

# Write the story YOU WANT TO TELL

The bestselling novelist advises to write for yourself by gazing inward at what is unique and true in you

By Susan Isaacs

**S**O THERE I was, at a “Meet the Author” luncheon in Detroit, my speech about how I became a writer finished, the question-and-answer segment concluded, when this ferociously determined woman with shoulder pads bulldozed a couple of innocent bystanders, came up beside me and announced: “Susan, you give me *such* confidence!” I smiled and began work on a modest thank you, but she cut me off: “If you can do it, anybody can.”

Condescending? Sure. But also correct. If I could do it, so could she ... or, if not, her neighbor ... or you.

Of course, any literate person can write, but writing that *lives* is a gift; the earth is not teeming with billions of potential novelists, waiting only for time and a typewriter. Writing is a talent you’re either born with or have acquired by the time you’re 8 or 9 years old.

Where does the gift come from? I don’t know. How do you know if you have it? Only one way: You write.

This takes enormous courage. We all have successful writer dreams: exchanging bon mots with Johnny Carson, delivering our Nobel address. You will always be great in these dreams, but let me tell you: The reality of actually writing will wake you up. Nothing I’ve written is as clever, brilliant (or as well

received) as my original conception of it. Deep down I think we all sense this disparity, this abyss between our dreams and our talents, so actually sitting down and writing an entire novel takes guts.

I used to think: Who am *I* to be a writer? Writers don’t wear makeup. And they’re gaunt, haunted-looking, like Virginia Woolf or Joyce Carol Oates or Joan Didion. Or else, writers are incessantly witty, urbane—even glamorous. Well, all that is nonsense, pure stereotype. A writer can look like Christie Brinkley or a troll. As for sophistication, a writer is not necessarily someone who can get a good table at Elaine’s. In fact, life in the fast lane probably does more to destroy talent than nurture it; look at F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote. Further, a writer is not someone who touts his or her genius or vulnerability. Nor is he or she someone who goes from writers conference to writers conference, year after year, working over the same 15 pages of refined prose.

A writer can be *anyone*—pretty or not, a sophisticate or a creep. As for writing, like making chicken soup or making love, it is an idiosyncratic act. There is no one right way to do it. I can only tell you how I do it.

*Writing is a job*, and I go to work every morning: nine o’clock, five days a

week. I quit about noon when I’m working on a novel (creating a universe being somewhat fatiguing), although I might edit the two or three pages I’ve written the rest of the day, or go to the library: What did most women do about birth control in 1940? How did the OSS screen potential agents?

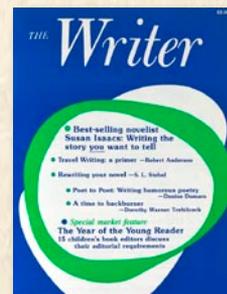
(Writing a screenplay is less taxing, and by the time production rolls around I am so familiar with my characters that I can, on occasion, write whole scenes on the set while electricians drag cables over my sneakers and the grips look over my shoulder.)

But back to the beginning writer. When I decided to start my first novel, which was to be *Compromising Positions*, I thought about taking a fiction workshop. Lucky for me, I couldn’t get

a babysitter at the time the New School’s best course was being offered. So instead I bought a copy of John Braine’s *How to Write a Novel*.

Like the Montessori method of tying a shoelace, the book broke a complicated task into a lot of idiot steps, so that the job didn’t seem overwhelming. *Make*

*an outline of no more than four pages:* When I began, all I knew was I had a housewife-detective who lived on Long Island. When I finished, I not only knew who done it, I knew where, how, and



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why. In writing those few pages, putting down ideas that had probably been whizzing around my unconscious for months or years, I discovered that my heroine, Judith Singer, and the homicide lieutenant were soulmates, while her husband. ... Well, you get the point.

*Draw up a list of characters:* I did, and suddenly Judith’s best friend, an ex-Southern belle with an earthy sense of humor, jumped up and winked at me. The victim? I considered who most deserved to die: a periodontist.

You know that old platitude: *Write about what you know.* Well, it’s not a bad idea. You can use what you know—computers, mahjong, Harlem or parakeets—either as the core of the novel or as a background. And write about what you care about. I care about people, character. For me, writing a novel is fashioning an intimate biography.

In *Compromising Positions*, I used my home, suburban Long Island, as the setting, and bestowed my then-job, housewife, on my heroine. In *Close Relations*, I drew on Brooklyn and Queens, the world I grew up in, the world of New York City ethnics. I also took my (brief) experience as a political speechwriter, as well as my passion for New York Democratic politics and gave them to Marcia Green. In *Almost Paradise*, I wrote about show business (this was before I became a screenwriter) and celebrity. Wasn’t that writing about what I didn’t know? Well, in America show business is everybody’s

business. And celebrity? I took my own exposure to it, my 12-city book tour for *Close Relations*, and puffed it up: being on a TV talk show; being recognized by an effusive reader in the ladies room; having mere acquaintances feel that my sex life—to say nothing of my tax return—is their property.

By the time it came to writing *Shining Through*, I was secure enough in my proficiency as a novelist, in

my imaginative ability, to write about what I didn’t know: speaking German, being a spy in World War II. But what I *did* know was what it’s like to look at the rich and powerful through the eyes of someone who was neither. Linda Voss, my heroine, like me, started as an outsider. Like Linda, I worked as a secretary and knew what it was like to be thought of as something more than a type-writer—but less than a human being. (Later, when Linda became a spy, her “cover” was a cook. I was still writing about what I know. I was a housewife. I know from pot roast. I just transferred it to Germany and made it sauerbraten.)

In other words, in *Shining Through*, I was writing about *people*. I was writing about love—real and unrequited—and passion, honor, deceit, friendship, patriotism, courage, terror. In other words, having lived for over 40 years, I was writing about what I knew.

Another suggestion: *Write for yourself.* I was among the blessed. I never went to a writers conference, never took a fiction workshop. I learned to write for *me*, not for a teacher, a critic, an editor or even that amorphous, intimidating mass, the “audience.” I never allowed myself to worry: What will my mother think? The minute you write to please someone, or not to offend someone, or to make big bucks, or to be taken seriously, you’re gazing outward, not inward, and you’re doomed to lose sight of what is unique and true in you.

So then, what does it take to be a novelist? Well, a gift for writing. A willingness to sit alone in a room for one or three or 10 years, telling yourself a story. Then you must be able to *become your toughest critic*. Ask yourself the blunt questions: What is there about this protagonist that would make someone else besides me, the creator, care about his or her fate? What propels the novel, what will drive the reader to turn the page? This may be the most difficult task of all. With all four of my novels, there were days I was embarrassed—no, mortified—at the drivel I was passing off as fiction; and there were days that I was jolted by the force of my own brilliance. You will discover, after many readings, that the truth lies somewhere in that broad range in between.

**I**F YOU WANT to write, expect criticism, some of it personal. If you write about sex, someone will tell you that you have a dirty mind. If you are a woman and you write about something other than glitz or, on the other hand, quiet, domestic lives, you run the risk of being criticized for chutzpah or naiveté. (“Serious” American female novelists are almost all experts at literary petit point; the big canvas is left to the men with their broad strokes.) Don’t be afraid of what They say. *Write.* Don’t write the story you think they want to listen to. Write the story you want to tell.

I know, it seems overwhelming. But then again, maybe that nagging thought—if *she* can do it, I can too—is really a good, honest gut feeling about your own talent. Do you think it’s worth taking the chance to discover the truth?

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