

## SPEAKING OF WRITING



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 (Bloomberg Press)

**When you were growing up did you have books in your home?**

Apart from my own collection, which grew as much as my pocket money allowed, there was just one small bookcase of books in the living room. My parents weren't readers; they ran a chemist's shop, and didn't have time. There were some good things in that bookcase, though: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Three Men in a Boat*, *The Three Musketeers*. And a lot of Jane Austen, but I've never got on with her.

My favourite childhood book—and it's still a favourite—was *The Tale of Pigling Bland* by Beatrix Potter. It's the story of a little pig who is sent to market but runs away. He's a cautious pig who's egged on to do something wild, and who escapes into deepest Westmorland, "over the hills and far away." I still love that phrase, and I'll always sympathise with that mad dash for freedom.

**When did you think about becoming a writer?**

No one encouraged me to write. I just wanted to do it from the beginning. But I remember very vividly the moment I decided to make it the centre of my life. I was sitting in class when I was 11, writing an essay about the spring, and I realised that my description of pink prunus blossom had brought the flowers into my head as vividly as if I was touching them. I realised then how powerful words were, and I've wanted to play with them—and weigh them, and detonate them—ever since.

**How do you write? Do you have a daily routine?**

I have a full-time job on *The Economist* (which partly involves writing, of course), and my book-writing has to revolve round that. *The Book of Obituaries* is an exception, because it was compiled in the most painless and delightful way, out of my week-by-week work in the office. Generally, my books have to squeeze into the space left between work, cooking supper, and sleep. If I couldn't read on the bus, I would be sunk.

Over the past 20 years I've written five non-fiction books, including three biographies—of Pontius Pilate, Perkin Warbeck and the poet Shelley—but they've all been done in my spare time, evenings, weekends and holidays. I write in a little blue-and-white shed at the end of the garden, like a beach hut. Our house is full of boys, a dog and an untidy husband, so this is the nearest thing to a study I have. It's hidden behind the bushes, where no one can see me, and it's my favourite place in the world. I write with black biro on an A4 pad; no computers allowed. They're for my work writing, and pen and paper keep me aware of writing as a craft, something physical and tactile. Even in winter I hunker down in my shed, with

a noisy old fan-heater, and listen to the squirrels thundering over the roof and the foxes barking. But in fact this wild place is only four miles from Trafalgar Square.

I make a point of doing my out-of-office writing every single day. I may not do much of it, but I have to move the project on just a little, even if I'm really tired. And generally I can't wait to sit down to do more writing, even if I've written all day. We writers are like that. It's our life.

**What good advice have you received concerning writing? What's some advice that you could offer young writers?**

Writers don't often offer each other advice. I think we respect that each project is so different, it makes its own rules. The most recent good advice I had, though, was not to try to pack everything I knew into a book; to prioritise, and pick out what I thought important. I find it very hard to leave things out, especially when it's been a labour to unearth them. But "Less is more" is a great dictum. People don't want doorstops to read.

I would tell young writers to read a lot, and to read in other languages as much as they're able. Words are music; if they don't work as melody, they lose much of their impact. And I would also encourage them, as I said, to write every day. Just give those words a workout for a while.

**How did you find the publisher for this book?**

**What has your experience with a publisher been like?**

The publisher for this particular book was found for me; again, it was very easy. I recommend books based on columns from work, especially for the lazy! But I have always had a very good arrangement with my British publisher, Jonathan Cape (who then forwards my books on to Random House/Pantheon in the States). I never write synopses of my books (they are a little unusual, especially the biographies, and I think it would be difficult), and I'm not paid an advance for them. I just write them, and hope they like them. So far, they have. The bliss of this arrangement is that I'm completely free to write what I like. No commissions, no steering, no deadline. Since my book-writing time is so limited, it has to be sheer pleasure, and with this system it is.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

I'm trying to write a biography of Orpheus. It may all come to nothing, but I've heaved it over several huge hurdles, and it's starting to feel like fun.

*The rest of this interview is available at [www.forewordmagazine.com/authors](http://www.forewordmagazine.com/authors).*