



Module #10

Is This Your Life?

Writing for a Living

The writing life fascinates me and always has done. I love talking to fellow authors from all kinds of different countries and backgrounds. Over the years our conversations have not only been hugely enjoyable, they have also taught me an enormous amount about how writers go about their lives. Just as there are no rules about how to write a crime novel, there are certainly no rules about the writing life. Your priorities may be very different from mine. So my observations are simply intended to offer personal insights which I hope you'll find helpful in forming your own judgements about how you might live the writing life.

Giving up the day job?

Some people write crime for the money, pure and simple. Nothing wrong with that, but for the vast majority of aspiring novelists it's not an approach I recommend. The brutal truth is that there are many easier ways of making a living. Surveys by the Society of Authors and other bodies give depressing news about the median earnings made by professional writers. Of course, there are exceptions. You may drop lucky, and I hope you will. Luck does play a huge part, but if your main priority is financial, you run the risk of being disappointed.

One of the drawbacks of writing primarily for money is that it can put you under a great deal of stress. To earn a reasonable living, you may have to make compromises that, in the long run, affect the quality of your writing. This can happen whether you're self-published or traditionally published.

Marketing your work and keeping on top of technical issues may drain a lot of time if you're self-published, and there is often financial pressure to keep producing 'fresh content'. Even traditional publishers will expect you to devote time to promoting your books. We'll talk more about this later, but certainly, if you leave it all to the publicity team (assuming that there is one, which can't be taken for granted with smaller publishers), you risk being disappointed.

The need to meet publishers' deadlines may subject you to severe time constraints. To inexperienced writers, the prospect of being offered, say, a well-paid three- or four-book contract by a major publishers seems like a dream come true. And perhaps it will be. But those three or four books need to be written within a timescale defined in your contract. Publishers don't pay money for nothing – at least not intentionally.

The danger is that if you rush to meet those deadlines, your standards will drop. If your writing suffers, readers (not to mention your publisher) will notice and lose faith in you. If your books all sell so well that you earn back your advance and start to be paid handsome royalties in addition, no doubt everyone will be happy. But this isn't guaranteed. In days gone by, publishers were willing to invest long-term in authors they believed in, and wait for years for them to grow a devoted readership. Now, finance departments often demand a rapid return on investment.

Almost all writers, therefore (except the lucky few with private means) need to think carefully about the money side of the writing life. The temptation is to give up the day job, if you have one, or at least reduce your working hours. It's a seductive prospect, especially if you're offered a pleasing financial deal or if you have a wonderful idea for a novel that you're desperate to write up.

The attraction is that you will give yourself more time to write, and the value of time is hard to exaggerate. It can be extremely difficult to combine writing with a busy working day or caring responsibilities, given the drain on your time and energy. A supportive family is invaluable, while if you live on your own you can probably please yourself about writing at unsocial hours. So it may be worth taking a calculated risk. You have to make judgements about your own personal circumstances and any changes in them that you foresee.

These are difficult judgements to make. Believe me, I know. In my years as Chair and Vice Chair of the Crime Writers' Association in particular, I've talked to many talented crime writers who have needed to take tough decisions about their own careers. They have encountered many setbacks, often facing problems outside their control. Some of them gave up writing, defeated by a whole series of setbacks. Even though new talent is always coming through, the genre is the poorer for their absence.

I strive to encourage fellow authors to keep writing, despite the difficulties, and some have kept going through dark times, sometimes re-emerging into the light, perhaps under a pen-name, perhaps with a different sort of crime novel. A recurrent theme in many of these conversations has been the distress caused by money worries.

Everyone's circumstances are different, and what has worked for me won't necessarily work for others, but perhaps it will help to give a flavour of my personal experience. As a young boy, I dreamed of becoming a full-time crime writer. Many years later, when I finally met full-time crime writers, I realised to my dismay that theirs wasn't necessarily the utopian existence I'd imagined. It has taken me thirty years as a published novelist to become a – more or less – full-time author.

As a result, I've always been cautious about becoming over-dependent on income from writing. I worked long hours as a partner in a law firm, and also had a wearisome commute. But in order to devote enough time to my passion for writing, I preferred to sacrifice other pleasures and pastimes (watching sport, going to the theatre and cinema and watching television, for instance) and to avoid putting myself and my family under financial stress.

