

“The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer”

A series of blog posts

by Ian Phillips for

Writers & Artists
THE INSIDER GUIDE TO THE MEDIA

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1. The journey begins ...

... or, to be more accurate, the next stage of the journey begins.

A publishing contract has been signed and so the first leg, writing the thing, is over. I now must treat it as though hewn from stone, rather than the waters of creativity. No more tweaking, time to move on. It's been with me so long that it might be hard to let go ... but let go I must!

So what are my hopes and fears for *Grosse Fugue*? Should I reveal my innermost thoughts? Perhaps not yet. As any author knows, the greatest hunger is for an audience, preferably one as large as possible. Of course, there's a revenue attraction to that. But for many, it's just the notion of our work being read by many hearts and minds.

A few may love it, many may loathe it. A handful might be moved, others offended. With any luck, no-one will be indifferent, the true mark of failure. But I hope that some may be tempted for the first time to delve into the music that permeates the novel - Bach, Beethoven, Schubert - and then perhaps relish the consolation, inspiration and transportation that I have sought to communicate. And if one or two are stimulated to think about the Holocaust, its meaning and legacy, then I might just begin to think that the journey was worthwhile.

There, the context is set. The purpose of this blog series is to share the experience of writing a novel and seeking a publisher, and to explain the

process of getting the work out there in print and digitally. It will be a serial of excitement and frustration, bloody-mindedness and compromise, highs and lows, hopes and fears.

My next post will return to the very beginning.

26th January 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

2. Back to the start

Let me nail the 'Long-Distance' bit of the title as I don't imagine that the 'Loneliness' part needs any explanation. It's purely a function of time, not miles.

In the time-honoured cliché, I'd always felt a book lay within me, albeit invisibly deeply. Being made redundant and deciding to go freelance created the space and time in which to contemplate the possibility. I didn't set out to write something that might be published. It was much more that I needed to know that I could do it; 'it' being create something from thin air that worked. 'Worked' meaning that it had integrity, a sense of purpose and being.

If you'd told me then it would take eighteen years from first contemplation to final realisation, I may well have taken up some other life challenge, perhaps crocheting or self-waxing.

But then again ...

Who, once they've written, would ever really want to be without the joy of sculpting a phrase that captures all you wanted – or relish that moment when a character leaps from the page in all its three-dimensional glory? I think it was Paul Auster who said that there is only one thing worse than writing, and that is ... not writing.

Of course, each of our books will differ dramatically: one of the reasons this is not a 'How to write' blog but an experience-sharing outreach project! It will over the coming weeks declaim as loudly as the written word can: YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

So, when *I* sat down in front of the dreaded blank screen, what did I have before me? Just the skimpiest outline of a core idea.

I had a long-held ambition to share my passion for classical music generally, and the late string quartets of Beethoven specifically. There was my main character - a great violinist. And I had been wrestling with a Very Big Question: how to find meaning in the teeth of catastrophe? That gave me the stirrings of a philosophical purpose and narrative line.

Now all I had to do is write the thing ... oh, and earn a living at the same time.

2nd February 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

3. Writing ... and writing

The plot was beginning to take shape, its long chronological lines appearing, dare I say, quite gracefully in my mind's eye. But my writer's tale is not one of romantic poverty or great arcs of streaming consciousness liberated between bar jobs and waiting tables.

I had been a senior(ish) executive who'd done such glamorous jobs as running Robert Maxwell's law publisher or managing ad campaigns for dialysis machines and chemicals.

Sadly, none of that had provided financial security so I turned to writing and advising businesses on communications. And thus I found myself churning out speeches, brochures, websites, in fact the whole panoply of message-carriers, in fractured parallel to composing the novel.

The main lesson I learned was discipline and compartmentalisation. If I'd been earning all day, don't touch *Grosse Fugue*. Creating a complex corporate communication is the antithesis of literature. That's not to say it can't be satisfying, only that it's a completely different writing experience. If during periods of high endeavour, the itch needed scratching, go back to the book but only for background reading. If business was slack, get stuck in.

