



How I Write

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How I write depends on what it is I have before me.

Letters, notebooks and working diaries testify to an ability to write with tolerable coherence without prior planning, careful structuring, word limit, deadline or repetitive drafting.

Everything else, however, has me pacing, note-taking, sketching out paragraphs, dictating, binning and starting anew — even before I sit down to the screen. If it's a method, it's one I'd hardly recommend.

For fiction, I've found that the way I write falls into one of three broad categories.

The first applies to just one piece of work, the novella *Stranger Than/Beneath the Tide*, now illustrated by Paul Ebdon (please see my website). This slice of juvenile gothic arrived fully, if imperfectly, formed one night in 1979 and was scribbled in a frenzy between the hours of three and six a.m. If only I had bottled that energy.

The second approach applies to short stories. Over the years I've accumulated files of what I call *spunti*. A *spunto* is something that stops me in my tracks, sparking a short and inconclusive text: a piece of word play, a glimpse of something striking, a conundrum or paradox, a scrap of conversation, the look on a face. Often it's the merest sketch. But when, later, I wish, for a change, to create something small and self-contained,



I flick through my file of *spunti* until I find two that, for whatever reason, evince some natural attraction, an affinity in tone, voice or setting. Then, to adopt a zoo-keeping metaphor, I bring them together to see if they'll mate. With the exception of *Surly Child*, all the *Sweets and Toxins* stories came into existence in this way, as did *Midnight's Orphans*. In some cases, a visible join remains, but most encounters spawn something entirely surprising, a brand-new animal, as it were.

When it comes to *November* and its sequels, many overlapping processes jostle and alternate. First, 'writing', my hold-all term for the creation of the innumerable background texts from which I ultimately derive the novel. Second, 'pondering', which I accomplish in work diaries, teasing out the tone and mood and 'curve' of the coming swathe of chapters or sections. Third, 'reviewing', when I reread and summarise what has so far occurred with the fourteen clusters of people portrayed and track each person's forward path. Fourth, 'charting', where I detail the pattern of choreographed play for the next few chapters, moment by moment, section by section, stipulating *dramatis personae*, location, references, wordage, etc. Fifth, 'earmarking', when I search among my myriad files of background writing for the grist I need for the sections projected. Sixth, 'composition', where I begin to draft the chapter at hand.

At this point, if all goes well, my careful preparations fly out the window, taking some cherished prose with them, but, but, but...as if by a magic that I fear won't ever repeat itself, I *get* the chapter I need, the next brick in the edifice, and can then stocktake, look around and move forward again.