

## The Tao of Writing

### Why the Tao of writing?

Tao (pronounced dow) is generally translated into English as ‘the path’ or ‘way’, metaphorically, one assumes, as well as literally. This is curious, and maybe unintentional, because way has two meanings: one being the ‘means’ of doing something and the other being the direction to follow. Both are applicable to almost anything that assumes a goal or objective, which is why the word, Tao, is adopted for almost any endeavour known to humanity. So why have I adopted it? Because, philosophically and historically, Tao has many interpretations in Western discourse, all of which, I believe, are relevant to writing and storytelling.

Taoism has origins in ancient China, predating Confucius, who predated Christ by 500 years. To put this in context, Confucius was contemporary to Buddha and Pythagoras. In reference to Confucianism, Taoism is considered mystical and metaphysical, complementary to Confucianism, which is considered pragmatic and political. The Chinese classic, *I Ching* (pronounced Ee-ching) embodies both. The *I Ching* (literal translation: book of changes) is an organic book that predates Confucius as well, but it has evolved and the version we find today is heavily Confucian in its philosophy. The Richard Wilhelm transcription, translated into English by Cary Baynes, is the best known and most respected Western interpretation. Whilst its text is predominantly Confucian, its soul is Taoist. It’s premised on the idea that change is a fundamental aspect of the universe. The Asian psyche seems more aware of the ephemeral nature of life than we are in the West, which may be a consequence of a culture that venerates ‘ancestors’ compared to a culture that believes in ‘eternal life’. As an oracle, the I Ching also assumes that there is a transcendental realm, not unlike Plato’s world of ‘forms’, or Jung’s collective unconscious.

What has any of this got to do with writing? Storytelling occurs in the realm of the imagination, not unlike the world of dreams – as a writer and an artist, it often feels like one has made contact with a Platonic realm. Many artists and musicians make this same allusion when they attempt to explain their ‘art’. The Tao is often referred to allegorically as the ‘uncarved block’, which can be seen as a metaphor for

the unachievable ideal in all aspects of life and art, but it can also be interpreted as the potential yet to be revealed.

Taoism is often associated with the symbol of Yin and Yang (pronounced yin and yung), which is a pictorial representation of all the polarities that are inherent in life: day and night, birth and death, man and woman, good and evil; curiously they are opposites that all require each other for their existence. Some would argue that the spiritual and organic should also be included, but in Western philosophy, there is an assumption that such a dependency is illusory. I would also include energy and matter, as depicted by Einstein's famous, and deceptively simple, equation:  $E = mc^2$ . Quantum mechanics also has an inherent duality, as captured mathematically and descriptively by the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, but I don't subscribe to the idea that this is evidence that quantum mechanics is Taoism revealed in physics, except as metaphor.

Irrespective of its philosophical implications, there is an inherent tension required for storytelling that is manifest at many levels, and it's aptly depicted by this well known symbol. Obviously, character and plot are the two primary attributes associated with storytelling, and could be seen as another metaphorical projection of Yin and Yang, which I discuss in detail later. But I would add a third attribute, which is world, and I would depict them in a triangular relationship putting character at the apex. I will explain the relevance of this representation later.

According to Lao Tzu, author of the *Tao-te Ching* (the book of the Way), the Tao cannot be explained because it represents the very thing we cannot grasp. This has been carried over into Zen Buddhism, which is what Buddhism became after it traveled through China, following its migration from India at about the time of Christ. But this notion of the inexplicable has a resonance in Western mysticism. Karen Armstrong, in her book, *The History of God*, repeatedly refers to the conflict that arose between those who believed that God could be explained through intellectual analysis and those who believed that God could only be experienced mystically.

Again you ask: what relevance has this to writing? Well, there are times in any physically or mentally strenuous endeavour, like sport or music, when one seems to transcend oneself. Sports people call it finding the zone, but I call it a Zen experience after I first read about it in a book by Daisetz Suzuki, explaining how a samurai must effectively 'remove himself' and act without thinking in order to survive. This was something I personally recognised: when we have so acquired a skill, that we not only

do it without conscious thought, but we become detached from it and observe it as if removed. It's one of the few occasions when we are free of ego, and yet it is when we feel most accomplished. When one achieves this in writing, it is the most satisfying experience one can realise whilst practicing one's craft.

That is really all I have to say about the Tao part of this topic – the rest is dedicated to the writing part, with, of course, the odd reference made back to it along the way.

