you’ve pretty much wasted all that time. So keep writing – not necessarily at the same frenetic pace as during November – until the book is done. Trust me, it’ll be worth it.

### **A Random Assortment of General Tips.**

- When you get to the end of the day’s session, avoid the temptation to finish on a cliff-hanger at the end of a chapter. It’s often best to just stop writing in the middle of a sentence, save your work (and run your back-ups!), and then shut down the computer. That way, when you start up again the next day, your first instinct will be to complete

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that sentence: that gets you back into the swing of things very quickly. If you stop at the end of a chapter, there's a strong chance that next day you'll lose a lot of time wondering how to best resolve the cliff-hanger.

- “Said” is an invisible word: don't be afraid of it. If your saidophobia forces you to tag your dialogue with “she retorted” or “he exclaimed” or “he barked” or anything like that, the readers will soon become conscious of it and it'll start to feel artificial. Readers will only notice “said” if it appears after every single piece of dialogue. That doesn't mean you should be minimalist with it: use it just enough that it's always clear who's speaking.
- Give your major characters names that start with different letters. That makes it a lot easier for the readers to identify the characters. (I learned this when reading Stephen King's enormous novel *It*. Great book, certainly, but the two main male characters are Ben and Bill. I could never remember which was which and had to keep flipping back to the start to check. This wouldn't have happened if Mr King had called the second guy “Will.”) Now, it's not always going to be possible to do that, but it is something for which you should strive. This rule is particularly important with SF or Fantasy tales that feature made-up or unusual names with which the readers aren't going to be familiar: if your main characters are Varilla, Venorit and Vaaprid, the readers will quickly learn to hate you, and so they should.
- On that note: *anything* that reminds the readers that they're reading is to be avoided. So don't go putting in fancy spacing or insisting that your alien character's dialogue must be in her own typeface. That's just pretentious and distracting for the reader. Avoid parentheses in fiction (like these) because it just looks weird. Likewise, don't use exclamation marks in your narrative to direct the reader on how excited they should be: *Johnny turned – the beast was right behind him!* Em, no. That's amateur hour right there. Unless your story is being told in the first person, don't address the readers: you're not Charles Dickens or one of that lot.



- Exposition is often necessary but it should be done with a minimum of impact. If your science fiction novel requires the readers to know how a piece of imaginary technology works, telling them in the narrative can be clunky, but it's almost always better that having the characters explain things to each other when they should already know them. Related to that: avoid exposition that doesn't drive the plot forward. You might have spent a week working out exactly how the teleporters work in your fictional future, but the huge majority of the readers won't care and don't need to know: the name "teleporter" is sufficient. Likewise, watch out for that horrible approach frequently taken by the writers of TV detective shows: you know the one... The two detectives arrive in their car at a suspect's house and *then* one of them explains why they're there. The implication is that they spent the entire trip in the car in silence, or perhaps talking about the weather or last night's big game. What rubbish! So keep it natural.
- Watch out for characters doing the impossible... For example: "Getting to her feet, Daisy strode across the room..." What's wrong with that? It's telling us that Daisy got to her feet and strode across the room *at the same time*. I recently copy-edited a book in which the writer made this mistake nine times in one paragraph.
- Some writers will switch back and forth between characters during a scene (Terry Pratchett does it a lot!), but in my experience it's wise to resist that: every scene should be related only through one character, almost always the first character mentioned in that scene. If Tom is the scene's primary character, you can tell us what *he's* feeling and thinking, but not what *Mary* is thinking and feeling... Switching perspective inside a scene can weaken the reader's connection with the primary character by reminding them that they're reading: in the real world, we only ever know our own thoughts – and have to make educated guesses at others' thoughts – so fiction presented through a third-person perspective should attempt to mimic that. (Pratchett can get away with perspective-shifting because he establishes the

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process very early in each book; the readers are conditioned to expect shifts in perspective as well as the intrusion of the author's voice. And also because Mr Pratchett was a genius.)

- Punctuation goes inside the quotes. Inside. Not outside. Inside.

