



The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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IT WASN'T ADVICE as such, although it *was* offered advisedly; it was a statement of the bleedin' obvious. Yet I needed to hear it, and to this day it's with me every moment of my writing life.

I'd finished a draft of my second novel, or I thought I had; but unfortunately, as is usual for me, the ending wasn't much of one. 'Like in real life', I was so callous as to say in my defence to my then-editor. Which left him having to break it to me: 'But it's not real life, Suzannah, it's a novel.'

I was two novels into my life as a writer: you wouldn't think I'd need to be told.

So often when a writer is asked why he or she writes fiction, the reply centres on truth: to get at the truth, to show the truth. This has me cringe, because it seems precious – we're only storytellers! – and, seeing as our stock-in-trade is fabrication, it smacks of cakes being had and eaten. But the cringe is also, I'll admit, one of self-recognition: I have always seen it as my job as a writer to show *how it really, really is*, be that a scenario, a dynamic, a state of mind, a physical sensation; whatever. To show the truth of it. As a reader, I most often give up on a book because the characters don't seem 'real'; they are a type of people whom you only ever encounter in novels, and likewise what happens to them is implausible and, frankly, convenient for the author. This leaves me feeling cheated: I opened the pages for something of 'real life', and I'm being shortchanged.



Writing fiction is – word by word – a balancing act: what to say and what not to say; how much to focus on detail while pressing onwards to keep up the momentum of the narrative; and, to put it simply, how close to keep to the ‘real’ and how much to make up. My commitment to the ‘real’ runs deep – I badly want to put real life on the page – yet here I am in the business of making things up. So how do I square that? Over the thirty years I’ve been writing, I’ve been circling this contradiction at the heart of my practice, often perplexed, confounded, uncomfortable; but I have been working my way to an understanding that when we write fiction we are not in the business of merely reproducing reality – of reflecting it – but of recreating it. My stories should indeed be of ‘real life’, but worked upon, differently weighted, presented at a slant, and that’s no failing; on the contrary, it’s in the nature of the work. It’s what I must do. It’s my job. And if ever I doubt it, then I remind myself, I let that statement of the bleedin’ obvious ring in my ears: it’s not real life, it’s a novel.