

RIDING THE WIND

Writing for Children and Young Adults

‘Riding the Wind is a thoroughly researched how-to-write book, well-informed by the author’s long career as a writer and teacher, full of practical advice, and written with humility and grace. Novice writer-readers, particularly those interested in writing for children and YA, will find it an accessible clear guide; more experienced writers will be refreshed and provoked into rethinking their own work and process. Unashamedly Christian in its approach, it encourages all writers to pursue excellence and to ride the Wind.’

Anne Bartlett, author of *Knitting*

‘Riding the Wind is a book to be loved, to have page corners folded, passages underlined, notes scribbled in the margins. Carry it with you on your writing journey; there is no guide as gracious as its author Rosanne Hawke.’

Saskia Capon, tutor and post graduate student

RIDING THE WIND

Writing for Children and Young Adults

Rosanne Hawke



MORNING STAR PUBLISHING

Published in Australia by
Morning Star Publishing
P. O. Box 462
Reservoir Vic. 3073
Australia

ISBN 9780648453765

Copyright © Rosanne Hawke 2019

All rights reserved. Other than for the purposes and subject to the conditions prescribed under the *Copyright Act*, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the National Library of Australia <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au>.

This edition first published in 2019

Typesetting by Morton Benning

For Mark Worthing
& all my students at Tabor Adelaide

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I want to thank Abba God for helping me write this book. My thanks then go to my colleagues Claire Bell (MA), Dr James Cooper, Dr Juhani Tuovinen, Dr Phil Daughtry, Dr Joh Wurst, and many of my students who helped me formalise this project. Thank you, Rev Dr Mark Worthing, for asking for this book and always challenging me to ride the wind and fly higher.

Thank you to those who have enriched my career including Eleanor Nilsson, Madeleine L'Engle, Katherine Paterson, Leland Ryken, Frederick Buechner, Ken Packer, the eKidnas (SA writers and illustrators), my agent Jacinta di Mase, and all my editors and the hundreds of authors whose work I've read who inspired me and still do.

Thank you also to Dr James Cooper and Saskia Capon for reading drafts and your helpful comments; thank you so much, Claire Bell, for your excellent editing and suggestions for *Riding the Wind*, to Amanda McKenna and the team at Morning Star Publishing, to Eleanor Nilsson, Saskia Capon and Anne Bartlett for your generous endorsements, and Professor Emeritus Leland Ryken for being so kind and gracious to write the preface.

I acknowledge and thank the following authors for their kind permission to quote their inspiring words: Kathryn Apel, Claire Belberg, Morton Benning,

Christina Booth, Janeen Brian, Susan J Bruce, James Cooper, DM Cornish, PH Court, Joy Cowley, Phil Cummings, Sally Dixon, Elizabeth Fensham, Sally Heinrich, Penny Jaye, Andrew Lansdown, May-Kuan Lim, Alison Lloyd, Lorraine Marwood, Glenda Millard, Scott Monk, Wendy Noble, Lisa Shanahan, Elizabeth Snow, Catch Tilly, Colleen Tuovinen, Jade Wyatt and Claire Zorn. If what they have contributed here has inspired you, do check out their details in the chapter notes and read their books/websites.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	5
Preface.....	8
Introduction – Riding the Wind.....	11
1. A Writing Life.....	16
2. Children’s Literature.....	39
3. Keeping Fit: Writing and Storytelling.....	48
4. Characters Can Write Your Story.....	58
5. Character and Plot.....	74
6. Writing Short Stories.....	89
7. Writing Picture Books.....	100
8. Writing Chapter Books.....	130
9. Writing Novels for Middle Grade, 9-12 years.....	143
10. Crossing Borders: Writing for Middle School and YA.....	188
11. Rewriting and Editing as Writers.....	224
12. Reflecting On Our Writing.....	251
13. Writing for Children Matters.....	262
14. Preparing to Publish.....	286
15. A Publishing Story.....	296
16. Being an Author.....	308
Reading Lists.....	334
Chapter Notes.....	345

Preface

My brief commendation of *Riding the Wind* is that I like everything about it! Since more than that is expected in a preface, I will proceed to name the particular virtues of the book. Novelist EM Forster famously said that a story can have only one merit – that of making a reader want to know what happens next. Rosanne Hawke's book about writing makes the grade, being what is commonly called a page turner. Every page puts new material and fresh insights before its readers, and I found myself eager to see what the author would say about the next topic.