*This is wrong:*

*“Let’s get out of here”, he said.*

This is correct:

*“Let’s get out of here,” he said.*

It might not look like a big deal, but have you ever tried to copy-edit a book where the writer has got it wrong every single time? I have. And I have never been more inclined toward murder.

- Capitalisation of nouns: This can be a tricky one to get right... If something like “Mom” or “Dad” or “Professor” or “General” is being used in place of a character’s name, then it should be capitalised. Otherwise, it shouldn’t. Best way to think of it: if they were doctors, then when they’re addressed by their profession it would be “Doctor” with a capital D, but when referring to them otherwise, it would be “doctor” with a lower-case D: “My neighbour, Doctor Smith, worked as a doctor.” Or... “Captain Britain was never in the military and therefore isn’t really a captain.” So if you can replace the noun with the character’s real name and the sentence still flows, then the noun should be capitalised, otherwise it shouldn’t (unless it’s at the start of a sentence!)
- Be mindful of repetition of unusual words or phrases. If, for example, you use the word “resplendent” four times in one paragraph, that’ll jump out at the readers and could break the suspension of disbelief. I have a friend who’s far too fond of the word “discomforting” and when editing his most recent book I counted thirty-seven occurrences of it. He’s dead now.
- Learn how and when to use commas, and when *not* to use them. Seriously, this is vital. Example of poor comma usage: “I’ve got the inclination if you’ve got the time honey.” Um... What is “time honey?” Something *Doctor Who* puts on his porridge? A comma in the right

place (hint: after the word “time”) will make all the difference. (And speaking of commas, what’s up with this growing trend of always putting a comma after any name that opens a sentence? “John Smith, drove his car at speed along the sidewalk.” Cut that out, people!)

- Every character is the hero of his or her own story. The secondary or background characters don’t *know* that they’re only going to appear in a couple of scenes. Each of them has a past, a future, ambitions, dreams, fears... The readers don’t need to be made aware of everything about every character to understand them, but all the characters, however minor, should behave as though they have their own story to tell.
- There is an old saying: “Show, don’t tell.” This means that instead of just informing the reader what’s going on, you need to let them in on the action. Example: “So we started digging the tunnel and forty-one days later we were free.” That’s boring! It needs flavour and texture and substance, all of which can be added by the writer mentally picturing the task and considering the obstacles. *How* was the tunnel dug? What dangers or obstacles did the diggers face? What did they do with all the soil and rocks? How did they cope when the tunnel collapsed? How did they light the tunnel? Did they have candles? If so, where did they get them? How did they explain to their captors why their clothing was covered in dirt? Maybe they realised that dirt-encrusted prison uniforms would be a problem so they dug in the nude: that gives us a scene in which a prisoner working at the far end of the tunnel has to desperately scramble backwards in the nude because a surprise inspection is on the way; he knows that even when he does manage to get out – which won’t be easy because his progress is hampered by the other backward-scrambling prisoners behind him – he’s going to have to pull on his prison uniform and somehow clean his hands, face and head. Or, better still, he’s out of the tunnel, has his uniform on but before he does manage to clean up, the guards arrive: his best chance is to dive back into the tunnel, get his colleagues to disguise the entrance again, and hope that the guards somehow don’t miss him during the inspection.

