

## Waiting for the Whispers

The impetus for writing my first novel - 'The Rocket Post' - dates back to a warm, clear day in June 2006. The routine of daily life needed to be broken; time to obey that call to the sea. Ginny Grainger, my partner and future wife, travelled with me by car from Sheffield to an old fisherman's cottage that we had rented on the East coast, via those atmospheric, treeless swoops across the North York Moors.

It was the first of our many visits to that addictive, sometimes mysterious stretch of coastline between Saltburn and Filey. We enjoyed those predictable pleasures – windy clifftop walks, cosy pubs and, as Larkin put it, 'the miniature gaiety of seashores'. But gradually, and without real intention, I began to sense something else - a raw, darker sense of place that became more tangible as I read books about the lives and hardships of former fishing communities, as well as articles describing perilous sea rescues, Press Gangs, smuggling, and cliff erosion.

The history, evocative locations, conflict of land and sea, and even local military sites were rife for story-telling. A question began to form in my mind: could I write a mystery/crime novel set in the area? I had recently left a senior Local Government role and was looking to develop my creative writing, which had never extended beyond a few short stories and poems after studying Literature at University. I knew how to write a novel though - didn't I? The answer was a hesitant yes ... sort of. But the process wasn't what I expected. Being a bureaucrat had given me some useful writing skills, as well as an ability to concentrate and block out the internet. There was no scope for flowery language or over use of adjectives in Committee reports, policy documents, and briefings. I could gather relevant information, set out a concise narrative,

include the necessary characters, and arrive at a conclusion. It was a well-honed, linear style which I brought to Chapter 1, page 1. And then ...

Naively, I thought the novel would be completed in about three weeks, like Jack Kerouac writing *On the Road*, only not on a typewriter with a continuous scroll of paper. Instead, I would attack the laptop keyboard and writing pad with a torrent of ideas, be the 'spokesman for my generation', imagination running free. The reality, of course, was very different. Instead of a raging torrent, I had a dripping tap, and often not even that. My daily word count was low and getting lower, until there was nothing much to add up. It quickly became apparent that business writing and creative writing were two different beasts. I still sat at my desk every day, at various times, even though I knew it was probably just to tinker around with the existing syntax and punctuation, sometimes for hours on end. It was the opposite of how I pictured the activity of a novelist, little more than a way of kidding myself that acceptable progress was being made. As Flaubert (or was it Oscar Wilde?) once said: 'I spent all morning taking out a comma, and all afternoon putting it back.'

But this daily ritual of literary minimalism did at least keep me connected to the physical proximity and mechanics of writing a novel, if not the practice. I always believed that I had a story to tell, and that the drip would turn into a meaningful flow. Looking back, it was a kind of dogged perseverance that forced breakthrough moments, typically when one of the characters felt sorry for me, leaned over, and whispered a line of dialogue. I would hurriedly tap it into the laptop, not knowing the significance, often half asleep. But once there, that simple one liner usually demanded a response from one or more of the other characters, perhaps a description of place or movement as well, which itself suggested more dialogue, action and narration. After what seemed an endless wait, suddenly there were a few pages of viable prose that eventually expanded into a complete chapter. For better or worse, that's how most of the

book was written – via an intermittent supply of whispers. Not surprisingly, the first draft took a lot longer than three weeks!

I fully accept that nobody would recommend this approach to an aspiring novelist, particularly one who hopes to have a prolific career and make money. On the other hand, I came to realize that there is no perfect template, or ‘step by step’ guide to success, certainly not one worth following with any confidence. Even famous writers work very differently. Hemingway wrote most of his best work standing up. Ian McEwan recently suggested that novelists should ‘do an hour, then empty the dishwasher.’ Hilary Mantel had her finger on the pulse when she asked: ‘the central mystery – what is inspiration?’

The point is that every new writer needs to develop a process that is right for them, however protracted and quirky. Based on my very limited experience, the only tip I could offer, if asked, is this: show up every day, wherever it is, disconnect from social media, and wait for the whispers.

Ian Glossop - September 2022