A few years ago, on a crisp autumn day in Cambridge Massachusetts, I attended a lecture entitled ‘Singularities in Algebraic Plane Curves’. For reasons that I will not go into, it was necessary that I attend. I slumped into the room, armed with a doodle pad. My plan was to sit politely and let the talk sail over my head. I would use the hour for meditative reverie; perhaps, if I positioned myself wisely, a discreet little nap might be possible.

On the pad I carried that day, I have a few fragments of the sentences the mathematician used:

*A formal power series about the origin is an infinite sum
*Homomorphism is an isomorphism if and only if the matrix is inevitable

This is like poetry, I thought, and I leaned forward to hear more. The mathematician was eloquent. She was passionate. And when I set aside my firm belief that I could not comprehend her, something strange happened. It wasn’t that I understood her work, but I understood her vision. I realised I had lived, until that moment, in an airlock, and that she was prising open the heavy door, just a crack. In the sudden brief shaft of light, I glimpsed a sliver of the world beyond, the world in which she lived. When she looked at the old maple beyond the lecture room window, at the great swoop of bough arcing out from massive trunk, her consciousness overlaid a pattern on that branch that was elegant and sensual. I could imagine, for a moment, what it was to see with her eyes, to feel with her heart, to inhabit a space in which the language was not particular and national, but infinite and universal, a world in which every object sang to her with its own particular music, chiming out in delicate arpeggios and thundering chords.

I know now that it is a beautiful world, but I also know that I can’t live there. If she has lungs, I have gills. I swim in a sea of words. They flow around me and through me and, by a process that is not fully clear to me, some delicate hidden membrane draws forth the stuff that is the necessary condition of my life. I *am* sure though that our work, the mathematician’s and mine, is essentially the same. In her exploration of the singularity in every plane curve, she seeks a way to more perfectly describe that arcing branch, or a soaring bridge, the squiggle in the iron lace of a terrace house, the quivering S bend of a squirrel’s upraised tail. She pushes her way deeper and deeper into the full truth of the world. This, also, is what I must do.

It is my great good luck that the words I use are English words, which means I live in a very old nation of open borders; a rich, deep, multi-layered, promiscuous universe, infused with Latin, German, French, Greek, Arabic and countless other tongues. I would not be able to swim so far, dive so deep, in a linguistically isolated language such as Hungarian, or even a protectively elitist one such as French. When I write a word in English, a simple one, such as, say, *chief*, I have unwittingly ushered a querulous horde into the room. The Roman legionary is there, shaking his *cap*, or head, and Al Cap is there, slouching in his signature working man’s headgear. The toque-wearing cook is there, too, reminding me that English had *chef*, from the French (who had changed the Romans’ *k* sound to *sh*, and the *p* sound to *eff*) before it had *captain*, from the Latin, which is why the word chief now sounds more like the younger word than its elder. So is the English root of *chief* properly described as French, from which English first borrowed it, or Latin, from which it originated? I don’t know what a linguistics expert or a lexicographer would say. But as a novelist I am glad to have this immense cast of captains and chefs standing behind my chief, telling me that whoever she is in my novel, she trails a vast raft of history and association behind her, subtly framing her in my readers’ minds before I have let her utter a single word.
Henry David Thoreau wrote that ‘The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or perchance a palace or a temple on the earth, and at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood-shed with them.’

Well, it did not go that way for me. I started out hoping for the woodshed – a nice tight serviceable structure that would serve a modestly useful purpose. I would be a newspaper reporter in the city of my birth. I would try to write stories that helped people; perhaps, every so often, an article might right a local wrong or even shift policy a few degrees in a more progressive direction. But generally my stories would be useful simply by offering an informative, entertaining read. Then they’d end up lining the floor of the budgie cage.

In my twenties, unexpected doors opened for me, and my ambition enlarged a bit. I started thinking that building a temple might not be out of the question. As a foreign correspondent bearing witness in the dark and troubled places of the earth, I began to entertain a hope that my words might have an impact on the councils of the powerful. I hoped they would be a true and valuable reflection of the history unfolding before my eyes – that ‘first rough draft’ that historians and analysts would turn to as they shaped a better understanding of our times.

Now, as a fiction writer, my ambition has slipped all reasonable bounds. Now, in middle age, I aspire to build that bridge to the moon. Like the mathematician, I am after nothing less than eternal truths: what is this world, how can we more perfectly describe it? Who are we, who have we been?