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- “Show, don’t tell” is important, but that’s not the end of the process. There’s a less common saying that I believe was originally designed for teachers, but it definitely applies to writing: “Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand.” An engaging story allows the reader to believe that she is right there in the middle of the tale. It makes her care what happens to the characters, to feel their fear and share their hopes. In our tunnel-digging scenario above, don’t just relay the action as though you’re compiling a “Use of Tunnelling Equipment” report. Put the reader into the tunnel and make them believe it. You could *describe* the panic, the heat and the fear, and that might work, but it’s far better to allow the reader to *feel* that: instead of saying “It was hot and dirty and scary” it’s far more effective to have a character have to stop digging because the sweat on his forehead keeps running into his eyes, pulling in dirt and grit. He tries to wipe his eyes clear, but there’s even more dirt on his hands, making it worse. But he can’t even stop for too long: hundreds of other prisoners are relying on him to do his part. So he closes his stinging eyes and keeps going, working totally blind, trying not to imagine what will happen if the guards later notice his blood-shot eyes. Or maybe because they have to dig in the nude – to keep their uniforms clean – they figure it’s easier to work on their backs to avoid their naughty parts scraping along the ground: so even a minor tunnel collapse will mean dirt falling onto their faces, getting into their mouths. That pervading loamy smell, the grit between your teeth that never seems to go away, the tickle of an unseen beetle the size of your thumb that’s scuttling over your face and toward your nostrils, the mental picture of a hundred tonnes of earth above you, only inches from your face, pressing down, ready to crush you. And the tunnel cuts across the main entrance to the prison, through which every now and then massive supply trucks will pass, so heavy that their weight causes the ground to tremble. Then there’s the rush of fear when your makeshift spade scrapes against a large rock, and you begin to work around it, feeling for the edges, desperately trying to not imagine that it’s not just a rock, it’s a wall, and all of your work has been for nothing. Then your scarred, worked-raw fingertips and split fingernails finally find the edges, and your muscles ache as you pull the rock free, and you want to scream with relief but you can’t

because oxygen is precious down here, so instead you squirm about, trying to make enough space to pass the rock back to your waiting colleagues – let *them* worry about what to do with it; you've got to keep going because your shift in the tunnel doesn't end until dawn and it's only just past midnight and this is only the tenth day and there's another forty or even fifty days to go.

- You should strive to avoid what I call the Unlikely Parade Scenario. To understand what that means, think back to the last movie you saw that was set in New Orleans. You know that part where the drunk women flashed their breasts and were rewarded with strings of beads from the drunk men? Yes, it's Mardi Gras! Woohoo! Every day is Mardi Gras in New Orleans! Except, of course, *outside* of movie-land, the Mardi Gras celebrations only last for a couple of weeks. Same with movies set in Chicago: there's *always* a Saint Patrick's Day parade going on. And did you know that every window in Paris has a clear view of the Eiffel Tower? It's true, in movie-land. Sure, Mardi Gras and the omnipresent Eiffel Tower are just shortcuts that movie-makers employ to instantly inform their viewers of where the scene is taking place, but it's a cheap trick and doesn't apply to writing prose... Or does it? Yes, it does, in different ways: your protagonist just happens to know the one person who can lead her to the *real* killer. The plucky sidekick is, luckily, a genius hacker. The professor coincidentally visits his old school on the very day that the annual science-fair is taking place. The protagonist's boyfriend's step-father turns out to be the mastermind behind the bank-robbery. The random planet on which your hero is exiled just happens to be the one place he needs to be to resolve the plot. (Yes, I'm looking at *you*, JJ Abrams' first *Star Trek* movie – Kirk flees a scary monster and ends up in the exact cave where Spock Prime is also hiding? Seriously, that's appalling – and rather easily fixed: Kirk spots a fire in the entrance to the cave which is what leads him to realise that there *is* a cave, and that it's likely to be inhabited. Sure, we're still left with the staggeringly unlikely coincidence of Kirk and Spock running into each other on an almost barren planet, but again that can be fixed by the application of a little brain-matter.) OK, so you do need *some* coincidences to get the story started, but try to add some logic to them, or at the very least

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disguise them! Maybe the protagonist's boyfriend was forced by his father to woo her because his father needed someone on the inside. How about the plucky sidekick teams up with the hero *because* he's a genius hacker? Doesn't it work better if the professor is visiting his old school on that particular day because he's been asked to *judge* the science-fair?

### Beginnings

Finding the best entry-point to a story is a lot simpler if you know the entire story before you begin. Some writers make it all up as they go along, but I say nuts to that. That particular avenue leads to madness, writer's block, and is littered with abandoned manuscripts. Besides, it's easier and quicker to change the plot of your outline than it is to ditch entire chapters. So, with your story completely worked out, how do you find the best way in?

