

THE WRITING LIFE: AUTHORS SPEAK

MAKING A WRITER

Howard Jacobson: I cannot remember a time when I didn't want to be a writer and specifically a novelist; I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else. I never wanted to be a sportsman, I never wanted to be a musician, I never had the slightest bit of interest in music, we were too clever in my school to be interested in pop music, we weren't interested in pop music. So when other boys had pictures of footballers on their walls, I swear this to you, or they had pictures of, you know, musicians on their wall I had a picture of George Eliot, I had a picture of Jane Austen, I had a picture of Ben Johnson, a copy of Sargent's portrait of Henry James which was in the National Portrait Gallery, that's what I had. They were my— I only ever wanted to be a writer and I only ever valued writers. And it hasn't changed, I only ever value writers. Everytime I see writer I don't value them so much, but in the abstract writing is the only thing. Absolutely nothing else. It's never been anything else, never.

P D James: I knew from very early childhood I wanted to be a writer, never any doubt in my mind about that. I used to tell stories to my brother and sister. At one time we were in one room; my sister and I shared a bed most of our childhood, a double bed, and my brother had the single one against the wall, and they would want a story last thing at night, and they very unimaginative in a way because they were all about the adventures of a pig called Percy Pig [laughs]. Yes, I just knew I was going to write one day.

Maureen Duffy: At twelve I'd decided I was going to be a writer. I was going to be like Keats, I was going to be a writer. But I didn't tell anybody this, at least I didn't tell any of my family because they would have been appalled because of the insecurity of the life and as a good working class girl what you did was you went to college and you became a teacher, and you got a pension and all the benefits and the long holidays and the status, and that was what you were supposed to do. Whereas, you know, who became

a poet? They were either mad or they were upper class and could afford it, or they died young [laughs]. I think I just envisaged writing and writing and writing, I don't think I had any idea of how you would make a living or anything practical like that, it was just to be a writer, which meant then to me, as it did in the 17th Century, to be a poet.

U A Fanthorpe: I never thought of being a poet because, a) poets were men on the whole, and b) they had to have studied Latin and Greek. Now my school didn't do Greek so as far as I was concerned I was ruled out of possibility of being a poet. I mean I know this was ignorance on my part but you – you feel – you get the impression that to be a poet is something rather highly educated and special.

Sarah O'Reilly: U A Fanthorpe born in 1929. Despite early reservations about her suitability to be a poet Fanthorpe did realise her ambition. But aspirations aside, what is it that makes a writer? Here the novelists Michael Morpurgo, Ian McEwan and Hilary Mantel make connections between childhood experiences and the books they would later write.

Michael Morpurgo: The first home I remember is a place in Philbeach Gardens and I sort of remember there was a bomb site there, next door to the house where we lived and we used to play in the bomb site. There was a big fence up telling you not to go in, and it was a brilliant place to play of course because it was ruins and you could climb the walls and there were dens and it was fantastic. And I knew it had been something to do with the war but you're completely unclear as to what it was all about, and then bit by bit and I'm sure what happened, and I can't quite analyse my feelings about it, but bit by bit what grew on you was that there had been this great loss-making trauma that I was growing up in. And some of the books that I read, I read a lot of books which were about heroism and of course a lot of comics were, there was Biggles and there were all these things, and lots of wartime comics, there was lots of reliving this – the fantasy of war and I'm quite sure that all seeped into me, you know. And the films you went to, I don't know, *Reach for the Sky*, there were all these – all these things were

all about this generation of people who had done extraordinary things, you know, and so you were this little boy growing up and in an atmosphere in a family, an atmosphere in society, middle class England, all these things were what you aspired to. So I – it did have a profound effect which is with me still, no question about that. I write a lot about war now, some of the books which are most widely read, whether it's *Private Peaceful* the *War Horse* or whatever, I'm sure they wouldn't have been there had it not been for the bomb site and all these things, so you can see a rather strange link. I mean what I do believe very firmly is that what happens to you when you are a small child, what it is that you are fascinated by when you are a small child, is what goes on fascinating you, maybe obsessing you for the rest of your life. You don't just shrug it off and become another person, a child is the father of the man.

Ian McEwan: Ancestors, distant relatives and the past really were not part of my sense of family as I grew up. Something of my father's exile from Scotland, self-exile really and then exile from – from Great Britain has rubbed off on me and probably affected the way I – even the way I wrote. When I started writing, I didn't feel that I was quite part of the English literary world or its systems of class or whatever, I always felt something of an outsider in it. That's faded over the years but I think it has made quite an impression on me, this sense of not being deeply connected to all the branches and roots of family. I could make one narrative of my writing which goes something like this: that I began as a kind of existential writer, much more interested in casting characters almost, as it were, outside of history and outside of identifiable places, and as the years have gone by I've become perhaps a more traditional writer, or at least a writer much more aware, consciously expressively aware, of the traditions of – of the English novel, the treasures that are laid up for us by the great 19th Century expositors of character, psychology and so the – the gap, say, between my early short stories and a novel like, say, *Atonement*, [with] its country house, family members, a novel that looks partly back over its shoulder towards Jane Austen but also back towards the hallowed traditions of Agatha Christie and crime novels in that you set up a scene, you have a stranger

arrive and everything follows from that. So that – that is an enormous gap to measure from *Atonement* to say the earliest short stories with their very dispossessed, alienated characters who are living in a city with no name, often in a time that's not fixed. I think this sense of not being aware of family lineage, of not being deeply connected to all the branches and roots of family has had a big effect on me.