It didn't exactly make for smooth progress! I was dimly aware of professional novelists who had a strict regimen of preparing, writing,

relaxing. But that, to me, was the stuff of paradise, where a career was on an even keel and both accommodated and demanded structure. It seemed – and seems – a luxury resort way beyond my current horizon (albeit lusted after in great gobbets of desire).

And that really set the pattern for the intervening years. It was staccato progress, interspersed with earning money, prolonged crises of confidence and marvellous moments of self-belief.

I kept beat to that wonderful line by Fernando Pessoa on the glories of actually writing: “When I am at the wheel, I am greater than myself.”

But it wasn't only writing. My imagination doesn't stretch to conjuring whole worlds from nothing. It has to be rooted in historical reality, so there was at times more reading than writing as I immersed myself in factual accounts of the times I sought to recreate. My next post will look at this part of the process.

9th February 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

4. À la recherche du temps perdu

Ok, so call me a chutzpah merchant for stealing Proust to talk about research. We virgin authors need all the cred we can purloin.

If I had one wish, it would be that I could write in a stream of consciousness that had little need for historical veracity. No such luck. For me there was only a deep dive into an ocean of data. And when you've chosen as the central theme possibly the single greatest catastrophe to befall a people, you take upon yourself the moral imperative to get it right.

With a novel spanning a momentous century and whose hero is submerged in its two great conflagrations, it was not enough to 'remember lost times' but to reveal them. In other words, get under their skin for the purposes of exposure, rather than merely articulate events, albeit (hopefully) in a compelling and literary form.

But pretty quickly I realised that this was treacherous territory, with many opportunities to go badly wrong. When you read broadly and deeply around a subject, there is a real temptation to show off your learning. Of course, you're going to have to buy the book to find out whether I succumbed!

So, the long, lonely distances travelled refer as much to the hours of sitting with book and screen as it does to the days spent tapping away at the keyboard. But it has had some high spots, no more so than finding that a personal account of life and death in the extreme margins of human depravity was undeservedly out-of-print. A request for a facsimile sent to the publisher led to an e-mail exchange, a gift of their last-ever copy and the reprinting of the book, something I could tell the author's son about.

That, and the correspondence I had with a participant in the emotional centre of the novel, reminded me daily that what we know, and how we know it, is imperfect, incomplete and invariably subjective. And, therefore, any one fact should not really be relied upon with some further verification. Of course, fiction is just that, fiction. But there is a delicate tightrope to be walked when dealing with sensitive and controversial subjects.

Cue existential crisis.

16th February 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

5. It is finished ... not

It took me six years to finish the first draft. I'd set myself a target of completing it in time for my father's 80th birthday. I made it, but only by dint of writing non-stop during a family holiday.

Among the early questions posted was one about Writer's Block. Well, I never had it as such, although there was a massive obstacle I had to confront. The heart of the book was the events leading up to, during and immediately after the Holocaust. I was, perhaps understandably, nervous about doing this. There would be many opportunities to go badly wrong.

But I had always assumed that the book had to be written chronologically. I was wrong in this, and got some inspiration from a pretty obscure source. One of my favourite books is a Proust-length novel by the French Nobel Laureate, Romain Rolland. *Jean-Christophe* is the life of a fictitious composer. Rolland's own biographer, the wonderful Stefan Zweig explained that he wrote this 10-volume novel (if memory serves) episodically, rather than linearly.

This was a real breakthrough. It meant I could write around the central section and then come back to it, rather than await inspiration before progressing. This liberated me to write episodes from his later life while they were fresh in my mind without waiting for 'their time', so to speak.

So the last – most challenging – part, the epicentre of the storm that befell my hero, was actually written during a blazing Mediterranean summer.

But of course it wasn't finished. Yes, I got a printed draft wrapped up in ribbon for my dad but that was, in many ways, a mirage, a cruel deception, of completion

Because the haunting then began. I'd lie there thinking about the book generally. Sometimes, gaping holes appeared in the narrative. On other occasions, new avenues of possibility opened up that made sense psychologically or chronologically.

In short, what I found was that that Churchill's famous quote about El Alamein ("Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning") rang with great carillons of truth.

And then began the biggest question of all. What the hell do I do now?