Well, let's look at a story with which everyone is familiar: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The entire opening (Indy stealing the idol) has got almost nothing to do with the main plot. It serves to introduce the protagonist and give the viewers a bit of thrilling action that'll tide them over during the scenes where Indy is teaching, before all the stuff about the Ark of the Covenant comes in. James Bond movies traditionally do a similar sort of thing: adrenaline-fueled opening, atrocious pun to show that the hero remains unperturbed by the action, then titles. But that approach doesn't work so well in a book, because watching a movie is passive (the viewer doesn't have to do anything but sit back and let it happen), and reading a book requires more input: the reader has to pick up the book and physically turn the pages. A throw-away action scene just gets in the way of the plot, and your readers will likely feel short-changed by that.

Instead, focus on the actual plot, and get to it as soon as possible. Now, you don't have to give away too much, and you can be subtle about it, but your book's opening should be connected to the main storyline, or should directly lead to it.

Let's look at *Star Wars* (the first one, which was later feebly retitled "Episode VI: A New Hope"). It opens with the Star Destroyer chasing Princess Leia's ship because – somehow – the empire knows that the rebels have the stolen Death Star plans on board. Bam! Straight into the story – that's what we want! There's no set-up where we see the plans being stolen (we're not getting that story until next year, apparently –

thirty-nine years after we first heard about those plans), nor is there a heart-tugging scene where we see Leia agonising over whether to join the rebellion. We don't need any of that, so *Star Wars* doesn't give it to us.

Likewise, your book must capture the reader's attention within the first few paragraphs. That doesn't always mean dumping them in the middle of a world-shattering event; it just means that they must be intrigued enough to want to keep reading.

So don't open your book with something boring or pedestrian, like having the protagonist wake up, or describe the weather in great detail. If you *must* do that to set the scene, then get it over with as soon as possible. "When the alarm clock went off, she'd already been awake for several minutes, listening to the rain pounding against her bedroom window."

And please don't have your protagonist waste the reader's time by having her look at her reflection in the mirror so that you can quickly describe her stunning cobalt hair, her chestnut-coloured teeth, and full, pouting ears.

At this stage, the readers don't care about any of that. Yes, they want to know the basics so that they can mentally picture the scene, but really all that means is the character's gender, rough age (that is; whether they're a child or an adult), and where they are. You can refine the details later.

The late, great Harry Harrison spoke often of the "narrative hook" – an opening sentence or paragraph that catches the reader's (and the editor's) interest. It's a tricky thing to master, and not necessarily one you should always use, but I strongly recommend that you start practising. Here's a few to get you thinking...

*There is a knife in my chest. It hurts, and I can't pull it out because they've cut off my arms.*

*On the far side of the high street, Mary saw her first boyfriend and wondered if the police had ever found his sister.*

*The Hall of Heroes' greatest treasure was the sword that killed the last dragon, but Mattin was disappointed to see that the legendary weapon was dull, chipped and barely as long as his arm.*

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*Jameson was late for the detective inspector's briefing on the school shooting because he'd been in the pub watching the match.*

*"I'll kill you!" she screamed, and Mark knew that she meant it.*

### **Writer's Block**

This happens when the writer gets stuck. And that's because he or she didn't stick to their outline. (Or didn't *have* an outline to begin with, in which case that's just tough: you don't build a house by buying bricks and then just putting them on the ground – you need a blueprint and you need to adhere to it!) So if you find that you've written yourself into a corner, go back to the point where you deviated from the outline and scrap everything that comes after it. That brilliant idea you had that came out of nowhere? Yeah, that's the one. Drop it. It's not *that* brilliant.

There you go: that was easy, wasn't it? Well, no, of course it wasn't. No one likes having to excise great lumps of text from their novel, but do it anyway. Copy the offending chapters to a new document, save that under a new name, delete it from the main text and keep going. (You're saving it because you want to tell yourself that you might use it later, and that therefore it wasn't wasted time. Well, chances are that you'll never use it again, but it's comforting to think that it still exists "just in case.")

If you honestly can't find a way to get your characters or story from where they are now to where they should be, then try this: pretend you've solved the problem, and skip over the hard part. That's right: just stick a note in the text along the lines of "[They escape from the dungeon]" and then carry on as though you have already worked that part out.

Later, the solution will come to you.

