



Start writing fiction

Redrafting and editing

Narrator:

Writing with precision. Michele Roberts and Tim Pears.

Michele Roberts:

Well in *Daughters of the House*, I tried to slow down my writing and it wasn't really in order to make evocations of place, it was in order to write better. Because I can write with great facility, and I write very badly when I do that, and I've often found when I'm starting a novel, particularly if I've put it in the past tense and if I use a third person narrative, it's terribly easy to get possessed by the ghost of Georgette Heyer. Now, I did love her when I was a little girl of 13, wanting to find out about sex and romance, but they are stories that just gallop off with you - they throw you across the saddle like the heroine is tossed over the saddle, and away you go. And actually for writing my own novels, this wouldn't do. So to slow myself down, and slay the ghost of Georgette Heyer, I tried to turn into a kind of witnessing camera I suppose and look at things very closely, in great detail, and just use all my senses.

Tim Pears:

In general, writing is about detail isn't it? It's about, when you're reading a book, you're reading about the moment and the description of small things. I mean, a novel is composed of lots and lots of moments, and lots of sentences and each sentence, I guess, is an attempt at something concrete in this strange symbolic form that language is so, it's all about detail really.

Narrator:

Plot and suspense. Patricia Duncker talks about the 'linger' factor.

Patricia Duncker:

When you're writing, you're addressing a particular process at the other end, which is the act of reading. So you have to think about, how long are you going to keep your reader waiting to know something, that you have signalled, as a secret, as something that's important, as something your characters know, but your reader doesn't yet know. How long are you going to let your reader wait? How are you going to hold information back from your reader without making them feel that you're lying, or frustrating them, or baffling them?

I think the release of information in prose fiction is terribly, terribly important, how to do that gradually, how to keep your reader hooked, how to keep your reader tantalised, and how to keep your reader satisfied. What I want is a writer who wants to seduce me, as a reader, and the seduction goes to the last page. And then the seduction can actually have another aspect to it, which is the really crunch one, that you aim for as a writer, which I call 'linger' factor.

Now this is when, it's exactly like any other seduction, it's when, the seduction has been achieved, the person has left your bedroom, but you go on thinking about them, that's when they've won, that's when they've got you hooked, and with writing it's exactly the same.

Narrator:

Redrafting and editing. Michele Roberts, Patricia Duncker and Tim Pears.

Michele Roberts:

I write differently depending on what medium I'm writing in. I use a pen for writing poetry, because very often I write poetry in bed and I like to have lots of sheets of paper which are the different drafts of the poems spread out all in front of me. And a pen on paper just seems perfect for that. I also use a pen because I have a conventional little black notebook that I carry everywhere, and everything goes into that first. It's my little treasure basket of bits, of scraps. I write short stories straight onto a word processor, similarly novels, similarly I think

almost any other kind of text. And of course it's lovely editing on a word processor; it's brilliant. For 30 years I had a little portable Olivetti, and I used to type out every new page, just over and over again, because I re-draft madly, and I got into computing only about 10 years ago I think, and changed my life, because you can re-draft without pain! And I think re-drafting is absolutely crucial, it's one thing I bully my students about is re-draft and re-draft and re-draft.

Patricia Duncker:

I keep all my drafts, the first draft is the most exciting. I do the first and second draft in a mass of paper, ink written over paper. The third draft is the first one that goes into the computer. And then, after that, the third and fourth, the third draft is a major, usually a major change, the third draft is a draft which has big shifts about and it, because I'm working then from the hand written manuscript, into the computer, and I change a lot at that point. Then about the fourth and fifth is mostly tinkering, and a little bit of shifting. And if I'm going to throw the whole thing out because it's no good, it goes out at the second draft.

Tim Pears:

When my first book was published I met my editor, Alexandra Pringle is her name, and she was fantastic with helping edit my first book, and at the end of it she said that in her experience, every writer that she's worked with on their first novel have had to go through a big editing process, and half of them sort of take this on board and assimilate it, and will do it themselves, largely, from then on, and the other half will never be able to, and will always need a lot of help. And I felt quite relieved that I was in that first group, because I saw what we'd done and, I realised that it was pretty simple and straightforward. But I've discovered painfully that in actual fact, I'm in the second group, not the first group at all, and every novel I write goes through the same painful process, that I have a structure to begin with, keep to that structure, finish it as best I can, and then my editor opens my eyes to the fact that in fact I need to do a lot more work on the structure, and then I go away and do that very happily, and I love doing that, I love rewriting. I would expect to spend about eight months writing the first draft, and two years rewriting.