The primary beneficiary of this book is literary authors, who naturally want to know how to write in various genres and how to manage the publication process. I cannot imagine a better instruction book than this one for writers who are early in their careers. As a professor and reader of literature, I found myself equally interested in what Hawke says. People who love literature are naturally interested in the process by which literature is created, and additionally our theory of literature is based partly on what we know about the writing of it.

An obvious virtue of the book is its practical orientation. Hawke wants to make a difference in the lives of writers, so she sets about telling them how to do it. The advice has authority because Hawke is a professional writer and teacher of writing who has both the fund of information and the record of success to command a hearing. The continuous appeals to personal

Preface

experience, buttressed by statements of other writers, lend a narrative quality to the book, as we listen to the story of how to be a writer.

Another virtue of the book is its scope. It covers all of the important topics. I was continually delighted by how the author speaks to every aspect of writing of interest to me, and then I was even more entertained by answers to questions that I would never have thought to ask. I do not hesitate to call this a ‘no stone unturned’ book on the subject of writing. Variety of content is a leading merit of the book, leading me to add the label ‘never a dull moment.’

While it would have been a treat just to know what Rosanne Hawke has to impart about writing, her book also draws upon the insights of the whole guild of authors. The breadth of reading and research that feeds into the book is one of its greatest achievements.

A final genre into which I would place the book is that of a behind-the-scenes book. We all know the appeal of being taken behind the scenes of an event or performance. As a reader rather than writer of literature, I felt that this book showed me what the writing life is really like. This ‘backstage visit’ is both informative and entertaining.

This book has something for everyone. For aspiring writers, it is a practical ‘how-to-do-it’ manual of the highest quality. For people who read rather than write literature, it is a book of literary theory, imparting viewpoints on what literature is and how the thing we love is produced. For everyone who is curious about the writing life, here is a chance to find out. By the time I

Riding the Wind

had finished, I felt that I had read the literary autobiography of someone I had come to admire very much.

Leland Ryken, Professor Emeritus of English,
Wheaton College, Illinois, 2019.

*He makes the clouds his chariot and
rides on the wings of the wind. Psalms 104:3*

Introduction – Riding the Wind

Writing for children is what I imagine riding the wind would be like; that rush of exhilaration, the soaring of ideas and creativity, the hanging on for dear life in case I fall off, but also the total satisfaction of doing what I was born to do, however hard it may be. In this book I want to share what that ride has been like. When I began writing for children, some people didn't take it seriously. When an early novel was launched a man asked me a question that most children's authors have heard at least once: 'When are you going to write a real book? Haven't you practised enough on kids' books?' He wanted an adult book, one he thought he would enjoy reading. He didn't know what an art form children's and young adult (YA) literature can be and how many adults read it for their own pleasure. May we never grow up if it means we cannot enjoy children's literature.

My students asked if I could treat this writing book as a memoir, keeping it personal by sharing how I became a writer and the writing practice that I've developed over the past twenty-five years to secure a younger reader's approval. They wanted anecdotes and tips from my writing life and practice, but I've also added comments from other writers since no two writers' processes are the same. I'll cover the tools that help me, including my worldview and faith, creative

journals, reading logs, work environment, attitude, as well as what I've learned about character development and the writing of different forms of children's and YA books in the market. To quote one of John Marsden's titles, there's so much to tell you, but I'll aim to be brief. A book like this is never finished; by the time this goes to print I'll think of more to add or change. There are reading lists of resources at the back for more research. I also acknowledge that everything I know which isn't personal experience has developed through what I've learned from reading and sharing with other writers and students. We don't create in a vacuum, but from the stimuli that affect us every day.

When discussing the different types of writing for children (novels, picture books and so on) I give each form a section of its own, including the elements that need to be considered. This is in case some readers only want to read about novels or picture books. In this book I start with short stories as I find these are what most people I teach have attempted before taking a class. Picture books and chapter books are difficult to write, so I discuss them next, once a new writer becomes more used to writing for the younger age group.

However, I give character development an early chapter as it is my belief that character is the scaffold upon which all else in the story builds, and all forms of writing need to construct it strongly for the story to work. Although this book deals mainly with writing for children, I include a chapter on young adult writing as legally many YA characters are still children. This is probably why writers like me, who write for both

children and YA, are still referred to as children's authors.

In the chapter called 'Keeping Fit' I show how quick/free writing and writing exercises help us to practise our craft. The 'Workout' suggestions in other chapters are more considered tasks that may have bearing on works in progress. Chapters are also included on some of the issues I have dealt with as a children's author as well as the ethics of working in this industry that have helped me along the way.

