



## The Perfect Place to Write

---

Andrew Martin

**T**HE BEST PLACE TO WRITE is the place where you are willing to spend the longest *time* writing. From that point of view, the optimum spot I had was a desk in a rented house overlooking the front in the seaside town of Southwold.

The desk worked because the sea is constantly changing, and so never boring. I would break off from writing to stare at it, but these were writerly thoughts in themselves: I would challenge myself to state the colour of the sea, or the mood of it, at any given moment. The view also included a strip of the promenade and the beach, and so for much of the time there were humans in the picture as well, and they did interesting things in relation to the sea – especially if they entered the water – whereas the people observable by a writer with an ordinary street view are merely trudging along.

The sea was especially mesmerising at night, when a line of cargo ships would appear on the horizon, but they didn't look like ships so much as clusters of coloured lights and, since the sea was black, they might have been a series of spaceships. The sea would also put on spectacular double acts with the moon. All of this imagery, I found salutary. It would shame me out of writing banal sentences.

Another benefit was that, if I kept the window open, my room was filled with the white noise of the sea, which could block out the sound of a radio in another room, or the barking of a dog in a distant garden. (The absolute enemy of the working writer is the barking dog, or the owner of one.)



Eventually, the sea entered one of my novels as a character, rather than just a background stimulus. I'd had a plotline for a historical crime novel worked out, and the setting was going to be inland, but I dragged the scenario coastwards. The novel was called *The Last Train to Scarborough*, and I sometimes think it's my best one. There are many sea scenes, and the wintry North Sea seemed to be dictating those passages as I sat at my desk.

Our penultimate day in the house was a bright, windy Sunday in September. We had some friends with us, and we set up camp behind a windbreak on the beach. I went swimming alone in the sea, and I nearly died. I got whacked in the head by a giant wave, and then – in a dazed condition – had to fight my way back against the undertow. When I returned to the party on the beach, I was a little pale and shivery, but none of them would have guessed at the trauma I had just been through, and I didn't mention it to anyone. What had occurred seemed to be a private matter between me and the sea: a rough goodbye, or the sea reminding me that there was more to it than decorative effects.