Of course, it is one thing to have the ambition, another thing to have the means. But I know I have to do the best I can with the materials I have to hand; materials that I started assembling from the time I became literate, and have continued to amass throughout my career in journalism and on into fiction. By now, the toolbox has grown quite heavy, and some of the first acquired implements continue to be the most useful of my craft.

At Sydney University, I studied government and fine arts. A freshly minted BA (hons), I came to the newsroom of the Sydney Morning Herald tremendously well informed about the merits of fresco over tempera in Quattrocento painting and classical political theory from Plato to Hobbes.

So they sent me to the sports department to cover the races.

Actually, that’s putting it grandly. I didn’t actually get to ‘cover’ the races, if that conveys writing delightful Runyonesque colour pieces about characters at the track. My job was to amass and record the ‘details’ – the plethora of facts on which the senior reporters relied for their reporting. I had to take note of how the odds fluctuated in the run-up to the start, note the condition of the track, record where each horse was at each turn and at the finish, the weights and the handicaps and reams of other data that I do not now remember. I had to do it at speed, for each horse in each race at every race meeting. Who would have thought the old town had so many race meetings in her? On Saturday night, having covered the trots the night before and the gallops during the day, I made my way to the greyhound track and did a different set of details for that last redoubt of the desperate punter, the dogs. Then I had to return to the old Herald building on Broadway and check the first edition of the paper ‘on the stone’ before the presses rolled for the early edition. This was the most nerve-racking moment of a very long week, for two reasons. One was a matter of union demarcation. As a member of the journalists’ union, I was not to handle anything that pertained to the work of the printers’ union members. If I inadvertently touched a piece of hot type, the father of the chapel might call a stop work. The second reason was that if I failed to see a misprint, country bookmakers who paid out on the results in the Herald first edition might lose money, and they would be … unhappy. In consequence, I would lose my job. At the very least.

As much as I disliked that work, I acquired some useful and durable tools from it. Above all, I learned a respect for factual details which is essential to fiction. That might seem odd; why should a novelist need facts? Isn’t fiction fact’s antonym? In this, I am advised by Leclerc de Buffon, a distinguished 18th century naturalist. ‘Let us gather facts,’ he said,
‘in order to have ideas.’ For me, facts are first inspiration, the idea or set of ideas from which my imaginative edifice will grow. They are also the indispensable formwork into which imagination can be poured. Sometimes, the texture of the forms will still be there, in the finished text, part of the aesthetic of the work, meant to be seen. I will do it this way to give the work a sense of authenticity, to ensnare my readers and convince them of the truth of the world I have imagined. But most of it will be taken down and carried away, because the imagined thing will have fully occupied the factual spaces and become strong enough to stand alone. Always, the better the formwork, the better and more complete the factual basis of my novel, the more daring the design of the fiction can be. But the fiction must dictate the design. The story must tell me what it is I need to know. So I do my research as I write, and when I come to a place where I need to know something, only then do I go looking for it.

I enjoy running down these facts. It’s a bit like a quest, sometimes, or a vast puzzle. How can I find out exactly what books a rural English minister in the mid 17th century would have had in the rectory library? What word would a mid-17th century midwife have used for fetus? What did Thoreau do when he wasn’t contemplating the wilderness or spending the night in jail to protest slavery? In the case of the rectory library, I happened upon an academic who had just written a paper on that very topic. For the right mid-17th century word, I consulted the Oxford Historical Thesaurus of the English Language to find that the word she would have used for fetus was ‘shapling’. And I was amused and astonished to find out that the great New England wilderness sage earned his bread in the family pencil making business, and had used much of his time at Harvard to glean the secrets of variable-hardness pencils.

So the tools acquired by the racing details cadet all those years ago at the Herald get a good workout these days, as do many other tools picked up here and there in my career as a journalist. I was a news reporter for 16 years, seven of them a foreign correspondent in the Mideast, Africa and the Balkans. Perhaps the most useful equipment I acquired in that time is a lack of preciousness about the act of writing. A reporter must write. There must be a story. The mot juste unarriving? Tell that to your desk. Your editor will not wait for you to get your aura on straight. File, or fail. As a result of that discipline, I no more believe in writer’s block than in panel beater’s block or hairdresser’s block. Writing may aspire to art, but it begins as craft. Words are stones, and the book is a wall. You choose each stone with consideration, you place it with effort. Sometimes, you find just the right stone – the right shape and heft – for that difficult niche, and the effect is beautiful and satisfying. Your wall has gone up straight and true. Other days, you pick up one stone and then another, and none of them is right. You try it, it will not fit. Frustrated, you jam it in anyhow. The effect is unsightly, the balance precarious. You come back the next day and you cannot bear to look at it. You bring in the backhoe and knock it over.