### **So remember the cardinal rules:**

1. Outline the entire story before you begin. Use any method you like to do this, but you *must* know the entire story.
2. Stick to the outline.
3. Every scene – every scene – should either develop the characters



or move the plot forward, or both: Characters and plot are symbiotic: characters effect the story, story affects the characters (if you don't know the difference between "affect" and "effect" look them up!). Anything else is just fluff. Readers don't want fluff – they want substance.

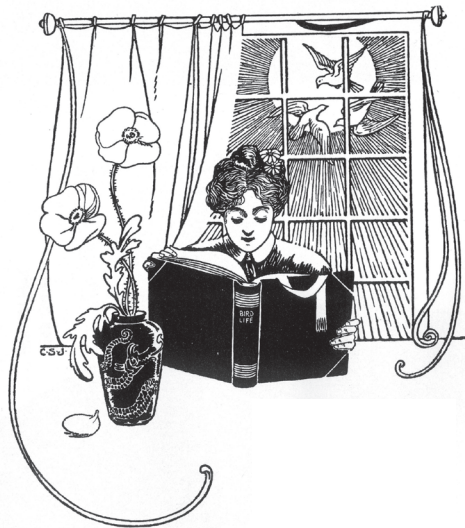
4. When it gets tough, push through it. Don't quit. The only way we can rise is by climbing the obstacles in our path.

5. It's not about how clever the reader thinks you are: it's about how much the reader enjoys the experience.

6. Writing can be difficult, but looking back a decade later on that book you never wrote because you were too scared or too lazy can be soul-destroying.

7. They're just words on a page, people. You're not even expected to invent *new* words – you already know the ones you're going to need.

Finally...Attitude is everything: If you believe that you can't write a novel, then you can't. If you believe that you can, then you can. *I* believe that you can do it... but only you can determine whether you *will*.



# 30 Days of Writing Prompts

-or-

## How to Ruin Your Perfectly Serviceable Novel

by Chris Garca

So, you need a prompt. You need that little restriction that makes all possible worlds into merely (All Possible worlds) - I. I am here to provide you with tiny little babysteps towards your goal. If you can crowbar these gems into your writing every day, you'll manage to destroy whatever flow you were establishing and turn the entire project into one big gag...

... and that's actually a good thing.

Let's face it, without a good National Novel Revision Month (or Season, or Year), whatever you write is highly unlikely to be of publishable quality. If you throw in these prompts, what you might find is that the writing process itself becomes more fun. If writing is more fun, then you'll want to do more of it. If you do more of it, you're more likely to complete your project. If you complete your project, you will then go and edit it at some point, and you'll likely find these prompted bits need to be cut. Without them, you may never have finished though, so they're important, but expendable. Like your appendix (both for your book and your body).

The key to NaNo is finishing. It's what it's good for. It FORCES you to finish by denying you the neat little graphic elements unless you complete your task.

And now, prompts that will make your wrong smell like New Jersey two weeks into a Garbage Workers' strike, but still manage to make it fun!

Day One - In your first paragraph, make a veiled threat against the United Nations. Bonus if you specifically name a character UThant.

Day Two - A ninja appears.

Day Three - Have a detailed passage where a character cooks a meal.

Use an actual recipe and describe well enough that a reader could go and cook it themselves.

Day Four - A character hears a Klaus Nomi song on the radio, and reacts.

Day Five - include the phrase "...but it needs to feel organic."

Day Six - a different ninja appears.

Day Seven - Have a character describe a book they're writing to another character, who is also writing a book.

Day Eight - Write a love scene without the characters ever touching.

Day Nine - An Hourglass falls into the wrong hands!

Day Ten - Write yourself into today's output, but make yourself a misunderstood villain.

Day Eleven - Too much coffee!!!!

Day twelve - Have a character tell a joke with the punchline "No! I said a plumber's WRENCH!"

Day Thirteen - A family is torn apart by something as simple as a pack of wolves.

Day Fourteen - A character lights a cigarette, has it slapped from their mouth before they take a single puff.

Day Fifteen - Insert a Latin phrase into a character's dialogue, then have another character mis-define the phrase.

Day Sixteen - Lightsabers. Day Seventeen - Junot Diaz and Ric Flair appear together on an Anti-Bullying PSA your characters see on TV.

