



How did I get here?

Mark McCrum: Only happy writing

Mark McCrum was born in Cambridge and read English at that university. His first book, *Happy Sad Land*, about a journey round Southern Africa, was published in 1994 by Sinclair-Stevenson. This was followed two years later by *No Worries*, describing an eight month journey round Australia. In 1996, he collaborated with Jack and Zena Briggs to write *Jack and Zena - a story of love and danger* (since reissued as *Runaways*), following this up with another travel book, *The Craic* (1998), about a journey round Ireland. In 1999 and 2000 he worked on two books about television programmes – *1900 House* and *Castaway 2000*, which both got into the non-fiction top ten. In 2001 he documented Robbie Williams' tour of Europe for the book *Somebody Someday*, which reached no 1 the week it was published. Since then he has been ghost writing (*The Tribe*, 2007), collaborating with an old friend on a book about unusual foreign words, writing an international guide to contemporary etiquette and working on a novel. He is a member of the Management Committee of the Society of Authors.

Becoming a proper writer

How did I get here? Where? I'm tempted to think, as I stare at the screen of my laptop, wondering how to answer this question. I've now written and published seven books under my own name and two under other people's. I've had three top ten bestsellers – one of which reached the no. 1 spot. I've written articles on subjects ranging from scuba diving to cinema management for a good variety of magazines and nationals. So I should count my blessings, maybe even regard myself as a success. But no, I look back over my past work and find it wanting. I want to press on, do better, write a book that will really make people sit up and listen.

Managing this ongoing insecurity on your own is perhaps the worst thing about being a professional writer. Sometimes I look out of the window and see men and women in suits striding past, in groups, heading off to a meeting or lunch or a drink 'after work' and wish that I had that gregariousness and daily support network in my own working life. Which is absurd. Because I've tried office life and know how claustrophobic and frustrating it can be. And one of the nicest things about being self-employed is the freedom you have. If I wanted to go down to Heathrow this evening and get on a plane to Caracas, I could. Even if I don't, and generally find a regimented nine-to-five life works best for me, just having the possibility is wonderful.

My own brief experience of an office made it clear to me that I would only be happy writing.

Having read English at university, I was supposed to be training as an advertising

account exec, but spent all my lunch breaks and half the rest of my time scribbling my own ideas. After three months I managed to move to a job as a copywriter, but the daily diet of brochures and body copy for 'below the line' adverts was hardly inspiring, and I was secretly relieved when my six months' probation wasn't renewed. I decided I'd use my redundancy money to go out on my own and become a proper writer, doing my own stuff full time. Little did I realise that it would be ten years before I got my first book contract.

Writing for the market

My initial idea was to write for TV. With a couple of friends, I very nearly got a topical satire show involving latex puppets off the ground with the BBC. We had actually been commissioned by the Head of Light Entertainment when he discovered that *Spitting Image* was already in development with ITV.

After that gutting disappointment I turned to what I'd loved at college – playwriting. And finally, three years later, with the help of some very generous 'angels', I managed to get a play I'd written onto a London stage with professional actors, directed and produced by my greatest supporter – myself. We garnered a few good reviews, but lost £15,000. But hey – I got an agent, a young woman who had been to see the packed first night. She took me out to lunch a lot, but failed to place *The Swap* or the two following plays I toiled over during the next two years. Hardly surprising. One was an appallingly autobiographical three-hander; the other an ambitious Chekhovian effort with a cast that Ayckbourn couldn't have commanded, let alone an unknown. If you want to write, for the stage or anyone else, find out first what it is they're looking for.

I packed in playwriting. I would write a novel, I decided. I spent three years on *The Big Wheel* before showing it to a kind editor friend who suggested cutting it in half. He also suggested a

new agent who was happy to take on the new, shorter version. In due course he sent it out and it came bounding back from six publishers, one of whom rejected it with the single line 'The Big Wheel doesn't turn for me.'

There are pros and cons of living in London and hanging around on the fringes of the literary scene. The cons are that publishers, agents and other professionals in this tiny world get to know you as a person and are unlikely, therefore, ever to see you as a mysterious genius along the lines of DBC Pierre. The pros are, just occasionally, that a chance meeting can lead to a lucky break.

Mine was with a publisher called Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, who had been a big cheese at Hamish Hamilton and recently set up on his own. He was pointed out to me at a party at a time when I knew my novel was on his desk. I took my courage in both hands and went up to him, asked him if he'd had a chance to read it.