In Tabor Adelaide, the tertiary institution where I've taught part-time since 2006, students are required to study Introduction to Creative Writing before attempting Writing for Children; that is, the subject Writing for Children is considered a second-year subject and for good reason. Writing for children is harder than people think, but not impossible.

My students also suggested making this book accessible so that not only students will read it, but also new writers, or even those who enjoy reading about the journeys of other writers. It's good to remember that, whatever stage we are at in our writing career, we are always learning and becoming better writers.

I have a passion for encouraging people to write well. When we write and create (or co-create) we are doing what God loves doing: creating. Also, learning our craft well gives him glory. For me, writing is like prayer, as if I am writing in the presence of God, much like riding the wind. In this way our work becomes worship.

Can creative writing be taught?

Gifts, talents, perhaps even passion or vision cannot be taught, although they can be encouraged. But if I said teaching creative writing is a waste of time then I'd be lacking integrity writing this book. I wrote my first novel because my daughter wanted a book of her own. It was rejected. I gave it to a journalist friend, Ken Packer, to look at it for me. He taught me about point of view. When I re-wrote it, with the point of view changed, it read much better.

Each time an editor writes her suggestions on my manuscript I learn new techniques and I try not to make those mistakes again. So I believe the craft of writing, or the technical side of writing, can be learned. Because of this I think of myself as a facilitator of learning. A facilitator/teacher can discuss with others all she's learnt on her journey, and a critique group can also become a support that can guide and sustain us. If we are serious about writing we'll find others who are too, and be able to safely share our work with them. Thus we learn from each other.

Taking writing workshops inspired and taught me as well. When I studied for a PhD in Creative Writing, I realised I could write better than I knew. The manuscript of *Zenna Dare* was in my portfolio to enter the BA Honours program, and the *Wolfchild* manuscript became my Honours thesis which gained me entry into the PhD program. Studying with clever young BA graduates, and supervisors like Dr Eva Hornung (then Sallis), Kerryn Goldsworthy and Emeritus Professor Thomas Shapcott, helped me to write better and I

learned much more about rewriting. It's been said by many that we are not writers but rewriters. Not everyone thinks of that perfect image in the first draft. We all improve as we practise our craft, but I found a course of study did fast track my progress.

However, the time when I learned the most about writing was when I was lecturing, helping others to understand how to hone their skills. It became a two-way street where we gained knowledge from each other.

A Writing Life

Dreams, goals and writerly thinking

Now we feel like jumping in feet first to begin this fabulous journey of writing for children, but I've found that we need to develop a writing life with a writerly mindset to make sure we make it out to the ocean.

First, it's important to know the difference between goals and dreams. Do you have the dream of having a children's book published? So did I, but what makes that dream happen, besides prayer or wishing? Can we control a dream? Dreams are good to have because they force us to make goals. To get a book published we can make a goal of writing 1000 words a day. Or we can make a goal of taking a class or joining a writing group to learn more. We need to set goals to bring us closer to the dream. When we've done all we can and submitted our story to a magazine or publisher, then it is out of our hands. We cannot control what the professional reader or editor will think of our work. That's when I start a new project to take my mind elsewhere.

So what is your long term goal? What smaller goals will you set to achieve it?

There's power in writing out a goal. I often plan my goals for a project or a life decision with a mind map (these are explained more in Chapter 4). The goals focus my mind so I'm clear about what to achieve. In the beginning of my writing career I prayed to discover what really mattered to me. I wanted to write to glorify God. And this is another important thing: what is your

worldview? What are your values? Your beliefs about life and your place in it? These will affect your writing habit and also what you write. They will also affect what you think about yourself and your abilities.

Keep positive. It helps to write a list of things you can do well in your writing, and then a list of things you want to learn, and will learn. Value yourself as God values you. You are unique, with special skills. You are a writer. You have something to offer. Your brain acts on what your mind tells it. I've believed this for quite a while, so it's exciting to hear that neuroscientists are proving this is true. So tell your brain you're a writer and that you can finish the book you are working on. Take the focus from your weaknesses. Don't forget to make your goals achievable and bite-sized at first, then to reward yourself when a goal is achieved.

When my first book was released a wise lady prayed for me and my new career. She had a vision that I was happy, standing with a rose bowl in my hands; she presumed something good would happen, but she didn't know when that would be. It was a confirmation for me to keep on with my writing career. A call to write kept me focussed and positive in writing. Having a belief that writing is what God wanted me to do to glorify him kept me going through the rejections, publishing houses folding and the lean times. Madeleine L'Engle talked about the artist as being a servant who is willing to be a birthgiver.¹ Like Mary, who was called to give birth, so I felt called to write.