### **How is fiction different?**

How is fiction different to other forms of writing? This is an important question, because there are many people who can write very articulately, even eloquently, and yet they fail at fiction. But referring to writing in general, I always maintain there are only two rules for writing: rule 1, get the message across; rule 2, make it easy to read. Most people can manage the first rule if they know their subject well enough; it's the second rule they struggle with. This dictum is relevant whether one is writing a philosophical essay, a technical report or a novel, and I've done all three. But writing a novel is totally different because it involves narrative, the message is complex and layered, and yet it still has to be easy to read, perhaps more so.

Journalism and biography often involve a story as well, so they are the closest to fiction without being fiction, yet there are fundamental differences. Perhaps the most significant difference is the need to create character. In fact, in fiction everything has to be created, albeit some of it may be based in fact, but character is usually the most problematic when one is starting out. If one takes biography, the character doesn't need to be created, as they already exist, and the author relies on historical records, diaries, letters and interviews. This may create a sense of character in the reader's mind, but it's not the principal intent of the writing, and it's not the same as creating a character from scratch as one does in a novel.

This is best demonstrated by examining an exception. Thomas Keneally's Booker Prize winner, *Schindler's Ark*, is a fictional biography. In a forward to the book, Keneally describes how he came across Oscar Schindler's story, and how he decided to write it as a fictional novel because that is his craft. Schindler is a character in this novel along with others, especially the Commandant, who is portrayed as a formidable adversary. In taking this path, Keneally illuminates (which is not the same

as analysing) Schindler's character transformation from a playboy entrepreneur to a humanitarian saviour. Schindler seemed to treat the entire enterprise as a game, albeit a highly dangerous game, but one where he knew he possessed the requisite skills to win. Keneally's decision to novelise the story allowed him to put character front of stage, which is what gives the story its mystery and its fascination.

There are three components to all stories, which I've depicted in my aforementioned triangular relationship: character, plot and world. They are so interdependent that it's hard to separate them, yet I will discuss them separately as well as in conjunction. In my view, character is the most important, and it's also the hardest to do when one is starting out in fiction. In fact, character is so important to me that it is almost a theme for this entire dissertation.

Character provides the window into the story for the reader, and also for the writer. Many people talk about the point of view when discussing the writing of fiction: first person, third person intimate, third person omniscient and so on. Most novels are written in one of these three voices, but the most common is third person intimate, and there is a good reason for this. When people discuss the comparable merits of movies and books, everyone agrees, whatever merits movies may have, the one advantage a book gives is that it allows the reader intimate access into the character's mind. This is the principal secret in writing a novel, so it is not surprising that first person and third person intimate are the most common forms of writing fiction. This is how the character provides a window into the story for the reader, and why, as a writer, one effectively allows the characters to tell the story. Not literally telling the story, but to use them as the conduit for telling, showing and feeling, instead of describing and explaining, which is what we normally do as writers. This essential difference is the most important skill to develop as a writer of fiction – more on this later.

### **Writing as analogy – imagination as instrument**

I often compare writing to music, and, in fact, I call writing fiction, composition, as I believe it has more in common with musical composition than the writing of non-fiction. You may ask, how can I make such a comparison if I've never composed music, which I haven't. Well, I've dreamt music that no one has ever heard, but that doesn't qualify me to commentate on musicianship or composers. Basically, it's the

way music affects me, and also what I've heard songwriters and composers say about the creative process. There are many similarities, but the most relevant is the way both music and prose affect their audience. It's to do with emotions. Music evokes an emotional response and so does prose. Music can create moods and ambience. Music can be meditative, it can excite, inspire, and arouse feelings of melancholy or euphoria. Music can make you weep and make you dance, make you love and make you sad. Prose can do all of these things, and more, but it depends on the writer.

There is another analogy I wish to make: the medium for a movie is the image on the screen and the soundtrack, so what is the medium for a novel? Many people would answer: it has to be the words on the page. I disagree. By analogy, the same people would say that the medium for music is its score: the notes on the page. But only a musician would be able to read that medium. For most of us the medium is the instrument through which it's played, even if the instrument is a human voice.

Using this analogy, the medium for a novel is the reader's imagination. A novel starts in the writer's imagination and is transferred, via the reading of words on a page, to the reader's imagination. It's the imagination that is the medium, not the words per se. It is the imagination that is the instrument of transformation.

There is another important point to be learnt from this analogy. If you listen to a particular recording or rendition of a score, you won't feel anything more than what the musician has invested into it. The same is true of writing: the reader won't take any more out of the writing than you, as the writer, have put into it. If you don't feel passionate about what you are writing, then neither will the reader. And this brings me back to something I said earlier: about getting the message across. In the case of fiction, the message is multi-layered and multi-informational, but most importantly, the message is emotional. Are you seeing a theme here?