The important thing is the effort. There can be no day without lifting stones. And after enough days, if you have sweated enough, scraped enough skin off your hands, been patient and diligent with your craft, unsparing in use of the backhoe, you will, in the end, have a wall. And it may even be a beautiful wall that will last for a hundred years.

I learned to write fiction in stages. From daily newspaper reporting, I wrote a reporter’s book. Nine Parts of Desire was a journalist’s attempt to stand back from what I had learned in six years living among the women of Islam, to take all the shards of experience written up in haste, the stories walked away from under deadline pressure, and go back, with time to reinvestigate and consider. I had a one year leave of absence from my reporting job, and I wasted the first six months of that leave trying to figure out how to write something longer than a three thousand word news feature. For weeks, months, the stones lay scattered, resisting all attempts to gather them into a serviceable wall. By trial and error, I eventually came up with a narrative strong enough to bind together disparate experiences gathered over many years in several different countries.
My second book, *Foreign Correspondence*, was much more quirky and personal. It began as a memoir cum travel adventure about my childhood penfriends and my adult quest to find them. But because it was written in the shadow of my father’s death, it became a different book. As I wrote it, I learned that my real quest would be to make sense of my father, and of my relationship to that difficult, damaged, beloved man.

I can pinpoint the day I became a novelist; I can recall the moment with perfect clarity. But at the time, I did not know it had happened. It took me ten years to find out. It was a rare, beautiful English summer day and I was taking a brief break from reporting in the Middle East. As a respite from the hot and dusty places of my beat, my husband Tony and I were rambling in England’s Peak District. We came across a finger post pointing to Eyam, and underneath it said ‘Plague Village’. Intrigued, we went there, and in the parish church was a small exhibit that gave an account of how Bubonic Plague had struck the town in 1665 and the villagers, alone among all other infected communities, had elected to quarantine themselves and prevent the spread of the disease into the surrounding population. The account described how at the height of the plague, the surviving villagers had closed the church and met for services in a field, where the worshippers could stand apart from each other. We went to that field, and in the play of the light through the leaves, I could see them: standing alone, worshipping together, somehow still willing to talk to a God who had asked so much of them and yet offered no respite. The pale faces lifted towards the weak English sunlight were haggard, weary, grief-racked. Yet hopeful, because they yet lived, and so many others had died.

I did not speed home that day and call the *Wall Street Journal* to tender my notice, run up to my garret and start writing a novel. I went back to my work, covering modern catastrophes. But all the time, the story of that ancient time of crisis was on my mind. I would use the conduct of the people I was covering as a template to imagine it: Did the villagers of Eyam act like this? Did crisis bring out their best self, or their worst? Did one of them answer disaster with the kindness of that Kurdish man, the grace of that Eritrean girl? Did another become as vicious and morally lost as this Baathist torturer, that Somali boy-soldier?

The questions nagged at me until I started hearing voices. Or one voice, at least: the voice suggested in half a line from one of the Eyam minister’s few surviving letters, written just after his wife has died of plague. In it, he mentions that his maid has survived and is attending to his needs. That brief mention was all there was of that maid in the historical record; there was nothing more of her to be found, not even a name. Yet her voice was very clear to me. And how she sounded told me who she was. Who she was told me how she would act, and that, in turn, set the plot of the novel in motion.

Something similar has happened in all my novels. Someone rises up out of the grave and begins to talk to me. Until they do, I do not have a book. Often, the voices that speak to me are the voices of the unheard. The maid who was illiterate and who did not get to set down how she felt about caring for that minister, how she grieved for his wife. The enslaved woman on a Virginia plantation, when teaching slaves to read was against the law. Puritan minister’s daughter who has been taught to read, because it is good for her to study her Bible, but not to write, for women are not thought to need a tool to communicate outside the boundaries of the family. Which is one reason there are no female diaries from colonial America before 1700, and no good ones until 1750.

So where do you go to hear their voices, to imagine how they might have expressed themselves, what issues might have occupied their minds? Well, sadly, you go to court. You will find her there, in every era. Accused of being a witch, because she was poor and alone, or a scold, which meant she had been overheard criticising a man in public. And if the English assizes or the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s religious tribunals took down verbatim transcripts, you will be able to read what she had to say. And you will recognise her – her anger, her sense of injustice, her awareness that she, as a woman, is getting a crook deal.
Some critics have complained that my narrator’s voices are too modern, too feminist. I urge them to go read some court transcripts.

