



## **brings you some fiction-writing tools**

### **Tool 1: A character who wants something**

Kurt Vonnegut advised his students to have their protagonist want something straightaway. It doesn't need to be their innermost yearning (though we should ultimately glimpse that). It can be the last chocolate biscuit, an hour alone, a woman who has just married someone else. When someone wants something they don't have, we have natural tension. We also have a character to follow, as they pursue whatever it is they want. And as the protagonist chases their heart's desire, they will inevitably have to make choices. Each one of these choices, big or small, is revealing of their character. And that's where our interest in fiction lies: character.

### **Tool 2: A stumbling block**

Because this is what a novel does – it 'stretches the tension' to use a Hitchcock phrase, by thwarting its protagonist in her efforts to get what she wants. It is in trying to get around the obstacle(s) that she makes those character-revealing decisions. That she goes deeper and deeper into trouble.

### **Tool 3: A splinter of ice in your heart**

Graham Greene famously said there is a splinter of ice in the heart of every writer. By this, he was referring to a necessary detachment from life; the ability to watch and listen and take it all in. I think this also comes to play when reading your own drafts. You need to be able to look coldly at your own work, as though someone else wrote it.

### **Tool 4: A knowledge of your weaknesses as a writer**

Because every writer has them, and to know your weaknesses is a strength. Knowing them means knowing what you need to work on, or maybe what you need to avoid. Maybe both.

**Tool 5: A (probably bad) draft**

Having said that, you need something to work on. So get words down without too much self-criticism, at least initially. Many writers find the early morning the best time to do this – their inner critic hasn't woken up yet. Try to have most of these early draft words come from a feeling, a sense of the character, their yearning. When you write 'the end', you won't have the draft of a novel. But you will have fabric from which you may be able to fashion one.

**Tool 6: A compulsive reading habit**

Especially concerning the works of your favourite writers. Read everything they write, then read it again. Read every interview and essay and article they've ever written. That's where your neverending apprenticeship lies.

**Tool 7: A bookshelf on which lie the best books on writing fiction**

Some tried and tested ones include *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner, *Big Magic* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *On Writing* by Stephen King, *From Where You Dream* by Robert Olen Butler (especially the chapter *Yearning*). James Scott Bell, in his book *Plot and Structure* is forensic in his dissection of how plot and structure shape a novel. Then there's the *Paris Review* 'writers at work' interviews.

**Tool 8: A stoical attitude**

Someone said all writing is an act of emulation. If you feel the desire to write fiction, chances are you have been a reader of fiction for many years. If your love of reading has developed into this desire to write, you may well be stuck with it. Writing does not tend to make writers much money, even published ones. And living is expensive, as someone else said. You must therefore find a way to accommodate this urge of yours, and understand that it's probably here to stay.

**Tool 9: A good flask**

This isn't a metaphor. You need an actual flask that keeps coffee hot all night. Fill it with freshly made coffee before you go to bed. Leave it in your office, or wherever it is that you write. Maybe on your bedside locker. When your alarm goes off, alerting you to the fact that it's six thirty, and your precious writing hour is here, you will remember the flask of hot coffee waiting for you. And that might be the thing that tips you away from going back to sleep, and towards opening up your notebook or laptop.