VOX

Writing and Technology

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W HEN I STARTED WRITING, the only technology I had at my disposal was a fountain pen which I would fill by squeezing its little bladder as I dipped its nose into a bottle of Quink. Now my writing life is so heavily dependent on twenty-first-century technology that my *Desert Island Discs* luxury would be my Macbook, a solar-powered battery, and a satellite-based broadband connection. What do you mean, that's cheating? On their own, none of them is more useful on a desert island than a rock. And that, I suppose, is a downside of technology: its proliferation and interdependence.

I first appreciated the value of technology in my chosen artform when Amstrad released its PCW 256 and 512 word processors. The models were named after their RAM size. Unimpressive as they seem now, in 1987 – and I almost wrote 1587 it seems that long ago – they offered unrivalled time-saving and sanity-preserving power to any writer who might, as I had just done, decide to change the name of the protagonist 50,000 words into a novel. The far-more-fitting name I devised for her was one sorry letter longer than the original name. Changing her name involved locating wherever it occurred on every single one of two hundred typewritten pages, painting over it with Tippex, waiting for the Tippex to dry, loading the sheet back into the platen, lining it up as best I could to type the name into the thickened white gap and then, because it was a longer name, taking the sheet out of the platen again and separating that name from the adjacent word with a slash of blue biro. The end result: a horrible mess. And confusing in its imperfection, as evidenced by the moment my

friend, in the middle of Chapter Three, cried out, 'Who is Sarah'? What a dream, to be able to change a name comprehensively, in seconds, with a global Find-and-Replace.

My biggest technological crutch these days – or perhaps I should say crush, given my passion for it – is the writing software Scrivener. The ease with which sections can be dragged and dropped into different orders, the way you can click from the depths of a chapter to the structure of the whole and then back again; genius. People ask novelists, how d'you keep the whole thing in your head? The point is that with the right technology, you really don't have to.

As a former programmer, I am perhaps more passionate about technology, and relatively keen to adopt it, than some other writers. Yes, it can cause aggravation at times and distraction at others. I have brought in all kinds of technological aids – such as software to bar me from social media in working hours – to save my writing time from being destroyed by the very technological advances I champion. But I struggle to understand why anyone would ever – and I really mean *ever* – choose to write a novel in longhand.