

How NOT to Write a Novel by Gladys Winkworth

My first novel was conceived when I read "The Handmaids' Tale" by Margaret Atwood some 35 years ago. That was a time when women were recognizing that they were underpaid and undervalued, and overexploited, conditions brilliantly depicted in the TV series, "Mad Men" aired a quarter of a century later; conditions I experienced in high school in the 1950's and early in my career in the 60's. I came away from Atwood's Tale deeply disturbed by my heightened awareness of a world full of systems, and organization as well as male individuals devaluing and abusing women economically, and often sexually and emotionally. Rarely do we hear about the reverse. Someone, I thought, should write a book about women subjugating men to their control. At the time, I was a workaholic deeply immersed in my career, certainly not in a place in life to write anything other than professional journal articles, or an occasional short story.

Many people read before they go to sleep; I write.... in my head. Occasionally, a poem pops up in the middle of the night and I write it down, but plots and arguments for opinion essays and outlines for presentations run through my head before, and perhaps after, I go to sleep. Little by little the *Revenge of the Handmaids* took possession of my brain.

The original idea was a short story which takes place in Chapter 4 part 2 of the novel. As the plot unfolded in my head, I realized that I needed a place for the events to take place. I was not anticipating a gradual evolution of beliefs and events; I wanted a coup, an overthrow of male dominance and power. I wanted the Handmaids of "Mad Men" to rebel. It was clear this had to be set in a small town where it would be possible to assemble everyone at once and evoke compliance. Clearly, it was not going to happen in a small town in New Hampshire or Montana or anywhere else where it would be noticed by outsiders. I did not want a tribe in the Amazon or some remote part of Africa or the Middle East. I realized that I had a better chance at suspension of disbelief in my audience if this coup took place on another planet, and thus, I stuck my toe in the waters of Science Fiction. My story would take place on planet Paradiaceo. My bedtime fantasies were not constrained to the point of view of one person, character, or narrator, I was clearly standing above the events and seeing all. The point of view had to be 3rd person omniscient.

I do not know where Ali, my main character, came from or when she snuck into my bedtime story, but once she got there, she was running the show. I didn't manipulate my characters. They tell me what they are thinking and feeling. They decide what they are going to do, where and when. I only censure those who create continuity problems.

After decades of characters and events playing inside my head, I found myself retired from my job, my grandson in high school, no longer needing after school care, and the final blow, the passing of my partner, and end of our travel adventures. There was nothing else to do except the terribly scary act of putting words on paper. I was terrified. I was a competent writer of journal articles and training manuals, and a teacher of a course in writing and literature. I had identified many a talented writer and helped him or her hone their craft, but none of that makes me a novelist.

And so I began writing. I cannot tolerate brutality or violence; the coup is accomplished with drugs, not guns. The male children are physically disciplined like the England represented in Pink Floyd's "The Wall," and the US educational philosophy practiced from the 19th, physical punishment being disallowed in public schools only in the last half of the 20th century. On Paradiaceo, Men are controlled, denied sex, conditioned to accept their lot in life so they will not rebel, but they are not beaten or sold or lynched like slaves. I imagine this story in the action format of a movie or TV serial, but I suspect suspense and violence would need to be kicked up by script writers needing to satisfy a contemporary audience.

The norms in Paradiaceo's culture required little conscious thought. The objective was to turn *The Handmaid's Tale* and "Mad Men" on their heads. It needed to be the reverse of the culture I grew up in. Women would be in control, so why not hit another example of earth's inequality and make it a lesbian culture. Women marry women; heterosexual women are not completely closeted; they can seek hetero sex in a nightclub, but if they seek a serious heterosexual relationship, they will be counseled, reconditioned (like male homosexuals were in the 19th century) and finally expelled into the Wilderness if they do not become compliant. Males provide labor and are breeders, and prostitutes. Once I realized my story was not very subtly satirizing Earth, particularly western, norms, and often specifically American

practices, past or present, endless possibilities opened up. The planet was settled by a group of talented, educated men and young fertile women who escaped their planet before it was destroyed by natural events brought on by negligent occupants. Paradiicians in High School study an Earth bereft of natural resources and plagued by inequities resulting from the chasm separating the haves and have-nots.

The main character, Ali, is a newly graduated anthropologist from Earth, studying the planet's culture as an internship. She is young, curious, adventuresome, well meaning, and headstrong. She is questioning her sexuality, discovering love, making stupid decisions, and experiencing guilt (aka growing up). The characters who interact with Ali: her mentor, her housemates and her close friends all get hurt by Ali's actions, and all change personally for having known her. She is not heroic in the classical sense, but she manages to have an impact on the planet. I didn't know any of that was going to happen until I observed what she was doing. Much to my chagrin, she even changed the ending.

I have a tendency not to finish things. I have garments which will no longer fit me, cut out, but not assembled, lying in a cabinet in my basement near my idle sewing machine, and next to a cabinet filled with yarn not yet woven or knit – all awaiting my attention. There are half written stories – pictures unframed or just not hung. I like the act of creating, but not the dreary repetitious act of finishing or polishing. I was determined to finish this story before I leave this earth.

When I believed the book was ready for final editing, I sent it to a few friends with the caveat that they should critique it. I was careful to select people who I believed would be honest without telling me I was too stupid to own a typewriter, let alone write a book. They helped me see the book was nowhere near finished: there were events that readers did not understand, confusing descriptions, inconsistencies, even the word "not" inserted by mistake in a sentence near the end which made the main character look like an evil cheat; not Ali's intent or mine.