I was doing all the wrong things, but it turned out OK. 'Oh *no*,' he said, fixing me with the smile I would come to know so well, 'I've just today turned it down.' My ten year struggle must have been written on my face. 'But,' he added, 'you *can* write.' Had I ever thought of a travel book, he asked. While he published maybe two 'literary' novels a year, he did much more genre stuff and non-fiction. That lesson again: unless you have something exceptional up your sleeve, it's wise to write for the market.

Publishing is a tough business

I took the great man at his word and sent him a ten page proposal for a journey round Southern Africa, where I'd taught in my gap year. After two nail-biting months he bought it, for £3000. It was enough. I blagged air tickets from British Airways, a hire car from a firm in Cape Town who thought travel books were guides, and

headed off. It was pretty much the first money I'd earned as a writer.

During the ten years since leaving my office job, I'd managed – somehow – to avoid nine-to-five. For three years I spent weekends drawing caricatures on the street in Covent Garden. For two, I existed on the dole, holding occasional 'one-night-stand' exhibitions of watercolours to pay mounting bills. Finally, I got the perfect job, as relief manager of a cinema where every last usher was a wannabe something. My only regret is my time on the dole: it's so easy to get disheartened and self-obsessed in a room by yourself.

Returning from South Africa after a stimulating four month trip, I was finally – I reckoned – over the fence. I was still working shifts at the cinema, but I was into that magical world where you are no longer just typing away madly on your own. You have an editor, and in due course an eager-sounding publicity person. Proofs arrive for you to correct. The print is real. Your name is on the front page, opposite an ISBN number. My god, you've written a book.

That's the best bit. Out it goes into the big bad world and nobody notices it. Your mother calls to tell you she can't find a copy in the local Waterstones. The big splashes in the papers that the publicity person was so hopeful of fail to materialise. Etc etc. Any published author can tell you the same story. *Ad nauseam*.

As it happened, I was lucky. The ever-astute Sinclair-Stevenson had backed a story that was in the news. In Spring 1994, *Happy Sad Land* was reviewed everywhere and occasionally quite favourably. A year later it was read on Radio Four's 'Book at Bedtime', by Richard E. Grant.

By that time I was in Far North Queensland, mustering cattle. Before the first book had come out, I made sure I'd got a contract out of Christopher for a second. So what if it was his idea? I wasn't precious. Anyway, how bad could travelling round Australia be? Over a merry

lunch, Christopher outlined the vision of a book that would sell well in both the UK and Down Under. Enthused, I flew to Sydney and got on the road. But when I returned, eight months later, the picture had dramatically changed. Christopher's firm had been bought up and he'd been sidelined – by a man from Melbourne. He'd rather gone off Australians, he told me. The book came out, but only in the UK. So much for my Antipodean bestseller. That was an important lesson. Even the best publishers can fall by the wayside. It's a tough business, pre-eminently about making money. Never again would I set massive store by the praise or hopes of upbeat editors.

Ghosting the words

Both these travel books did fine, but neither made me enough to live on. I was lucky to have an agent who specialised in ghost writing. He let me cut my teeth on a project that had just come in to his office: the true-life story of a mixed-race couple who had eloped to escape an arranged marriage and ended up being pursued around England by her murderous family. Slowly I learned that just writing down what your subjects have told you isn't enough: you have to add onion-layers of texture, and then, when that fails, make it up. The book became *Jack and Zena*, a bestseller in Norway and Israel, held up in Parliament by Ann Cryer, as she first raised the issue of Forced Marriages. I was proud to have been involved. And the book might have done even better had it not been published the day after Princess Diana died in a car crash.

I hung on in there. The editor I'd been working with asked what I might like to do next. I grabbed the opportunity and dashed off a proposal for a travel book about Ireland. He and the others in his office liked it, so I got on the plane to Dublin with my rucksack. Back in England six months later, I worked hard to write it up, aware that my editor seemed very keen to stick to our tight deadline. I wanted longer, to digest the huge amount of material I had

accumulated. He was insistent that we should publish that autumn. Lucky I didn't protest too much, because in November his firm was bought up by a larger one. Contracts were cancelled, and shortly after that he moved on.

TV tie-ins

The Craic got some kind reviews, but again made little money. I was thrown back to commercial work, accepting my agent's offer of a TV tie in, for a 'millennium' programme that in 1999 sounded bizarre: taking a modern family and making them live for three months in a fully-realised Victorian home. As it turned out, *1900 House* can lay claim to being the UK's first Reality TV show. The programme was a hit, and the book went to no. 5, garnering me a royalty four times larger than the advance of £5000.

