

Which Brick Wall am I Hitting?

I find increasingly that new writers tend to feel that writing well means the script just pours onto the page. This is rarely the case (unfortunately) and is possibly the result of books and courses like my own that, despite themselves, cannot but help imply that writing is a nice linear logical process that just involves memorizing some ground rules - instead of the terrifyingly unpredictable business of applying craft skills to a mess of ideas and metaphors and intuitive links coming in code from the subconscious.

The novelist Flaubert counted himself lucky if he wrote one sentence a day!

Professional writers are monitoring what they write all the time. They check and rewrite as they go, then when they've finished a draft, they go right back to the beginning and do more drafts. They accept as given that what comes first is not necessarily the true idea, indeed, is probably out of focus. You can imagine the business of planning and writing .as being like using binoculars to focus on an object in the distance. You keep adjusting the lens - first you go too far one way, then you go too far the other way, finally, you get the script in focus.

To switch metaphors, the writing process consists of hitting a series of brick walls and finding the doorway in each. The only way that individual scripts (or plays or novels) differ in the writing is that sometimes you find the doors faster. Getting stuck is normal! Being stuck usually means you know something is wrong but can't yet pinpoint what (it can also be because personal, emotional factors have intervened) Sometimes it takes a minute to sort out, sometimes months.

Solving each problem is what writers do all day. If you always write fluently you are either a genius or not writing to your best. This is because fluency particularly at the planning stage tends to be the result of one of three things: either you are writing out of your vertical imagination (which will give you .pre-plotted clichés) or you are writing out of your lateral imagination which bounces instantly from idea to idea with no quality or credibility control; or you are writing something that you have been thinking about for a long while but haven't put pen to paper about (in this instance you are already subconsciously really deeply into the story, that is, you know where you are going). The trick is to work out which "brick wall" you are hitting.

Be conscious that at the planning stage you can often end up writing scenes for the sake of writing scenes. You must always ask: what is the point of this scene? What is its character and plot content? Where does it start and what has changed by the end? Why is this speech here? What is its function? What is the subtext? What do the characters want?

Don't assume that because you wrote it it is good. And realise that if you are a good writer anything you write is liable to be pretty good. That doesn't mean it's necessarily useful here, in fact the sheer weight of verbiage might be damaging the quality of the piece (if you did the Core Skills exercise on picking the extra dialogue I added to Being John Malcovitch, you'll remember how the extra repetitive dialogue stopped the scenes in their tracks).