



## Killing Your Darlings

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**B**Y CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, my first book *The Long Dry* was ‘way too short to be published.’ It was 28,000 words or thereabouts, and I’d already been told by the publishers I had in my sights that anything under 35,000 words was (‘still very short’) the absolute minimum length of manuscript they would consider.

So I employed a sleight of hand. I sent in a physical copy of the novel rather than a Word doc., banking on the fact no-one would wordcount it. It would stand on its own merits, and either feel the right length for itself or not.

As it happens, it *was* the right length for itself. It got published, won an award, and has been widely translated. It was an early signifier I should stick to my instincts when it came to telling a story, and not get drawn by convention.

Unfortunately, the industry – back then at least (2006/7) – wasn’t so open minded about form. Several houses had their eye on me after the attention *The Long Dry* received. But they wanted a longer book. A ‘proper’ book, some of them called it.

I tried. I accepted the existing publisher’s direction to grow my second book, *Everything I Found on the Beach*, and added backstory, more setting and so on to what I had down originally as a scant, direct narrative. It was a good exercise, and a learning curve. But ultimately – and though I still



stopped well short of the 70,000-word novel they hoped for – I have a niggling feeling the original approach was stronger.

It didn't win any awards.

I tried again. This time attempted another sleight of hand. I would write *two* books and stick them together. Effectively, of course, and coherently. But each narrative would have its own arc, and I'd be in my comfort zone, wordcount-wise.

Two years and 90,000 words later, I had a draft. *Traces of People*. The story started before the Second World War and stretched to the (then) present day, 2010 or so. When I read it over, I recognised the historical preliminary was just a route to the second part of the story. I cut 60,000 words in a oner and was left with *The Dig*.

My publishers were horrified. They rejected the book. The same week *Granta* magazine called. They'd heard about my work and invited me to send a short story. I didn't have one, and in haste, I lifted a chapter from the rejected novel. They took it.

The chapter, as a short story, shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* EFG Private Bank award. I put the book back together, and on it went to auction. Never mind now, that, like *The Long Dry*, it was only 28,000 words. 60,000 darlings killed. It won awards as well.

I could talk about *Cove*, too. Initially 30,000 words, that eventually became an eleven-and-a half-thousand-word novel. That I then halved for *The New Yorker* into 'The Edge of the Shoal', that won the BBC Short Story Award.

Ha! Talk to me about killing your darlings! I could go on, but I'm out of space...