To keep on task I often make mission statements for a project I am working on: what is the goal that I am

achieving? I keep it in the present tense. This helps me keep a positive mental attitude. An overall mission statement about our goals can help us with what we want to be and want to achieve in our lives. A book won't usually be written by someone who doesn't care whether they do it or not. Nor will it be written by a person who has little confidence in her creative abilities.

Once I wrote in a journal: *I am an author writing affirming books for children*. Another time I wrote this from Micah 6:8 as my career mission statement: *And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*.

Are you creative?

At the beginning of each semester I tell my new students that they are all creative. Some drop eye contact. They are in a writing class, so they either know they are creative, or they think the class will make them so. 'I don't think I'm creative,' one will venture. Then I tell them how I know they are creative. 'We are all individual children of a creator God who loves creating things. We are made in his image. Do you think he'd miss out something as important as our creativity? A few visibly brighten. I ask them to write in their journal these words from the classic book, *If You Want to Write* (1938, 1987) by writer and teacher Brenda Ueland:

Everybody is talented because everybody who is human has something to express.

Everybody is original, ^{...} if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself.²

There are many books written about developing creativity. Some explain how the right side of your brain is creative like Tony Buzan's work³ with mind maps or that of Henrietta Anne Klauser.⁴

Readers often ask me about that first idea, the first spark of creativity that begins a book. This is how my YA novel *The Messenger Bird* (2013) was conceived:

‘Play some more.’ It’s what I always call from my room when my father plays the piano late at night after coming in from the paddock, especially ‘The Maiden’s Prayer’. It is my favourite – maybe it is his too, for he plays it again until I fall asleep.

Imagine forty years later finding that same piece of music, yellowed and curled at the edges, in a box of your father’s effects. You can play it yourself now, and you almost hear the echo of a little voice, ‘Play some more.’ So you play it again, and you realise with a start that the voice is not an echo after all, but a warm sense of your father’s closeness.

When that happened to me, I decided music has the power to do almost anything – instigate a story, make something magical happen, be a link of communication between people, even bring someone from the past. In that moment [*The Messenger Bird*] was conceived – that first spark of creativity that has been described by Krauss as ‘a burst of an instantaneous and originary act’.⁵

When NZ author Sherryl Jordan was asked how she thought up her ideas, she said this:

I don't. Books 'appear' to me like movies in my head, all in the space of a few seconds. However, I may think about the book, and do research for many months before I begin writing.⁶

Recently I've found a problem keeping my equilibrium with my creativity since I've started walking in the mornings. On hot days I have to walk as soon as I wake and I miss that early time where creativity rises to the surface after sleep. This is my morning reflection time when I write spontaneously and catch ideas to fix my plots. This flows into prayer, which leads to writing. I've realised I still have to let that happen before I walk. When I don't, I can end up cleaning the house!

Pastor and blogger, Alison Sampson, writes about creativity and faith in her article, 'Prayer as the birthplace of Creativity'. She says the way she writes is no secret. 'Listening to the quiet voice, or the silence, is also the way I write. My experience of this [meditative] form of prayer is inseparable from my writing practice.'⁷ Nor could I write a book from a single idea without prayer and the presence of God. Some artists speak of being like an aerial tuned into a muse or the universe. For me, the aerial is the presence of God and his Spirit is the source I'm tapping into for ideas and creativity.

Author Madeleine L'Engle believes creativity opens us up to revelation. 'In the act of creativity, the

artist lets go of the self-control which he normally clings to, and is open to riding the wind.’⁸

The Creative Call by Janice Elsheimer (2001) is a helpful book reminiscent of *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron (1992). Elsheimer shows how to recognise and develop our creativity and to practise one’s art in order to discover a deeper relationship with God. As Elsheimer points out, most artists see that creativity and spiritual growth are related, but she goes a step further: she understands the need to reconnect our talents back to God who created us and who calls us to be a co-creator with him.⁹

Tip

Find out when you do your best spontaneous writing where ideas flow, and guard it.

Guest Author — PH Court¹⁰

Three Creative Things

There are three things about highly creative people that stand out, but aren’t what you might expect.