23rd February 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

6. To share or not to share?

In any drawn-out labour, there comes the time when you need to ask: 'How am I doing?'

Writing is not amenable to an annual assessment and review. You can't ask your boss or your colleagues what they think. So one of the questions I faced after completing that first draft: should I show it to someone and, if so, who?

It was pretty pointless doing that if all I wanted was a pat on the back. I realised that having my ego stroked, while undeniably welcome, wouldn't help *Grosse Fugue* be as good as it could possibly be. But if I wasn't planning to publish, why reveal it? What could it gain?

Well, the truth was simple. I might have started off with noble intentions of purity of purpose, my high artistic ideals never to be sacrificed on Mammon's altar. But the more I wrote, the clearer became the notion that the world should not be deprived of such breathless brilliance, that I owed it to my fellow humans to share my work. Or, more seriously, that maybe, just maybe, it would no longer be satisfying enough just to write, now I had to be read.

It's only fair in this sort of confessional to be open and honest. I did harbour huge ambitions for the book. Once it was sitting there, I wanted it to make a difference, to challenge as well as to entertain and move.

Two Russians were banging around in my head. Myakovsky remarked that “Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it.” Perhaps more appositely, Zamyatin said this: “There are books of the same chemical composition as dynamite. The only difference is that a piece of dynamite explodes once, whereas a book explodes a thousand times.”

Well, I wanted my novel to explode a thousand and more times.

I had decided to postpone the sharing thing until I’d completed a first draft. Then I started talking to people and, if they seemed genuinely interested, I’d give them a print-out to read.

And then I waited for a response.

I don’t recommend this approach. Silence can only be interpreted as judgement-by-cowardice. Some commented constructively, others were enthusiastic. But I lost count of the number of people who said bugger all. This was hideous.

So, in the end, I decided to see how literary agents would respond. That was fun.

1st March 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

7. The Literary Agency Blues

“Well I woke up this morning/Got a letter in the mail/“Yeah, we like your novel/But it ain’t the Holy Grail.”

It may be that massive shifts in the publishing industry being driven by new modes of production and distribution are forcing change upon a business sector of strange and impenetrable habits - so it’s possible that I’m a little out-of-touch here. But my dealings with them lead me to characterise literary agents as remote and inaccessible, with ways of working almost designed to be as user-unfriendly and capricious as possible.

An antipathy to e-mail, discomfoting submission criteria, a general feeling of loftiness, an abiding sense of arbitrariness ... and, perhaps, an apparent lack of the hunger which we expect to be the key driver of an essentially entrepreneurial business.

Believe it or not, I did actually get an agent ... and then lost him, so please bear with me while I recount the tale.

I did have the odd contact. One friend went to the gym with an agent, another was chummy with a best-selling author and knew who represented him. A third was a friend of a director of one of the largest in the business. And finally one who was a patient of my wife, but having

his mouth full of sharp instruments at the time may have had something to do with his offer of help.

All were approached, kindly considered it – and declined to represent me. One gave me constructive criticism; the others said it deserved to be published but they could not act for me (too busy, not taking on new authors, or some such blather).

None dismissed it, which was either encouraging or infuriating, depending on what my mood was. But what I found strange about these commercial engagements was that I felt absurdly grateful for their attention, a puzzling inversion of the normal rules of commerce, in my experience.

In the end, I found a list of UK agents online, identifying smaller, more personal outfits with three criteria: they claimed to handle my genre, acted for virgins, and accepted e-mail approaches.

And one responded. I'd never heard of the (one-man-band) operation, nor did I care. We spoke, I sent him the manuscript. He commissioned a reader to review it and, as result, declared that he wanted to represent me. I received a contract, we met, did a deal.

Then came the phone call. Here was the question he asked: "When did you first meet Reuben Mendel?"

The front page of my script proudly proclaimed “*Grosse Fugue* – a novel”. Now, I was being asked about my relationship with its purely fictional hero. Collapse of relationship as it became immediately clear that I had been signed on the basis that it was a biography!

It raised an interesting question: Is literature great when you know it to have been invented? Or is it great when it is so compelling that you believe it to be true? If the latter, I was at least gratified, even as ‘my agent’ fled hotfoot over the horizon.

