

Nigel Bartlett now understands why he writes and tells us how he discovered the reason, as he takes us through writing his crime thriller *King of the Road*.



Why do I write? Can anyone tell me?

As a writer who's about to have his first novel published, the question I most dread being asked is, "How long did it take you?" I suppose the reason people ask is because they're wondering, "Could I do that?" And I know why I dread the question: it's because the answer is ten years. That's how long writing my novel took, from tapping out the short story that later turned into the full-length novel, *King of the Road*, to the final editing stage. I can shorten that time of course – conveniently forget the short story, shave off the editing stages – but even then, from starting to write the actual novel to finally submitting it to an agent, we're still talking seven years.

To me, that sounds like a long time to put together a crime thriller that some would call a pot-boiler. After all, it's not as if *King of the Road* is The Great Australian Novel, in which case I might be excused for taking so long to create my magnum opus. The fact is, though, that combining a desire to be a novelist with working full-time hours in my day job does not make for an easy existence. But still, that's the reality of my world.

I often hear authors being asked to describe their "writing life". My writing life entails waking on a Sunday in my Redfern flat, watching *Insiders* on ABC while having breakfast, then going to the computer and spending the rest of the day there, breaking for lunch, snacks, cups of tea and to put on a couple of rounds of laundry. It's not glamorous, but it gets the job done. Slowly. That was how I completed six drafts of *King of the Road*, a novel which eventually ended up at 100,000 words but which also used up many tens of thousands more in discarded copy.

That's not to say it's the only way I write. I took five weeks off from my day job recently to do the edits on my manuscript required by my publisher, Vintage (an imprint of Random House). That was an altogether different affair, maybe because the edits turned out to be far less arduous than I'd anticipated when booking that time off. I'd wake latish, around 8am, go to the gym, come home, have a mid-morning breakfast and then go to my computer, staying there (with breaks for lunch, tea, snacks, etc etc etc) until the early evening.

"This is the life," I thought. "I could do this every day."

Sadly, though, I can't do that every day, because my mortgage must be paid. And so it was back to my day job. Now, during the three proofreading stages that take place before the manuscript goes to the printer, entire weekends are devoted to poring over my 100,000 words, letter by letter, scouring them for those hated typos, inconsistencies and grammar errors. Friends wonder if they'll ever see me again.

I'm not complaining, though – or, rather, I'm reminding myself that I mustn't complain – because being published has been my lifelong dream. And for reasons I don't fully understand, I believe Theodore Roosevelt was right when he said, "Nothing worth having was ever achieved without effort."

Was he right? I don't know. My gas heater is definitely worth having in winter, and I was given that by friends who'd upgraded to a newer version. I didn't even have to ask them for it – they just offered it to me and delivered it to my flat – so the only effort on my part was to hook it up to the bayonet in my living room. But "success" in any field – well, that seems harder to come by without hard work.

I was talking with someone today and said, in my usual over-analysing way, "I wonder if I'm a workaholic." I don't think so, though. In my day job, I'm only too eager to bolt out the door at 5.45pm and not give what I've been doing another thought. I always take a lunch break, even when tasks are piling up and other people are chained to their desks, and, while I get the job done, I do so (it seems to me) with fairly minimal effort.

So, why have I made things so difficult for myself with this desire (some call it my passion) to write? Why have I piled this extra burden onto my shoulders? Why am I eager to spend weekends and evenings at writing workshops and author talks, give up my annual leave to edit my novel or finish my research masters in creative writing, go to my writing group once a fortnight, carry a notebook and fill it with plot ideas, read a multitude of books about the craft of writing, read endless crime novels and thrillers to find out how "they" do it, waste countless hours and minutes dreaming about seeing my name on the cover of a novel, spend hours and hours discussing writing, publishing, promotion and publicity with writer friends over coffee or dinner?

And all of this comes on top of that most difficult, but by far the most necessary, aspect of being a writer: typing away at my computer for hour upon hour upon hour. Why have I done all this? And why have I done it for years, without ever knowing (until 12 months ago) whether or not I would fulfill that dream of being published by a big-name house?

Because when I don't do any of this, when I've made the decision that it's all a waste of time and I need to give up on the idea of being a writer, or when I've taken time out to earn more money or concentrate on some fancy new job I've landed, I end up feeling moody, depressed, anxious and irritable. During those times, I tend to feel (frightening as it is to admit) that life has no point. So I go back to earning a bit less, give up the fancy job with the posh-sounding title and, funnily enough, I'm happier.

Now, don't get me wrong. If there's anything I do to perfection, it's procrastinate. I spend many hours a week on Facebook, love watching bad telly and eat away at my brain power by fiddling around aimlessly on my phone. The point is, however, that I've spent enough time writing, rewriting and rewriting again and again and again to produce a piece of work that someone wants to publish and that I hope more than a few someones will want to read.

I once told a psychologist (when discussing what I should do with my life) that by the time I reached my deathbed, if I hadn't made every effort possible to have a novel published, I would be "seriously pissed off". Despite the casualness of my terminology, she understood that this was a matter of supreme importance to me, and it was the first time I started to understand it, too.

That wonderful psychologist, whose name and most of whose advice I don't remember now, looked me squarely in the eye.

"Then you have to do it," she said. "You have no other option. You have to write."

That was all it took for me to take my desires seriously. All it needed was someone wearing glasses and being paid by Medicare to tell me what I already knew. Why do I write? Because someone told me I had to.

[King of the Road](#), by Nigel Bartlett, will be published by Vintage on February 1, 2015.