### **To Outline or not to outline?**

All writers have an opinion on this topic, and many express it with a religious conviction. Some insist you must do an outline and some are contemptuous of it. My response is to do what works for you. This may sound like a cop-out, but, in truth, I can see merit in both sides of the argument. Personally, I do an outline, but it's very broad and I can usually write it on the back of an envelope, literally.

It's really about plot and character, and which is more significant for you. Basically, the non-outliners, and there are a large number of them, believe spontaneity is the objective in fiction, and, on this, I concur.

One of the contradictions of storytelling is that the reader, or audience (in the case of movies and plays), have certain expectations of the story and yet they also want to be surprised. As soon as you open a story you invariably start to create expectations: if someone is trapped, you want them to be saved; if someone has an adversary or nemesis, you expect the protagonist to engage and you expect them to win. You also expect a happy ending and a book's success will generally suffer if these expectations are not met.

One of the writer's greatest skills is to not disappoint their readers on responding to their expectations and at the same time to surprise them with the unexpected. How does one do this?

Let's return to the Tao. For me, the Tao, amongst all the other polarities I've already mentioned, represents something fundamental to each and every one of us: the self. What is the self? Well, that's an entire essay by itself, but I would say, for the sake of brevity, that it's the nexus of the internal world and external world that we all experience. Think about it. We all think in a language, which is fundamental, not only for communication, but also for manipulating, comparing, conceptualising and integrating ideas. Yet we all gained our language from the external world. Whilst we all have an innate genetic disposition to learning language, we are completely dependent on the culture of our birth for its generation. My point is that the external world has a far greater influence on our individual 'self' than we care to credit. But there is another way of looking at this, and that is that the external world is 'fate' and the internal world is what we call 'free will'.

Now, a number of evolutionary biologists, not to mention philosophers, will tell you that there is no such thing as free will: it's an illusion, a cultural relic; like God. There is another time and place for that argument. But whether it's an illusion or real, it's something we tend to believe in simply because we like to think we have an autonomy that allows us to make choices, some of which are moral and life-changing, and some of which are prosaic.

Again you ask: what has this to do with writing? Quite a lot actually, because character and plot are directly analogous to the inner and outer worlds, as any writer can verify. The plot represents the outer world and the character represents the inner

world. A novel, or any story for that matter, should entail both an inner journey and an outer journey. I've always felt that the plot is merely a vehicle in which the character is effectively driven along, and it's what happens to the character, or characters, as a result of this journey that really interests me.

Ask yourself: which stories are the most inspiring? This question includes biography as well as fiction. The answer is self-revealing: it's the stories that involve triumph over adversity. This is philosophy in fiction. It is only by overcoming adversity that we really grow as a person, and we all know this as a fundamental truth even if we don't admit to it. I tell people that the most frustrating things in life are also the most rewarding, and, yes, that includes writing. But don't take my word for it, ask anyone who's won a championship, in any field. Or ask anyone who's brought up kids.

But I haven't finished with this analogy. If one takes the dialectic of fate and free will in real life and transcribes it to plot and character in fiction, then it makes perfect sense to give one's characters free will. Not all writers agree with this, but many do, and I contend that it's the best way to achieve spontaneity. When my characters surprise me then I know they will also surprise the reader. But I go further: if I'm writing a story and my characters don't take on a life of their own, then I feel I'm wasting my time. For me, the story only comes alive when my characters come alive – I like them to surprise me. The best fiction I've written is when a character has done something unexpected and I follow their lead.

As the writer, you play God – you create all the problems, all the obstacles and all the dilemmas. But, as far as possible, you should let the characters find their own solutions – if they surprise you, then they will surprise your readers. It's that simple.

## **Screenwriting**

I want to say something about screenwriting for a couple of reasons. I want to explain how it's fundamentally different to writing a novel, or a short story, and also I want to relay what I've learned from the experience of writing screenplays. I must add that none of my screenplays have been produced, but the experience of writing for the screen, albeit unsuccessfully, has certainly made me a better writer.

There are two fundamental differences to screenwriting from novel writing: one of them obvious, the other not. The obvious difference is the constraint created by

time. Even Peter Jackson's 8-10 hr realisation of *Lord of the Rings*, as brilliant and as loyal to Tolkein's vision as it was, left stuff out. Film is inherently more linear than a novel, not only because of the time constraint, but to keep the audience engaged without confusing them with innumerable sub-plots. If you analyse Jackson's film, especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> installments, you will notice he keeps switching between plots fairly frequently, which not only allows the audience to keep track of all the threads, but makes the time past more quickly. It's very clever filmmaking.

