

# The Writing Coach

LITERARY CONSULTANCY AND COACHING FOR WRITERS FROM JACQUI LOFTHOUSE

## On Planning



**“Real life seems to have no plots” - Ivy Compton-Burnett**

If you ask any writer the question they are most likely to get asked at literary festivals, it is this one: “Do you plan your novels in advance or work it out as you go along?” The reason, of course, for the popularity of the question is that any writer at the early stage of a writing project is likely to be wrestling with planning. The bottom line is this: when we start writing a book, we don’t yet know the shape of it. Thus, we fear that ‘not-knowing’ and the nebulous state of uncertainty it creates, and we long for an answer, some magical solution that will propel us into a new state, one of wisdom and knowledge and clarity. At the beginning of a writing project (and often for the duration of writing it) we are like the man in the picture whose brain is exploding with ideas. This can excite us but it can also be overwhelming. It makes us long for a solution and a structure or plot.

There is no hard science in this debate. The answer, of course, is likely to vary from author to author. My friend, the novelist Charles Palliser would say that it is essential to have a clear structure before you begin to write. He recently told me that he believes the key to a good novel is a “sound, interesting foundational structure”. Yet he was talking to the queen of “organic growth”. For years I have put forward John Fowles’ idea. He compares writing fiction to a woodland walk and, as I shared on my previous blog, he extends the metaphor beautifully in his book [‘The Tree’](#).

*"Behind every path and every form of expression one does finally choose," he writes, "lie the ghosts of all those that one did not. I do not plan my fiction any more than I normally plan woodland walks; I follow the path that seems most promising at any given point, not some itinerary decided before entry. I am quite sure this is not some kind of rationalization, or irrationalization, after the fact; that having discovered I write fiction in a disgracefully haphazard sort of way, I now hit on the passage through an unknown wood as an analogy."*

When I began writing fiction, Fowles' words were a huge comfort to me. He gave me liberty to believe that writing a novel is a process of exploration. I believe we all have a sense of 'story' and 'structure' and we bring our sub-conscious awareness of traditional forms into our work on a regular basis.

However, once my first novel was published, and as I began to teach creative writing, I realised that my students *wanted* to know how to put a good plot together and how to structure their work. It was not until I studied screenwriting and read the work of Syd Field and Robert McKee that I began to analyse the traditional Hollywood form and to see how it informed the stories I was already writing.

These days, I take a more balanced approach. I firmly believe that we must not let a lack of certainty around structure get in the way of our writing work. We must not let "I don't have a plot" or "I don't yet know the shape of it" get in the way of our practice. If this is what we are feeling, the first thing we need to do is to acknowledge this truth:

*Writing is an inherently uncertain act. We cannot create an entire book in our minds prior to writing it and we never know all of the answers in advance. It is essential that we have faith in the process if we are to complete our writing projects. There will be unanswered questions until the final page, so we might as well get used to that...*

Once we have acknowledged that we are not alone in 'not-knowing', then we can think about how we will tackle our not-knowing. For me, there are two approaches. The first, if I'm near the beginning of a new project, is to not worry at all about form. I've been taking this approach lately with a new book I'm working on. I have a lot of fragments in my mind, but my subject matter is broad and I have no idea how these fragments are going to fit together. Thus, I have spent the first couple of months on the project just writing the story down as it occurs to me, one scene at a time, separated by asterisks within the text. I have not allowed my uncertainty of the structure to get in the way of getting down what I *do* know about this story I want to tell.

The second approach comes next: once I'm at a stage where I have a solid body of material (say 10,000 words, the stage I've nearly reached), I pause. Now I start asking myself questions about the structure. In this case, I'm writing a hybrid book, part memoir-part cultural history. So I look at what I've done and ask myself:

- Am I going to arrange the material chronologically?
- What is my story arc? What shifts for the protagonist in this book?
- Will I, conversely, take a 'collage' approach – will that work? Will it be too much of a risk?
- What about arranging the material thematically – will that work better?

You get the picture. The questions will be different for different books and there is no 'one size fits all' philosophy here. My answers will be guided by the attention I have paid to plot/structures of other works in the past but they will also be guided by what is right for this material. At this stage, instead of procrastinating, my writing work becomes the act of answering these questions – and of playing with my material, re-ordering it, rewriting it, as necessary. I may need to think about other memoirs I've read and ask, 'how did that author tackle this problem?' At the same time, I'm going to be thinking about tone and voice too. Have I got it right? Does it need to shift? Is there anything here that is unnecessary? I will journal around these questions or take notes about my ideas until I get some insight. And then I'll begin to edit what I have.

If I had not got that initial body of 10,000 words down however, I'd still be stuck at the 'I can't possibly write this book because I don't have a shape' stage. If we have some material to work with, we can then look at it and think about the shape that *is* emerging and what work we need to do to make that shape better.

It's an ongoing process, an organic process in the end. We have to balance unfettered writing time with analytical thinking. We have to find a solution that is right for our own work. This might involve genre awareness or it might involve an avant-garde approach. It all depends on what type of work you are doing and what form you envisage for your final book. The most important thing is to 'do the work'. You don't have to measure yourself solely by word-count, but rather by the hours you put in. Your form will emerge, if you allow yourself time to read widely, to write freely and also to plan seriously when the time is right.

## Exercise on Planning

- Write a scene or section of your book that is at the forefront of your mind. Don't worry about how it fits into the overall structure. Allow yourself 45 minutes to write.
- What did you learn from writing this scene?
- What is the biggest question you have about the structure of your book? Spend 20 minutes journaling around what possible answers to this question might be.