Day Eighteen - Your main character eats, or is eaten by, a Mountain Lion.

Day Nineteen - Go to a public park where there are children. Record thirty seconds of them playing and incorporate it word for word in your novel. (NOTE: This could get you arrested in some municipalities)

Day Twenty - Ninjas vs. Country and Western Singers.

Day Twenty-One - The lights go out, a gunshot is heard in the distance. A thud off to your character's left hand side.

Day Twenty-Two - Two characters recreate the "I'm calmer than you are." portion of The Big Lebowski.

Day Twenty-Three - A man named Claude, and a woman named Maude, end up fighting over your main character's affections.

Day Twenty-Four - The word 'Namaste' is misused a half-dozen times.

“The search for the word gets no easier but nobody else is going to write your novel for you.”

Neil Gaiman

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Day Twenty-Five - A needless Neil Gaiman quote appears.

Day Twenty-Six - Sting appears in the rafters, holding a baseball bat.

Day Twenty-Seven - A portion of the lyrics to Baby Got Back are spoken by a Minister and/or parole officer.

Day Twenty-Eight - An arrow flies through the air, pinning the playing card your main character is holding in their left hand to the large maple tree behind them. It is the four of clubs. The Arrow was fired by someone between six foot one, and six foot one-and-a-half. There is a glass of cider on the table.

Day Twenty-Nine - Ninjas show up to explain how it was all a great big misunderstanding.

Day Thirty - Ever'body eats pudding! Alternate ending - George RR Martin pulls up in front of the bar where everyone is celebrating, gets out of his Rolls, screwing a silencer onto his 9mm as we fade to black.



# A Pros on Prose Addendum!

## Paul Kane

***Do you plan your novels in detail, or just start with a vague idea and make it up as you go along? (If it's the latter, how do you know when the book is finished?) If you've tried both, which method do you feel yields the best results?***

I'm definitely a planner, I don't like setting off anywhere unless I've got a map. I usually have an A4 hardback notebook for each novel, which contains research, character profiles and chapter breakdowns – even if it's just a single line for each chapter. That doesn't mean you have to stick religiously to it once you start, because things might suggest themselves to you as you go along, but it does give you a safety net I find if you start to get lost during the writing process. I've never tried writing something as big as a novel without planning it, only shorts. I guess I'm frightened that it'll go off track and then I'll have wasted all that time writing it. I know people who do write novels like that, but they're a lot braver than me!

***When writing the first draft, how do you motivate yourself to keep going on those days when the blank screen (or page) is just staring back and you and The Words Just Won't Come?***

It's hard; very hard sometimes. For me, though, writing's a living so I have to tell myself that if I'm not writing, then I'm not doing my job. When you are your own boss, there's nobody there telling you to get things done, so you have to rely on yourself for that. It's tempting sometimes, especially when you get to difficult bits in a novel, to just take the day off – but if you do that, you've only got to make the time up somewhere else. If I really do get totally stuck, I'll work on another project for a day or so, and by the time I come back to the original thing that stumped me I've usually worked out some kind of solution. 'Sleep on it' might be a cliché, but it does actually work – while you're not focussing on the problem or getting wound up about it, your brain's probably fixing it subconsciously.

***Your work schedule: do you have set times to write, or just write in the gaps between Real Life stuff?***

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I try to stick to office hours, especially if I'm writing a novel. Again, for me it's that thing of treating it like a job – because, well, it is one. Obviously, it doesn't always pan out that way and other things happen, like you might have to stop to do some PR for something that you have out or coming out, or – if you're very lucky – you get invited to guest at events, which is a lot more enjoyable than being chained to the computer. But, on the whole, office hours tend to work for me and what I do, unless I'm extremely busy and then it might spill over into evenings. I also try and take weekends off with the family, so that not only gives me a break it also sets aside some time for the real life stuff.