The less obvious difference is in the writing process itself. There is a recognised, standard format for screenwriting. You provide a heading for the scene, giving scene number, and whether it's day or night, interior or exterior. A scene change is defined by a change in location or time. You then give a brief physical description of the setting, everything written in the present tense immediate, using active voice as much as possible. So you would write: 'she sits', rather than 'she is sitting'. After that it's description and dialogue. The dialogue is headed by the character speaking, and the dialogue is indented so it sits in the middle of the page. If the character or characters perform some action in between or during the dialogue, it is described succinctly as if it is happening in real time. In other words, a screenplay reads like you are watching a film. You only write what can be seen or heard, and not what's in the character's head. In a novel, on the other hand, you can write the entire story from inside one or more of the characters' heads, and most often, that's exactly what one does. So, it's an entirely different process.

The best advice I can give to someone wanting to write for the screen is to obtain copies of scripts of some of their favourite movies. It should be stated that action scenes are usually story-boarded, and some filmmakers insist on story-boarding the entire movie, which is what they do with animation. Story-boarding is essentially comic strip style, without the dialogue balloons. Miyazake (Studio Ghibli) DVDs allow one to watch an entire movie in story-board format. But before you story-board you probably want to write the script out in full. You can insert comments like: 'close-up of fist'; or, 'Assassin's POV' (point of view); to describe how the scene is depicted to the viewer.

There are two lessons I learnt from screenwriting, which I carried over into novel writing, and they both facilitate economical writing and efficient pacing of the story. The first lesson is get into the scene as late as you can and leave as quickly as you can. In other words, keep the story moving and don't waste the reader's energy

with irrelevant information. The second lesson: every scene should give information about the story, or give information about the character, or move the story forward. If it doesn't serve any of these purposes, delete it. And stories in novels are comprised of scenes as well. The scene is not so definitively delineated as it is in a movie, but I would contend that the scene is the smallest unit of a story. At the end of the day, a story is a long sequence of scenes.

Writing for the screen, you don't give physical descriptions of your characters unless it's absolutely necessary. We need to know their sex and age group, but everything else should be ascertained from the dialogue and, to a lesser extent, their actions. Screenwriting sharpens your skills for creating character out of dialogue alone. It may be relevant to sometimes describe an article of clothing, but those decisions are usually made by others in the movie-making business. The same for describing scenery: you only describe what's needed to form a fundamental image in someone's mind; the details are worked out by others.

Christina Ricci was a child actor who has since made a remarkable career out of performing in Indy films as an adult. Learning her craft as a child, she didn't analyse it much, according to her directors, afraid she might confound her instincts. But after her first few adult movies, someone asked her in an interview (David or Margaret) how she created character. Her answer was unexpected, remarkably honest and illuminating. 'The character's in the dialogue, if the writing is any good', is how I remember it. It's a rare acknowledgement that good films require good writing. The audience only see the actors performing and the camera work and the effects – they rarely, if ever, appreciate that the writing is perhaps the most crucial ingredient of all. I can think of numerous examples where the best actors in the world, with the best special effects money could buy, couldn't save a dog of a script.

### **Genres, Worlds and Premise**

There are two categories of genres, yet people often refer to genres without reference to this distinction. Basically, there are world genres and style genres and they work in combinations. The world genres, are crime, espionage, periods, military, fantasy, sci-fi, westerns, and I'm sure there are others, plus sub-genres of the above. Style genres are thrillers, romance, odyssey, drama, comedy, and again there are sub-categories like horror, erotica, action, plus others I'm sure you can think of. And all

these generate combinations like crime-thriller, espionage-thriller, fantasy-odyssey, romance-period, and countless others.

I've no intention to talk about specific genres, only to say that writers tend to stay in the genre they know. This is especially the case when it comes to the world category but it also applies to the style category, because we writers all have specific strengths and we all do some things better than others. Even within a specific genre, like science fiction for example, one writer may create more believable worlds while another may create more believable characters. We all write to our strengths. In crime, writers specialise: some are good at suspense, while others are good at mystery. Writers tend to stay in a specific world genre for two reasons: one, it's the genre they like as a reader or audience; and two, it's the genre they know and have developed expertise in. It's not surprising that the genre one likes should become the genre one gains knowledge of. It should go without saying that one should never write a book that one wouldn't read oneself.

In the introduction I mentioned that there is a triangular relationship between character, plot and world. Everyone knows that a story develops from an interaction between plot and character, the dynamics of which I've already discussed in detail (refer: To outline or not to outline). But few people perceive the 'world' or 'setting' as an independent and equally important component.