Around now, my business was really hectic so I laid my novel to one side for a while and barely touched it. Soon enough, however, the worm in my brain reminded me that the work could not forever lie dormant.

The quest to publish began again.

8th March 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

8. It's alive, Dr Frankenstein, it's alive!

Did I now regard what I'd created as a monster? Not exactly, but I was made restless by the inanimate creation that it constituted.

Even when I was immersed in my 'commercial practice', there was some part of me that knew the book was lurking, waiting to be progressed or put quietly to sleep.

I need to confess something at this stage. At no time did I consider an industrial approach to seeking an agent or publisher. My only explanation for this is a cocktail of laziness and fear. Laziness because, let's face it, there are many businesses out there who one could target, and making submissions is time-consuming, particularly given the arbitrary nature of the acceptance process. Fear, because the only way to avoid rejection is not to invite it.

But the book would just not let me be and so I began to investigate self-publishing. At least this way, so I argued with myself, the book would be available as I had written it, warts and all.

I looked at Lulu and a host of similar offers and was immediately discomfited. Leaving aside the frequent opacity of the commercial offer, it seemed absurd merely to produce something with the appearance of a book when the definition of 'publish' is 'to make public'. In other words, the essence of publishing is publicity. It was pointless spending money to

produce an article if I lacked the resources (howsoever defined) to enable people to hear about it.

So finally I began to consider publishing it direct to Kindle. This promised significant benefits, not least of which was that it cost nothing and avoided holding stock and distributing it. Plus, of course, trying to market something virally is a function of time, insight and tenacity, rather than budget and, if it took off, I might even follow in the footsteps of other eAuthors and pick up a traditional deal.

I'd made the decision to do it, created a (free) microsite which would be my lead weapon in attacking the marketplace, and started to re-read it with a more editorial eye. Of course, this was bound to fail as there was insufficient distance (ie, none) between author and editor but, what the hell, I'm the man who once proof-read 'Pipes, Mains, Cables and Sewers - A Practitioner's Guide'. The Force was with me.

Then fate intervened.

15th March 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

9. An offer I couldn't refuse

So this is no tale of a brilliant self-marketing campaign that led to a publishing deal, nor a study of a state-of-the-art submissions process.

Nope, it's a paean to serendipity, to great timing and to the need to tell anyone, even strangers, that you're a writer.

In the confessional spirit of earlier posts, I stand before you and say: "My name is Ian Phillips and I am a bridge addict." No, I don't mean one of those strange Channel-5-real-life-documentary people who form an emotional or even physical attachment with an edifice made of concrete, wire and piles. I play the card game and have done so for years (it's how I met my wife).

I was at a club, and finished a round of the competition early. We chat sotto voce with our opponents. 'What do you do?' 'I write.' 'Oh, what?' 'Stuff for businesses, speeches and the like. And you?' 'I'm a publisher.' 'I've also written a novel.' 'Really! What's it about?'

I give her the elevator pitch (something I really recommend - I've worked hard to try and summarise it in very short phrases, usually starting with my equivalent of the legendary pitch to Hollywood for 'Alien' ('Jaws In Space'.) Mine: 'A Kosher Satanic Verses.'

'I'd like to read it.' We had a chat over the phone and I sent it to her.

I hadn't heard of Alliance Publishing Press, but really liked its use of Print-On-Demand (even if the end-product can't benefit from the versatility of traditional print). The industry norm of investing working capital in stock and distribution, let alone advances, seems to me somewhat archaic. Surely it was in everyone's interest to pour resources into increasing demand. With the explosion of channels for selling as well as communicating, this seemed completely logical, modern and, most important, author-friendly.

I was also drawn to the benefits of working with a small company. I like knowing who's going to be doing what with my book - and interacting with them. The atmosphere was more collegiate, more personal, than I would imagine a large publisher to be. They readily surmised that I am somewhat anal, so the notion of being genuinely consulted on issues like marketing and design was both seductive and a relief.

I sat down with the team and they were really enthusiastic about *Grosse Fugue*, even while flagging concerns about the ending. Believing that all things are resolvable between those committed to progress, I decided to commit. All that was needed now was to do a deal and get edited.

