

### **Possible discussion topics:**

- Why crime thrillers, and why Leith?
- How an idea is turned into a full novel.
- The key elements: story, setting, characterisation, dialogue.
- The less enjoyable aspects of writing - editing, checking, rewriting.
- The other people on the writing team.
- Publishing and printing.
- Sources of information and advice.
- Which writers or books do you admire?
- What do you do when you're not writing?

### **Sample Q&A**

**Question:** Prior to writing your debut crime thriller *Way Beyond A Lie* what experience did you have in writing fiction?

**Harry Fisher:** None. I hadn't written a single word of fiction prior to starting the book. I had plenty of experience with business writing and I've run courses on Report Writing Skills, some of which came in extremely handy. But as far as fiction was concerned, zero. I just launched straight in - cold turkey for authors, you might say.

**Q:** Popular advice says to start small, build up, practice your art before going for the big one. Do you agree with that?

**HF:** I agree that will suit some people, but there's no one size fits all. I wanted to write a novel, so I just started and kept going. It worked for me, but authors should always do what's right for them.

**Q:** Did you read books on how to write?

**HF:** Several. The best one was *The New Author* by R.A. Barnes. I'd read one of Barnes' novels and I discovered this one. It made a lot of sense to me, especially as he is a successful author. I reread it before I started my second book *Be Sure Your Sins*.

**Q:** Apart from a good imagination what's the most important attribute for a writer?

**HF:** Tenacity. Because dreaming up the story, writing narrative and dialogue, bringing the characters to life – they are all tremendous fun. But editing, checking, realising a thread doesn't work so it has to be removed and a new one stitched in – none of those are enjoyable unless you're some sort of masochist. So, at those times I had to work hard, keep my head down and stick at it. It's that iterative process of redrafting, checking, and polishing that will turn a first draft into something significantly better.

**Q:** Is writing a crime thriller a chronological process?

**HF:** By and large, yes. The exceptions are when I invent a situation that will happen later in the book, and then I have to work out the steps in the story that must take place before that situation can occur. The biggest example for me was once I figured out the ending for *Way Beyond A Lie*, I then had to plan out and interweave the four major strands of the story that all came together to make the ending happen.

**Q:** Do you know how your books will end before you start writing them?

**HF:** No. All my books have had multiple endings that were all binned for one reason or another before I settled on a final version. But I'm quite relaxed about waiting for the ending to reveal itself as I work towards it. Some people say you must have the whole story planned out before you start but if I did, what happens if a brilliant and better idea occurs to me while I'm writing. So, I might have an idea of how the story will end but I'm not wedded to that idea.

**Q:** You've had some complimentary reviews about your use of dialogue, can you give me some advice on how to get it right?

**HF:** I read an article about Elmore Leonard: the author of *Get Shorty* (the film starred John Travolta). Leonard is described as the master of dialogue and the article said that if you read his book, and you still don't *get* dialogue, you never will. The article was spot on – Leonard's use of dialogue is utterly outstanding. And what make it so good is it's completely natural to the time, the place and the situations his characters find themselves in. So, for me, that's the key – being completely natural.

Here's an example. Someone tells my character something surprising or incredible. Does she reply, "I find that hard to believe". That's quite a formal response so instead, imagine we're both in a pub, we're blethering away – now think about more natural

responses. "No way!" or "Get outa here!" or "You're kidding, right?". Maybe even one word: "Seriously?"

I always try to put myself in my character's head. When they say something, is it real life? Would I say it like that? Would other people? If not, I look at my dialogue again and see what I can do with it. Always imagine real life – and keep it natural.

**Q:** How do you come up with names for your characters?

**HF:** Key point to start: I keep lists to avoid using names that are similar. To use an extreme example, if I have a Jean, a Joan, a Jane and a June, I'm making it extremely difficult for my reader to keep track of who is who. And if I make them work too hard they'll get fed up and stop reading.

My central character in *Way Beyond A Lie* is Ross McKinlay. I wanted him to have a Scottish name, so I listed six first names and six surnames then looked at the various combinations to find one that I liked best.

For children and young adults, I searched online for popular names in the years they were born. Similarly, elderly characters will have names from their period like William or Edith. For foreign names, again, web searches were a great help.

Occasionally I deliberately mix up friends' names to produce something completely different, like Harris and Lindsey Matthewson.

But – one word of warning – for a character who is a psychopathic junky hooker bitch, I wouldn't use the name of one of our best friends' daughters whom we've known since they were born. I'm very careful about that.

**Q:** Do you have any suggestions to help with editing and checking?

**HF:** There are words that appear in narrative that add very little. For example: nice, really, very, rather, quite, just and almost. I use MS Word to search for these words; often I find they can be deleted without any detriment to the narrative. Or I replace them with more powerful words.

Other words like decided, luckily, need and try, seem to find their way into the narrative without me noticing. Again, I search and replace them with something stronger.

In both of the examples above I'm referring to narrative. But in dialogue they might be acceptable. 'Do you *really* think you're going to get away it?'

Then there are totally redundant words or phrases. Let's say I've already described a meeting where people are sitting round a table. One person leans forward to make a key point, and then I write: "*She sat back in her seat and folded her arms across her chest*". (Thirteen words). But we already know they are seated, and it's not really possible to fold my arms anywhere else apart from across my chest. So now it reads, "*She sat back and folded her arms*". Seven words that say the same as the 13 words did. I searched for these phrases in *Way Beyond A Lie* and found about 180 examples. As a result, I removed about 1000 unnecessary words from the word count and saved my poor readers the trouble of wading through them.

**Q:** What's the most worthwhile piece of advice you've been given?

**HF:** My first editor told me about this thing called *Kill your little darlings*. These are pieces of text - a phrase, sentence, paragraph, even an entire chapter - that don't contribute to the story in one of three ways. They must move the story along, develop the character, or describe the setting in which the story or character is operating. If it doesn't perform one of those three functions - it has to go. I might love that piece of text, I might have slaved over it for hours to get it just right, I might be so fond of it I'd like to take it home to meet my mum. But if it's not story, character or setting - delete!

Then my writing will be tighter, with very little padding, and the book will be shorter. And the reader will be whisked along, with every sentence contributing something important.