Before you start a story you need three things: at least one character, at least one world and, if not a plot outline, then a premise. In America, some writers and writing professionals, when they discuss premise, are really discussing theme, which is not the same thing as I'm talking about here. A premise is a starting point or foundation, upon which one builds an idea, an argument, or, in this case, a story. Examples of a premise: A boy is orphaned as a baby and put in foster care with an uncaring family. When he reaches adolescence, he's sent to wizard school. Another example: a young nephew of an adventurous uncle is given a family heirloom, that happens to be a ring, and told by a mentoring wizard that he has to undertake a dangerous journey to destroy it. There are two points common to both of these examples: the premise is laid out clearly to the reader within the first few chapters of a long story; and the premise involves the protagonist entering a new and completely alien world.

Changing worlds is a common device in fiction. The new kid at school, the new teacher, the new boss, the new relationship. The world is invariably a factor in the story; it affects plot and character. New worlds, strange environments, challenge all of

us, and we all change as a result. This is the stuff of life and it's equally the stuff of fiction. Most fiction involves a protagonist entering a different world or a stranger coming to their world. I stole this last gem from Terry Dowling, though we've never met.

## **Structure**

Structure comes with outline, yet it's even more basic than that. The simplest structure is the 3 act play that is revered by Hollywood, or so they would have us believe. It's called the beginning, the middle and the end, but it's better explained by calling it the setup, the development, and the resolution or climax. The only really mandatory parts are the setup and the resolution; you can do almost anything you want in between.

In at least two stories I have used a 4 act structure, which is quite symmetrical. I have 2 acts separated by a major plot point in the middle of the story, and book-ended by a setup at the beginning and a denouement at the end; the climax occurs in the 3<sup>rd</sup> act. Plot points are often concurrent with transitions to other worlds. Emotional plot points should be concordant with physical plot points. In other words, the inner and outer journeys should have a synchronicity, which makes the story satisfying to the reader, often without them being consciously aware of why this is so.

There is generally a main plot, or what I call an umbrella plot, with at least one subplot, though there can be numerous subplots of varying importance, in which case, there will generally be a main subplot. Almost any relationship with the protagonist can create its own subplot, and this is how one adds layers to the story without cluttering it up. It's like the protagonist's journey is the main strand in a braid and all the other strands are the other characters' journeys weaved around it. This only works if all the strands are all part of one integrated story. Where you have multiple stories, it can get messy if they're not connected.

The umbrella plot is what holds the whole story together, and it must be logically consistent. Example: J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter has a predestined and fatal connection to Voldemort, which began in his pre-conscious infancy. It drives the entire narrative for seven novels, yet each novel contains its own plot and subplots that often put the umbrella plot in the background. However, it never goes away and all these other plots effectively hang off it.

Subplots often involve relationships and the main subplot is generally associated intimately with the inner journey of the protagonist. Logically it could be a romance, but it may be a family relationship, or a friendship, or just coming to terms with something in the past. In the case of Harry Potter it's a combination: trying to deal with the loss of his biological family, and find solace in his surrogate family of Dumbledore, Hagrid, Sirius Black, Hermione and the Weasleys. Rowling says it's all about death.

Subplots can also occur by branching off a main plot as happened in Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, or one can have the convergence of a number of subplots that started independently, as in Stephen King's *The Stand*. Either way, one wants them all neatly tied off at the end or all brought together in a common resolution.

Structures are not templates, and one shouldn't analyse their structure too closely whilst one is writing. I think it's important to avoid an episodic structure, though its ideal for a serial. By this I mean it's important for a novel to have a narrative that goes from beginning to end. It should have a setup so the reader isn't landed in the middle of a story without knowing how they arrived. And it should have a resolution or climax that leaves the reader with a sense of a journey completed and a conflict or drama resolved. What you do in between is completely dependent on the story you are telling, as long as the reader remains engaged in the narrative and they don't become confused or lost. There, I could have said that at the beginning.

### **Getting started**

This is where it should all come together, but how does one do it? Where to start, how to suspend disbelief and what to do when blocked? There are no easy answers but it's not unlike any other complex skill, like driving a car. You can't learn everything at once, but with practice some things become second nature, and over time you evolve your own specific methodology as you find out what works for you. And this is an important point, because, despite what I tell you, you will find that some of what I say is spot on for you, and some is not. To outline or not to outline is a case in point – it divides writers – so experiment until you discover what you need. That's what I did. In this section, and the following ones, I will be talking about what works for me and the skills I have developed. This is where you might, through your

own experience, find other methods and develop different skills, so a lot of what I say here is very subjective, or even more so than what I've said previously.

Where to start is partly covered by what I wrote under Genres, worlds and premise: you need a protagonist, a world and a premise. But preferably you have a handful of characters, and maybe more than one world and your premise should contain at least one plot point, which could be the plot point where the character goes from one world to another. But generally you need the plot point which culminates the setup and launches the story proper.

