





HOW TO WRITE A NOVEL

The winner of the Montegrappa Writing Prize
lets *Stylist* in on her trade secrets from the
coalface of first-time novel writing

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KAREN OSMAN GETS UP
EARLY TO WRITE BEFORE
GOING TO WORK



The saying goes that everyone has a novel in them (though, according to Christopher Hitchens' witticism, "that, in most cases, is where it should stay"). But not many of us manage to commit one to paper.

Karen Osman, however, is in the process of doing just that. She recently won the Montegrappa Writing Prize at

about a mother who writes letters to the prison inmate who murdered her child. "It's quite dark," says Osman, who cites the recent trend for page-turning, female-focused thrillers such as *The Girl on the Train* and *Before I Go to Sleep* as an influence.

Although Osman runs Travel Ink, which provides content writing services to the travel and tourism industry, writing fiction

would challenge myself."

The inspiration for *Dear Michael* was drawn, in part, from her memories as a university student in the northern English town of Durham, where the novel is set. "There was a volunteer programme for students and one of the things you could do was writing to prison inmates, which I always found a fascinating idea," says Osman. "I became a mother myself 18 months ago, and I have another baby on the way, so I kind of put the two ideas together."

Osman is halfway through writing the novel, getting up first thing in the morning, "before the day really begins," to write, balancing the project

with motherhood, pregnancy, and running her own business.

Here, she reveals her insider tips for finally writing that novel you've always thought about...

"I'M A BUSY MUM AND I RUN A BUSINESS – I THOUGHT A NOVEL WOULD BE SOMETHING I'D DO WHEN I WAS RETIRED"

the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, a prize for as-yet unpublished, first-time novelists living in the UAE. Previous winners include Rachel Hamilton and *Stylist* columnist Annabel Kantaria, all of whom have gone on to become internationally published authors.

Osman, 37, won for her novel *Dear Michael*, a thriller

is new to her. "I've always read a lot – I can't imagine life without books – but I actually never imagined myself having a novel in me," she says. "I'm a busy mum and I run a business so I always thought that if I wrote a novel it would be something I'd do when I was retired. But then I came across the Montegrappa Writing Prize and I thought I

OSMAN SAYS SHE
NEVER IMAGINED
SHE'D WRITE A NOVEL



GET SCRIBBLING

Karen Osman's tips for fellow first-time novelists

FINDING INSPIRATION

- ◆ Immerse yourself in books and read a lot – I'm part of a book club, which is a great way to discover what other people want to read
- ◆ Set aside time to think, undistracted by your phone or Facebook, and use the tools that help you brainstorm best. For me, that's a quiet spot with a nice view and a pen and paper
- ◆ I made lists of my different life experiences and then started mixing and matching those ideas to create a unique storyline
- ◆ It's often easier to start writing when you have some knowledge of the topic. Setting my novel in the north of England, where I'm from and went to university, gave me lots of ready material

PLOTTING AND PLANNING

- ◆ I did a lot of research on how to plan a plot. A quick Google search throws up all sorts of mindmaps and template ideas to help you visualise your plot
- ◆ Post-it notes are really useful for planning the main plot line and various subplots and motivations, and how they occur and interact along different timelines, as you can physically move them around as the story evolves
- ◆ I started by writing my 'beginning, middle and end' down on different post-its and then filled the gaps with important plot points and subplots that I could shuffle around until it made sense
- ◆ For each plot point, I also wrote down the motivation behind it on another post-it – it's important to figure out exactly why each thing happens
- ◆ I then worked out a chapter structure and slotted the plot points in to it so that I had an idea of what I needed to cover in each section
- ◆ Writing a general roadmap of the plot is a useful exercise before you start writing – for the competition, we had to write a 400-word synopsis and that really helped to focus me

BREATHING LIFE

- ◆ Aim to create contrast between your characters – otherwise it's easy just to write several versions of yourself or your friends
- ◆ You need a solid picture of each of your characters – everything from what they look like to what their living room looks like. I use a spreadsheet filled with my characters' likes, dislikes, etc
- ◆ Each character's tone of voice will naturally develop as the novel

goes on, so you may need to go back and check for consistency later

COMMITTING TO PAPER

- ◆ I diarise my writing time and try my best to stick to it. Including small incentives like lunch with a friend afterwards can give you extra motivation
- ◆ Set yourself targets – I aim to write about 5,000 words every week
- ◆ Start the targets small at first, so you don't get daunted. Even writing just a hundred words a day is a start – the main hurdle is getting started, but once you become engrossed the writing process gets easier
- ◆ My approach is just to get it all down on paper, even if it doesn't sound great. Just go for it and get something written down – you can go back and edit it later. If you're too much of a perfectionist with your first draft, you'll find it hard to get anywhere
- ◆ Finding a writing buddy for mutual motivation can help you keep going
- ◆ Sometimes you can get a bit lost in the process, so having someone with a fresh pair of eyes – whether that's family, friends, or a writing buddy – to point out the bits that don't work can be really beneficial



COFFEE: AN ESSENTIAL
NOVEL-WRITING INGREDIENT

