

10-12-2013

First Novel Experiences

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Panel: First novel experiences. The author discuss how that first book in print changed their lives, or not; or anything else about their experience of going from unpublished to published for the first time.

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Recommended Citation

Hereaka, Whiti, "First Novel Experiences" (2013). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 514.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/514

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FIRST NOVEL EXPERIENCES

By Whiti Hereaka (New Zealand)

My first novel rewrote me.

A story is a powerful thing, it can shape how you see the world, it can shape how you see yourself. As a child I'd acquired a reputation in my family for not finishing things. I'm not sure when this story began; but it was told so often that it began to have a ring of truth about it.

That story has coloured my life: the refrain, "But you never finish what you start" has denied me ballet lessons, forced me to stay in the Girl Guides and continues to haunt me in the form of unfinished knitting projects.

How could a person-who-never-finishes-things ever write a novel?

I have a confession: I never had any interest in writing fiction. I have always thought of myself as a playwright. I had no intention of ever writing a novel, so I had no life-long dream of publishing. I did not have to suffer the hurt of being *unpublished*, because I never expected to *be* published.

The world had other plans for me. After winning a script competition, Huia publishers contacted me and asked if I'd consider writing a novel.

Me? Writing a novel?

When people would ask me what I was working on, I couldn't say "I'm writing a novel" without laughing.

Me? Writing a novel?

Things had to change in my life. I found a part-time job that allowed me to pay my bills and spend time writing. I started to apply for funding and residencies - and surprisingly, I started to receive them.

It seemed that "writing a novel" brought me more credibility as a writer than "writing a play" ever had. It felt like people took me seriously as a writer when I said I was writing a novel.

Or was it that I had begun to take *myself* seriously?

I demanded time to write. I resisted my publisher's urging to publish the manuscript before it was ready. I invested four years of my life in that novel.

At times I hated it. The novel became the centre of my life. It took precious time away from the greener-fields of new projects, from the playwriting that I had defined me as a writer.

The novel seemed like a parasite, always demanding more of me. I thought it had drained all the joy from the work of writing. I thought that it had sucked energy away from my first love of playwriting.

In actual fact, the novel didn't take anything away from my playwriting. Instead it enhanced it: until I'd written my novel I'd avoided writing monologues in my plays, preferring the tension and drama of dialogue. Dialogue made a scene move; monologues seemed to bring the scene to a halt. They felt too false, too "theatrical" to me.

Because the theatre is no place to get theatrical, right?

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After I had written my novel I realised that the monologue can paint a scene, that it can draw people into a character and into their world. I'm a reformed playwright - I have now written two plays that focus on the monologue.

Before the novel, I seldom planned the structure of my work; I used to just dive into writing without any planning and hope that along the way I'd figure out who the characters were, what their world was like and what I wanted to say. Planning had seemed like a waste of time. I think it took a couple years of drafting for me to figure out that a little planning was worth the time.

I learned that structure is not just how the story gets from one plot point to the next, but can be used to tell the story itself: sentence structure can affect the pace of how a piece is read, or how dialogue is delivered; that words can be like art on a page - their placement, their physical presence can be manipulated to help tell the story as well.

After four years of writing *The Graphologist's Apprentice* I swore that I'd never write a novel again. Everyone knows those jokes about mothers and childbirth, it seems they apply to novels as well. I forgot the pain, and have written my second novel and have started on my third.

Somewhere in those four years, in the midst of draft after draft, I had unknowingly rewritten myself. I am no longer the girl who doesn't finish things, I am the writer who does...

Knitting projects notwithstanding.