

THE WRITING LIFE: AUTHORS SPEAK

GETTING UNDERWAY

Philip Ziegler: It's just like being in an aircraft about to take off at the end of the runway, and you feel yourself a-shuddering and a-juddering and a-straining and then suddenly, whoosh, you're off and you take out your pen and put down your first paragraph. And I've always written the first paragraph in my mind years before, but I try not to go any further, and a sheer exhilaration of facing a blank page and putting, 'Chapter One,' and then starting to write. It's still – I find it – still find it – intoxicating.

Sarah O'Reilly: Philip Ziegler describing the moment he puts pen to paper for the first time. We begin this CD with biographer Victoria Glendinning and novelist Philip Hensher on how they start to write.

Victoria Glendinning: You could do research forever, there'd always be somebody else you could find out more about, you could go on forever, there are no boundaries. So I always give myself a date. I say – when I know that actually this great wodge of stuff I've got is enough for a book – I would give myself a date and say, 'I start writing on February the 3rd'. And I do.

Philip Hensher: It's like adding drop after drop to a bowl and you can just feel it, really. You mustn't start to write too soon or there's not enough in the bowl, and you mustn't leave it too long or it feels stale. The only things I can say is that there comes a point when it's actively annoying not to be writing it. And that's a very good moment to get to.

Ian Rankin: Well usually what happens is I tend to get ill just before I start writing a book. I fall prey to all sorts of fluey type coldy things and sore throats and stuff, and I don't know why that is. And then when I start writing the book it's almost like I still am ill, I mean it feels to me like my brain has got swollen somehow, like it's almost feverish, 'cause there's all

this stuff rushing around in my head, all these plots and subplots and characters and situations and things I've got to remember. So I almost do write the books in a sort of feverish state. And I'm pretty hopeless to live with, I mean I forget stuff and it's just 'cause I'm not – I'm barely there, barely in the real world at all. But that's for a short time, I mean it's only for forty days or so. Once I've got the first draft done then everything's fine: I can manipulate the first draft into something that's readable and saleable.

Michael Morpurgo: I get to the point when I'm really ready, I'm soaked in the research – I don't know necessarily the outcome but I'm so soaked in it I really want to get going and I feel I must get going, I'm very bad at procrastinating, I've always been a really bad procrastinator, but there comes a point when you know: stop bullshitting, Michael, and get on with it. And then that thing that Ted Hughes always says comes into it, you know, you don't face that empty page until you feel confident enough that you can tell your tale. The voice of the telling of the tale is the next thing that's really important and I find that in the telling of it, sitting down, having that piece of paper there, having all the people and the place in my head and the voice will come. The first person voice or playing god voice, whichever voice I'm going to use seems to emerge in the first few pages, [with] the tone of the whole thing and the pace of it. And again it's not planned, so I just start, I tell it down onto the page.

Sarah O'Reilly: Ian Rankin and Michael Morpurgo on the early stages of the writing process. The 'feverish state' that Rankin refers to is echoed next in Hilary Spurling's description of the intense experience of writing biography. She's followed by Hilary Mantel and Michael Frayn on how they begin their writing days.