



How did I get here?

Marina Oliver: Try everything once

Marina Oliver has published many novels, historical and contemporary, both under her own name and using pseudonyms for different genres, as well as How To books and articles. She has self-published a magazine and several books. She runs courses and workshops, gives talks, and has her own appraisal agency, StorytrackS. Lately she has been editing a new fiction imprint for Transita.

Follow your dream

I've had a compulsion to write, since I was a child. Many writers do, and feel bereft if they are not writing something.

Winning a prize in a borough's essay competition when I was ten was an encouragement, but when I left school and wanted to be a journalist I allowed my mother to deter me. Don't fall into that trap. If you have a dream, do your best to follow it whatever discouragement you receive.

So I came to writing by the back door, as it were. I tried all sorts. There were few books then giving guidance, I knew no classes or writing circles. I wrote by instinct, having been a voracious reader and having absorbed some of the techniques through a subconscious analysis of what I read. I wrote dire short stories, made an attempt to write stage plays, and then began to have some success selling articles.

At this time I met a woman who published a quarterly magazine, aimed at intelligent women. When she gave it up I edited and published it for three years. This was in the 1960s when many women's groups were forming. I asked some of these women to write articles about what they were doing, and discovered that enterprising

women could not necessarily explain themselves clearly. I had to do a lot of rewriting and editing.

It's much easier to see what can be improved in someone else's work than in your own! It's difficult to see your own typing mistakes because you tend to read what you expect to see. In the same way it's hard to be objective about your own writing, see mistakes, or how something could be improved. Having someone you trust to point these out is useful. You could have one or more writing partners to swap work with. You could depend on writing circles. You might go to classes or courses or conferences, or enter competitions. Be aware that if the critics don't know the industry well, their advice might not be of help in getting published. Paying for a critique by a professional body or agency can be more authoritative.

Don't give up the day job

Eventually I wrote a novel, which is what I'd always wanted to do. I wrote it in three months, and the first publisher I sent it to accepted it, with some minor changes. So for many years I wrote novels.

Find your niche and stick to it, but don't neglect other possibilities. Try everything. You may not

be very good at fiction but wonderful at explaining things in non-fiction articles or books. I once advised a student to forget novels, and suggested he used his knowledge to write text books. I had a letter soon afterwards to say he'd had two accepted.

Once something is accepted, however, you can't relax. Don't give up the day job until you are making more from your writing than your salary. All sorts of obstacles are put in our way. Editors move, publishers stop publishing your type of books, they amalgamate or are taken over, they cut back their lists, have bank loans called in, or collapse. This is the worst part of being a freelance writer. Suddenly we have to start all over again.

I have written for various fiction publishers here and in America. Nine of them have for some reason ceased publication, and I have friends who have lost four other UK publishers. Similar problems beset the magazine industry. We need perseverance, the resilience to bounce back when something like this happens. Always be on the lookout for potential new markets.

I began to do appraisals

When I had published a couple of dozen novels I began to do appraisals for the Romantic Novelists' Association (RNA), which has a scheme to help new writers by giving a report on their novels. Much later, two friends and I set up the StorytrackS Agency. I have appraised novels for Arts Council England and others.

I now analyse every book and script, trying to judge several things at the same time. I examine the techniques I have learned by reading dozens of writing guides, and those I know work for me from my own reading experience. I look for such things as a good title, interesting opening, varied and believable characters, a logical, believable plot, natural dialogue, too much or too little detail and description, in the right place, accuracy of historical or other facts, style, structure, and whether it fits the requirements of the target

publisher, in length and style, and most of all, whether I want to go on reading.

The tone of the appraisal should be encouraging, without being too optimistic about the chances of publication. Stress the amount of competition honestly. Praise strengths (where you can) and show how to improve weaknesses rather than just listing them.

I try to be positive, but saying I like something takes very little time, and praise, though welcome, isn't as useful as discussing how things can be improved, so I concentrate on that. And occasionally I may suggest a writer's strengths could be used more effectively in some other type of writing, such as non-fiction or script writing.

Some of the errors I see all the time are: starting too early in the story; too many characters being introduced at the beginning; explaining too much; not checking facts; and not reading recently published books.

Writing and self-publishing my 'how to' books

Most writers now buy 'how to' books. Writing my guides for How To Books came about because of someone I'd met. Don't neglect networking, it's invaluable. You can learn a lot from talking to other writers, meeting editors and agents at conferences, and reading the trade press. One thing often leads to another.

A journalist I'd met was recruiting authors for a series of guides for How To Books, and she asked me if I'd write the one on the novel. I wrote three more books for the series. My daughter Debbie, who is a magazine production editor, collaborated on a very basic book, *Starting To Write*, and I wrote two specialist genre books on historical and romantic fiction. *The Beginner's Guide to Writing a Novel* went into its fourth edition in January 2006, but when the publisher was cutting back his list I got the rights back on

the other three. I still have copies of the romantic fiction book, bought when they were remaindered, but we decided to self-publish the other two titles.

It would have cost a lot to get a printer to print hundreds of copies, and we had no means of distributing them. It would also have cost a lot to advertise. So Debbie set the books up in a new design, and we self-publish by print on demand. We print off a few copies at a time, comb bind them, and take them to sell at conferences and workshops.

It's risky to self-publish unless you know you can sell the books, and to do that you usually need a local or specific captive market. We had this when I was asked to write a history of my old school for its Centenary. Members of the Old Girls Club would buy them, so would present and future members of the school.

There are several printers who will set out a book and do short runs. I went to see a couple and had the impression they could produce a standard type of book well enough, but not the kind I envisaged, with good design and lots of drawings and photographs. To go direct to a printer was another option, but they wanted the copy all prepared, and I didn't then have software sophisticated enough to do that.

