



## The Writing Life

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I FIRST BEGAN WRITING seriously in 2001 when my three children were small. My brain was atrophying; I needed a creative outlet. An adult education evening class, I thought. Pottery. Or maybe car maintenance. Being an avid reader, a would-be adolescent poet (think Plath crossed with Ayres and not in a good way), an English graduate and a primary school teacher specialising in literacy, I chose creative writing.

By the end of my first class I was hooked. This was it. I wanted to be a writer. For the next year, I wrote so much my hands were cramping by the end of each day. I snatched whatever moments I could: sitting next to my daughter while she watched *Teletubbies*, waiting in the car for the boys' school pick-ups, in church halls during cello and ballet lessons. I wrote a novel (terrible) during that creative writing course, then did an MA by distance learning over the following two years in order to justify more writing time before returning to 'proper work'. I sold Avon to pay the tuition fees. Whatever it took.

When my youngest started school, there were gaping hours that should've been filled with novels and short stories and radio plays and all the things I wanted to try but, instead, whole days would pass with very little writing. Instead, I'd languish in bed reading. Or dither in the garden. Or attempt DIY. What was *wrong* with me?

I searched for inspiration and found myself in a workshop led by crime writer and former barrister Frances Fyfield. She told us a story about



a friend of hers, a fellow crime writer. On a day when she'd rather do anything but write, Frances Fyfield phoned this friend. 'What are you up to?' she asked. Her friend replied, 'I'm bleaching the spoons.' Frances then revealed that this friend was the prolific and successful Val McDermid and even she was prone to bouts of procrastination.

Over the years, I have learned to embrace the 'organic' periods, knowing there will also be disciplined ones. Deadlines help immensely. Whether you're a 'planner' or a 'pantser', doing your weekend homework on a Friday at four p.m. or on the school bus on a Monday morning, the writing must get done. A pantser by nature, I've recently had to become a planner — though it's taken a commission and advance from a new publisher, the embracing of a new genre, and the creation of a pseudonym to do this. Who knew I could write a first draft in three months and that my hands would be aching once again?

Now my children are in their twenties, back home, one saving up for rental deposits, one in between travels, and one a student. I am back to cooking, washing and refereeing and I have returned to those snatched moments, finding new creative depths. But I know now that this is part of the writer's cycle. This too shall pass. Then I'll be hunting for spoons to bleach.