

WordWorks Interview: Kathy Page

WW: Any book is the outcome of months—probably years—of hard labour, and the exercise of a wide variety of skills. As an established fiction writer, very familiar with the construction of novels, what would you say are the most important parts of the process?

K.P: The idea for a book can be powerful and persistent, but also quite vague: not a totally solid foundation. I do write outlines and so on, and the finished books do significantly resemble them, but I'm well aware that they are just stories I am telling myself about how the book might go. For me, it's first draft, which you get to any way you can, then revision, which is often very radical, and what makes the book. The first draft is a very important landmark in the process, but it's often more like a survey of the territory than an actual construction.

WW: Why do you say, "which you get to any way you can"? That suggests urgency. If writing that draft is as exploratory as you suggest in "a survey of the territory," shouldn't you prepare thoroughly before setting pen to paper?

K.P: Well, that sounds very reasonable, but should and shouldn't don't really work here (for me). It's only once I have committed myself to a story idea that it really reveals itself. By writing, you deepen your knowledge of the story and the characters and then sometimes your ideas about what it is, and who they are, begin to change.

WW: One of the things I was thinking of when I asked about preparations for the first draft was research. Research is most commonly associated with non-fiction for obvious reasons. Are the reasons the same for a fiction writer, or does a novelist do research for specifically fictional ends? If so, can you give any examples from your own work?

K.P: I (mostly) enjoy research. My ends are certainly fictional—I'm using what I discover, rather than being faithful to it. At the same time, though, things I learn through research may influence the story, even change it or take it in an unexpected direction. My research into the treatment of sex offenders, for example, supplied much of the structure for an entire section of *Alphabet*, where Simon participates in group drama therapy and is subjected to the penile plesmograph and "story tapes" designed to rewrite his sexual script... What I discovered in 1996 about the treatment of burns gave me a turning point scene in *The Story of My Face*, where, towards the end of the book, Natalie reveals herself and what she has suffered physically to the reader. I couldn't have written that passage without the generosity of James Partridge, founder of the UK charity Changing Faces, and a burn survivor himself; he put aside several hours to share details of his own treatment and rehabilitation with me, as well as his thoughts on living with disfigurement.

As for *The Find*, when a genetics counselor began to explain what they call the “protocols” for genetic testing for Huntington’s Disease, I realized straightaway that this was material I would be using and was able to ask her to go into a great deal of detail. The protocols are a series of stages that have to be passed through before the test results can be given, and they are there largely to give people time to think through what they are doing and why, to allow them time to change their minds, and ensure they are as prepared as they can be to take on whatever result they receive. I found the care that had gone into creating this process both fascinating and moving and this material provided me with several important scenes and an underlying structure for the entire book, which, despite all the other action of the story, is shaped around Anna’s decision to change her mind, take the test, and in so doing, to look her own future in the face.

WW: You did a considerable amount of research in two wildly different spheres for your new novel, The Find, but—correct me if I’m wrong—I don’t think you have any direct personal involvement with inherited degenerative neurological disease or discovering fossils. Why did you choose Huntington’s Chorea and paleontology as the key topics in the story?

K.P: An idea brews for years, sometimes, and I’m only semi conscious of it. One of the things about creativity, I think, is that apparently disconnected things are combined into new wholes. I remember reading an article called “Bring me My Phillips Mental Jacket” in the *London Review of Books* in which the author, Slavoj Žižek, writing about biogenetic intervention, used this matter of the choice to know or not to know whether one would get HD as an example of something or other—I forget exactly what—but I was blown away by the hugeness and complexity of the choice. And I have two friends who are caring for people with HD, so the disease and the position it puts families in (to know or not to know) have been in my awareness for many years. Anna is a paleontologist and I think that was inspired by a visit to the museum in Courtenay, where they have a lovely Elasmosaur suspended from the ceiling (it was discovered by a child). And then, when you look at them, these two things don’t seem to me to be so wildly distinct. They’re intimately connected: mutation and evolution, chance and fate. And of course, in the novel, they are both discoveries to be made, and both part of the same person, Anna, who at the start, wants very badly to know some things, but doesn’t want to take the test.

WW: Did your own life experience provide the basic research for your earlier novels, like The Story of My Face and Alphabet? I’m wondering whether that kind of knowledge hold the same kind of validity as the more scholarly variety.

K.P: So far, I have tended not to write about my own life. I’m interested in what’s beyond me, in the Other. So I’m always involved in finding out.

That said, part of *Story* takes place in Finland, and I have worked there; *Alphabet* takes place in a prison, and again, I've worked in one and it was that experience that made me want to write the book. But in each case, there were huge unknown areas which I had to find out about: I've mentioned the treatment of sex-offenders; social conditions and religious sects in nineteenth century Finland, and religious sects in general, for example.

Now knowledge of the facts is one thing, but sensory detail, things you have seen and touched, are the real resources for writing. Going inside an old wooden church in Finland and walking around the graveyard afterwards was worth a book or two of facts (and gave me the name of one of my characters). The vicarage nearby was a complete gift, too. So when I research something outside of my experience, I'm not trying to become an expert on it, I'm trying to discover what it was like to live within it, to get to that physical level wherever possible.

In exploring the background for *The Find*, for example, I spent time with a genetics counselor, and a neurologist, as well as the two people I know who have HD. I interviewed a psychiatrist, and someone working at the testing laboratory. So in the end, my knowledge of the test was multilayered. Because Anna is a paleontologist, I bored the one paleontologist I know personally with endless questions about her training and motivation. Then I made several trips to The Royal Tyrell Museum at Drumheller: I interviewed some of the curators there, attended an entire paleontological conference, talked to many of the delegates, hung out in the beer tent. I went on a dig, took photographs, poked around in the storage rooms... I read many books as well, but they were hard going... These down to earth(!) kinds of research are what I find most helpful and inspiring.