There have been occasions when I've turned down tempting offers from publishers because I preferred to do something different as a writer. These were risky decisions, and they didn't pay off quickly. At least I had the luxury of a separate income stream from the day job so that I could make those judgement calls. They were gambles, yes, but *calculated* risks because I had one advantage – a very clear idea of how I wanted to develop and stretch my talents as a writer.

As a generalisation, publishers feel more comfortable if their established authors produce more of the same rather than taking risks with their writing.

I left my first publishers because a slightly ‘different’ novel that I’d written to keep my series fresh didn’t suit them. They wanted me to keep on writing books of the same kind, but I was determined not to get stuck in a rut. I’m not interested in producing the same-old, same-old. Some authors are very comfortable with the security of sticking to tried and tested types of writing, and there’s nothing wrong with that if it suits them. Again, it’s an entirely personal choice for each individual.

As far as I’m concerned, in the long run the risky decisions I’ve taken as a writer have – luckily – worked out well. And yes, luck does play a big part: you can be a talented and disciplined writer and still find that your career runs into trouble. I’ve kept writing the books I longed to write, books I believe in, rather than those that were more obviously commercial or fashionable. As I said in the first module, being true to yourself in this way really matters.

I don’t pretend that I had no periods of self-doubt. On the contrary. Over the years, I’ve been dropped by more than one publisher and in more than one country. These mishaps are upsetting and frustrating, and at times the perceived unfairness of it all can feel debilitating. But you can’t afford to dwell on the negatives, far less allow your writing to be derailed by them. It’s hard to remain calm and logical and focused, but that’s the ideal to strive for.

I’m conscious that I’ve been very fortunate to have remained in the game for long enough to establish myself in the way I dreamed of. But if I’d come under financial pressure to compromise too much on my ambitions as a writer, it’s unlikely that I’d have found my career so richly rewarding. So although it wasn’t easy to stick with the day job for so many years, I’m glad I did.

Professionalism and resilience

Writing is hard work. Your aim is to produce a novel good enough to persuade people to spend their precious time and money on it. That takes effort and energy and a ton of self-discipline as well as talent and craft.

I don’t intend to talk in any detail about how to organise your writing day. We all have different preferences, and much depends on what you find realistically achievable. Some authors are larks, others (myself included) owls, working at different ends of the day. Those who write full-time may prefer to work something akin to office hours.

You don’t need to write *every* day. Yes, some professional authors do make sure they put down some words on a strict daily basis, but many (including myself) do not. Time spent testing out story ideas in your mind is time well spent and so is time devoted to relevant research. Please don’t torment yourself with feelings of guilt if life really does get in the way of your writing for a little while. That said, to be a writer, you do need to write. If you keep finding excuses not to write, you may not get very far. Setting specific targets works for some people, not for others. What matters is to seize every opportunity you can to get a few paragraphs written and not to succumb to the (believe me, I know) sometimes overwhelming temptation to indulge in displacement activities.

More than likely, there will be days when you are tempted to despair, days when you think your story isn’t working, when you wonder why you bother. You may even feel like an imposter. Please remember that this is a natural part of the writing process. We’ve all been there.

You’re taking this course, so you’re serious about becoming a crime novelist. If at times you feel daunted and dissatisfied, remember that you’re far from alone. James McConnachie began his summer 2021 editorial for the Society of Authors’ indispensable magazine *The Author* with the observation that: ‘All authors feel like

giving up sometimes.’ But he went on to emphasise the value of what authors do: ‘finding, filtering and processing, bringing what is valuable up, out and into the light. Of course, authors also offer solace and entertainment. Simple things. But...you really need them in a crisis.’

One of the most successful and prolific European writers of the twentieth century, Georges Simenon, even said that writing is ‘a vocation of unhappiness’. He was obviously having a bad day. The truth is simple: if you really want to write, nothing should stop you. Certainly, Simenon’s moans about the writing life didn’t prevent him from producing *hundreds* of novels and short stories.

Likewise, the American crime novelist Lawrence Sanders said that for anyone who wants to write fiction, the best thing to do is ‘take two aspirins, lie down in a dark room, and wait for the feeling to pass.’ This sounds depressing, but don’t be deterred. Larry Sanders has actually spent more than *sixty years* publishing a huge number of books and short stories. They include a very good book about the craft of writing with the wonderful title *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*.

