



Sarah Duncan's first novel *Adultery for Beginners* was shortlisted for the Joan Hessayon New Writers Award in 2004. Since then she's written *Nice Girls Do*, *Another Woman's Husband* and *A Single to Rome* which was longlisted for the Romantic Novel of the Year. Her novels are published in fourteen countries around the world including the USA, France and Germany. She has lived in the West Country for the past twenty years, and at present shuttles between Bath and St Ives.

Sarah has taught creative writing at the Universities of Oxford and Bristol, as well as Franklin and Marshall College, USA. She is a keen blogger, writing about writing techniques and craft. From October 2010 she is the Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Bristol University.

Her most recent novel, *Kissing Mr Wrong*, follows the path of children's illustrator Lu as she traces her missing great grandfather who fought in the First World War, while trying to find the missing Mr Perfect in her own life.

Cyprus Well caught up with Sarah last week to ask her a few questions about her writing career and the writing world in general.

Can you tell us a bit about how you write? Do you have a particular writing place, time of day, routine, number of words a day for example?

A good writing day is one where I have no other commitments. Before I do anything else, I sling the laptop into bed and write 1000 words. Then I'm allowed breakfast. Then I'll go back to bed and write another 1000 words after breakfast. At that point I'll shower and dress. It's probably lunchtime so I'll watch Bargain Hunt, do emails, Twitter, my blog... If I'm on a roll, I'll go back to bed and do another 1000 words before breaking for tea and Countdown (on Channel 4+1, I can't write that fast.) I don't write in the evenings.

But I usually have commitments, so my day doesn't work out like that although I try to get 1000 words done before I start getting involved in anything else like meetings, teaching, ferrying children around... I have an office with a desktop computer, but I prefer to write in bed because I can prop my back up and get into the right position - I slump if I'm on a chair, my shoulders freeze up and I get RSI.

Can you discuss how you approach beginning a novel. Do you always know the full plot before you begin, or do you ever start before knowing how things will turn out? How intensively do you plan your novels?

*I start with a couple of big events and then join the dots as I write, so I know where I'm heading for, and what sort of things are going to happen but the actual events are a surprise to me. With *A Single to Rome*, I'd written about 10,000 words when I had a dream*

about the ending so I wrote that scene, then wrote 90,000 words getting there, but that's unusual.

I've tried planning novels, but if the plan is too detailed I lose interest in the story and can't be bothered to write the novel. I seem to work best if the novel develops organically within a structure. The downside is that it involves a lot of re-writing as I'm constantly moving things around, changing characters, adding characters, killing them off, putting new things in. My first drafts are very messy.

Are there any writers who have influenced your writing?

I've never consciously tried to write like anyone. My favourite contemporary writer is Anne Tyler - I'd love it if she influenced my writing. As a child and teenager I read obsessively and my favourite author was Elizabeth Goudge. I often re-read her books which are about relationships and families, which I am what I write about.

If you had, say, three top tips for someone who wanted to see their work published, what would they be?

It's not enough to be in the top 1% of writers, you have to be in the top 1% of that 1%. So write, re-write and read as much as you can. Join a creative writing class and get in the habit of regular writing. Learn how to give and receive feedback - the ability to both make and take constructive criticism is a skill all writers need. Get some writing friends so you've got someone to share the journey with, the good times and the bad. And then write, write, write.

Do you have a favourite short writing exercise?

That's a tricky one - I have lots posted on my blog www.sarahduncansblog.blogspot.com If I had to choose one... Describe a person making a cup of tea and change their attitude each time. So an angry person might grab the milk then slam the fridge door, but someone in love might caress the shiny taps and watch the water flowing like silk into the kettle. It's an exercise to show mood without actually saying Joe was cross.

You say on your website that you have over 10, 000 books and counting. At Cyprus Well we're keeping a close eye on development in digital format books and constantly wondering what the iPad, Kindle, etc will mean for the future of books as we know them?

What I think is interesting about digital books, but which a lot of people don't seem to have grasped yet is that if you buy an e-book, you're not actually buying that book, in the same way you buy a physical book, you're only buying a licence to have that book on your reader. You can't pass it on to someone else, or sell it, or give it to a jumble sale... And if the licensees (Amazon, Sony, whoever) want the e-book back they can delete it from your reader regardless of your wishes.

I haven't gone digital myself. I can see in theory it would be wonderful to take lots of books on one device on holiday, but I'd fret it was going to be stolen, or dropped, or get sand in it. And what if you left the battery charger behind? They seem to solve a couple of problems - weight, storage - but then add new ones. I spend a lot of time staring at computer screens for work so I'm not in a hurry to add my reading to the load.

SW Writer Profile: Sarah Duncan

As a writer, I'm more worried about copyright than technology. Some people seem to think everything should be free and they shouldn't have to pay to read, but if I don't get paid, I can't afford to write. It's all very well saying that JK Rowling has lots of money, but she's an exception, the majority of writers earn well under the national average wage.

The technology will change and develop, but the interesting questions are about how we define concepts such as ownership and intellectual property.

Thank you Sarah!

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