In the end I used a designer's firm, one man who did the layout, using my ideas, the other who advised on printers and paper and master minded that side of the production. They produced a fabulous 'feel good' book, and the first 500 hardback copies sold out in three months, so we had another 500 printed in a softback edition.

This was the first book I'd self-published, and in order to get ISBN numbers I had to set up a publishing company. I had a lot of help from Whitakers. I phoned them going through various options for a name to use, and was given ten numbers for a minimal payment.

The next book I published was a history of a writers' association for its fiftieth anniversary. This was written by the secretary of the past ten years. By then I had better software and it was a more straightforward book, so I set it out and we had it printed by a short-run printer.

The software gets even better, and my latest self-publishing has been a 64 page A5 booklet to go with a new circular walk local rambles have set up. This includes some general history of the area, specific histories of the buildings passed during the walk, together with photographs and drawings. Having had the experience of setting out the RNA's magazine for the past three years, I was able to design the pages of this much more complicated book, and convert it to the right type of file which the printer could use.

I use WordPerfect for these books. (My daughter used QuarkXpress, which is what magazines use, and it's very clever, but expensive!) WordPerfect is more than adequate for my needs so I haven't tried specialist publishing packages.

Unless you intend to self-publish, you don't need the latest elaborate word processing package or the fastest computer. So long as you can convert your work onto a disk or into a file which can be sent by email to the publisher when they ask for it, you're OK. But I do advise getting the best printer you can afford. Consider a laser. It's more expensive to buy, but running costs are lower than those of an inkjet. If you will be printing lots of pages you want economy, but also good quality for sending initial submissions to editors. Faint print, difficult to read, is off-putting. Other vital tools are a good dictionary and a copy of the most recent Writers' and Artists' Yearbook.

Running writing workshops

I've judged competitions, including the first two Harry Bowling Prizes, and have administered the 2006 Harry Bowling Prize. I run workshops and courses, from half a day to a full week. I've been to most of the main writing conferences, but the

first time I was asked to run a course at one was when several How To Books authors were invited to the Writers' Holiday at Caerleon in South Wales. After that first year I was invited to speak and run courses at other conferences, including the Cheltenham Festival, and I've been back to Caerleon each year to run an advanced novel course with a dozen students who have completed a novel. I read some of each beforehand, and devise sessions to focus on what is most needed.

Networking happens at these conferences. At Caerleon I met the publisher of the Studymates Guides, and sold him an updated, much expanded book on writing historical fiction, which they published in November 2005.

It helps that I used to be a teacher. I plan sessions, and depending on the length of time, organise exercises. Say ten minutes for an introduction, a ten minute exercise, such as writing a character profile, and ten minutes for going over it. Make sure students understand the concepts, and also the reasons for them. People learn by doing as well as by seeing examples of good practice.

I mix the format with some individual exercises as above, and some done in pairs or small groups – for example, devising a plot given a few starting points.

I don't spend a lot of time letting students read out their work – it takes too long and is not productive. If you have two sessions and can read their work yourself in between you can pick out one or two illustrative examples. Give handouts at the end of the session unless you want students to read them in the class.

When I give talks, I use notes, not a script. This is more natural and most audiences are receptive, they don't want high level oratory. General audiences like to hear about how you and other writers work, and inside knowledge of the publishing world. Everyone likes to hear how ideas arise and are developed.

For a short talk or a half-day workshop, I concentrate on one aspect, such as character or plot, the main elements of a novel. In a day I can cover both, in more than a day lots more. When I do a workshop I have short exercises and plenty of handouts, since people can't be expected to remember everything from a concentrated session.

I am sometimes asked to do a specific topic, such as dialogue to a group of script writers. This can vary in a novel, a stage, radio or TV play, so you need to study the medium you are aiming at. Though it helps to know beforehand how much experience students have, I find it's always worth emphasising the basics. We never stop learning, and I find a new fact or tip in every talk I listen to or article I read.

Finding new talent, and guiding writers towards publication, as I have done in the RNA, StorytrackS, Arts Council England, Caerleon and elsewhere, is always a huge pleasure - the next best thing to having my own work published!

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Useful links

Marina Oliver

Includes information on how to buy her 'How to' creative writing guides.
www.marina-oliver.net

StorytrackS

Offers honest appraisals of unpublished typescripts (novels, short stories, books for children and teenagers and non-fiction) plus ghost-writing services and advice on self-publishing projects.
www.storytracks.net

Tudor House Publishing

Publishes a number of non-fiction titles including *Starting to Write* by Marina Oliver.
<http://www.tudorhousepublisher.co.uk/>

The Harry Bowling Prize

Held every two years, the prize is given for the first chapter and synopsis of a novel set in London, written by anyone who has not previously published an adult novel.

<http://www.harrybowlingprize.net/>

Historical Novel Society

Membership organization which promotes all aspects of historical fiction. Provides support and opportunities for new writers.

<http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/>

Romantic Novelists' Association

The UK's only professional writers' association specialising in romantic fiction. Unpublished authors can apply under the New Writers' Scheme – membership fee includes a manuscript appraisal.

www.rna-uk.org

The National Association of Writers in Education

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.

www.nawe.co.uk

Transita

Publishes contemporary women's fiction that reflects the lives of women aged 45 – 75.

<http://www.transita.co.uk/>

Vanity publishing

The site of vanity publishing expert Johnathon Clifford features a free advice pack covering both vanity and self-publishing.

www.vanitypublishing.info

Writers' Holiday

Runs an annual Summer Writers' Holiday at Carleon College, University of Wales and Winter Weekend Workshops at Fishguard.

www.writersholiday.net