The deal was easy.

22nd March 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

10. A second circumcision

The Rubicon was crossed. I'd committed to publishing the novel. Ratio of euphoric to paranoid/neurotic/panic moments? Oh, about 1:1000.

Negotiating the contract was relatively straightforward. The publisher had a template and we haggled over the splits of the many potential revenue streams. It's one of the beguiling facets of this business that, although the contract focused on imminent printed and e-books, it nevertheless also had to cater for the more outlandish hopes for a work of fiction – dramatisation rights, movie options, even a buy-out of the contract itself by a large publisher (most definitely not a hint to Bloomsbury).

With goodwill on both sides, this wasn't too difficult. Of course, the absence of an agent was something of an exposure but, in the end, I proceeded on the basis that a smaller percentage of something is better than 100% of nothing. APP has a number of publishing options but, gratifyingly, they had such faith in *Grosse Fugue* that the only commitment they required from me was to invest heavily in their marketing plan – not cash, but that rather more precious commodity: self.

And then the editing began. Not for nothing did I choose this particular title. Because that's how it felt. The book has been reduced by almost 10%, some of it writing that I felt was among the best I'd done (not that this is

any way to judge it). I write this through gritted fingertips but the vast majority of what the publisher and her editor said has improved the book, of that I have little doubt. The process has been excruciating, even though the end result is more than adequate compensation. It also identified some errors of fact, such as place names that I'd mistyped and areas where the historical research was not as spot-on as it needed to be.

Losing my original ending (back to the title of this blog again - sorry!), was particularly uncomfortable as I'd lavished a wholly disproportionate amount of writing time on creating a testament discovered after my protagonist had died. I had to concede that the novel now has a far more satisfying ending but there was plenty of wailing and blood, I can assure you.

Editing is so critical and so difficult that, with everyone's permission, I'll write about it some more next time.

29th March 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

11. Evisceration or enhancement - the wild and wacky world of the edit

As advertised last time, I'm going to plunge back into the editing process.

Before that, one key psychological point. Until signing the contract, I had been, as far as the book was concerned, master of all I surveyed. After signature, it became a joint enterprise. I was not ready for this. In the most frustrating moments, the plaintive wail "Whose fucking book is this anyway?" could be heard resonating around my house.

The publisher had always expressed reservations about the ending; I was prepared to consider removing the appendix, as explained last week. We agreed to delegate the final decision to their editor. If she thought it should go, I would remove it and deal with the (significant) fallout for the narrative itself. Well, she did - so the first thing I had to do was purge my hero's testament, discovered post-mortem. That took out around 7,500 words and I added back around 2,000.

Next, the editor went through the manuscript line-by-line, submitting her tracked changes and questions/comments for my consideration and, where necessary, rewriting. This was intensive, challenging and not entirely pleasurable. But it needed to be done.

I was surprised by the number of errors she found. They tended to fall into three broad classes: errors of fact, plot inconsistencies and some less-than-excellent writing. The errors of fact were very annoying, though I do comfort myself in thinking I'd have caught them with a thorough check had I pressed ahead with self-publishing.

The plot inconsistencies were more problematic. I'm not sure that I would have picked those up, being so deeply immersed in the book. It is, of course, an imponderable now but I have to be honest and say that there was probably no way they'd have been spotted without the objective and distant eye of my editors.

Then, most painfully, were the eruptions of poor writing. These really shocked me. All those countless read-throughs, improvements and revisiting had still left shards of incompetence that stuck out like sharp thongs which scratched my eyes when they were drawn to them. Most frequently, there were far too proximate uses of the same word. Other times, it was overwrought writing that just seemed to scream from the page. On some occasions, I realised there were better ways of expressing things.

Once I had worked through her forest of red, I sent the corrected manuscript back for final checks and sign-off.