You start off with a seed, which is your premise, and you have to determine whether the seed can grow into a tree, which is why I do a rough outline. But the other important tool that can help you is backstory. Backstory tells you what happened prior to the story starting. You can create backstories for your characters and backstories for your world. You may include bits of backstory in your written story, but generally it's for your own edification, and I find it helps you to immerse yourself into the story's world and into the mind of your protagonist. George Lucas created such an elaborate backstory for Star Wars, he created another three films from it.

I get a notebook and I write down ideas and what I call sketches, which generally include snatches of dialogue from various parts of the story, as if I'm trying to look into the future. Even if I don't use them, they help me to get to know my characters and get me into the story. I do a lot of this even before I start. Most of the material I write at this stage, I don't use, but it all helps, and it allows me to assess if I have a story or not.

When you start writing you will write a lot of exposition and description, which is boring, but don't stop, because what you are doing is providing material that helps you to create your world and find your characters. Later on, when you know your characters better, you will give the story over to them and let them tell it, through their interaction with other characters and from their impressions of the environment. You allow your characters to inform the reader by what they say and what they do. The less you describe and explain the better.

### **Creating Character**

Fiction is essentially an emotive medium, and writing is like acting, only different. Actors in a movie use their emotions to communicate with the audience, and

that is how we are engaged. It's the same with a novel only it's the author who translates the characters' emotions onto the page to engage the reader. Believe it or not, the process is exactly the same; it's just that the words on the page put the reader in the character's head, instead of the viewer watching the character emote on the screen. And this is how one suspends disbelief. If an actor is not believable, our suspension of disbelief is disengaged, and the same is true of our characters. We can create worlds of magic, wizards, aliens and surreal technology, yet if the characters aren't believable it quickly falls apart.

This is true of all fiction: the more believable and realistic the psychology of our characters the more credibility it's given. All fiction is a mix of reality and fantasy – it just depends how one makes the mix. Different writers do it according to their strengths. In a lot of espionage thrillers, it's not done with characters but with detail to locations. In the case of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, it was done with detail to history, even though the history was a myth. He still managed to suspend disbelief because the myth was delivered as plausible, even though the plot stretched plausibility to its limit. Most genre writers, including myself, stretch plot plausibility, so we need something else to anchor the reader. In my case, I depend on character, as I believe that is the best window for the reader into the story.

I believe that creating characters is the most basic and essential skill in writing fiction. For me, it's analogous to the ability of a songwriter or composer to create melodies. It's like driving a car: when I started, I couldn't do it, and now I do it without really thinking about it. Characters come into my head the way melodies must come into the head of songwriters.

So now that's the easy part; the hard part is plotting, and that requires a different skill set altogether. It requires problem solving skills, like trying to solve a puzzle.

## **Creating Plot**

Some people can write a scene but they can't write a story. It's like adding another dimension, going from 2D to 3D. A plot is best envisaged as a series of plot points, which brings us back to structure and outline. I call it a map, which is not a map of the world I'm imagining, but a map that shows me the direction and broad outline of the journey that I and the reader will take. As I've already stated, many writers don't have an outline, but I believe you must start your story with at least one

plot point, otherwise you will only write a single scene or a series of scenes that are going nowhere. The first plot point is the end of the setup, and I won't start a story until I know what that plot point is.

When I wrote my first novel, I didn't know what I was doing, so I wrote a lot of exposition, some of which became backstory. I had written down a series of headings, which effectively became chapters, but it was very episodic. I had a specific plot point in my head, which I aimed towards – it was roughly half way through the story. When I reached it, in stops and starts, I found I was completely blocked. I had no idea where the story went from there and I spent a long night sketching out the rest of it, even writing the last page. Ever since I've always done an outline, even though it's invariably better defined towards the beginning than the end. If I get blocked, I go back to it and start writing 'sketches', which become scenes I probably won't use, but which help me get back into the story. That's my methodology – it works for me – you have to find your own: what works for you.

I alluded at the end of the previous section, as a segue into this one, that plotting is largely problem solving. Everyone who has done mathematics, or who has attempted brain-busting puzzles, has had this experience: you can't solve it, so you give up on it, then later, maybe the same day, maybe not, you look at it again, and the solution just jumps out at you. This is a well known phenomenon that no one understands. We've all slept on a problem. Plotting seems to require the same technique, which is why writers are reluctant to explain how they get their ideas or how they resolve them – they simply don't know.

One of my favourite techniques, referring back to an earlier point I made in To outline or not to outline, is that I get my characters to solve the problems for me. A good example of this, I believe, is in Peter Temple's award winning book, *White Dog*. This is one of the best examples I know of how to create genuinely scary suspense and to resolve it realistically. Peter Temple is a firm believer in the 'not to outline' school, therefore I expect he had no idea how he was going to resolve this, and I suspect he let his character do it for him, because that is how it reads.