Years ago, I asked him to contribute to an anthology I was editing. He came back very quickly with a short story about his private eye character Matt Scudder that was quite marvellous. So marvellous that it won the Mystery Writers of America’s Edgar award. And that sums Lawrence Sanders up. He is the ultimate professional. This course aims to encourage you to cultivate an equally professional attitude and approach to your writing, even if you haven’t yet been paid for a single piece of your prose.

It’s unwise to be starry-eyed about writing, exciting as it is to contemplate the prospect of producing a book of your own. Understanding that writing a crime novel is a rollercoaster ride, with plenty of lows as well as highs, will help you to build up the resilience that is necessary if you dream of sustaining a writing career long-term. Most writers (including me) have from time to time had bad reviews or been messed about by publishers or agents, or seen exciting TV deals fizzle out. It’s not what you want, but it happens all the time. If you need to spend time feeling sorry for yourself or bitter about the malign workings of fate, impose a stringent time limit on how long you indulge yourself. You need to get over it and keep faith in yourself.

You’re *not* trying to write the perfect novel. Nobody – *nobody* – has ever done that. What you’re aiming to do is simply this: to write the best crime novel that you can. You’re making stuff up in order to find a kind of artistic truth. When you finally come to the end, and you’re ready to go again, the objective will be equally simple: to try to write something even better.

The ability to self-publish has opened up fresh opportunities, and I’m one of many traditionally published authors who has taken advantage of them. Please don’t see self-publishing as an easy option. Your writing should always attain the highest standards you can achieve. You *owe* it to your readers to be honest with them and to strive for truth about the human experience in your writing. To do your best with the story you want them to read, whatever your chosen platform.

Anyone who really cares about writing crime should do everything possible to stick at it, even when the going gets really tough. There are no guarantees of success, but even if a writer has a run of appalling luck, there’s always the chance that, if you keep working, things will change for the better. So it’s important to remain motivated. It isn’t enough to think about or dream about writing. You have to *write*.

Easier said than done – believe me, I know! – especially if you have to fit your writing around a job or other demanding responsibilities. Again, though, if you really want to write, I reckon you will find a way. Even if you’d love to become a full-time author, sometimes writing part-time is actually advantageous. If you’re not dependent on earning money from what you write, as I’ve said, that in itself can be wonderfully liberating.

Rather than simply producing a book in order to keep a publisher happy or meet some perceived gap in the market, why not concentrate your resources on pleasing yourself as well as your readers, and write a story you're genuinely passionate about?

Give yourself permission to write a book that you truly care about and believe in. Even if what you're working on seems to be hopelessly out of vogue, literary fashions can and do change over time. In the long run, following your instincts can make you a better writer, and perhaps even a more successful one than if you're always driven by purely commercial considerations.

Practical professionalism

One aspect of being professional is making sure that, before you send your manuscript out into the world, it is in the best shape possible. Make sure you've checked and double-checked grammar, spelling and presentation. This course doesn't cover those basic topics in any detail; I'm assuming that you are serious enough about writing to ensure you produce as 'clean' a final manuscript as possible. If you find it helpful to use an editorial service such as Fiction Feedback, fine. But if you send out sloppy work, publishers and readers will concentrate on stories written by authors who treat them with more respect.

Being professional also means being prepared to be self-critical about your writing and to listen to editorial judgements and feedback from people who understand what you are trying to do, but believe that you can improve your work. It's never easy to take criticism, however constructive, on the chin, but being over-sensitive or excessively defensive tends to be self-defeating. A stubborn refusal to accept any breath of criticism is unprofessional.

I always listen very carefully to my editors. They are objective; they can see the wood for the trees in a way that, sometimes, I can't. Of course, this doesn't mean that I agree with everything they say, or follow every piece of advice they offer. Ultimately, writing is so personal that you have to be guided by your own beliefs and instincts, not someone else's. But I think long and hard each time I decide to reject the suggestions made by skilled professionals who are sympathetic to what I'm trying to do, but who reckon there's a better way of doing it.