### ***Do you have a daily minimum word-count? If so, how rigidly do you stick to it?***

I try to do around 3 – 4,000 words a day if I can. It's not set in stone, and sometimes I might only manage 2,000, then other days I might be on a roll and get 5,000 done; the latter is very rare, I hasten to add. I'll usually try and get 1k done before lunch, so that I know at least I've got halfway there if I only manage 2k by the end of the day, though usually I can get a couple more thousand done before dinner. I am one of those people who beats themselves up if they don't reach their word-count, which helps to motivate me massively.

### ***Do you worry about creating a highly-polished first draft, or just barf it out onto the keyboard and keep going (like I do) and then clean it up later?***

I'm of the 'get it all down, then fix it' school definitely. I'm probably unusual in that I prefer the editing/rewriting process because I can see this big lump of words getting better with each draft... hopefully.

### ***What slows you down? (We're looking for anything and everything here that blocks the flow of words getting to the page: trying to come up with the ideal names for characters, messing about on social media, just one more game of Minesweeper, phone calls from well-meaning friends and relatives, answering e-mails, "another quick cup of tea and then I'll start", adorable cat videos on YouTube... anything at all! even Fanzines)***

I think writers are notorious for procrastination, for getting

distracted by anything and everything. I don't play online games or watch much YouTube, but yes to social media and emails, although I like to tell myself that this is all part of the PR process... yeah, right. I try and do all the research I can before starting a novel, but it definitely puts you off your stride if you come up against something that you have to go away and look up. Or you can't think of the right character name for someone you've just introduced because you suddenly realised you needed them to make a point. Tea and toast is the famous distraction, getting up and making either or both just to get yourself away from the laptop for a little while.

***What keeps you going? (Again, anything: sense of accomplishment, thoroughly enjoying the story, rampant poverty, determination and/or bloody-mindedness, giant ego, minuscule ego that needs to be nurtured, overwhelming desire to “get this one out of the way so I can get started on the next one” - that sort of thing!)***

I don't have much of an ego, so it's not that. When I first started out, I was earning a living from my journalism so money wasn't that much of an issue – so back then I suppose it was that sense of accomplishment. If I got a story published, amidst all the rejections, then that was a small win. Nowadays, and having made the switch from mainly non-fiction to almost all fiction, making a living is a good motivating factor. Keeping a roof over my family's head, putting food on the table. That doesn't mean I take on something just for the money if it doesn't sit right with me, but I do like to try and find a healthy balance of worthwhile projects and decent pay rates.

***Roughly, what's the time-line of your acerage book, from idea to outline to first draft to polish? How many drafts do you do? Do you tend to cut more or add more in subsequent drafts?***

It varies from book to book, really. With something like Blood RED, there wasn't a vast amount of research so I could just get stuck in and write that one – which took about a month, first draft, as it was only a short novel (roughly the same length as the ones in National Novel Writing Month). It's gone through several drafts and I've just finished the final polish for the publisher (SST Publications), so that's taken – all in all – about a year. With something like Sherlock Holmes and the Servants of Hell, just announced by Solaris (<http://www.solarisbooks.com/post/796>),

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there were a good few months of research first, before even writing a word of the book. Then I wrote the first draft of 93k over the summer, in about two months, give or take, and I'm about to start my first edit/rewrite. On adding and cutting, again it depends. I think you're always trying to make your work tighter, so cutting is a big part of editing. But if you need to rewrite sections, then it might end up adding more words. It's swings and roundabouts really.

***Care to share any nuggets of wisdom you've developed yourself or nicked from other writers that have helped? (Example: Bob Shaw once told me that he'd read a very old pulp novel in which the main character was described thus: "He wasn't very handsome, but girls liked him anyway." Bam! Instant reader-identification right there!)***

I'll share a piece of advice bestselling author Simon Clark gave me back in the day, which was just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Get on with the work and take it all a step at a time, then one day you'll look back and see just how far you've come... and he was absolutely right. The other is from me: try not to let rejections get you down – we all get them. And it's all subjective, so what one person loathes another might love. That's the nature of the beast...

***What advice do you give to those who, upon learning that you're a writer, tell you, "I've always wanted to write a book."***

To stop talking about it and just get on with it, essentially. If you don't sit down and get the words on the screen or page, then it'll never happen.