I still write in fits and starts, which is the 'not recommended' method of writing. I seem to be either constantly fighting against writer's block, or in a state of 'flow' where I feel like I'm channeling the story. This latter experience is a common one for artists, whereby we feel the 'work of art', in this case the story, already exists in some Platonic realm and it's our purpose to realise it for others. So when I'm blocked I feel

like I'm trying to see into the future of the story, and at some stage, usually before I'm half way through, I find myself writing the last scene, or the last piece of dialogue. It's like I'm given a glimpse of the end before I get there. I don't do this deliberately – it just happens.

## **Creating World**

I've already said a fair bit about this in Genres, worlds and premise, so I won't repeat myself. This is really about technique, or at least, the one I've adopted. World, in the context of a story, encompasses many things: not just setting, but atmosphere, mood and a sense of time and place.

I find the best way to describe a setting is through the eyes and senses of your characters. I believe description is the most boring narrative style, even more boring than exposition, so I keep it brief and minimalist. I find the impressionists are a good role model in that they understood that prominent visual cues had greater effect than detail description. In reality we see less than 10% of what we're looking at and the brain fills in the rest, so I take the same approach. In fact, we see even less than that because our brains 'freeze frame' whilst we move our eyes, otherwise we would be permanently sea-sick. I let the reader fill in quite a lot actually, including what the characters look like most of the time, and what they're wearing – people rarely complain.

In fact, I've been told by more than one reader, including a filmmaker, that I write a 'very visual narrative'. But I also have my critics, who complain, not without validity, that they wished for more descriptive detail. I think it's a lot to do with what you are used to. In my reading I don't like lots of description, so I avoid it in my writing. I would sooner sacrifice detail for pace (Also, refer to my comments on Screenwriting). I make a strong attempt to counter my shortcomings in this area by giving more emphasis to atmosphere and mood and even sensations. Again, I stress that it's an emotive medium and that includes the world in all its manifestations.

## Creating Theme, Style and Voice

This is a complex oxymoron, because I don't believe you create any of these things, at least not consciously, you let them happen. Some writers and commentators make a great deal about these aspects of writing, but I think the less said the better.

As I mentioned in Genres, worlds and premise, some American texts seem to confound theme with premise, but dictionary definitions indicate a clear distinction. I've already given a definition of premise in that section so I won't repeat it here. Theme, or leitmotif, is derived from a musical analogy where a melody is repeated throughout a work. In literature, it's often more abstract, but can involve a recurring image or idea. It can also involve a recurring or highly extended metaphor. A good example is the river in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is a metaphor for the journey that Huck takes internally.

My point is that one shouldn't set out to create a theme when you are attempting to expand the seed that is the starting point of your story. If there is a theme, it will appear of its own accord. Many writers deliberately set out to promote or comment on a political message, like Linda Jaivin's *the Infernal Optimist*. One of the worse things a writer can do is 'preach' to their audience. Jaivin's book is a good example of how not to preach on a very sensitive topic. For a start, she writes it as a comedy, and yet she's careful not to provide contrived 'happy endings'. She researched the book well and she tells her story through her characters, plus the ending of the protagonist's story is totally unexpected. It's clever, very witty and makes its point without beating people over the head.

Style is something that will evolve and is closely related to, but not synonymous with, voice. When you start writing you're style may be terrible, mine was. The most common mistake beginner writers make is that they try too hard. Poetry is an aspect of fiction writing, and I believe that poetry provides useful skills by way of imagery and metaphor, but when we start out we tend to try too hard. I compare it to a cricket batsman, though I can't bat to save my life. I expect when a blossoming cricketer starts out he tries all the shots. But, with experience, he learns which ones he can pull off and which ones he can't. There are some excellent batsmen in the world who have a limited range of shots. Writing is the same. You learn what you are good at, and the things that don't work you discard. In this way you will find your own style. It's more a process of elimination than accumulation.

Voice, I feel, is more dependent on character, and, in fact, different characters should have different voices, especially in dialogue. I don't mean in terms of their vernacular, although this can help, but in terms of their attitude and temperament. If you can't write an accent then don't. Syntax reveals more than elaborate attempts at writing accents. If you know your character well then the dialogue should happen without effort. This is a dialectic process because dialogue helps you to get to know your characters too.