Quelle naïveté! Then the publisher herself got busy, and she was much tougher and demanding than the editor. Twice. Both times face-to-face, her with marked-up draft, me with my laptop. This process was new to

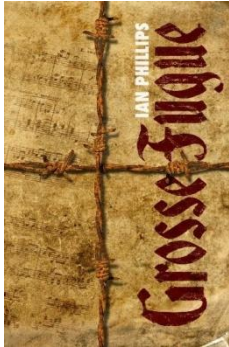
me. From my own days as an editor and in the toing-and-froing over executive speeches, think-pieces and the like, such discussions were always based on pre-exchanged views. This was something altogether different – and challenging – as I listened, made notes on screen and retired to consider, submitting a new version with changes highlighted after each session.

We got there, of course, or I wouldn't be writing this blog. Is the novel better for the input, if not the process? Yes. Would I have liked to understand all that was entailed before it started? Most definitely. I have no idea whether this is the standard way of working, so this element of sharing may be of no relevance to anyone else.

But the exposure to the business of publishing fiction has certainly had many more upsides than down, of which more next time.

5th April 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

12. The upside of the publishing process



Two weeks ago I promised to visit some of the pleasurable aspects of the process, having moaned on ad nauseam about the pain of editing.

Allow me to say something first about APP. Anyone visiting their website will immediately see some key characteristics. First and foremost, although the business is quite young, its key personnel are not. There's a lot of accumulated publishing and business experience and I'm confident that this collective power will deliver a great product and significant coverage - and hopeful this will translate into sales. It was really the clincher for me and if I was asked for any advice to those looking to find a publisher, it would be to meet those into whose hands one commits one's cherished work.

While the contract made clear that the publisher had final say on all matters relating to design, marketing and promotion, there has been a sense of involvement and sharing. In those long-past days when I dreamed of an eye-watering advance for a multi-book deal (don't pretend you haven't had the same fantasy), I accepted that one part of the price would be zero input into cover, publicity and marketing.

With APP, the opposite has been the case. They shared their cover concept and, while I was slightly disappointed that their designer didn't ring me when he saw my original idea and offer me his job, I'm bound to say that his idea was beautiful and strong. Nevertheless, I did suggest a slight change which I'm gratified to report they adopted.

There was an enormous amount of toing and froing on the back cover blurb before we finalised it. I was fully involved in that, which was great. I always remember a 96-page brochure I worked on for a division of Shell. It took about three days to approve the (very extensive) copy; and three months to agree the cover. So I know how important and challenging these things are. However, we were all batting for the same side so the carefully-wrought copy is poised to seize the attention of browsers in countless bookshops around the world, or so I would like to think.

They secured the perfect venue for the launch: Waterstones in Hampstead. Having such a location speaks volumes (sorry) about the book, I think. And in all the publicity media - press releases, invitations

and the like – there was a free flow of opinions and ideas. This gave me some ownership of the materials and engendered a real feeling of team spirit, which appeals to my collegiate approach for this type of ‘project’, even while I try to cultivate the temperament of a creative artist. More dreaming.

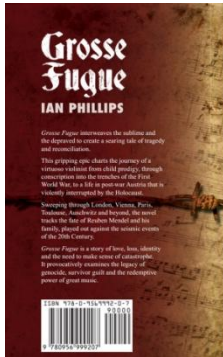
From an anecdotal perspective, I think that all this is different. There is emerging a new generation of publishers who place author-friendliness at the centre of their culture and are able to be far more flexible in their interactions as they are smaller and more agile than the traditional behemoths.

For all ambitious writers this may just offer a brave new world where we can strike out into virgin territories in partnership with pioneer publishers brave enough to take on the settled powers and find new modes of work and production that offer all parties real value.

It’s been something of a recurring theme of this blog series that technology is changing the old publishing model. The partnership culture of this aspect of the process tends to reinforce that impression, at least from my perspective.

12th April 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

13. Is the end also a beginning?



This week, *Grosse Fugue* finally appeared, ready for its soft launch. If you'll permit, I'm going to be even more self-indulgent than usual.

I can now hold in my hand a printed book of something that was once merely a figment of my imagination and a plan sketched out in a notebook.

For large tranches of the intervening period, I barely dared to hope that, one day, it might be able to take its place on bookshelves in homes, shops and libraries. That it might jostle for space with heroes like Primo Levi and George Orwell, well who could even dream of such a thing!

And yet, here it is, and here I am.