Once your book is out in the world, what about reviews? Lovely comments always give a feel-good factor; criticism is harder to swallow. I know plenty of successful writers who choose not to read their own reviews. They find negativity too damaging to their morale. Again, it's a personal choice.

I was a published reviewer before I became a published novelist, so I'm fascinated by reviews, especially those in the traditional print media. Of course, the prevalence of online reviewing means that in some respects, standards have dropped. Many online reviewers are first-rate, but you can't help wondering about those people who give a novel a poor rating because it was delivered to the wrong address by a courier or a good rating even though they have yet to read it. This strikes me as weird, but it's important not to let such things ruin your day.

A good reviewer will make every effort to understand what the writer was trying to do when writing the book, and make a judgement about the extent to which those aims were achieved. A reviewer who has an axe to grind is not worth worrying about. There are plenty of unpleasant people in the world who relish the smidgeon of power that comes from badmouthing someone else. Leave them to their unhappiness; their opinions are worthless.

But when a good reviewer acting in good faith finds fault of some kind, criticising your novel constructively, it's worth thinking over what they have said, just as it's worth taking editorial comments or thoughtful

rejections seriously. I try to learn from this kind of feedback. It's all part of the process of constant striving to improve as a writer.

Stimulation

According to *The Author*, the Covid-19 pandemic caused many full-time authors to think about giving up. There are various reasons, but a sense of isolation coupled with lack of stimulation and personal contacts are among them. At least if the rest of your life is busy, your experiences may give you, even if indirectly, valuable ideas and stimuli. And if you have to squeeze writing time around other pressing commitments, you may feel encouraged to make the most of it.

Don't be content just to sit there and stare at a blank page or screen. To write something, however unsatisfactory, is far better than not writing. It gives you material which can be improved. Even gifted and highly experienced writers frequently find that the words don't flow as smoothly as we'd wish. Waiting for inspiration to strike – just like the displacement activities that most writers indulge in – wastes time. Your time is valuable, so make the most of it by writing as much and as often as you can.

It also makes sense to spare some time for reading. I read constantly, and so do most writers. Reading enriches our lives. You will also learn a great deal about the craft of writing from understanding how others do it. As we'll discuss, you can also learn from the mistakes that, from time to time, even the best writers make.

You may feel reluctant to read novels written in your own field, perhaps worrying about unconscious plagiarism. But the more distinctive your own voice, the less risk there is that your work will be too similar to that of other writers. In any event, the books you read needn't be crime novels. There are lessons for any writer in the work of, say, Austen, Angelou and Atwood.

It's worth joining professional authors' organisations for which you meet the eligibility criteria. In the UK, the Society of Authors and the Crime Writers' Association have made it easier in recent years for writers who are not traditionally published to join, following the lead of the Mystery Writers of America. You can gain a great deal of information from membership, as well as enjoying the social benefits.

Getting stuck

Some highly respected authors don't believe that there is such a thing as writer's block. In *Writing: A User Manual*, David Hewson describes it as a 'pervasive myth', but gives useful tips to writers going through a rough patch. The problem may simply be that the story idea isn't working. Other people have first-hand experience of writer's block and see it as a potentially significant impediment to a novelist's career. I've been fortunate not to have experienced the problem myself, but I was fascinated to read the range of practical suggestions made by Suzette Hill, David Stuart Davies and Stella Duffy in *Howdunit*.

David highlights the benefits of talking with fellow writers who will lend a sympathetic ear. Stella Duffy, drawing on her experience as an actor, talks about the value of improvising, of finding the joy in writing; and that's a telling point. When your novel isn't going well, it's easy to forget what drew you into this in the first place.

Yes, you need to be self-disciplined and you need to work hard, but you also need to love what you do. Otherwise, why bother? As with any worthwhile occupation, writing isn't all fun. The lows should make the highs all the more rewarding.

For me, starting a new book is fun. Writing the middle part of the book, when I'm developing characters and plot in tandem, often feels like wading through treacle. But the effort is justified when I reach the later chapters, and all the strands of a complex storyline begin to come together. I tend to write those chapters more quickly than the rest of the book, because I become caught up in the excitement. It's exhilarating.

If you find you get stuck at some stage and simply can't think of a solution, you may even benefit from writing something completely different. But don't throw away what you've written. One day, you may find a way to make it work.