WW: We've talked about research. Can we move on to the second R—revision, or rewriting—for a bit? Most people would find writing a novel daunting enough; rewriting it is almost too much. But you said at the beginning that it's what makes the book. You are an indefatigable reviser, and I know that all your novels go through many different manifestations before they are published. What gives you the resolve for so much work? Do you ever hesitate to murder your darlings?

K.P: Once I have an idea as to how it could be different or better, I really want to see how it will turn out that way. Revision (by which I mean big changes and cuts, not tinkering) is a huge amount of work, but at the same time, it excites me. So I imagine a new version of the novel and want to make it real. That said, I do sometimes cling to those darlings. It can take me a long time to let go, too. It really does help if I can put the project aside and return to it after six months or longer.

WW: How do you go about dismantling what you have written?

K.P: Print out the old version, read it, make notes, keep it close by— but also, start a brand new file.

WW: Does there always come a time when you consult someone else? How influential is that feedback?

K.P: Yes, I always want to test what I have done. I weigh the response against my view of the person as a reader. People can't always articulate what they feel, or say it very clearly, so you have to interpret. The tiniest things can be useful.

WW: How valuable have you found agents, publishers or editors as far as rewriting is concerned?

K.P: I've found editors very useful when they do offer substantive suggestions. Many do not. Agents have been very useful too. They have to take the book out and present it to publishers, and if they feel it's not working, or has no commercial appeal, that's hard for them to do. Some agents are great readers/literary critics, some are perhaps too focused on the market place. (A degree of this is good, of course, but too much can perhaps blind them to the inherent value of an idea or piece of writing.)

WW: Is there ever a time when you would dig in your heels and refuse to change something? Can you give an example?

K.P: Editors can see problems, but it's the writer who must find solutions. On the whole, I've found most editorial input useful, and have gone along with it, though not always taking the suggested remedy.

Once, I experimented with writing a story for a women's magazine. The girl in the story decided not to keep her baby and I was asked to change this to suit the market concerned, and I decided against it. I wanted to subvert the romance genre, not go along with it.

And in my first novel, *Back in the First Person*, I have a black character who is illiterate. This was perfectly realistic, given his environment, but I was asked to change it for reasons of political correctness: *do not represent black people as illiterate*. This was in 1986. After due consideration, and consultation with several black people, I refused, saying I was happy to take the consequences. No one complained.

WW: Just as a reality check for aspiring novelists, how many drafts of The Find have you written, and how long have they taken?

K.P: At least four drafts, and as many years. Plus a bit of thinking and note-taking for a year or so before.

WW: Looking back at that exercise, and similar ones with earlier novels, can you now define the ways in which rewriting strengthened the original concept? What kind of changes had the most significant impact?

K.P: Point of view is something that I have often changed in the course of a book. *Alphabet* was begun in the first person, but ended up a close third. I didn't discover Natalie's voice until I'd done a first draft of *The Story of My Face*. And true to form, much of the revision of *The Find* has centred around the point of view and story-telling voice. I began it wanting to write in a quite knowing third person, because I felt the story would work best with that kind of flexibility, but also because my last two books had each used the point of view of one of the characters and I just wanted to do something different. Halfway through, I lost my grip on this, and felt that I had to write in the first person for the two main characters. Much, much later, I realized that this didn't work because it interfered with the momentum of the story. And I did still hanker after the distance a more knowing third person voice could give. So although I resisted the work involved, I eventually recast it in a new kind of third-person narration. Of course that isn't just changing the pronouns and verbs. Every sentence and every scene needed to be reconsidered. I think the first-person interlude helped me to understand both characters. Structurally, I dithered a lot between two beginning points, liking them both, and in the end managed to weld them together (the new storytelling voice helped with this), and I also played around a great deal with how to reveal Anna's huge but necessary back story... It's endless really! Perhaps some people get it right first time, but I am just not one of them.

WW: Is it possible to do too much rewriting? How do you know when you've done enough?

K.P. There's a particular feeling of exhaustion/satisfaction... *Okay, I'm done*. As opposed to *Well, maybe*. But even that isn't totally reliable and yes, I think there's a danger of changing things simply because you are bored with how it reads to you, having read it ninety-six times! This is where having enough time is important—you can judge all this better if you are allowing the draft to sit and “go cold” between revisions.

WW: We are including a page of revision from an earlier version of The Find. Would you set it up for us please, and perhaps explain why nobody will find it in the novel when it's published next spring?

K.P: This passage of descriptive writing (which continues on the next page) was for quite a long time the beginning of the book. It's one of those darlings you mentioned. I like rain. And I like some of the sentences, and the idea of this young man, Scott, waking up in the night and having this moment of wonderful alertness, listening to the rain, before all sorts of trouble starts to come his way. On the other hand, it is slow, and the story has not really started: it's the moment before the beginning, really. When I changed to a completely different beginning, I played around with inserting this material (which I

was somehow attached to) later on, but I realized that the break in chronology was going to be confusing to anyone who had not read the earlier versions. Eventually, I managed to make myself cut it, and begin later in Scott's story when things are more exciting. I saved a couple of sentences (underlined in the passage that follows this interview). Still, I like knowing that this moment did exist; it's just that I have decided not to show it.

*WW: It's always fascinating to see how someone's mind works, Kathy; so thank you for those insights into the way you work. I know you've already plunged into that exploratory first draft of another novel, and while that's gestating, we'll look forward to spring and publication of *The Find* (McArthur & Company).*