What's strange is that I feel somewhat empty. I'm not looking for sympathy, I hasten to add. I know how fortunate I am to have got here. But in the confessional nature of some of these blogs, it seems to me that I ought to be honest.

First things first, I am a perfectionist. I also subscribe to Kant's dictum that 'from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can ever be made'. So I am alive to the novel's flaws and imperfections, blinded by the might-have-beens. I'm a glass-half-empty kind of guy; in fact, I'm pretty sure someone peed in it when I wasn't looking.

I revisit the entire editing process and think of all the times I might have been more assertive or built in more buffers to allow for reading the latest changes with some distance and detachment. My only consolation is that when it's a runaway success (ahem), I can seek a revised reprint that allows for more improvement (and even revisits my original ending). Well, is there any harm in dreaming?

I'm also painfully aware that the high ambitions I set for *Grosse Fugue* may well remain unfulfilled. While unpublished, there was no risk of failure or of a full frontal attack on the ideas it contains. Now, I'm a bit like a stand-up comedian – hopelessly exposed and nowhere to hide. It's a strange sense of nakedness.

So this is a new phase. At the age of 58, I think I can say with some confidence that it's never too late to live your dreams, and I'm so grateful to my publisher that they have enabled me to proclaim that. Leonard

Cohen sang 'there ain't no cure for love'. We all know that there ain't no cure for writing, either. Once bitten, we are forever infected. I feel the fever rising once again as I begin to think about the next book.

As I look at *Grosse Fugue*, I find myself drawn to some great words by Zamyatin: "True literature can exist only where it is created, not by diligent and trustworthy functionaries, but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels, and sceptics."

And I wonder which, if any, am I.

19th April 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

14. A dot.com boon?



Today's post is a bit of a deviation from the trend that has been established up till now but I wanted to share something with you that might prove of some benefit.

Think about building a website dedicated to your book.

Now I know I'm in a different place from many readers in that I am now published (still something of an alien concept). However, I always thought that the novel would benefit from a supporting online presence and had done quite a bit of work on one. Then my publisher and their publicist encouraged me to upload it. As I've developed it over the last month or so, it's become clear that there are some real, tangible advantages.

First, you can do it for free. I believe there are a number of sites out there that facilitate building a simple site. I used Weebly which, for a non-technical person like me, was something of a doddle. I'm not endorsing it as such, only saying that it worked for me.

Secondly, you have complete creative rein over the content. So you can illustrate it with whatever images you think will help make it seductive and exciting, and write it in any style you wish. Basic content management systems make it dead easy to change, purge or grow.

Thirdly - and, I think, most importantly, at least for me - is that the length of an ideal web page forces you to articulate succinctly the core properties and values of your project. Let's face it, we can all bore for England when we get started talking about our work. The discipline of the web means that we have to reduce our ravings to relatively short sections. Why are we writing what we are writing? How to encapsulate what is probably years of thinking, crafting, challenging into a few pithy paragraphs. What's it all about? Who we are? And so on.

Fourthly, it can be a great tool when you're out there networking or selling your talents. Slipping someone a URL or including a hyperlink in an e-mail, tweet or Facebook is a game-raiser in the eyes of a recipient.

Fifthly, it can be a living, breathing resource that'll enable you to blog about your writing, talk about books you love and, generally, vent (if that's what you need).

I'm not saying www.grossefugue.com is in anyway perfect. But I do find myself thinking about things I want to say about it and, perhaps, to engage with readers as they're working their way through it or once they've finished it. It'll also be nice to blog on a wide range of subjects that may even be relevant to the book. I'm ambitious; I want *Grosse Fugue* to have a long shelf-life and be something significant. I think a website will further and foster that desire.

Anyway, I hope the idea may appeal to some readers and they'll investigate the possibilities.

26th April 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

15. A week of lessons

It's been an interesting and insightful week.

One thing above all else is clear. If the course of true love never runs smooth, then the course of publishing is also a white-water, white-knuckle ride.

Watching the process from the inside, I realise just how hard it is on so many different levels. It requires tenacity, faith and vision. They need to find a book they can believe in, deal with the obstreperous, egotistical writer (that's me, folks) and keep their eyes on the prize.

