



## Writers and Deadlines

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**F**ROM AN EARLY AGE I didn't acknowledge the existence of deadlines. It wasn't quite the case that, like Douglas Adams, I 'like[d] the whooshing sound they make as they fly past'. I just didn't think they applied to me. They were like an obstacle course set up in your way to trip you up and put you off direction. I thought the only deadline that mattered was death.

My first writing deadlines were for academe, and I never met one of them. The cause now was not hubris but self-doubt. *Not good enough! Just another hour, or day or week, and I'll make it perfect.* The tutorial system cured me of that: you have to turn up and read out something. Your tutor is there, your fellow-student. The prospect of an hour with nothing to say puts things in perspective. Whatever you write is provisional, a punctuation point in your thinking on the subject.

In my fiction writing it remains more complicated than that. Deadlines are essential: they let you know you're alive and that people want to hear what you're saying. They make you part of something bigger than the isolated and often introspective act of writing. I'm alone at my desk but there's a world out there and I'm linked into it.

But deadlines can be interfering old busybodies that come between you and your imagination. They can paralyze (that page waiting to be filled by twelve noon becomes a mortal enemy it's impossible to vanquish). They can lure you into taking the easy, or the well-tryed option (*Give it a*



*happy ending! Make them fall in love! Leave out that aspect of character-complication!*). The imperative of must-do-by-Monday can be a relentless taskmaster that drives off discovery, abates excitement, drowns out the recalcitrant voice of the 'other' lurking within you that views things anew, ramps up discord and mayhem, forces you into tight corners that you can't get out of, that impels you – in short – to push back the boundaries of the known world and create something new.

The inevitable bedfellow of a deadline is anxiety. That frisson of fear, that adrenalin level rapidly rising. Waking up in the night with *I must! I must!* — the unvanquishable mantra. And yet, if you're lucky, something else kicks in: a kind of defiance that makes you dig deep into all your resources, that means you can put yourself aside, your fears, the repercussions of failing to meet — what, exactly? The deadline, but isn't that deadline a manifestation of yourself, your hopes, your ambitions, your drive to produce something of substance that, against all odds, communicates truly?

I *love* deadlines: the concentration they resolutely demand; the sheer application; the refusal to give in, or give up; the possibility they offer of meeting, or even surpassing, yourself. I love them for the hope they offer that this thing here, taking shape, in front of you, will be better than the last; for the trepidation they bring with them, that tells you you're truly alive.