



Letter to My Younger Self

Simon Booker

DEAR SIMON,

If you really want to be a writer, start practicing early in life and don't worry about following the money or writing for the market — whatever that is. Remember what William Goldman says in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*: 'No one knows anything,' so there's no point trying to second-guess what agents, producers, broadcasters or publishers are looking for.

Write what you want to see or read, and write from the heart as much as from the head. Work on developing your own voice rather than emulating others, even – or especially – the *crème de la crème*. Like they say: 'Be you, everyone else is taken.'

Having said that, pay close attention to how the writers you admire practice their craft. In particular, dissect the screenplays you love – *When Harry Met Sally*, *Broadcast News*, *A Man For All Seasons* and all the others – and figure out how the component parts hang together. Get the hang of structure, but above all, focus on character. You have a knack for plot, and that's important, especially when writing for television, but it's characters that bring any piece to life, so concentrate on how to create memorable people rather than intricate plots. Simple stories, complex characters — that's the gold at the end of the rainbow.

Instead of going out to eat four or five nights a week, cut it in half, stay home to write, and save the money to buy yourself something much



more precious than even the most delicious dinner — time. You'll be so busy earning a living and working with fun, clever people that you won't notice how little satisfaction you get from some of the well-paying jobs you do just for the money: ghost-writing books and magazine columns for celebrities; booking guests onto TV chat shows; writing scripts for shows like *This Is Your Life*. There's nothing wrong with any of those gigs — and the bills must be paid — but they won't help you develop the skills you need to become a first-class screenwriter or novelist.

Don't be afraid of criticism from agents, editors and producers. It's not personal, so don't gnash your teeth after reading a set of notes, instead go for a walk, or sleep on it, and remember: the person who issued these annoying suggestions is trying to help you make the best piece of work possible. Stick this note on your pinboard: 'Sometimes the criticism feels bigger than the fix required. Relax, the moment will pass.'

In a writing career lasting thirty-five years, the piece you'll be most proud of is not one of your prime-time TV dramas, or one of your novels, but a 1500-word article for the *Guardian*. It'll be about your mother, a tribute you'll write after her death, and the reason it will hold a special place in your affections is that it's written with feeling — genuine emotion that leaps from the page and touches the reader's heart. If you can pull off that trick a few more times, ideally in a book or a script, you'll have achieved something worthwhile.

Above all, be grateful that you get to do this for a living. You may not scale the dizzy heights you dreamed of — few do — but the writing life is a privilege and you're lucky to have lived it all these years.