It now seems impossible to believe that a book can succeed without being available on Amazon. And with only one national bookshop chain here in the UK, it's Waterstones and the enervating challenge of targeting the 1,000 or so independents.

So, for example, the critical element of the POD publisher is the nexus between printer/distributor and retailers, be they online or high-street. This is essentially an automated process that doesn't appear to take too kindly to human intervention. Waiting for the system to unwind requires patience and tranquillity. Much of this is invisible to the likes of you and me. As writers and readers, we take our product when we can, producing what outsiders can scarcely imagine in terms of output, even if much of it

lands on the cutting-room floor, and getting our mitts on books via Amazon, ABE or our local bookshop.

Let me tell you, I don't do patience. And tranquillity is not really my stock-in-trade. The only time I'm laid back is for a medical procedure of unspeakable invasiveness (try and put that image out your mind, if you can). So, funnily enough, the whole e-book thing is more sympathetic. Converting the text into Kindle format, getting it through the Amazon 'stocking' system and readers downloading it was fast, flawless and hassle-free.

So I've learned quite a lot since my last blog. That commercial processes work in their own sweet way and can't be rushed. That publishing requires the dexterity of the juggler, the mental acuity of an Einstein and the patience of a saint. Also that, sooner rather than later, I may have to revisit my decision to eschew e-books in preference for the tactile pleasure of handling books, picking one out from a shelf or just settling down in an armchair with a beloved and trusted old friend.

But, for now, I have to write a speech for tonight's launch at Waterstones Hampstead. I'll report back next week, if that's ok with you.

3rd May 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).

16. A beginning and the end



So, as promised, a brief report on the local launch of *Grosse Fugue* at Waterstones Hampstead last Thursday.

Of course, I have nothing to judge it against and am wary of the plaudits of a sympathetic audience. But, suffice to say, the general verdict was very positive. My publishers were happy with the smoothness of the operation and both they and Waterstones were pleased with the number of copies sold and the genial atmosphere. My speech seemed to go down well and, believe it or not, there's now a video of it up on [YouTube](#). Those of a nervous disposition are advised to give it a miss.

The bookshop is a tremendous space, on two levels (it used to be a Woolworths aeons ago). We had the upper floor, surrounded by books and much goodwill. The posters in the window and around the shop and

the invitations all added to the branding and sense of occasion. APP decided astutely against any reading (just as well considering that, in addition to having a face for radio, I also have a voice for mime) so I was introduced by the Publishing Director and then gave a brief speech about what I was trying to achieve with the book and a few more personal observations.

That was followed by a gratifyingly long queue of people wanting me to sign their book. This was really strange as it cast me in a role for which no preparation was possible. My handwriting is dodgy at the best of times so I'm expecting a number of them to pop down to their local Boots to find out what I actually wrote. It was an exciting day, full of trepidation and excitement, uncertainty and hope.

So here I am, sixteen weeks after this blog series began, a published author with a great-looking book and a photo of me at its launch. The fate of *Grosse Fugue* is now in others' hands, a truly strange feeling.

It seems the right time to conclude the weekly *Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer* posts. With Bloomsbury's indulgence I shall, perhaps, pop back from time to time and update you with news and developments, if that would be welcome.

It only remains to thank *Writers & Artists* for its hospitality and for allowing me to share my thoughts and experiences with you. Primarily, of course, I'm most grateful to everyone who has read this blog and, in

particular, to all those who took the trouble to comment. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to write this series.

In parting, I'd like to revisit the second blog where I expressed the hope that, above all, the blogs would ensure that visitors realised they were not alone. Writing is a lonely business. It is easy to become disillusioned and full of doubt. But we do it because we cannot not. The voice within demands its freedom and we can do little but succumb.

I wish all my fellow writers a safe and successful journey towards that hallowed land where others hear the songs that play inside our head.

10th May 2012: for the original post and subsequent discussion, click [here](#).



Some Links

Bloomsbury Publishing
www.bloomsbury.com

Writers & Artists
www.writersandartists.c.uk

Alliance Publishing Press
www.alliancepublishingpress.com

Grosse Fugue
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