

WHEN DEADLINES DON'T LOOM

Every story starts with a blank page – and a good idea. It's true for 300 words of hard news hammered out on deadline. Same goes for a whimsical magazine feature, a rapid-fire blast on Twitter, the first draft of a television script or last chapter of a book. Come to think of it, the same principles of writing apply throughout, they just have to be bent to the will of the medium.

There's no better place to get over fear of the blank page than in a newsroom – because there's no time to indulge a creative block, or to wait around for the muse to appear.

Journalism's probably the best training ground for long-form non-fiction. You learn to follow an idea through the various strata of research, from initial telephone queries and Google searches, to picking through archival press clippings and deep background stuff. You get a handle on interviewing, and suffer the labour pangs of transcribing them (forward and back, forward and back, until you've picked the exact quote out from the background noise).

Then you learn to weave all that into a compelling storyline. There are the mind maps and brain storms, the frenzied writing, the cigarettes in a gusty doorway, more writing, the panicked coffee with a colleague to talk a flabby story back into shape. Most of all, journalism teaches you to get through all that toil fast, with the hot breath of a news editor on your neck.

For some journalists, writing a book is as inevitable as swinging one foot ahead of the other. "It comes so easy to us," says veteran reporter and six-book author, Max du Preez. "I've spent my entire adult life writing and reporting. Writing is a part of me like eating and drinking."

Journalist and agony-aunt columnist Caroline Hurry says, after two books, that the best way to write "is to plonk yourself down in front of the PC, and stay off the web".

When children's novelist Helen Brain starts a new manuscript, she writes 1 000 words a day, re-

WRITING A BOOK IN TANDEM WITH PRACTISING JOURNALISM IS A BIT LIKE TRAINING FOR AN ULTRA-MARATHON IN 100M BURSTS, WRITES LEONIE JOUBERT

ardless. No excuses, no whining, just get that bum on the seat and the words on the page.

My first book happened by accident. I'd outgrown one job and the local newsroom wasn't hiring, so I stumbled into a juggling act of freelance writing (mostly low-profile features and columns), studying and travelling. It was low-budget stuff, but out of that came the first long-hand scrawls that became *Scorched: South Africa's changing climate*.

The deadline is a peculiar animal – it's terrifying, up close, but it's the beast that makes us most productive. "Much as I hate deadlines, there's nothing like a stick to get you to produce the goods," says Hurry.

After 23 years in a newsroom, Jeanne Viall is writing her first book. "For the first six months I did both (journalism and the book) – and soon realised that it wouldn't work. It's easier to get working on a 2 000-word article that has a deadline, than research a book which has a wide-open brief and a deadline a year ahead. I couldn't get my teeth into it. So I've stopped journalism for now."

Scorched wasn't written to deadline. But the regular journalism that paid the rent while I cobbled the manuscript together, was. I wrote enough journalism to live off, a bursary paid for the Masters, and I toiled over individual book chapters the rest of the time. I'm not sure what kept me at my desk late on those Friday nights or through the odd weekend, but I got the book out. I think it was the whiff of a great story that itched in my nose like a delicious allergy. Everything I've done since then (two other books, a text for school kids, an early foray into TV script writing, monthly journalism) has happened to the sweet angst of deadlines.

Journalism is about finding ideas, researching them and then laying them out in story form. Whether it's in 150 words or 80 000, the process isn't that different – except that long-form writing allows

much greater depth to the story. When you do journalism and a book in tandem, the two inevitably feed off each other like one of those Celtic animal-bite-animal motifs, meaning that the journalism reflects the book, reflects the journalism.

But when it comes to getting those words down on paper, long-form writing demands large blocks of time, which is where daily journalism becomes disruptive. Book writing is a hobby, until the deadline starts looming, says Du Preez, "then journalism becomes a nuisance just to pay the bills and book writing becomes a priority".

Just about every writer you'll speak to will tell you this: when the big push starts, everything else gets put to one side. Du Preez finishes off a manuscript with 14-hour days. Liza Lazarus, who wrote *The Book of Jacob* with her husband Greg Fried after eight years of magazine writing, said it was "a mammoth undertaking, with multiple edits and agonising over every word".

Once the first manuscript draft is down, then the editing starts – first, the DIY edits (I must have reworked some chapters in *Scorched* at least 15 times, sometimes more); followed by the tweaks asked for by the proofreader and the publisher's editor. Helen Brain will do "a minimum of six drafts and often double that before the manuscript finally gets sent to the printers". It's a long, long haul getting from concept to neatly bound title.