If one definition of home is a destination, then I have reached it at last, as a fiction writer who draws inspiration from the past and nourishes it with experience garnered as a foreign correspondent. I do not think I would be able to write the books if I had not had, as prelude, those years of covering catastrophe. A foreign correspondent enters people’s lives at the worst of times and mines them for the most terrible details. You write the story, hoping someone who matters will read it and give a damn. And then you try to forget about it so that you can go and do it all again; some other war, some other person’s desperate sadness. You try to clear the cache. But you can’t. You can’t drag and drop your memories into the void.

*What is the price of experience*, asks the poet William Blake. *Do men buy it for a song? Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.*

*Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,*

*And in the wither’d field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.*

So, I try to use the experiences that I have had, to make the suffering I witnessed count for something. I believe fiction matters. I know it has power. I know this because the jailers and the despots are always so afraid of it. In Israel, I interviewed, and later befriended, a 15-year-old Palestinian after he stoned my car on the road to Hebron. Not long after, his militancy landed him a five year sentence in an Israeli jail. Because he had told me he loved English books, I tried to bring him a copy of Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, thinking the story and the spare language would be accessible to him. The jailers would not allow it. I thought of that boy when Major Michael Mori, the US Marine attorney for David Hicks, recounted how he had been barred from giving Hicks a copy of *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. He also noted that in the few letters Hicks was allowed to receive, the word ‘love’ had been redacted. These stories enrage me, but they also get me up in the morning. I am glad the jailers fear the power of fiction, the power of words. It encourages me to try harder, to give them something new to worry about.

The contours of my work life are very different these days from that of the young woman whose bag was always open in the cupboard, ready to receive items from a packing list that included both a chador and a bullet-proof vest. These days, my work day begins with a short walk up a dirt track from my house to the main road, where I wait with my younger son for a yellow school bus to come to a halt in a strobe of flashing lights. It is odd that in this country that so deplores any hint of the nanny state, this most nanny-ish and levelling institution is ubiquitous and embraced. My son climbs aboard, the stop sign folds back, and I wave. By the time I reach the house, I am already at work. I pause in the kitchen to brew a fresh cup of coffee, and as I wait, I pull a poetry anthology off the shelf and let the book fall open. I read whatever poem my eye falls on and, pump primed, climb the stairs to my study and step back into the past.

In his 1936 classic for children, *A Little History of the World*, the Austrian author Ernst Hans Gombrich describes the business of writing about the past. It is, he says, like lighting a scrap of paper and dropping it into a bottomless well. As it falls and burns, it lights up the sides of the well in the same way that our memories light up the past. The deeper it falls, the less is illuminated. Living memory gives way to archives, archives to cave paintings, cave paintings to fossils, until the light goes out and everything is dark. But, as Gombrich writes, even in that dark silence, we have not yet reached the beginning of the human story. Behind every beginning, no matter how long ago, there is another beginning. Every generation has its *Once Upon a Time*. Your grandmother, her grandmother, your grandmother’s grandmother … and already we are back several hundred years. And every one of them probably telling stories that started with some version of *Once Upon a Time*.
I don't know why I am, as a novelist, so attracted to the stories of the past. It might be a case of symbiosis. Because I was an Australian of a particular time and place, I yearned to know the world, to travel and adventure abroad. In my travels, I met a man who never wished to leave his own shore, who would have dwelt contently in the archives that can be found in the Boston–Washington–New York corridor. That man loves history. Because of me, he travels the world. Because of him, I travel the past. Moral, if any: it's fun to sleep with foreigners, but be warned – this can change your life.

And now, as I make my home in literature, in a particular genre of fiction that explores the places in the deep well that the burning paper has left unilluminated, I think of that mathematician, and her search for a more perfect description of the world's swoops and curves. What can I know, after all, that is true about these people who lived and died so long ago, lived and died, as Henry James asserts, with a consciousness different from ours, a consciousness formed when more than half the things that make our world did not yet exist for them?

But I believe that consciousness isn't shaped by things. You can move the furniture about as much as you like; the emotions of the people in the room will not change. Consciousness is shaped by fear and joy, hatred and tenderness. This is what I know: they loved, as I love. And that is as good a starting point as any.

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