



Start writing fiction

Researching and influencing your fiction

Narrator:

Learning from book and films. Listen to Louis de Bernieres, Patricia Duncker, Tim Pears and Alex Garland.

Louis de Bernieres:

I think that if you don't read, you don't get anything out. You don't get any writing done. It's pointless wanting to be a writer if you're not a reader. I read every day in the bath 'til the water goes cold; that's just novels, fiction and stuff, and for research I do with my feet up on the kitchen table, you know, that sort of thing. And I do a lot of reading. Through my life I've had crazes for various writers, so an awful long list now. My longest craze was for various Latin American writers which I think is very obvious from my style. But other, otherwise I've had my Tolstoy craze and my Henry James craze and my Steinbeck craze and my Hermann Hesse craze, you know, when I was a student and everyone was looking for the meaning of life. I had a little Jane Austen craze a couple of years ago and an Iris Murdoch one, when I read a lot of them and then stop and go on to something else.

Patricia Duncker:

Read everything, read all the time. Read in as catholic a way as possible. Read fiction if you're a prose fiction writer, read widely in fiction, read a lot of non-fiction, go to the theatre, read everything you can get your hands on. Because, the more you read and the more you absorb, the denser, the richer your own texts will become.

Tim Pears:

Literature is a huge world, and if you can get inside it through writing, somehow you're into the driving seat of something very special, and reading is going to be a far richer experience, and it's something that you're doing as a sort of, as a co-conspirator almost.

Alex Garland:

I'm a big film fan, I love watching films. The film I wish I'd written, the one I'd loved to have written more than any other would probably be Taxi Driver, I'd have thought, but yeah, they're big influences and, I think, because I come from a background of comic strips, the way the films work and the way comic strips work are very, very similar and in terms of setting scenes, and stuff, I'll, in novels, I always used to think in comic strip terms, almost like you'd have an establishing shot, so you'd set the scene, and then you'd zoom in on a character, and you'd look at these, so you'd have set the scene so now you can really just deal with these two characters talking and maybe pull away at one point, there's a bit in The Beach where some people are sitting on a beach and they're chatting and, and then you sort of cut away to a kid who's knocking a ball around on a beach and then you cut back to them and, and that's very like comic strip but it's also very like a film.

Narrator:

Tim Pears talks about the pleasures of researching and about he gathers details for recreating the past.

Tim Pears:

It's one of the great advantages of writing a novel is that it's an excuse to find out about a whole world. I always have that at the beginning of a book. I think 'right, what do I really want to find out about for this book? I've got some basic idea but, it's got to be embedded in a world, a real world, a world of people, and work' which is something I'm kind of generally interested in is what people do. From everywhere, you know like a magnet, people sometimes

say that, you know, the most important thing that we must do is to remember, do not forget, you know, do not forget, there's a great a kind of a 20th Century injunction. Do not forget, do not allow things to be forgotten, and that novelists are somehow, it's one of our jobs, as guardians of memory. But in my own experience in, for other writers that I've spoken to, it seems like one of the common attributes is a poor memory, and it's almost like you kind of fill yourself up with things, and then you let them go, because you move onto the next thing. So certainly, for *In a Land of Plenty* it was dealing with the recent past with things that had happened in my lifetime, but certainly I couldn't rely on my own memory, so I would just draw on everything; newspapers, books, other people's memories a lot. Photographs, I think photographs are very useful, because you forget hair style, fashion and so on and then it just all comes back, when you see a photograph and you think, my god we were dressed like that, and all things come back.

Narrator:

Now listen to Patricia Duncker and Alex Garland.

Patricia Duncker:

I've written one historical novel which is my second novel, *James Miranda Barry*. To some extent, I think all novels are historical novels because whatever period you're writing about, has to be thoroughly researched, and the last novel that I wrote was a contemporary novel, that was set in our present time. And I still found that I had to do almost as much research for that as I did for *James Miranda Barry*. *James Miranda Barry* - the research was fun because it was set in the early part of the 19th Century through to about 1865/1870 and one of the things about that period which really interests me is the fact that you're moving from the Regency through to the Victorian period. So we're gradually becoming more and more straight-laced, and religion is becoming more and more important in the society. So that the reading I did was a lot of history, an awful lot about the professions of my characters. One was a doctor one was an actress, so I read an awful lot about what the conditions were on the stage of that period, and about the state of medical research in the 19th Century. The other aspect of the book that was fascinating for me was the West Indian content of the book. Because *James Miranda Barry* was a doctor in the colonial service who worked abroad, and he spent some of his professional life in Jamaica, which is where I come from, so it was fascinating to read all the things that I'd vaguely heard about in history or knew a little about, but to go into them in-depth. Particularly the slave revolts, because there is a scene in the book, there's a section in the book which is about, the Morant Bay rebellion, about which I knew absolutely nothing, except that we frequently commemorated it on stamps, until I'd researched it up. But I wouldn't say that I did less research for the novels that are contemporary, and in fact, the research tends to be the same. It's about professions, about locations, and about the histories of places.

Alex Garland:

I didn't really do any deliberate research on either of the two books. Coincidentally I was a back packer, that was what my life revolved around, in a way. Writing was always a secondary concern to me about how I could get a ticket or a visa and where I wanted to go. The Philippines I was particularly fond of, I'd been there repeatedly for years and years and years by the time I started to write *The Tesseract* so I didn't really need any research. I think also research, deliberate research can be difficult because it's a kind of side-step away from imagination or it can be if you're not careful. And that can show up in writing as well. I think very often, you know, another one of these little truisms about writing is that a lot of writing is about editing and about what you take out, and I think that's very true and if you leave a reader with a sense that something's been too heavily researched I think that's bound to distance them from their emotional contact with the narrative.