### **When it's finished**

There are differing opinions, and advice, on whether you should canvass your ideas before or during the writing process. I think Stephen King gives the best advice, which he calls: 'closed door and open door'. I'm a strong believer that you don't discuss a work-in-progress with anyone. I agree with Hemingway, who said it 'takes the dust off the wings', which I thought was a brilliant metaphor. He also said that all writers need a 'bullet-proof bullshit detector', and I would suggest that that's harder to achieve, which is why I agree with King.

After you've completed it you should give it to others for feedback. Others should include trusted friends, readers of the genre and professionals. Now, I have broken this rule, so I need to explain how, in my case, I found the exception that proved the rule.

When I was writing Elvene Part 1 (the first half of the book) I was overseas and I wanted to have a backup copy somewhere else back home, so I emailed it to a friend, whom I trusted, and who is a Sci-Fi reader, so he received it in installments. Naturally, he told me what his first impressions were and I wasn't fazed, as I felt confident about the story. When I completed Part 1 after about 6 months, I stopped sending him copies, and, in fact, it took me another 2 years to complete Part 2, all the time keeping my friend in limbo.

About 12 months into this second period, I was having lunch with him one day, and he was obviously getting anxious that I would never finish. Wanting to help out, he started to tell me what he thought might happen. I gently told him that I wasn't listening, and that I already knew how the book ended. This is not a criticism against my friend, he was being supportive. When it was complete, he was the first to receive

a copy and I specifically asked him for feedback, which, of course, I found very useful.

I'm against the idea of canvassing your ideas to see if they work. If you don't have faith in it, then you shouldn't pursue it. I'm against the idea of writing a book to suit a perceived market. You should only write for one reason and that's passion. If you're not passionate about it, then no one else will be. Despite my anecdote above, I recommend against showing your manuscript to others while it's in progress, especially if it's your first. The reason is that people will start to make suggestions about what should happen and what they expect the characters to do. They will suggest names and locations, seemingly innocent and helpful, but not. These innocuous interventions will interfere with the whole creative process. It should be your vision alone, at least until you've finished a first draft. Writing is a solitary activity – it happens completely inside your head, and that's where it should stay until you've got it all on paper, or on a hard disk.

When it's completed, however, you do need others to point out failings and inconsistencies, as you won't see them all. One of the best things I ever did was to send my manuscript to an assessor. I did this with my first manuscript after I got numerous knock-backs with no explanation, and became frustrated that no one would tell me what was wrong with it. Well, an assessor certainly sorted that out, and told me numerous things that were wrong with it, which made depressing reading but gave me a lot of food-for-thought for my next attempt.

Presentation is all important, and an assessor will quickly tell you what the conventions are and what you need to do. Basically, double spaced typescript on A4 pages, one side only, is the accepted norm. The cover sheet should include your name and an address. Publishers, agents and assessors like return addressed, postage paid envelopes that will take the script, assuming you want it returned, and you should.

### **Philosopher, Entertainer, Magician**

Many years ago, about 20, I read an interview with the filmmaker, Fred Schepisi, who quoted an author, I've forgotten whom, that you have to be part Storyteller, part Teacher and part Enchanter. I've always remembered that, but I changed it slightly to suit my own interpretation.

Instead of teacher I say philosopher, because if you have a philosophical point of view it will appear in the book whether you want it to or not. The lesson here is that you don't have to spell it out or underline it, but just let it happen. I gave the example of Linda Jaivin's book earlier. I write philosophical essays as a hobby, and so I believe that's where my philosophy should stay, yet I don't mind if bits of it leak into my fiction, as long as it doesn't dominate and as long as it remains consistent.

Instead of storyteller I say entertainer, because I believe if you don't entertain then no one will read it. Whilst some stories don't entertain as well as others, or don't place emphasis on entertainment, I think it's the fiction writer's obligation to entertain. Otherwise write non-fiction, as many good writers do, like Hugh Mackay and Terry Lane, Paul Davies and John Gribbin, John Searle and Peter Watson. In fact, I read far more non-fiction than fiction, because I simply can't get enough food-for-thought. I once described science fiction as a large dose of escapism with a pinch of food-for-thought, and that's what I aim to do in my fiction. If I want to write pure food-for-thought I write an essay.

So what do I mean by magician? Well, this is the whole secret, because the best way to entertain is with magic. Enchanter is an equally good descriptor because that is what one does: you create a world in the reader's imagination; you cast a spell that suspends disbelief. If you can't do this then you can't write fiction. But there is magic in the process as well, because that is what it often feels like: channeling a story out of the ether, with characters who seem to have an independent existence and who surprise you. I like to introduce my characters gradually, so that the reader sees them evolve and grow just like I do. Sometimes they are not what they appear to be, and sometimes they develop relationships you never anticipated, and sometimes they surprise you with their valour and integrity, and sometimes they repulse you with their manipulations and deceptions. Just like life really.