

IN THEIR HANDS: Q&A

What's it like being a writer? Author Susan Fletcher helps us find out...

DOES IT TAKE A LOT OF HARD WORK/MOTIVATION TO WRITE A GOOD STORY?

Sometimes, when I'm deeply involved in a story and enjoying it, it feels like no work at all! The words just seem to come naturally; sometimes, it even feels like the characters are talking to me and I just need to type it down! But most of the time, yes, it does take a lot of hard work.

It isn't just the actual writing itself that takes a lot of time. It's also the researching (which can be reading other books, visiting places or interviewing people), the planning, the thinking (which doesn't really stop! I'm always thinking about plot or character). Also, once a book is published, there's a lot of promotion to do – travelling to different book events and bookshops. So the job does take discipline and hard work. But I love it – and I feel very grateful that I'm able to do it.

HOW EASY IS IT TO PUBLISH YOUR WORK?

The traditional route to publishing – that is, through a publishing house – isn't easy at all. There are so many writers out there, all writing stories – and all wanting to find their place on a bookshelf. So it's never wise to approach a publishing house directly.

The best thing to do is make sure you get a wonderful agent, first. Agents will read prospective novels and, if they love the writing, will agree to represent the writer. Then it's the agent's job to approach the publishers on your behalf, and fight for a deal. (They do the hard work for you!) So finding an agent that you like and trust is the most important bit of all. Mine is called Cathryn and she is brilliant.

HOW HARD IS IT TO CREATE A CHARACTER AND HOW HARD IS IT TO COME UP WITH A NAME (AND STICK TO IT)?

Characters are very important in a book. They must be likeable and believable; we want the reader to be drawn to them, and to want to follow their story. So it can take quite a long time to invent a one that works. A writer must know their character inside-out, too – so I ask myself questions like, what did they have for breakfast? What did they dream about last night? What are they most afraid of? These questions help me to fully understand the character – and, I hope, make them feel real.

As for names, that's a very interesting question! I don't have a very clear answer – except that usually one just knows when the name feels right. On occasion, I've had to change a key element of a character late on, in the writing process – their appearance, say, or age – and I've felt the need to change their name after that. (I had a character called Dora who wore very thick spectacles because she had a serious eye condition; when I decided to restore her eyesight, she stopped feeling like Dora – and became Clara instead.) I'm not quite sure how or why this happens, but it does!

HOW LONG DO YOU SPEND WRITING EVERY DAY?

No one day is the same, as a writer. But I try to make sure I am at my desk – either reading, writing or planning – for 6-8 hours a day. Then, in the evening, I will often read back what I've written that day and make further notes; or I will read other books related to my project. So all in all, perhaps 8-10 hours a day.



HOW DO YOU FIND INSPIRATION?

By being nosy! I think it's very important, as a writer, to be interested in life. Yes, you need to read books. But you also need to enjoy exploring new places, going to museums and galleries, learning new skills, meeting new people etc. I love being outside, too – I walk a lot, and I see so much in the natural world that makes me want to write.

I think the best advice I can ever give to someone who wants to write is: pay attention. Because there are so many wonderful things out there (often small and overlooked) that can lead to a story.

HOW MANY BOOKS HAVE YOU WRITTEN?

I am about to start writing my ninth book! My first, *Eve Green*, was published in 2004, so I've nearly been doing this for twenty years, now. Time flies!

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO FINISH ONE OF YOUR BOOKS?

I am a slow writer! Typically, it might take me two years – but I have often had to do other jobs alongside my writing, for extra money. So this can slow me down further. My next deadline gives me 18 months to write the next book; this will be tight, I think, but do-able.

WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DO YOU NEED TO BE A WRITER?

It helps, of course, to love reading. (You need to enjoy being lost in a good story; so if someone doesn't like reading a book, it's going to be very hard for them to understand how to write one!) So an English qualification will help.

I also think it's important to be really interested in life and people – to think, I wonder how that works? Or, I wonder where that lane goes to? A good writer has a wish to learn about the world - so qualifications of any kind will be proof of that. But a person could have all the qualifications in the world – hundreds of them! – and still not be a good writer.

Ultimately, I think a good writer needs other things: self-reliance; an ability to meet deadlines; not minding long hours of working on your own; and a general awareness – looking, listening and experiencing the world around you. What matters most of all is that you stay inquisitive – and that you're happy being you 😊

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And thank you to Susan for the answers!

CAREERS IN WRITING...

If you're inspired to pursue a writing career, there are lots of different jobs and specialisms, including in these areas: Content writers, Copywriting, Editing, Journalism, Publishing, Social media content producer, Marketing and PR, Teaching

