



Start writing fiction

Starting the writing process

Narrator:

Starting out. You'll now hear several novelists talk about what influenced their beginnings in writing. The first speakers are Alex Garland, Michelle Roberts and Tim Pears.

Alex Garland:

I got into writing really through drawing comic strips. My Dad's a cartoonist and I grew up around comic books. I was always reading them and he draws so, you know, as a kid I was copying him and did drawings, and I always thought that would be how I'd make my living really. At a certain point, I think I was about 21, two things happened. One is I began to realise that I wasn't as good at drawing as I needed to be in order to really make this work and I also began to get frustrated, I think, by how long it took to tell a story because you'd write it and then you'd draw it and the drawing which wasn't that good would take me ages and ages and ages, and eventually what I did was, I just ditched the pictures pretty much and stuck with the words.

Michele Roberts:

I think I began writing, and of course this is a story I've made up in adulthood looking back, and it's a story that changes I think probably every 10 years as I go through my life - I think I began writing to invent some kind of cultural identity for myself, because of being half-French and half-English, that was the major conflict in my life. I think being a Catholic was very important to me. Partly in a positive sense because it gave me lots of stories - Catholicism is a source of what we might call magical realism - mad, crazy things the saints get up to - miracles, so on and so forth. Catholicism was also a very bad place for a young woman growing up. It's a very misogynistic religion - I think it's founded on the fear of the body, and in particular the female body. I felt completely crushed by it. And also crushed by the practice of sitting in church listening to a priest who was very angry and particularly with young people, rant on Sunday after Sunday about our sins and our evil and our inequities. And I think as a very angry young woman I just began to start talking in my head and as soon as I could, I left the Church and read voraciously and lived a free life and began to write down all the angry things in my head and they turned into stories. So in a sense I think, I always had the love of language, because growing up in a bilingual household with a story-telling English grandmother and a father who'd wanted to write stories about his war time experience, a mother who taught French literature, I was surrounded by story telling and books, and poetry and recipes and people quarrelling and using language very powerfully and I think that I began to find that subjects arrived. And nowadays when people ask me what I write about, I say - food, sex and God. And that just about sums it up.

Tim Pears:

I always wanted to be a writer from when I was very young, I think it came from being somewhat unhappy as a child. In my second book, *In the Land of Plenty*, the main character in it, the middle son of a family, Freeman family about whom the book's, that follows their fortunes he's a sort of semi-autobiographical character, he's a photographer who takes photographs, partly to try and understand the world by looking through the lens of the camera, and partly to have something to hide behind, and I think really, that's, for me writing has been that, or was that, that's why I became a writer. Because, I was perplexed by life and by people and, grown ups and the world, and writing was an attempt to understand it, but also something to hide behind.

Narrator:

Now listen to Abdulrazak Gurnah, Monique Roffey and Louis de Bernieres.

Abdulrazak Gurnah:

Why I'm not sure, I guess 'why' is one of those things that happens as you're doing it, but how is more like a stumbling into it more than, you know, having some kind of ambition at a certain age and saying - I know what I'm going to do. Starting to write, rather than wanting to. And the starting for me happened with coming to England. I mean I used to write before, like at school, write the odd thing and so on, but it was only kind of playing, doing it for your friends and that kind of thing. Not what we mean when we say 'a writer'.

But it was after coming to England and kind of thinking about what it means to have left home, to have left people you know, to have come here, coming to grips with the things that were happening, not all of which were nice things. And it was during that process of thinking about things, understanding your position in relation to where you are that I started to write things, just things, and then after a while the things you think, well, 'can I do something with these things?' And you gradually realise that you've got something that is developing or that is growing and then get silly and say 'I could write a book!' You know, that's how it began really.

Monique Roffey:

I think it was just a sensibility. I've been writing from a very young age even as a child and in the same way that some people are naturally very musical or interested in insects or good at tennis or you know, crazy about trains or whatever it is, I mean from a very young age I've been writing diaries and journals and I just think it just progressed. I was a journalist for a while, and you know I was always writing something else, a screenplay or a comedy script or a telly this or you know, something, and I think eventually when you're old enough, you know, and you want to take yourself a bit more seriously I just woke up one day and said right - I'm going to make the next step and I'm gonna write a novel, I'm gonna have a go. So it's been something that I've always done, there was never a conscious decision.

Louis de Bernieres:

I always knew that I was going to be a writer. My father wrote poetry so in our house it was quite normal to want to do that sort of thing. And I knew it from a very early age, I suppose from about the age of 12. And I had a couple of fantastically good English teachers, I think about three all together who were a definite inspiration and a guide. Then all through my teenage years I wrote poetry, mostly the sort of embarrassing sappy love poetry that one does write about 'why don't you love me and I'm going to kill myself', that sort of thing. And then in my 20s I actually forgot that I was going to be a writer because I thought I was going to be a rock star and I wrote songs and things instead. But I did carry on writing things from time to time and then when I was 35 I had a motorcycle crash that put me in plaster for 6 months and during that time I really couldn't go out much, so I wrote my first novel to keep myself entertained.

Narrator:

Writing rituals. You will now hear about some useful practices including the writer's notebook and morning pages. The speakers are Michele Roberts, Monique Roffey and Alex Garland.

Michele Roberts:

In the first 6 months when I'm fumbling and grumbling and scrambling, I write a lot, I write obsessively in my notebook. I write ideas that are hopeless and don't work. I write diary entries about not being able to write and about being a complete failure and about silence and about writer's block, and I write about anything that comes into my head, because what I'm doing is practising - I'm freeing up the unconscious, I'm letting language out to start dancing, and I think it does sound rather close to madness what I'm describing, but I don't mind. I know it's a madness contained in my room and it's a madness that will flow into a novel - I can handle it.

I wouldn't want to upset anyone or alarm anyone by saying 'you have to have a nervous breakdown in order to write', it isn't about that, but it's about going down below the level of everyday, daily language, the language we use for chatting to each other. Going down into the unconscious where language is much looser and wilder. I think of it as being in a kind of beehive and there's all this buzzing and bees rushing about and you've just got to be there.

Monique Roffey:

When I wrote Sun Dog I'd previously read about this idea of doing morning pages. It was Dorothea Brand, and she has this idea that in order to sort of harness your unconscious, writing in the morning, writing before you do anything else is a great way to sort of harness your unconscious, and consciously get yourself going and I took that idea up and so I wrote Sun Dog very much like that. I would get up, go straight to the computer, gummy teeth, bad breath, gummy eyes, you know, not stopped for coffee, not stopped for anything and I would just write for an hour or two in that state, in my jim-jams. And I wouldn't make my bed as again it was all a series of rituals and superstitions but I just went from bed to my word processor and started writing. And I wrote like that every day for a year or two, practically.

Alex Garland:

I tend to work mainly late at night, I think that was a consequence of, I suppose initially it was because of living with my Mum and that past 10 or 10.30, that's when the place was quiet and I'd get work done. But it became a habit and I stuck with it's a good time to write in general I think. Although, having now met some other writers and spoken to them, it's quite interesting how many of them opt for the very early morning. I think you get the same deal. It's quiet, essentially.

You're less likely to get disturbed or interrupted by anything. And sort of veering towards the slightly more pretentious, I'd say that something about working either late at night or early morning, maybe because it's got a kind of proximity to dreams - either you're about to start dreaming or you've just been dreaming and the sort of proximity there with your unconscious or something that's going on in the back of your head, I think that can be helpful, and I think when I look at my stuff there's often a slightly sort of trippy, hallucinogenic quality to it which I think is to do with when it gets written partly.