It’s no mystical, magical thing. Isn’t being truly creative all about being free, ethereal or just committed to letting it flow? Sure, inspiration is pretty wonderful but creativity, inspiration, the making of something unique, requires direction. Without a purpose, without a direction, creativity shrivels up and dies. It needs somewhere to go. So, first, creativity needs a purpose.

Second, creativity requires discipline. Again, not what we expect. We love the idea of sleeping late, maybe doing some stuff, then sitting back and being applauded for our amazing creativity. But it doesn't work like that. Successful, highly creative people have incredible discipline. Setting aside regular time to deliberately hone and shape their art is vital. Sure, inspiration will strike at 4 am or in the bath, but turning inspiration into a creative product that you can share with others, that takes discipline. Deliberately set aside time to create.

Finally, and most counter-intuitive of all, creativity needs rest. The most energy hungry part of your body is your brain. When you are in that time of disciplined creation, your brain is chewing through energy like an elite athlete. So, seriously, you need to be physically fit. But also, just like an athlete after a heavy training session, when you reach the end of your creative time, when a comedian steps off stage, when the musician stops composing or the writer pauses, you need to rest. Just rest. Do something totally mentally untaxing. Some very creative people refer to their 'post performance depression'. This is why that happens. It's not a bad thing, it's expected and is part of your creative life. Enjoy the rest, knowing that because you are disciplined, you can soon return to your passion, refreshed.

A writer's values

What are your values? These will be different for each person depending on worldview. A major part of our worldview is what we believe. Even when a person is an atheist, that person has a belief that God does not exist.

If you know what you stand for, you are on the road to reaching your goal. So decide what your major purpose is. What really matters to you? What is important enough to write about?

- What do you think of failure? Choose not to fear it. Each step, each critique, each rejection from a publisher is teaching you how to be a better writer. Also, knowing what you are trying to accomplish and why will help you sustain passion. Psalm 62 says there is no risk of failure with God, so why should we worry?
- Are you a perfectionist? Some writers won't start for they believe they won't do it well enough. We need to be sensible: new writers do not immediately write like Jane Austen or Wendy Orr. Maybe you will never write like an award-winning writer, but you will write the stories you are meant to. Unrealistic expectations like this lead to disappointment. Stop negative self-talk and be kind to the writer in you as you would be to another writer. Aim for excellence, not perfection. We can give God our best, be original and creative like him.
- Do you compare yourself or your writing to others in a negative way? Apparently, Mark

Twain said that comparison is the death of joy. As artists, we can never compare our work to another's in a way that could lead to jealousy, or even depression. When a book wins an award for which mine had also been a runner up, I need to thank God for that author's gift and God's blessing to him or her. And learn more about the craft from them. Let's not be threatened by another writer's talent, but rather be grateful for it. It is difficult being jealous of others when you are thankful for them. Rory Noland (1999) has excellent tips for having peace as an artist in his book *The Heart of the Artist*.¹¹

- Star or servant? Our attitude can be one of humility as Lisa Shanahan's piece below shows, or we can act the part of the star and expect everything to happen for us. Fortunately, I haven't seen children's authors act like this in twenty-five years of working in the industry. Be sensitive if you suspect another writer is jealous of you. The people who truly have talent or success in publishing never need to flaunt it.

What does success mean to you?

I've seen a lot of complicated answers to this question, but success is actually achieving a goal. Therefore, affirming we have achieved a goal is important to our concept of success. Don't fear success either. I was so nervous before my first book was released that I wrote a poem about being a tiny animal in a shell and the tide washes me out into the public eye. That first book

coming out, and subsequent ones, was scary. I have found it best to leave my personal success in God's hands.

Lisa Shanahan's response to having two of her books shortlisted in the 2018 Children's Book Council Awards shows the humility of a great writer when faced with success:

I was astounded to discover that *Hark, It's Me, Ruby Lee!* and *The Grand, Genius Summer of Henry Hoobler* were both short-listed in the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards yesterday. I'm very grateful and quite undone. Even though writing is so solitary at times, I'm aware that writing a book is always done in community; that every book is in conversation in some way with other books, both past, present and future. It's a beautiful thing to be part of the children's book community in Australia. It's hard to articulate the debt I owe. I know for certain that all the good things I've ever learnt and am still learning about writing (because the apprenticeship never ends) have always come from the grand, genius goodness of sitting at the feet of the many brilliant writers and illustrators from this community.¹²

US literary agent, Steve Laube, says the secret to defining success for yourself is not in comparing numbers of sales and awards but being obedient to the task. When you focus on yourself, it goes back to 'me, myself, and I,' and you get wrapped up in yourself – in self-doubt, self-criticism – and you begin to worry, and worry eats away at your soul.¹³ We need to focus on

doing our best for God's glory, while praying and trusting that God's glory will be magnified in the work that we do.

