



Start writing fiction

How to keep going

Narrator:

The short story. Michele Roberts and Patricia Duncker.

Michele Roberts:

I've got more and more curious about the way the different literary forms actually overlap and can speak to each other, so I often write novels which are composed of fragments and even short stories. And I've written short stories which pretend to be novels, because I think it's really fun to play with form. And I think the short story has ended up for me as being the closest to the poem that I can come up with because it crystallises things in a very intense way.

Patricia Duncker:

Short fiction interests me. I'm always quite careful before I start to think about how long I want a particular book to be. So that I will generally know, before I begin, whether I want this to be 50,000 words or 80,000 words. It's unusual that I'll be very far short of the mark. So that, with short fiction, the material that you have will usually dictate its length. I wouldn't try writing a short story about someone whose volume, and whose presence was going to demand a larger structure. I think that's something you learn from, again from your reading.

Narrator:

The use of autobiography in fiction. The speakers are Abdulrazak Gurnah, Michele Roberts, Monique Roffey and Alex Garland.

Abdulrazak Gurnah:

I don't in any case expect that you can evade this, you know, that you can escape writing about your experiences, or if you do then in itself that becomes a kind of project. You can say 'well I'm going to write about everything but I'm going to keep myself out of it'. Now what would be interesting then, if you were a reader, is to see where that suppressed self actually comes into the writing however hard you suppress. But, you know, I don't feel like that at all and I know a lot of writers don't. There are a lot of writers who in fact quite happily write about themselves, Saul Bellow being one, Philip Roth being another, who quite happily write about themselves. They make themselves the subject of their fiction. V.S. Naipaul is another one in recent times. But I still believe that in fact it is actually harder to keep the writer out of the writing than people imagine, at least the kind of fiction that I write and like to read.

Michele Roberts:

I think every novel has its roots in the real world in that it presents me with a problem that I then try and solve. It might pose a question that the novel tries to solve. The *Mistress Class* was inspired by, I can't remember what now, it's so long ago, it's vanished into the unconscious. I think it was inspired by a real situation in my life, in that I have sisters. I'm very interested in the relationships between sisters - it's a theme I return to. I am a twin sister. I'm fascinated by twins, by doubleness, by 'the other', the mirror image who's not the same as you. So there's an autobiographical element there. But I've found over and over again, every time, if you just write about yourself, you're too close to yourself, to your own stuff, you can't see it properly. So normally you end up repressing, writing quite clumpily and clumsily, and you need to open up to the world and throw your own stuff out into the world and find what T.S. Elliot called in this grandiose term 'an objective correlative'. For this new novel I knew I wanted to write about sisters again, particularly sisters who were rivals. I found a pair of sisters - Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë, and I suddenly remembered that I'd had wanted to write about passionate obsessive unrequited love - ha ha! - Charlotte had exactly that

experience with her tutor M. Heger in Brussels, so I was off. I'd found a subject in the world. But I think actually I'm writing a lot about my feelings about being a twin when I was little. It's not directly autobiographical, but there's an energy there.

Alex Garland:

In the case of *The Beach*, the protagonist, and I think it's something that young writers or, maybe young is the wrong word but first-time writers often do is that what they end up doing is they draw a lot on themselves to flesh out the character. So I did that a lot I think with the narrator of that book because you could do it and then you could drop in a few things that he would do that you wouldn't do, and suddenly you've got a fictional character who will take you in different directions.

Narrator:

Some final advice from Alex Garland, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Monique Roffey and Michele Roberts.

Alex Garland:

One thing I'd say is, expect to feel that what you're writing isn't good and isn't working and don't be put off by that. I think a self-critical facility is really important and all that is is a self critical facility. It doesn't mean that what you're writing is bad, it means that you're questioning it and, and that, that's good. A lot of people I think harbour some kind of ambition to write a novel - they say 'one day I'm going to write a novel', and they maybe find the first three pages quite easy, and then they they hit a kind of brick wall and they think that that brick wall means that they're not a writer. And it doesn't. That brick wall is just what happens when you're writing, then you work through it and then a little bit later you find another brick wall, and that's what the whole thing is from start to finish.

Abdulrazak Gurnah:

Be patient. I think that's one advice, be patient both with the writing, that is write patiently, but also be patient about what you think you'll be able to do with it or achieve with it. And I guess aside from that it's like I said earlier, you trust whatever comes, what instinct you have for writing.

Monique Roffey:

I do think that your first novel takes you your whole life to write, so you may as well, if you have actually got to the stage where you're writing it and you're some way into it and you feel that it's nearing the end, I mean, give yourself that extra six months or year, don't blow it, it's a small world out there, the publishing world, if you've got your, you know, this this book you've been writing - they want to see three chapters, there are only so many agents, if you send it out and it's not ready, that's it. You've blown it. You know. So wait 'til it's ready, make sure it's ready, show somebody who you trust, show somebody who maybe even is a writer if you can, get some feedback on it, get some criticism, wait 'til it's ready and then send it out.

Michele Roberts:

Get on with it. Buy a notebook. Fill it. Buy another notebook. Fill it. Write down your dreams. Don't tell the wrong people that you want to write because they'll mock you and laugh at you. Get some friends who believe in what you're doing, which isn't necessarily your best friends or your family, which I think for beginners especially, and that's nothing wrong with being a beginner, we're all beginners every day, get a writer's group, or find a good class with a good tutor. Go on an Arvon course. Read voraciously. I think if you want to write fiction you must read passionately and voraciously. And I would be a bit suspicious of a would-be writer who didn't read a lot. And then finally I'd say keep at it, keep going.