Hilary Mantel: In the ideal world, all writers would have a Catholic childhood, or belong to some other religion which does the equivalent for you. Because Catholicism tells you at a very early age the world is not what you see, that beyond everything you see, and the appearance – or the accidents as they're known – there is another reality and it is a far more important reality. So it's like running in the imagination. I think that this was the whole point for me, that from the earliest – my earliest years I believed the world to have an overt face and a hidden face, and behind every cause another cause, and behind every explanation another explanation which is perhaps of quite a different order. And if you cease to believe in Catholic doctrine it doesn't mean that you lose that, you still regard the world as ineffable and mysterious and as something which perhaps in the end can't quite be added up. It could be summed up as saying 'all is not as it seems' and of course that's the first thing Catholicism tells you. And then it just runs through everything you write and everything you touch, really. Plus, it's good to have something to rebel against, you know.

Sarah O'Reilly: Many authors recall the important role that teachers played in their development as writers. Here novelist and playwright Michael Frayn describes Mr Brady who introduced him to the poet Shelley. He's followed by Maureen Duffy remembering Mr Evans and Duffy's own earliest attempts at writing poetry.

Michael Frayn: I do remain very grateful to Mr Brady and I dedicated my first book to him. He was rather despised by the rest of the staff because he didn't have a degree, he didn't have any proper qualifications for teaching.

He'd been a teacher in the Army Education Service educating the children of British servicemen abroad and I suppose he got a job at Kingston Grammar School during the war when there was a great shortage of teachers and they took him on. And he was Irish, and he taught in an extremely informal and ramshackled way. One day he said, 'I'm going to read you a poem.' Oh god, you know, that sounded like a really boring prospect. And he read us Shelley's *Ode to a Skylark* and for some reason it absolutely connected with me and I sat there entranced by it. And I thought, 'This is magical', that 'These wonderful phrases that just hit it – just hit it like that'. It really caught my fancy. And then he said, 'Okay, the exercise, now we'll do some work, is you have to write something about a similar thing,' and instead of just thinking, you know, how little can I do to get out of this, something to mock him or whatever, I really set to work and wrote a story based on my own experience about hearing a bird singing in the twilight and absolutely gave it my best shot. And he marked this thirty out of thirty and [laughs] I'm sure with hindsight that he just thought, the boy needs encouragement. And the other thing he did was to read it aloud to the class, and it absolutely got me, he really won me over and I started to work at English. He changed my life.

Maureen Duffy: Mr Evans was our class teacher and he would read us poetry and I particularly remember him, he was Welsh and he would do this wonderful dramatic rendering of *The Highwayman*, [imitates] 'clot clot in the echoing darkness, clot clot in the dusty night' [laughs] and that was very exciting. When I was about six, I was already writing my own poetry, I would recite it to my cousin Madge who didn't like poetry. That little bit of the family was very anti anything which seemed pretentious, or to be indulging the emotions. You had to have practical commonsense and, you know, get on with life, not bare your troubles to the world or anything like that you see. But I would sort of say, 'Can I say you a poem?' Seemed to happen on the bus I seem to remember and she would say, 'Oh go on then,' and so I'd say a poem and she said, 'And who wrote that,' and I'd say, 'I did.'

Ian Rankin: It wasn't the thing my parents wanted me to be good at, but you know you're working class and your parents have never owned their own house and never owned a car and stuff, they think you go to university to get a trade, to get a profession. So accountant, lawyer, dentist, doctor. There was one relative, the aunt of mine who had grown up with my mum in Bradford was married to an accountant and he had a nice flash car, they owned their own home, seemed to have a very good standard of living, so I thought, 'Well I'll become an accountant'. So by the age of sort of fifteen or sixteen that's what I thought I was going to do and I was doing economics and accounts and then there was this sort of epiphany, I was seventeen, I'd just sat my highers and I'd scraped a C for economics, just passed economics, and I thought, 'Why the hell am I going to university to do a subject I'm really not that interested in and obviously not that good at? The thing I really like is English, I like books'. I knew very few professional writers who made a living out of their writing so, you know, there – at uni I was thinking, oh I'm going to have to become a teacher or hopefully an English lecturer, a lecturer at university, and I will continue to write as a hobby part-time, in the margins of my life I'll be a writer.

Sarah O'Reilly: Crime writer, Ian Rankin, remembering the obstacles to his ambition to be an author. The novelist and children's writer Penelope Lively was born in Cairo Egypt where she grew up under the care of a governess, Lucy. In the next extract Lively describes an exchange of letters between Lucy and one of the leading writers of the day.

Penelope Lively: When I was about eleven or twelve I think I must have said something about I wanted to be a writer, I don't remember this, I mean I don't remember have any such aspirations until much, much, much later. But I must have said something about this because she wrote to Somerset Maugham and said that she was governess to a little girl who wanted to be a writer and what would Mr Maugham suggest? And heaven knows how she managed to write to him, I suppose care of the publishers. And what I do remember is that he wrote back and she was terribly pleased, and he

wrote a very nice letter back saying absolutely the right things, saying, 'If your little girl is interested in writing then the best thing she can do is read a lot.' Perfect answer, exactly what I'd say myself [laughs].