Workspace

My writing life began on my bed in Pakistan. As I was writing the first draft of *Jihad* (1996) I became sick. I soon grew better, but while I was in bed people left me alone, so I kept writing that draft in bed. When we moved back to Australia to a house with three bedrooms to share between five of us, I wrote on my bed again. A friend gave me a desk that would fit in our little bedroom and I wrote *Re-entry* (1995) with a laptop on that desk. But when I bought a desktop computer and had to share it with my young teenagers wanting to type up essays and play games, I nearly went spare!

I've written lots of drafts on my bed. As a child I enjoyed writing in our paddocks, and I still enjoy writing drafts outside. Since I write much of my draft by hand, I can do it anywhere, even in the Outback. Children are shocked when I tell them this, but I find the tactile 'hands on' approach helps with my creativity. But it may not for others. Other practices that help me with creativity, getting ideas and keeping a narrative flowing are to use images, music, colour, and artefacts to stimulate the right side of my brain.

Tip

Have your own computer and uncluttered workspace. It does help, even if it is your bed or a cupboard.

Developing a Writing habit

This brings me to writers' block. It may come as a surprise, but I don't believe in writer's block. If I did it may give me an excuse not to write when it gets difficult. Especially at the beginning of a book. It is normal for a book to be hard to write. Why should we expect it to be easy? If a story isn't working for me or I can't get started, I go back to my journal knowing I haven't done enough research or thoughtful work on my characters.

When my mum died, I couldn't write my work-in-progress for six months. The book was *A Kiss in Every Wave* (2001) which reminded me of Mum, so whenever I tried to write it, I cried. That wasn't writer's block; that was grief. Often writers procrastinate – that gets called writer's block too. Some writers lack the confidence to keep going; that's not writer's block. Author Markus Zusak called this 'a lack of writers' faith' at the 2019 Adelaide Writers' Week. Some would-be writers don't have the passion for writing at all – that's not writer's block, but maybe 'I should be doing something else' block. There are genuine cases where writers are not well enough to write or a mental problem is blocking their progress, but if it were me, I'd hesitate to call it writer's block. Rather I'd name it for what it truly is. Then it can be overcome.

Anne Lamott (2008) discusses writer's block in her excellent book *Bird by Bird*: 'we all get it – but is it a block? The truth is you're empty.'¹⁴ So replenish, fill up

with reading, walking and all the things you know will help you rejuvenate.

Sometimes we just need a break, as PH Court suggested earlier.

A good tip to overcome obstacles in our writing is to write each day, not just when the wind blows. If not writing, do research or write rubbish. I'm surprised at how the story will progress into good words again after a few pages of drivel. The quick writing exercises in Chapter 3 will kick start sluggish writing. Limber up first.

I've also found prayer very helpful in getting a story started. First, I do the procrastination thing – clean out a drawer or actually pull the vacuum cleaner out of the cupboard. Then I say, 'I can't do this again', so I read the first page of my last book which was published and think, *okay that doesn't sound so bad, maybe I can do this again.*

Never underestimate the power of positive thinking. I try to be careful to 'tell my brain' optimistic and true statements which are backed up by a verse from the Bible. See Dr Caroline Leaf's book *Switch on your Brain* (2007) for more discussion on this. She undergirds what we've always known about renewing our minds, with the science of neuroplasticity. If we think we won't be able to start our novel, we probably won't. Simple. So, instead of saying I can't, tell yourself 'I can do all things in Christ's strength.' Then pray for help. It always comes. I'm learning to pray first.

Thinking like a writer is making our writing a habit, our work. And what work is that? We are

communicating. We need to consider not only what we feel led to write but also our young readers. We need to keep them interested, which is quite a feat in our digital times. We need to know something of the forms, genres and media made available for children. What we do is transfer what we see and experience to the minds of our readers and we keep learning how to do it well. We don't wake up one morning wanting to play the violin and expect to immediately perform on stage. It takes ten years to be able to play music on a big stage. Writing a novel is similar; it can take ten years of reading and practice to write a novel that will be published. We need to be determined and steadfast.

