

My working day 'One of the pleasures of old age is the thought that I shall never see Heathrow again'

Penelope Lively

What writing day? I am 84, for heaven's sake. Which is not to say that I no longer write, simply that the concept of an ordered daily ritual is now out of reach. I look back - not with nostalgia, but with a kind of friendly interest - to those years when I would get to the desk by about half past nine and stay there till five or so, even if staring out of the window a good deal of the time.

Not that my working days were always like that. There were many other commitments: organisations to which I gave time, much travelling for bookish reasons. The desk days were jealously guarded. Looking at old diaries, I see that I am always complaining that I can't get to the book that I am writing - too many other demands. One year, I left Heathrow 12 times. Well, no more of that. One of the pleasures of old age is the thought that I shall never see Heathrow again.

The writing day now is likely to be a couple of hours in the afternoon. The capacity for sustained concentration has gone. That said, ideas - a line or two, a note to myself for future reference - can pop up throughout the day, requiring quick resort to the Work in Progress file. My writing life has been like this for several years, the two hours sometimes stretching to another hour or two at some other point in the day, but are junked altogether if I simply can't get on or more pressing matters have arisen. Rather surprisingly, I have managed a couple of books like this - a collection of short stories and, recently, a non-fiction reflection on gardening. So, the late life shorter bursts of activity have been almost as productive as the



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they would have been in the ponderous pre-internet days. Admin is not, strictly speaking, part of the writing day, but it is an inevitable appendage. I am tidy by nature and I couldn't get on with anything else if there was a stack of unanswered letters - or, today, an unchecked inbox. But it is all quicker nowadays - and more economical.

In fact, I rather appreciate the old-age writing day. It is still essential to be writing something, at some point, but the pressure is off. Now that I am done with outside commitments, pretty well, all my time is my own. Back in the too-busy days, I felt guilty if a commitment-free day was not entirely devoted to writing. None of that guilt now. If I get in two or three hours at the turquoise notebook, that is great. If I decide to get out and about, or go gardening, or socialise, that is fine. Writers have to goad themselves throughout a writing life: you are your own employer; there is no one else to see that the job gets done. Equally, the late-life writer is entitled to claim some licence: no question of packing it in; you are just accepting that you can still do it, but there is no need to feel driven. Seize those fewer fruitful hours and be satisfied.

Penelope Lively is the winner of the Charleston-Bede's award for a Lifetime's Excellence in short fiction.

days in the past that were dedicated to the desk, the novel-writing days.

Writing a novel is like hacking at the rock face. Somewhere within the daunting but inviting mass of the general idea that you have had, the inspiration, is the careful, sculptured construction of the finished narrative. Two or three years of hacking, usually, for me. That burst of short stories was unexpected; I had not been writing stories for nearly 20 years, I thought they had left me, then they came back, not exactly flooding, but creeping up

with stealth - the hint of a new one, not a rock face to hack at, but a suggestion to consider and manipulate.

In fact, the desk was never a necessity. I could write anywhere; still can. In the too-busy years, I wrote in airports, in hotel rooms. Some of my most productive writing time has been spent in a Somerset garden, with people coming up to chat every now and then, which is fine - listen, respond, go on writing. I write in longhand then type up later on. That way you make all sorts of corrections and additions in the pro-

cess; it is an editorial stage. And I have no fancy preferences for style of notebook or breed of pen - anything will do. At the moment I am using a turquoise notebook with PENELOPE on the front in silver lettering that my daughter gave me for Christmas; into that is going what may - or may not - turn out to be a shortish novel.

And then there is all the admin generated by a writing life. Since email, there is a blessed reduction in paper; deal with a few emails and the files on that brimming shelf are not fattened as

Hours: entirely various; two or three on a good day ● Internet time: much checking and sending of emails. Facebook? Twitter? What are they? ● Refreshment: tea at teatime and half an Eat Natural bar ● Essential work props: window to look out and an iPad for information purposes

The week in books

Testosterone Rex reigns

Cordelia Fine continued busting stereotypes with her book *Testosterone Rex*, even as she stood at the podium as the winner of the Royal Society Insight Investment science book prize on Tuesday. "One of the myths I wanted to debunk in the book is that women are not risk-takers," she said. "I thought, there's a one in six chance that I'll be up here so I won't worry about preparing any gracious words of acceptance."

Fine's book, subtitled "unmaking the myths of our gendered minds", exposes bad science and counters the idea that testosterone is behind all our gender inequalities. Inevitably, it had put some noses out of joint. "I am already enjoying the boys grumbling about Cordelia Fine winning," tweeted the geneticist, author, broadcaster and former editor of *Nature*, Adam Rutherford.

