

Creativity

Matthew Tett

A WAY OF MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

I realise, writing this in late April, that the world might be quite a different place again when this is published in the summer. We've all adapted and have had to change in the last few months and maybe, one day, we will look back on this period as being invaluable for creativity.

The lockdown came upon us speedily, although we probably knew what was coming, considering how other countries were already affected. A lot of us found ourselves at home, working remotely, with Zoom (and other platforms) quickly becoming part of our daily routine. For many, having more time at home, enjoying surroundings which are often accepted but not appreciated, it was a dream come true. More time, more flexibility, more space. So, how does this work when you are a writer?

Setting targets

I work part-time as a teacher and manage several other projects, including writing, when I am not in school. Having the extra time to develop ideas, to put pen to paper, to edit first drafts of stories, and finish works in progress: perfect. But, like many things, having an excess amount of time can result in not achieving what one hopes for. So, I decided, during lockdown, to be disciplined—a way for me to achieve, both on paper and on my laptop, but also to have a sense of achievement which is important for mental wellbeing.

It may seem a bit draconian, a continuation of school, perhaps, but I set myself up with a disciplined timetable of creative tasks to complete each day. Okay, so this sounds as if it defeats the object of being creative—that having so much intended control over creative output is

a contradiction. Maybe this is true, but not for me. When I knew we would be in lockdown for a lengthy period, I thought that a timetable would work—and it has. This is off the back of a 2020 resolution I set myself in January—to document the year by writing a haiku every day, a bit like a diary—but through the beautiful Japanese poetry form.

A haiku a day...

Why haiku? They're short. They're fun. They're manageable to complete every day—and having this focus has helped me during the lockdown. According to The Poetry Foundation, the haiku only became popular in European culture in the early 1900s. Haikus became "appreciated for [its] linguistic and sensory economy" after both world wars and this is something that rings true for me. I have viewed the haiku-writing as an outlet—and one that has helped me to make sense of key daily events. One from 3 April reads:

*Two weeks of lockdown.
Quiet fear. Isolation.
Thankfully it's bright.*

My intention has been to log a snapshot of the day, sometimes when getting up, other times at the end of the day. Some days, admittedly, the focus has been more negative; but mostly, my writing has helped me to tackle an unprecedented situation—and it has proved to be a great way of reading back through the events, something I hope to return to in years to come.



To blog or not to blog

One of the more irregular, but time-consuming, ideas I set myself up with was a writing blog. My plan was to use the blog (thank you, WordPress) to document my ideas about my own writing but also about the creative process more generally. I use the blog not in the same way as my haiku-writing but to clarify my own thoughts and to include, with little editing, my own writing. The first entry from 25 March, the first day of lockdown, started with:

Lockdown: keys jangling, no freedom, that's it til morning time when a bowl of gruel will be shoved through the bars.

Here, my focus was on my immediate response, a bit like a stream of consciousness but with more deliberate efforts to make my writing coherent. Thinking back now, this opening section is about reacting to a given situation—associations with what has become a frequently used word in our modern-day lexis. With the haiku, there is a sense of urgency to get it written—and I am not happy if I misplace my notebook (which is when the notes section on my iPhone comes in very handy). The blog, however, is less urgent—but when I do give time to it, it is more consuming and prevalent, or so it seems at the time.

A change is as good as a rest

I set myself another writing challenge—this time, completing an online travel writing course, something I am interested in, both as a consumer of the genre but

also as someone who enjoys writing about experiences. Usually, fiction is my go-to genre, but I am also mindful of it being healthy to be adaptable and to try something different. Working through specific modules, as well as reading material I might not have come across before, has been helpful. Also, helpful has been critiquing some of the material—not in a nit-picky, tut-tut way but as a means of thinking ‘Okay, so this is good—but maybe a bit dated now. How can it be improved for the better?’ This is something that we, as writers, do. I have spent quite a lot of time recently polishing short—and not so short—fiction. But I have also returned to pieces written a year, or longer, ago – and I believe this is very healthy. Coner Murphy, on the Writing Cooperative website (www.writingcooperative.com), quotes Stephen King, the horror writer. In his much-praised book *On Writing*, King recommends taking a “long-step back”—and I think we all know the benefits of this; this isn’t just good advice for our writing, but it is valuable for reflecting on life in general, too.

Read and revise

I recently returned to a partly written short story I started a couple of years ago. I have been thinking of this work-in-progress for a good while; it has been nagging at the back of my mind. For some reason, though, it has been placed at the bottom of my writing pile, although I know that there has been something I have wanted to develop. Reading through the draft made me cringe a little. I could see how I have developed as a writer—and how life experiences might have played a part as

well—since I wrote this draft. Phrases were clunky; some characterisation jarred and seemed implausible. This, for me, has been great. We do not always have the luxury of long periods of time to ignore a piece of work and come back to it at a distant point in the future—but when we do, I think it is hugely advantageous to our own understanding of the craft and saying what we want to say in the best possible way.

Learning from others

Having surplus time has been a great way of reading more—and I think many will agree that reading different books, and books that have been teetering on a precarious stack for a good while. As a teacher and a writer, I know that we learn a lot from the writing of others. We learn how to execute a great plot; how to make a character come alive; and that taking risks with ideas is no bad thing. Without a doubt, I have enjoyed having time to read books that I have been meaning to read for a good while but haven't got around to.

Many publications have been advocating reading as a superb pastime during these tough times. We all know how reading can help with mental wellbeing—and how it is a great stress-reliever. However, we have, perhaps, been spoilt for choice, with lockdown reading lists, such as *The Guardian's* suggestions by famous writers: Matthew Kneale's go-to is Sherlock Holmes; Curtis Sittenfeld selects Alice Munro's short stories, for example. In the same newspaper, it is stated that online/virtual book clubs have been incredibly popular – and we have access to technology to thank for this. I have enjoyed some JD Salinger that I had never read before; a genre-blending debut (*True Story*) by Kate Reed Perry; and a Richard Yates classic—*Easter Parade*—and others. There is not a right or wrong in terms of what one chooses in turbulent times; it's more a case of what works and what's right for the reader.

As the sun continues to shine and the days get longer, it is strange to think that being in lockdown has become an accepted part of life the world over. Restrictions will lift, in time, and life will return to some sort of normality. But it is important to remember that having time to take stock, to generate new ideas and to return to old ones, and to relish a great book, is essential for creativity. I have certainly benefited, and I do hope that others have as well.

References

The Poetry Foundation: Glossary of Poetic Terms. Available from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/haiku-or-hokku> [20 April 2020]

King, S. (2000) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Simon and Schuster referenced by Coner Murphy on The Writing Cooperative. Available from: <https://writingcooperative.com/tagged/stephen-king> [18 April 2020]

Various writers (2020) Lockdown Culture: Novelists pick books to inspire, uplift, and offer escape. *The Guardian*. 5 April.

Hunt, E (2020) 'The perfect time to start': how book clubs are enduring and flourishing during Covid-19. *The Guardian*. 26 March.



Matthew Tett is a teacher and freelance writer living in the south-west of the UK. He is also *Writing in Education's* Reviews Editor. Since its inaugural year in 2018, Matthew has coordinated the StoryTown book festival in Corsham, near Bath. He also writes short fiction.