Tips

- *Make* time to write. People who can't *find* time to write will never find it. Choose your writing time by deciding when you work best. For that period of time don't answer the phone or check social media. One writer I know has a voice message that says she's working and please ring back after 1 pm or leave a message. Once I tried a Do Not Disturb sign on the door when I had teenagers at home, but they knew I didn't truly mean it.
- Decide what keeps you on the chair. A cat on the lap? Music helps me stay put when I'm writing a draft. It also helps to tell myself that writing this chapter/s is the only thing I need to do today.

- Turn off social media and the phone if you can't ignore it. I find it best to pay bills or write that email at lunch time or when I'm finished writing for the day. This eliminates frustration.
- Declutter. Try to throw paperwork away and don't double handle. I'm still not good at this. Right now I need to de-clutter my desk even though I'm told I'll write better with the clutter gone. Discover what works for you; some are more creative in a stimulating environment.
- Try not to be concerned about the housework. Cornish brownies don't usually come to our house even though it is an antique Cornish cottage, so I keep a few hours on Saturday to clean up. Then I'm not using valuable writing time.
- Be encouraged that your writing is worth the time spent. I find it helps to know that my writing or my work is part of my worship. I believe God has placed us where we are to serve with our writing.

Beginning with a story

My writing career began when my husband and I were aid workers with a Christian mission/aid agency in Pakistan. My eldest child was a young teen and listening to stories was her favourite thing. One night she asked me to tell her about a kidnapping, since an aid-worker we knew had been abducted by freedom fighters. After this she asked me to write it for her. Without her

encouragement I may never have had the ‘nerve’ to become a writer, but I knew she wanted that book: ‘Mum, I want to walk into a bookshop and buy a book that my mother wrote just for me.’

For me, writing began with storytelling, and I still believe telling stories is a good way to begin writing a book. In lectures and workshops, I often ask students in groups to tell a story from words on a card they are given: a character’s name, a setting and a problem. This grew from a story game my children and I played in the car crossing the Himalayan foothills or on a bazaar walk. They gave me a character’s name, a setting and a problem. Then I had to fix the problem, though they helped in the process. ‘No, Mum, he wouldn’t have said that’ or ‘What’s she wearing?’ and ‘Why doesn’t she tell him the secret?’ In this way I learned about strong motivations, having to think up a plot line quickly as three expectant faces waited. I still tell the stories of my novels, usually to one of my grownup children over tea or coffee, as I’m writing them, or beforehand. I find the writing process becomes smoother as a result.

Workout

Try telling a story to a child. Think of a child character, where that character lives and what’s happening in their life right now. How will they resolve it?

Try asking the child to give you the character, setting and problem. It’s more challenging, but it’s amazing to see how you can make up a story with elements you hadn’t thought of.

Reading

Reading is not just a fun activity for a writer's spare time; reading is an important tool for writers. I consider it part of my working day, even though I mostly read at night. I may have started writing through storytelling, but I began learning *how* to write by reading (as well as forging ahead to finish that book for my daughter). Oh, I took writing workshops later and learned how to hone what I knew, how to edit, how to decide what to rewrite, and more. But in those early days of writing the draft of my first novel, I kept reading.

AJ Cronin's *The Lady with Carnations* (1978) taught me that I hadn't developed my characters well enough; Michener's *The Source* (1965) disclosed how to take my readers on a journey and to think more about my plot; Geraldine McCaughrean's *The Maypole* (1989) showed me that words can sing. As I wrote her first line in my journal, I sighed at the beauty: *Day came in like Joshua, with ramshorn blasts of sun.*

I took novels apart to see how the structure worked: how many chapters, what was in them and how they ended, where the climax came. As Francine Prose (2006) suggests by the title of her book *Reading Like a Writer*, we have to learn to read like writers, what she describes as 'close reading'. It's a good idea to keep a log or journal of what we read (I also use Goodreads) and do remember to cite who wrote that beautiful quote you wrote in your journal. Ten years later you may forget it wasn't you!

Not only do we learn how to write when we are reading, but our brains are also computing how story

works. We think of creative ideas because, as we are reading, our brains relax. I often think of the very way to fix the hole in my current plot when I'm reading a novel with no connection to the story or genre I am writing. Other brain relaxants, like going for a walk, having a shower, listening to music or looking at images, will also give me ideas for fixing plot problems.

In the beginning I learned to write by reading, passion, persistence and hard work, and I agree with Prose's additions: 'repeated trial and error, success and failure, and from the books we admire.'¹⁵

Tip

As well as reading like a writer, learn to see like a writer, hear like a writer, feel like a writer. For children's stories it's good to remember like a writer. Do you remember some of the key turning points in your childhood?

