

4 – Beating Heart

The plot is the beating heart of a novel. And despite character outlines and being aware of the conflicts and motivations of those characters, it can be as complicated and as delicate as open heart surgery to get the heart beating. One beat is not enough. The heart has to find its rhythm, and its continuity. The plot must be steady, reliable, strong enough to guide you through the writing process until it is completed.

I think the element that comes to mind here is courage. Courage to follow the voices in your head that tell you what your characters need or want to do in order to resolve or work out the elements of conflict that drive the novel forward. Courage, too, to say whatever needs to be said. Is this confusing? If someone had said this to me before I had written a novel myself I might not have understood it. But, believe me, to write the novel you will need courage.

The moment you start to write the plot, many conflicting voices will start to sound in your head. There's the voice telling you that your idea is unrealistic. There's another telling you it's silly, superficial, unnecessary, boring. There's yet another telling you that you're not the one to write this novel. And another one, maybe the most powerful, telling you to quit having delusions of grandeur and to go back to your mundane existence. These are the voices of your fear and your resistance. These are the voices that will prevent many from ever putting pen to paper. These are the voices of your imagined, external world, a critical, unfriendly world.

These are not reality. They are just your imagination. And, in order to overcome them, you must make the decision that you are writing this book for yourself, in the first instance, and for a wider public, maybe. This book is for you; this is your growth, your development. This book is your way of making sense of the experiences you have and the events you have seen, and the people who have crossed your path.

So, if fear and embarrassment and a feeling of inadequacy prevent your literary heart from beating, then a certain selfishness, and a need to make sense of your world, and moreover an acceptance that you are writing initially for yourself, should be the jolt it needs to start it up.

You will be surprised, but even at the plotting stage you will feel the momentum gather, and the story take shape, once you have overcome this initial, paralysing fear. You know your characters, and what you want them to overcome and achieve. You also know, have decided where these conflicts take place, in terms of geography, history, and society. And once you blend these elements into a story, secondary characters, events, new conflicts needing to be resolved, will present themselves.

At this stage the plot can be written into a synopsis. How long a synopsis is, is purely personal. I prefer to keep a synopsis short, letting the secondary characters present themselves. I then return to my character sketches and write a rough outline of those characters to add to my initial sketches.

In the case of *The Cloths of Heaven*, when I had written about one A4 for the plot, I had added mothers, fathers, friends, etc to my three main characters. What also came to light at this point was my need to literally draw a map of a fictitious street in Limerick City, which was to be the common setting for the entire book. This street was the base for everything that happened in the book. The characters might move on, but the link, the core, would be this one street. I called it James' Street, and set about drawing the map. I needed it to incorporate a Church, a shop, a pub, and schools. I also wanted it to be close the banks of the River Shannon, and yet not too far away from the city centre. And more importantly, it had to cease to exist once my story was completed. So it had to be an area that would be included in any inner city development plans which were taking place in Limerick at that time. I wanted these people to come together, create something together, deal with issues together, and once they had moved on, I wanted even the evidence that they had ever been together, to be no more than a story. I wanted the entire novel to have a mythological quality, to emphasise the very Irishness of it.

I drew the map, placed Michael at the Church, Sheila in one of the terraced houses with her mother and father, and decided that Maud would live in a caravan with her mother, who, with her gypsy-like

wildness, might just become a more important character than even I had planned. Maud's mother, Kitty, might just be the electricity that would keep this novel alive.

Being methodical and needing clarity, the next stage for me has to be the chapter breakdown. Not all writers need this much preparation – D.H. Lawrence preferred to let the book take him on a journey of discovery so he did very little preparation. John Irving and Minette Walters do a lot of research and planning. I fall somewhere in the middle. But I need a chapter breakdown if only to see if there's enough muscle to the plot