



Writer's Block

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I HAVE NEVER BEEN one of those writers who have several projects on the go at once, or ideas for half a dozen future novels circling like stacked planes waiting to land. I write one book, slowly, laboriously, over several years, and when it is done it may be a year or more before I feel the tug of an idea that is the starting point of the next. These pauses never troubled me; I didn't think of myself as blocked; I thought a rest between books was no more than my due.

Then, in 2015, I had the unpleasant experience, not uncommon among writers, of realising I had sunk five years in a failing project. The book I was writing would not capitulate. My agent was less than enthusiastic; my regular publisher turned it down. The choices before me were to keep desperately trying to re-animate its corpse or to write off those wasted years and start something new. It wasn't a difficult decision to face forward rather than back, but five years is a long time with nothing to show for it, either creatively or financially. The whole episode left me jittery and bruised. What was so troubling was my loss of judgment. I had not seen that it was falling short. How, if I couldn't recognise inadequacy, could I guard against it next time around? Writing is after all a kind of confidence trick, and without confidence you are lost.

For over a year I was completely blocked — not just from writing but from reading too, an even greater deprivation. I couldn't go into a bookshop without feeling judged and found wanting. So many new books; so many writers succeeding where I had failed. In the mornings I had my office



job to keep me sane, but in the afternoons where once I had written, I sat around feeling depressed and lethargic. I tried exercise, baking, gardening and, in knitting, I finally found something that I was even worse at than writing. Then I got knitter's block.

There is a happy ending to this story.

I wish I could tell you a simple, five-point plan that worked to unblock me and could work for you too. But writing is a long game, and there are no shortcuts and no quick fixes. I knew that the only cure for my malaise was to write another, better book and that this would involve years more work, with no guarantee of success. I gave myself permission to have one last try before I accepted that my writing career was finished. I returned to an old idea that I had toyed with years earlier and abandoned because it represented a departure in genre and style. Now change seemed desirable — perhaps essential. I found a new agent whose enthusiasm and optimism gave me hope. She liked my idea and urged me to write a detailed plot synopsis. I had never used this approach before, always plunging in before I had ironed out all the wrinkles, but it was exactly what I needed. It took time but once I had my plan, I never again had that fear of the blank page. I knew the story I had to tell and with that came the belief that I and only I was the person to do it.