We need to align ourselves with the river of our story, the river of the unconscious, of memory and sensibility of our lives which can then pour through us, the straw – Anne Lamott.¹⁶

A writer's journal

Not everyone believes in writing journals as I do, though only a few students groan when I mention them. Journals can take many forms: a hardcopy visual diary, a notebook, a computer file, a blog. I also use Pinterest as a visual journal. Some writers like to research and plan extensively, so a journal is ideal for that. Some writers are 'pantsers' – they write by the 'seat of their

pants' with no planning and often little research beforehand. May I suggest that the pantsers' journals are in their heads? Even writers who say they don't plan ('it just happens') are thinking constantly about their story.

A journal, in whatever format, for ideas, scraps of information and images can be beneficial. I call this my daybook, which is with me most of the time. I use an A5 format so it's easy to slip into a shoulder bag. Ideas for future works or research not pertaining to the present project will go in here; also drafts of talks; quotes, images pasted from newspapers or magazines; photos or sketches.

The last few years I've also kept a journal for each novel I'm writing. In it go images, research, quotes, mind maps of characters and plot, ideas for structuring the work, exercises on voice and dialogue; editing. I often invite my main character, (especially if she/he is the narrator), to write in my journal so I can see how the voice sounds. I can't start in earnest until I hear that voice. I showed a friend my journal for *Kerenza: A New Australian* (2015). It is much like an old scrapbook album because that is what Kerenza creates in the story. My friend said, 'I wouldn't have time to do this.' I replied, 'I didn't have time not to.' I had a deadline and, while I was writing in the journal or pasting in old images from my research, the story was developing in my mind. I believe I wrote that story quicker because of the preparation in my writing journal. And when I rewrote the novel, all the information I needed to refer to was easy to find in the journal.

Early in the morning I draft in the journal, so getting on task later in my underground writing room is easier, since I just need to begin by typing what I've already written, and I can carry on with the story without stalling. Journals are also helpful in thinking about or evaluating our writing: where it needs to improve, what works and what doesn't and why. (More on this in Chapter 12.) Many writers think little about their craft and surge ahead on intuition and what they've subconsciously learned through reading. Others want to improve their craft and do their best. That involves evaluation, either by oneself or by trusted readers.

Besides creative journals, I also use a spiritual journal in which I may even mention the current project. I've been finding pieces for this writing book in my spiritual journals and daybooks from the last ten years!

Tips

- Use an index in your journal so you can easily find information. Leuchtturm1917 journals have page numbers and an index already marked.
- Write words every day. This is why a journal is useful. Don't wait for inspiration to strike. A Latin proverb states: 'When there is no wind, row'. So limber up with some 'quick writing'. See Chapter 3 'Keeping Fit' for practice writing exercises.

Writing in a group

If you are critiquing another's work:

- Read the work before commenting.
- If not stated, ask what in particular the author would like comments on (i.e. don't quibble about punctuation if it is an early draft and the author needs to know if her child character's dialogue is genuine).
- First, make positive comments about the elements you think work well in the creative piece (e.g. character development, setting, plot, voice, writing style).
- Then suggest areas which can be developed more. Be encouraging and honest.
- Always be mindful of the level of the writer. If a new writer, choose only a few things that can be worked on rather than everything you see, so as not to discourage.
- I suggest using pencil when making comments on someone's manuscript; it is less confronting than red pen.
- Be kind with humility. Never use critiquing as an opportunity to show how much you know. We are all learners who are writing better each day.

If your work is being critiqued:

- Try to take your draft as far as you can. Please don't ask the group to look at what I call a zero draft: your very first or messiest version.

A Writing Life

- Be careful of defensiveness. It keeps us from the truth about ourselves and our writing, and perpetuates self-doubt. Constructive criticism can be liberating. There is no need to defend or justify your choices. If others didn't understand what you meant, it's possible an editor or professional reader mightn't either. Don't interrupt to explain unless asked.
- Keep an open mind, even if others do not understand your story. All writing can be improved.
- Bear in mind that people's comments are their opinions. There is no right or wrong way to write your story.
- Don't revise just to please others or you'll be revising forever; you decide whether a subjective suggestion is right for your story and character.

Choose carefully whose opinion of your work you listen to. And write. It sounds obvious but until you get the words out on the page, nothing will ever come of them.¹⁷

Riding the Wind

i cannot speak the words
screaming for release
so i bleed
onto the page

one

heartbeat

at

a

time

Elizabeth Snow¹⁸