***If you read an amateur manuscript and it's rubbish, is it better to gently steer and encourage the writer or just tell them the brutal truth?***

I used to teach creative writing courses, and still do workshops with my wife (the author and editor Marie O'Regan), so I can safely say that it's always better to be honest - but at the same time, every writer can improve with constructive criticism. You'll find that the ones who aren't that great don't usually take this well anyway, and probably stop coming to the class or going to workshops. Chris Fowler once said to me, we're all developing and getting better as writers the more we do, and that's absolutely spot on. Stephen King also said, there's only one way to become



a good writer, read a lot and write a lot – so I think that says it all.

***Would you write a book for no money because it's a story you really want to tell?***

Hmm, more so when I had the other income coming in probably – I have a couple of 'for the love' books that I still haven't been able to place, written because I really wanted to write them. So that can be particularly soul destroying... But nowadays, as I say, I have to bear in mind that I'm actually earning a living from writing, so have to look also at what might sell. The most rewarding books are those you really want to write that also sell really well, like my Hooded Man novels; that's the best of both worlds.

***Would you ghost-write a book for someone more famous, knowing that they'll get all the credit and you'll only get a pile of cash? (Have you already done so?)***

Depends who it was, I think. If it was someone I really admired then I might, but not someone who was famous for just being famous. No amount of money would make up for that. And no, I've never done one. Never been asked.

***Finally and, most importantly for this issue, what are your thoughts on the National Novel Writing Month, shortened as NaNoWriMo***

I think it's a brilliant idea. Anything that gets people writing – or reading – is fantastic. How else are we going to find the bestselling authors of the future, but with schemes like these? All power to people's elbows, definitely!

**Paul Kane** is the award-winning, bestselling author and editor of over fifty books – including the *Arrowhead* trilogy (gathered together in the sellout *Hooded Man* omnibus, revolving around a post-apocalyptic version of Robin Hood), *The Butterfly Man and Other Stories*, *Hellbound Hearts* and *The Mammoth Book of Body Horror*. His non-fiction books include *The Hellraiser Films and Their Legacy* and *Voices in the Dark*. His latest novels are *Lunar* and the YA story *The Rainbow Man* (as P.B. Kane), with the sequel to *RED* – *Blood RED* – forthcoming from SST Publications. [www.shadow-writer.co.uk](http://www.shadow-writer.co.uk)

# Extroduction

## by Michael Carroll

So, dear reader, here we are at the end of this special issue of *Journey Planet*. If you've read through this entire issue and you still want to write that book, then we're happy. But if something in here has forever soured you on the idea of writing a novel, then that's probably a good thing too because the world doesn't need any more novels half-heartedly churned out by a writer who doesn't care.

NaNoWriMo is a meat-grinder in many ways. It's a crowbar that separates the wanna-bes from the will-bes. It's hard work, and you will likely be tempted to quit more than once. You will come to despise the book, and love it at the same time. You'll shed tears of frustration and tears of joy. You'll doubt your talent, and discover skills that you never knew you had. You'll compare yourself to the greats and find your abilities lacking, and then you'll realise that, hey, it's just words on a page and every writer has to start somewhere.

So cancel your social engagements for November. Book some time off work if you can. Tell your family and friends that you'll be busy – you don't have to tell them why (in fact, it's often best not to mention what you're doing, because you really, really don't want everyone forever after to keep asking you, "Hey, how's that book coming along?"), and then go for it. Grab the bull by the horns and don't worry about whether that's a tired old cliché – get it down on the page now, and polish it later.

If you're new to novel-writing, allow NaNoWriMo to be the first step on your path. It's a tricky one, but you only have to take that first step once. And if you're a seasoned novelist who's been putting off writing that new book until "the right time," well, you know by now that the wishbone is a poor substitute for the backbone.

There *will* be occasions when you'll wish you'd never started. But I implore you not to give in to the urge to quit, because it's only a month. Not even one of the *long* ones. Thirty days, then you can look back and think, "I made that."

You can do it, and – if you really are a writer – then you will absolutely give it your best shot, because even though few writers agree on the details of the process, we all understand that we can only get to “The End” when the drive to succeed is stronger than the temptation to quit.

The End.

