



Writer's Block

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I GREW UP IN SWITZERLAND. I seriously believe I exhausted my reservoir of discipline during the decade and a half when I was a pupil at Frauenfeld lycée, then a student and postgrad at Zurich University by day and a TEFL teacher by night. I got up at six most mornings to catch the train and usually taught until ten at night. I worked incredibly hard.

You'd think this strict routine was the perfect conditioning for my future profession as a self-employed writer. But there's the rub: in order to explore my imagination, I needed to distance myself from my academic life. Which meant a holiday from discipline. Meant procrastination.

By then I'd married a Scotsman and relocated to my new home in Edinburgh. While busily DIY-ing, I was supposedly working on my PhD in English Lit — which I ditched once I started writing my own fiction. My schedule was haphazard. Being an owl, I aimed to be at my desk by 11am, work for several hours, walk the dog, do some housework, spend a sociable evening with my husband or friends, then return to my computer. I've always loved writing at night, after a glass or two of red. Sitting under the skylight, stars overhead, typing in the dark.

In 2008 this sort-of routine was shot to pieces: a couple of weeks after my third book, a story collection, was accepted for publication by a small indie press, I got diagnosed with bowel cancer. A blow like that leaves its mark, even after a complete recovery. If you can't trust your body, *how* can you trust yourself? Despite being shortlisted for a Saltire Book of the Year



award for a second time, which cheered me greatly, I often felt akin to Baron Münchhausen, trying to pull myself out of a swamp of self-doubt and inertia by my own hair.

During the days and weeks I suffered from writer's block, I tried to write blind, typing with my eyes closed. Sometimes it worked. Other times I fell asleep.

So I threw myself into the renovation of our flat. I wrote mainly flash fiction that year.

Later, after the publication of my fourth book, my then agent refused to handle a new novel I was working on because of an underage masturbation scene. And she discouraged me from writing more stories because 'stories don't sell'.

It was the Royal Literary Fund that rescued me, emotionally, creatively and financially. I was appointed a Fellow, then a Reading Round Lector. It felt like an official blessing — acknowledgement that I wasn't simply an impostor.

I still have spells of writer's block. After my sister died in a terrible accident in late 2017, for example, and then again after my husband was blue-lighted to hospital with sepsis in the summer of 2018. It's hard to concentrate when you're traumatised. I have good days and bad days. But the good outweigh the bad by far. When I work, I work intensely. That's why I now prefer writing short fiction and, more recently, poetry. They both allow for distillation and completeness — and there's not much scope for writer's block.