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## AUTHOR, AUTHOR

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I didn't write two books last year. I know a lot of people didn't write two books last year, but I didn't write two specific books – one of them was set in the 1930s in Dublin and one was set in the 1940s in Wicklow, and I researched both and mulled over both, I rolled the ideas around in my head, I thought of them when I woke up and I thought of them when I went to sleep, and I ordered yet another book from AbeBooks, thinking that some obscure volume, preferably from a foreign dealer (hello Halifax, Nova Scotia!), might arrive through my door, with the provoking fact, or problem, the missing character or insight I needed in order to make one or both of these books "go".

It wasn't a stressful process. I am not sad to leave them behind (if I have left them behind). It was a question of appetite and enthusiasm, and it had bizarrely little to do with the success or failure of my other books last year – I know this is hard to believe, but it is true. When you're inside the possible world of a new book, tapping the walls, opening cupboards, testing the slope of the floor, then that is where you are – inside it. Sometimes, with a different part of your brain, you wonder: "Will it

play?" Is it the right book for this moment – in the culture/my career/my writing life? You do, in other words, worry about location, but only once

you have left the space itself. Besides, wondering about location kills the thing straight off. The trick is to concentrate on the quality of the light, or the wonderful arbutus tree, or to worry if mock-Tudor is really your "thing".

Speaking of mock-Tudor (and, yes, I can extend this metaphor as far as I like), the problem I had, or one of them, was that the theatre world of the 1930s and the world of 1940s lyrical Irish nationalism (for this was where the unwritten books were set) each required a language of its own, and these languages – as mock and as natural as a bit of half-timbering on your suburban frontage – are either there in the writer's head or they are not.

And I don't know if these languages are there in my head, because I haven't written anything down yet.

This is the most shocking and shameful fact about my two unwritten books. Because if you have a sentence – from the beginning, middle or end of the damn thing – then, whether you know it or not, you have the book. You may have to pick this sentence from out of the midst of many other sentences, but in order to do any of this, you must, must, must, sit down and type. This is the most fundamental rule.

I should do this now, actually. I should go off and try this now. Hang on, let me open a new file . . .

No. Couldn't do it. Panic attack. Sorry.

Actually, I tell a lie. There was no panic. There was just a quick turning away. I work, perhaps like many writers, by a peculiar system of aversions. I am too averse to the writing of these books to risk a bit of typing yet. In this, I am like every other person

who hasn't written a book recently, the difference being . . . well, the difference being that I did write a book at least once, I suppose, and so I don't let the whole process worry me too much.

It's a bit like not having sex with someone because you really fancy them. Don't tell me that doesn't happen, too.

You will notice that I haven't mentioned what either of these books

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is about. That is because I know you will steal them from me immediately. These are really good ideas. You are not having them.

I realise, as I say this, that the problem with these books is that they are just good ideas, which is to say they are *all* location. How could I not have noticed it before? You think, this is

a really good story for a novel: this character, that character, that event, the 30s, the actors, the homosexuality and the endless cigarettes. (And damn, hasn't Beryl Bainbridge done this really well already? Damn.) So it is as though I am walking around the house trying to prise open a window, peering into the rooms, and thinking how close it all is to the superhighway and the airport, if only I could find the actual door. And finding the door is not a question of doing more research.

There is another rule, apart from "Try writing", and that is "Do the research after you finish the book, not before". By which I mean that there is the early provoking research, where you find out enough about a historical situation to realise that most of the commentators have got it wrong (and you have got it right), then there is the moment when you throw the books away because you know better, and this is the moment when you "have" your book. Then there's the slog re-research after you have written the story, and you need to find out how much a hansom cab actually cost in 1859 (and if you need to know that, it's already a crap book, I'm afraid).

It is all very vexed, and tortuous, and above all self-deceiving. Because under and beyond these two books that won't let me in, or that will let me in, but I don't know if I want to go there, yet – while all this mulling and peering has been going on, I've been typing. I don't know if it is a book. It doesn't have any historical colour – no one smokes, no one dies. It's just a series of problems I have to sort out about these people who are in a certain situation. About a woman who is wrong, in a particular way. And I haven't written a line of it yet. I mean, I have typed. I have typed

many casual, pushy-feely sort of lines, but I don't know which one is the first line. Not yet.



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