



## Why I Write

---

Leigh Russell

**W**RITING FICTION IS A CURIOUS combination of the personal and the public. For many authors, writing is a solitary pursuit, and we are fiercely protective of our privacy. While we are writing, we hide ourselves away from the world, inhabiting a fictitious world peopled by made-up characters. Yet the moment a book is published, any hope of protecting ourselves from exposure vanishes. The book is catapulted from the hidden world of our imagination into the public domain, and readers can review the work as kindly or as brutally as they please.

Writing partnerships, such as crime writers Nicci French and Michael Stanley, are the exception. Like me, most writers work alone, driven by some irrational compulsion to pour words onto the page. All it takes is an idea, and we are swept away by a new story. Ideas can come from many sources – a snippet of conversation overheard, a newspaper headline, a dream – the possibilities are as numerous as the stories we tell. There is no shortage of brilliant fiction writers inspired by real people and events: Dickens, Hilary Mantel, Tracy Chevalier, Ken Follett, to mention a few who come to mind. Works of fantasy, like George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, are also clearly influenced by real events. And inspiration from real life need not be historically significant. Peter Schaffer's disturbing play *Equus* was famously prompted by a true story.

My first book was written purely for myself. Writing gave me a sense of freedom we rarely experience in the real world. Although the characters made their own demands on me, they weren't real, and I had complete



power over their words and actions. The worst that could happen was that the story would not work, with nothing lost but many hours of my free time. I had no idea anyone else would ever read what I had written, let alone publish my story, so nothing about it mattered, giving me complete creative freedom. Writing a book now has become a different experience, both more satisfying and far more terrifying, as I can be fairly sure it will be read, if only by my agent, my editor and my publisher.

Why people devote so much time to writing is a difficult question to approach in general terms, since the answer is probably different for everyone, but most writers will probably agree that once a story takes hold of our imagination, it can annex our thoughts, refusing to leave until the story has reached its conclusion. That has certainly been my experience. Writing is not something I deliberately choose to do but once an idea takes root, characters appear and demand that their stories be told. I do have control over 'the voices in my head' and can switch them off at any time. One day, maybe, I will walk away from this compulsion. But not yet. There is always another story clamouring to be told, and I'm enjoying writing too much to stop just yet.