Jim's Journal

How I Write Novels

Letting the story reveal itself without losing craft, pressure, or direction

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I do not begin a novel by outlining every chapter, naming every turn, and locking the story into place before it has had a chance to breathe.

I usually begin with a situation.

A person is in danger. A child is born with a destiny. A man carries a burden across lifetimes. A woman has been wounded by the world and still carries something beautiful inside her. A historical moment opens like a doorway, and someone steps through it.

That is enough to begin.

I have always been closer to writers such as Diana Gabaldon in this respect. She does not treat the novel as a machine that must be fully assembled before the first page is written. The story evolves. Characters reveal themselves. Events that seemed secondary become important. A scene opens a door the writer did not know was there. My novels develop the same way.

That does not mean there is no craft. It means the craft serves a living process. I may know the central character, the emotional direction, the historical background, or the spiritual pressure behind the story. But I do not need to know every turn before I begin. The book reveals itself in the writing.

The Opening Must Create Pressure

One of the best ways to teach fiction is through openings, because a good opening shows the writer's whole method in miniature.

Ken Follett is a master of this. *The Pillars of the Earth* begins:

> *"The small boys came early to the hanging."*

That sentence gives us children, death, public spectacle, danger, curiosity, and a whole society in motion. It is plain as a fence post, but it pulls the reader forward immediately.

In *Stargate Awakening*, I used the same principle in Sarah's dream:

> *"She was going to die by drowning."*

That line does not explain. It does not warm up. It does not ask the reader to wait while the author clears his throat. It places the reader inside danger from the first sentence.

The question is immediate: Who is she? Why is she drowning? Is this a dream, a memory, a prophecy, or a warning? The reader has been given pressure, and pressure is what moves a story.

Something Must Happen

In Ken Follett's writing course, he makes a simple but powerful point: something needs to happen every few pages.

That does not mean every scene needs a battle, a murder, a betrayal, or a dramatic announcement. Something happens when a character learns something, decides something, loses something, fears something, wants something, or collides with someone. Something happens when a relationship shifts. Something happens when the reader is given a new question.

In *Circle of Days*, Follett opens with a boy in the company of his father and brothers, and the boy hates every one of them. That is movement before the plot even starts. The family is already under emotional pressure. The reader knows there is trouble in the room.

That is the lesson: a strong opening does not merely begin the story. It loads the story.

I Listen for What Wants to Happen Next

Once I have the living center of the story, I begin listening. That may sound vague, but it is actually very practical. Fiction is not assembled the way one assembles a machine. A novel grows.

For me, the great question is always: what wants to happen next?

Not what would be clever. Not what would impress someone. Not what fits the fashionable formula of the week. What wants to happen next?

A scene usually begins when I can see it. I may see a room, a road, a face, a village, a battlefield, a church, a woman standing at a window, or a man afraid to speak what he knows. Once I can see the scene, I can enter it. Then the characters begin doing things I did not plan.

That is one of the great pleasures of writing fiction. You create the characters, and then, if you have done your job properly, they begin talking back.

The Writer Still Needs Authority

Letting a story evolve does not mean drifting. A writer still needs judgment. He must know when a scene has gone slack, when a character is speaking falsely, when a chapter has become explanation instead of story, and when the reader needs a shift in pressure.

That is where experience matters.

I use examples from writers such as Ken Follett and Diana Gabaldon because they are excellent at what they do. But I also use examples from my own novels because I have spent a lifetime learning the craft from the inside. The fact that a writer is not yet a household name does not mean he has nothing to teach. Craft is craft. A strong opening sentence works whether it appears in a bestseller or in a book a reader is discovering for the first time.

A writer does not need permission to understand his own craft. He needs to do the work, study the work, revise the work, and tell the truth about what works.

Description Should Suggest, Not Exhaust

I also do not believe in overdescribing everything. Readers are intelligent. They do not need the author standing beside them with a flashlight and a clipboard.

Give them enough to enter the scene. Give them enough to care. Give them enough to wonder. Then let them participate.

This is especially important with character description. A scar, a gesture, a way of looking away, a bitter sentence about a father, a hand resting too long on a letter - these can reveal more than three paragraphs about eye color, height, and clothing.

One of the strongest techniques is to let one character describe another. That way the description reveals two people at once: the person being observed and the person doing the observing. A description filtered through love, envy, fear, resentment, or longing is almost always more interesting than a neutral inventory.

The Author and the Living Book

Writing a novel is partly craft, partly patience, and partly trust.

The craft matters. Sentences matter. Structure matters. Openings matter. Dialogue matters. But there is also a point at which the story itself knows more than the writer does.

That is when the work gets interesting.

And on good days, that is when I stop trying to control every turn and let the book show me where it wants to go.

From Jim’s Journal

> *Jim’s Journal features notes on writing, books, publishing, creativity, and the author’s life, with examples drawn from both classic storytellers and the novels of James P. Lewis.*