I agree with Suzette Hill that the crucial thing is to keep writing – whatever you write, however poor you think your writing is. That's been my method for remaining productive even when I've had little time or energy to devote to writing. Once you've written something, you can always improve it. And even if you think what you have written is fine, the fact remains – you can always improve it.

Revision

A few gifted writers are able to dispense with revision and still write excellent novels. A rather larger number of capable writers economise on revision and write publishable novels which aren't quite as good as they might have been, had they put more effort into revising them.

Again, this is a personal choice, but I'm a passionate believer in revision. It isn't simply a matter of skimming through your manuscript to make sure that a character's blue eyes on page 10 don't turn to brown on page 150 and fixing other 'continuity' issues. It makes sense to go through the novel line by line, to see what can be improved. You may conclude that a significant change, maybe more than one, would make it a better book. If so, resist any temptation to turn a blind eye to the problem; far better to fix it while you have the chance rather than waiting for an editor or reviewer to point it out.

Very often, small changes prove disproportionately beneficial. Frequently, they involve nothing more complicated than cutting out extraneous paragraphs or lines or words. If you find a section that adds nothing to the story, delete it, even if you're rather pleased with your turn of phrase. There's truth in the old adage about killing your darlings.

Does this seem like a tedious task? It shouldn't. Think of it, instead, as a golden opportunity to make a decent story better. It can be exciting to see the quality of your story improve as you make judicious changes to what you've written.

I revise to some extent as I go along, as more ideas about the characters and the incidents occur to me, with the people and the story coming to life almost before my eyes. Even if I've written a fairly detailed outline, I'm happy to abandon whole chunks of it if something better springs to mind, following the story where it leads me. In fact, I can't think of any novel I've outlined where the final book wasn't significantly different to the story described in the outline. This doesn't mean that outlining is a waste of time; it simply illustrates that there's always room for improvement.

Most of my revision takes place after I've reached the end of the first draft. I always take a short break before starting the revision process, so that I can look on the manuscript with a little distance, a little more objectivity. How many times I go through the manuscript varies from book to book. My first novel went through innumerable incarnations before achieving publication. The whole process took three years, partly because of my lack of experience, partly because of my anxiety to produce a book that I thought merited publication.

As a young man of 23, I'd written a full-length thriller that I never attempted to get fully typed, let alone published. I knew it wasn't good enough. But writing that book was good experience. It was also very positive, simply because it taught me that at least I had the stamina to write a full-length crime novel.

A relatively recent novel, *Gallows Court*, also took three years to write. This was because the book represented a major departure for me. It was set in a different time period (1930), had a different lead character, different tone, different style of writing – and I didn't plan what was going to happen. It was an experiment, a leap in the dark. The idea I started with was character-based and unorthodox. I didn't have a contract or a publisher. The whole business felt rather like starting out again as a beginner. I wrote a short story about the character, not for publication but simply to see whether I liked writing about her, before I set to work in earnest.

That manuscript went through innumerable changes before I plucked up the courage to send it to my agent. Luckily for me, it was bought by a great publisher and it became my most successful novel. I attribute this to two things: the quality of the concept and the effort I devoted to writing an entertaining story.

The toughest question is: where do you draw the line? The revision process can seem endless. Sooner or later, the author has to let go. Before reaching that stage you owe it to yourself, as well as the reader, to make sure the final version is as good as you can make it.

Exercise

Set aside half a day for yourself to think about your writing ambitions and what that will mean for your life. First, write down why you want to be a writer. Are these reasons compelling? Can you *not* imagine yourself *not* being a novelist? Great: let's continue.

Consider how long it's going to take to plan and then produce your first draft and then to revise it thoroughly three times. Where are you going to find this time? Be practical. Think about it seriously. Can you manage two hours every day? A full day every weekend? How many things will you need to give up to achieve that, and will you be able to do that without damaging your mental well-being – or that of your family! If you think you'll need to cut down on paid work to find the time, look carefully at your finances. Can you afford to do that and sustain your life as you want it to be? If not, think very carefully before taking this action.

OK, go back to that original list of why you want to be a writer. Do those reasons still seem irresistible now you've properly thought through what you might have to give up? If the answer's yes, then go back to your practical considerations and even if you only write an hour every other day and a full day every third weekend while you continue to work full-time, you'll find a way.