"The very idea that a book about science as we currently understand it can be considered provocative tells me that there is something amiss in public discourse," said Professor Brian Cox (right), who chaired a panel discussion of shortlisted authors in front of an audience who had queued round the block for the free event. It was a short-list spanning "what it is to be human, gender politics, ageing, and I must add, cephalopods", Cox said, beginning a lively conversation that ranged from gut microbes to testicles on key rings.

The Royal Society's president, Venki Ramakrishnan, stressed that good science communication is as vital as scientific research, but the shortlisted authors all had very different motivations for writing their contrasting popular science books. "I'm drawn to science as an occasion for literature," confessed journalist and literary critic Mark O'Connell, author of *To Be a*



Machine. "I love going to parties so I've had a lot of practise at talking to non-mathematicians about maths," said *Beyond Infinity* author Eugenia Cheng. Fine thanked her mother, the children's author Anne Fine, who "was always there to tell me when I was writing like an academic, which needless to say wasn't a compliment but flagging a need for literary intervention in my work".

Fine is the third female winner of the prize in a row - a hatrick that breaks a run of men winning every year since it began in 1988. The judges, chaired by the palaeontologist, writer and television presenter Richard Fortey, said that *Testosterone Rex* is "the ideal companion read to sit

alongside *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Power*". That's quite a compliment, considering that *The Power's* author Naomi Alderman was on this year's judging panel. Fortunately, Fine said that she has read Alderman's dystopian novel, and enjoyed it very much.

Katy Guest

Boswell and Boris's birds

"No, we are a government working together," Boris Johnson insisted post-jog to journalists in New York. "We are a nest of singing birds." You could be forgiven for assuming that the classicist foreign secretary had reached for another Latin-lit allusion (Horace? Ovid?) to pooh-pooh the idea of continual Brexit bust-ups. In fact, the quote comes from Dr Johnson and has nothing to do with interpersonal harmony.

Quizzed by Boswell about his student days, the 18th-century Johnson noted how many poets had attended Pembroke College, Oxford, besides himself, adding "with a smile of sportive triumph, 'Sir, we are a nest of singing birds'". The original quote and its use are so bizarrely askew as to require imaginative inference about the workings of the bookish Borisonian subconscious: could he have referenced his namesake (despite the allusion making no sense) as a way of repressing the words he really wanted to use about the cabinet? John Webster after all came up with a much better known avian quotation (in *The White Devil*) in conjuring "a summer bird-cage in a garden" where "the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds within ... fear they shall never get out". Or perhaps Boris was thinking of another literary allusion by another namesake: Catherine Johnson's 2008 novel *A Nest of Vipers*. **John Dugdale**

Jonathan Franzen The book that ...



The book that changed my life

To read is to have experiences; every book changes my life at least a little bit. The first time I can remember this happening was when I was 10, with a biography of Thomas Edison.

The book I wish I'd written

I aborted a third novel, and it's interesting (for about five seconds) to imagine what I would have produced had I soldiered on through to the end of it. I might have liked to do groundbreaking work such as Haruki Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* or Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, but why would I want Murakami and Ferrante not to have written those books themselves?

The last book that made me cry

I defy anyone to finish Halldór Laxness's *Independent People* without wetting the pages with tears.

The book that had the greatest influence on my writing

Maybe CS Lewis's Narnia books, because I wanted to read them again and again and because writing begins with that kind of reading.

“I can speak very knowledgeably of Proust. But I'm a terribly slow reader, especially of Proust”

The book I think is most underrated
The Man Who Loved Children, Christina Stead's masterpiece, remains the most fabulous book that hardly anyone I know has read.

The book I couldn't finish
Ulysses. I needed a graduate thesis adviser to crack a whip over my head, and didn't have one.

The book I'm most ashamed not to have read
I can speak very knowledgeably of Proust, as if I've read all seven volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*. But I'm a terribly slow reader, especially of Proust.

The book I am currently reading
I just finished reading the manuscript of Rachel Kushner's forthcoming novel, *The Mars Room*. It's her best book yet, another big step forward. A California novel set in the world of prisons and strip clubs.

The book I most often give as a gift
Lately it has been Michael Frank's brilliant and recently published memoir, *The Mighty Franks*. I'm responsible for more than 50% of its sales at our local bookstore.

The book I'd most like to be remembered for
I'd rather be alive than remembered.