In the end, book writing in South Africa is for the love of it, and for building the journalist's brand. Because God knows, it doesn't pay. Most book deals are royalties-based, meaning the author gets a percentage of sales. In this country, in spite of a 47-million-strong population, book sales are so low that a bestseller in fiction is a miniscule 3 000 copies sold, non-fiction is 5 000. Unless the extraordinary happens (as in Jake White or John van de Ruit), royalties on sales is small change. Journalism pays much better, rand-for-word.

Moan and gripe as we might about the economics of book writing, it's not enough to put authors off, so the rewards are clearly beyond the hard currency. It's got something to do with the thrill of the chase, the satisfaction of chewing over a three-course issue rather than hurrying down a fast food meal, and the utter joy of what happens when the words flow freely, and read well.

It's a long-haul run, book writing, but ultimately there's no substitute for the view along the way, or the thrill of making it to the end.

ACCIDENTAL JOURNALIST

BEFORE SHE BEGAN WRITING BOOKS AND TV SHOWS, LAUREN BEUKES DALLIED WITH LUXURY, SEX, ADVENTURE AND CRIME – ALL IN THE NAME OF JOURNALISM.

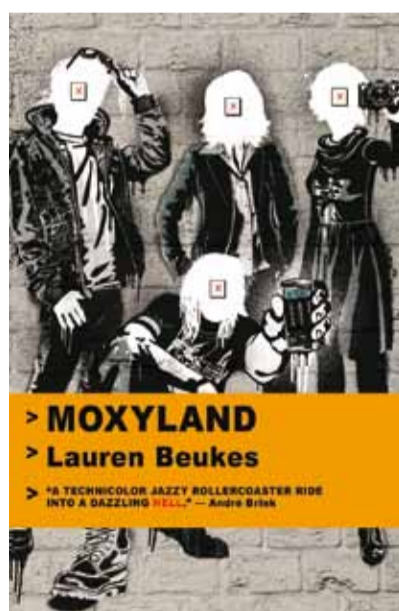
I never intended to be a journalist. As a teenager, I craved the indolent glamour of being a novelist, you know, lying around making stuff up all day. Journalism seemed too much like hard graft.

At the time, I didn't realise that research makes writing richer and real-er and more readable. Or that transcribing hours and hours and hours of interviews can teach you more about dialogue than university writing courses. Or that the profession comes with a built-in All Access Pass.

People will tell you that money opens doors, but those doors tend to lead onto the kind of plush places featured on *Top Billing*. Once you get over the gooey adjectives, all that "sumptuously appointed"-ness, they blend into a blandly samey blur of luxury.

If, on the other hand, you're looking to crack open the portals that will take you somewhere interesting, somewhere with the potential to jar you from your inhibitions and suppositions and surprise you, drop whatever it is that you're doing and take up a career in journalism.

It might not be a VIP pass (it's usually more about sneaking in the maintenance door than pulling up in a limo out front), but



it'll still get you backstage. And in 12 years of freelancing, I've been backstage in some bizarre and wonderful and terrifying places.

In pursuit of a story, I've jumped out of a plane and into howling sky, crashed a wedding in Langa, learned how to pole dance and make mqombothi, hung out with nuclear physicists and homeless sex workers, high court judges, rehab tourists and teen vampires and lunched with the owner of the Cape's

self-proclaimed finest brothel, whose eyes were more cold and dead than the snaggle-toothed prehistoric monster fish I'd scuba dived with the week before.

And, here's the ridiculous bit: been paid

for the privilege. Journalism gives you a licence to intrude, to get backstage in people's heads. You're actually required to ask the queasily uncomfortable questions that polite society would dictate as strictly off limits. You learn to unpick the truths from the subtext, in the way people say things, like the Aids activist couple who explained their love as a temporary infection. Or the electricity cable thieves who assured me that the catcalls of "iz'nyoka" trailing them as we walked through Nyanga weren't referring to the vilified human snakes from the Eskom ads, but rather the perils of electricity, how it can bite you like a snake. Or the paramilitary township vigilante group, all Sopranos-pantsula behind oversized Raybans and gleaming teeth, who described themselves as lions guarding the sheep.

Journalism opened up my head as well as doors, recalibrating the way I understand the way the world works, and, more importantly, how people do. What my imperious novelist-wannabe teen self didn't realise all those years ago is that you can't make this stuff up. I've become a better writer for it.