On the back of that I was offered the TV tie-in for the UK's second reality show – *Castaway*. This was a huge project, taking over my life for a year. But the show did well, and the book went to no. 2. Silly me for not insisting on a royalty on that one.

Nine months later I had my first no. 1 – with *Somebody Someday*, a book about Robbie Williams on tour round Europe. It had been a challenge to work on, with tough old rock managers who wanted one kind of book and determined young publishers who wanted another and a lot of money floating around to up the ante. Robbie himself is no fan of interviews, so our 'collaboration' was testing, to put it mildly. When the jacket appeared without my name on it, I was told it was 'a design decision'. I had to fight to get my name in the bestseller lists as co-author. When Robbie was asked by a journalist what he thought of his book, his quote was, 'I haven't read it. It's full of words' – a remark I treasure to this day. It was marketed as an 'autobiography', which confused a good few of its readers, if Amazon reviews are anything to go by. But the advance – £800,000 – made headlines, and I got a quarter of it, plus a couple of very healthy royalty cheques in succeeding

years. Not that I was made for life. Take away 40% tax and 15% agent's commission and £18,000 of mysterious *post-hoc* expenses that I'd apparently agreed to, spread it out over five years and it's not a fortune.

After Robbie, I decided I'd have another crack at fiction. As I write, I'm still at work. My fairy gold has run out, so I'm back to the day job of ghost writing a TV tie-in. One day, perhaps, I'll earn a living from my own work.

Books (and organisations) I have found useful are:

Dorothea Brande, *Becoming A Writer*: this charming little book doesn't give any instruction on the nuts and bolts of writing, but addresses the problem of writing *per se*: how to find time to do it, how to get over distractions, how to inspire yourself etc. Worth reading if only to know that, as you get up to make yet another pot of tea, you're not alone.

William Strunke Jr and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*: this short classic covers usage, composition, form and style, and – like a Bullworker – will tighten and improve your writing after just one reading.

Stephen King, *On Writing*: Half this book, again, deals with the problems faced in just finding time and inspiration to write. King then takes you through the process of writing as he does it; a fascinating series of tips and insights from a modest master.

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Renni Browne and Dave King: covers the basics of fiction writing, with good examples and some useful exercises. This is an American approach to creative writing, and not gospel, but it contains a lot of useful pointers and a good further list of books at the back if you want to read further.

On Becoming A Novelist, John Gardner: another classic, by a seasoned creative writing teacher and novelist. Perhaps a bit old school, the book contains lots of useful stuff about how,

practically, to be a writer, plus a useful section on 'Publication and Survival'.

From Pitch to Publication, Carole Blake: this is probably the best book around on the tricky business of getting your work accepted and successfully published. Blake is one of London's top agents, with a dazzling track record, and gives here an insider's view of how to work this fickle trade, from pitching to and getting an agent to handling the publicity of your sold novel.

The Society of Authors: the Society provides another Catch-22 for aspiring writers, in that they don't take unpublished members. Once you've got a book accepted, though, they are well-worth joining, offering, in return for their annual £80 subscription, advice on everything that may trouble a published writer, from a difficult – or dodgy – contract to an inadequate agent. Many authors who don't have agents use them to check their contracts.

www.societyofauthors.org

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Useful links

Mark McCrum

Features extracts from his books, journalism and other work.

www.markmccrum.com

BBC writersroom

The BBC's online resource for writing for television, radio and film. Writers' guidelines, script archive, free script formatting software, newsletter.

www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom

British Guild of Travel Writers

Association of over 270 writers, editors, photographers, producers, radio and television presenters involved in the world of travel.

www.bgtw.org

Andrew Crofts - Ghostwriter

The site of one of Britain's best known ghostwriters, author of *Ghostwriting* (A & C Black) and *The Freelance Writer's Handbook – How to make money and enjoy life* (Piatkus).

The British Association of Communicators in Business (CiB)

The UK's leading professional body for in-house, freelance and agency staff involved in internal and corporate communications.

www.cib.uk.com

National Union of Journalists

The trade union for journalists in the UK and Ireland. NUJ Training (www.nujtraining.org.uk) offers information and advice on careers and training in journalism.

www.nuj.org.uk

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media.

Negotiates minimum terms and practice agreements for writers in TV, film, radio and theatre.

www.writersguild.org.uk

writernet

National organisation that aims to provide dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers and redefine the culture in which they work.

www.writernet.org.uk