In addition to friends, I was fortunate to meet a gentleman who is an excellent writer, and whose mission in life appears to be helping struggling writers. He offered to read my novel, and he did: every bloody sentence of every chapter, offering excellent advice and support. Some of his input was technical: chapters that were too long – that was easy to fix since those chapters covered two connected topics and could be split in two; chapter endings reached closure rather than drawing the reader into the next chapter – dah..... also not difficult to fix. Overall, he found the book lacking in description and dialogue, and needing to ramp up tension and suspense. He is a SCI FI author. His stories contain incredible descriptions. Reading one of his stories is like being on a tour, seeing and feeling the environment in great detail with the author as guide, weaving a story into that backdrop. I knew where my characters were in my story but couldn't write detailed descriptions because I couldn't see these places. He suggested I find pictures in magazines or movies that show what I am trying to describe - good idea. I worked on those issues, and will continue to do so in future writing, and given my advanced years will probably quite literally die trying. Some of his suggestions came from his knowledge of SCI FI, and technical or scientific information. I soon recognized that my book was a coming-of-age story set on another planet, not a SCI FI novel. I managed to change or skirt the technical information, often finding technically impossible passages superfluous, so I just deleted them.

Other readers complained that my aliens didn't look like aliens. I skirted that problem by having one of the characters explain that Paradiiceo is to earth; therefore, physiological and biological differences are minimal. I rationalized that having the occupants of the planet look like earthlings might make it easier for readers to relate to their cultural norms. Paradiiceo's technology was not nearly sophisticated or imaginative enough for the SCI FI readers so I made Paradiiceo a 3rd world planet, economically and technologically, not intellectually. They acquire outdated technology in trade from other planets.

Many reader reactions pointed out inconsistencies or things that were just wrong, like reversing east and west, and they identified things that simply did not make sense. One suggested I attach a map. I corrected things that were flat out wrong or inconsistent and embellished descriptions that were difficult to understand.

In this, often painful, rewrite process, I became acutely aware of how my cognitive style and personality impact my writing. I am highly kinesthetic. We put things in our memory and retrieve them through 3 modalities: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. I have known since college that I have almost no auditory memory. I took prodigious notes in lectures

because I remembered almost nothing the speaker said but almost everything I wrote down, even if I didn't review my notes. For many years I thought I was a visual learner seeing the notes on the page, until I realized that I remembered information from textbooks when I took notes rather than from seeing the words on the page. For me, taking notes was not about seeing the words – in fact I rarely can read my handwriting; it was about the feeling of the pencil on the paper - kinesthetic.

By personality I am a thinker, and a problem solver. I am a good listener and I have learned a couple of skills to help people solve their problems. I understand feelings in others intellectually but not on my own skin, and I do not get emotionally involved in people's problems. One of my readers is highly empathetic and had a much clearer understanding than I did of what a couple of my characters were going through. "I wish they spent more time talking to each other," she told me. "So write some dialogue for them; I hate writing dialogue." I responded. And she did, and I began writing more and more dialogue, and I improved. Another skill to work on.

I am still trying to figure out why everything that comes out of my imagination, be it a speech or story, is ever so much more elegant and entertaining in my head than it is when subjected to type on a page. I am most disappointed in the lack of literary techniques in my novel. After years of teaching literature, do you think I could come up with just the right metaphor or allusion? I desperately wanted irony and paradox and I thought and thought, but my characters did not. On the other hand, my characters, perhaps because they live and breathe inside my head, seem to be believable on the page. Strange and wondrous, this thing called writing.

Meanwhile, I was able to hire an editor. She was teaching creative writing and put the novel on google docs as she does with her students' writing, so we could work on it together. She made some excellent changes in the first few chapters, and I was simultaneously making the changes readers had suggested, and then..... GOOGLE DOCS FROZE UP. She called their tech people - she was also having some difficulty with student work - and they added some memory, and when I got to chapter 15 of 24, it froze again. It took me over a week to rescue my novel, a few paragraphs at a time into word. The two are not completely compatible so I had to retype some sections and then delete what had come over from docs. Meanwhile my editor had a serious accident and was hospitalized.

Editing one's own work is like counseling one's own family - not fun and not a good idea. I had reached a level of frustration where I just wanted to get the damn thing finished. I put it away for a couple weeks – that helped. The next reading uncovered a few inconsistencies I had missed, and many sentences which could be worded better or more cleverly punctuated, and vocabulary that could be improved. Word, of course turned up spelling errors and what it considered grammatical errors. For grammar, Google was wrong about 80% of the time. I thought of international students learning English as a second language, and hoped they did not use the grammar function. It was good for finding some spacing errors, but even that was not consistent. Then I came to realize that I was not doing a proper technical edit because I kept rewriting, thereby missing technical errors and creating new ones. I had to do something to focus only on things like punctuation and spacing so I watched movies while I edited. The distraction was enough to keep me from examining sentence structure and vocabulary.

I once heard an artist answer the question: "How do you know when your painting is finished?" with "It's finished when I say so." I would say I declared my novel finished when I got tired of it. I'm sure I could improve it significantly if I put it aside for a few months, and then worked on literary techniques and descriptions and vocabulary and dialogue for another year or two. I am not a perfectionist. Maybe I will pick it up again, but it is more likely I will write something else. Right now, it is at the Library of Congress copywrite office and when it comes back, I will put it out on my website, perhaps embarrassing myself with my wanting skills, but at least it is not on a shelf waiting for me; it is finally out of my head so I can move on to other things.

My critique of my novel: The underlying premise and plot are quite good, and interesting enough that in the hands of a competent script writer, could be compelling.