

I believe that there are five building blocks required when writing a book: conviction, inspiration, premise, style and most importantly self-belief. Last year the fruits of my labour turned into *The Zulu and the Lion*, a novel based against the backdrop of the Anglo Zulu War. I am grateful to various contributors to the Society Journals for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences of the writing and publishing process with the rest of the Society. With luck some of you may even be inspired to follow my example.

About 6 years ago I was sitting in the car park (aka the M25 motorway) listening to a recording of the comedian Eddie Izzard in concert. My mind was wandering, half concentrating on his sardonic voice, half on the bumper stickers of the cars in front. Mr Izzard was just wrapping up a rather surreal sketch about Greek mythology, in particular the legend of Achilles, which seemed to revolve around the unfortunate warrior having a concrete boot made to protect his weak heel. Obviously the boot was fitted with some form of propulsion system, lest our hero be permanently rooted to the spot. From nowhere, as is Eddie's style, the theme turned to archaeology and the way in which those modern-day Howard Carters manage to take a few dusty imprints in the ground, a couple of sandstone blocks and a few fragments of ancient pottery and conjure up an image of what life was like 2,000 years ago in a Roman villa. I seem to remember that the example he used involved God having a voice similar to that of James Mason and the room the archaeologists had excavated being a temple in which a herd of elephants tap-danced on a specially built podium.

The point was that no one could really know the truth. The evidence is inconclusive and once again we rely on the "experts" to paint a picture of our history. A picture which, it saddens me to say, we far too readily consume, like so many TV dinners - convenient, but lacking substance. The further back into the past that we travel, the more unreliable and hypothetical the written history becomes, particularly prior to the electronic era with its plethora of recording media. Please do not misunderstand me, I am not rubbishing the fantastic work of people such as Adrian Greaves, Ian Knight or Cecil Woodham-Smith. I have nothing but the greatest admiration for the efforts that they make, and have made, to bring history to life, to teach us the known facts. But, for example, the truth is that no-one really knows exactly what caused the Light Brigade to charge down the wrong valley, or what exactly happened at Isandlwana. There are always gaps in the accounts. So why couldn't I exploit those gaps by weaving in my own storyline.

That was it. The rest of the transvestite comedian's performance was lost to me and I spent the remaining hour of my daily crawl to the office immersed in a personal debate on why we accept so much of what has been written about the past at face value. By the time I had sat down at my desk the light in my head had flickered on - I had my premise.

Style and Inspiration.

I didn't realise I had written so much until I was rummaging through some old papers a few years ago. In amongst them I uncovered two unfinished books I had written, one of them nearly sixteen years ago. That took the tally to five unfinished works. Five. Each one has a different subject and most importantly a different style. In fact the only thing they have in common is that they are incomplete, and likely to stay so forever. The styles ranged from pulp science fiction to a 'Douglas Adams'esque comedy. Two things were clear to me. Firstly, that I have obviously had a deep-seated desire to write for a very long time. Secondly, that these past attempts remain incomplete because I could not maintain interest in the style of writing I was adopting.

Around the same time that I discovered my premise, two other events occurred. The first was that I saw *The Blair Witch Project*. An unlikely source of inspiration I know, but I was rather attracted to the diary style used in the film-making, the rather voyeuristic quality it added to an otherwise dreadful cinematic experience. The second was the release of the book *Bridget Jones Diary* which I must profess I have never read, but which reinforced the public's interest in the first person journal concept. I had just completed reading, *The Washing of the Spears* and the desire to write about a subject in which I had always had a keen interest was riding high. So, while on a flight to Colorado, I tapped away at my laptop and soon had John Bowden's first diary entry tied down. The finished excerpt depicted a slightly surreal scene, reminiscent of the Governor's dinner party scene in *Carry on up the Khyber*, with the officers eating their supper on the plains of Zululand. It never made it into the final book (thankfully), but I was fired up. This time I was writing about a subject that had inspired me, ever since the first time I had seen *Zulu*, in a style that honestly excited me.

Conviction and Self Belief

While I was writing *The Zulu and the Lion* I got married and had two children. Teething children can drain anybody's energy. I still managed to complete my book. Enough said.

So what is different about *The Zulu and the Lion*? Why did I finally reach the momentous instant when I could type "T-H-E E-N-D" this time? The answer is that for the first time I had all the elements required to complete the writing process, accompanied by the support and encouragement of my family and friends.

But writing a book is only the beginning, something that I didn't appreciate until after the first draft was complete. I am not quite sure what it was I expected to happen. Perhaps two men in dark suits were going to burst through the door, pick up my manuscript, say "OK Mr Wilson, we'll take it from here" and walk out again. The reality was very different. Instead I had approximately three hundred pages of text and no immediate method of getting it before a single reader's eyes. Where did I go now?

The answer came from a quick scour of the Internet. I needed an agent, or even better a publisher. "Right then," I said, "I'll just go and get one of those". Whom was I kidding? Half a dozen rejection letters later the world was caving in around me and I had cancelled the order at the Porsche garage. For the first time my self-belief wavered. Little did I know that a defining moment was about to occur.

I heard about a writer's conference in Winchester and went there armed with a copy of my manuscript and a well rehearsed sales pitch. Whilst there I was fortunate enough to secure lengthy discussions with Carole Blake, one of this country's leading literary agents, and also with Carolyn Caughey who is the senior commissioning editor at Hodder and Stoughton. The upshot of these conversations was that Carolyn asked me to send her the complete manuscript. I went home full of dreams of Whitbread prizes and appearances on Richard & Judy. The manuscript was duly dispatched to her office and the next few weeks were agonising.

When the letter finally arrived I could hardly bear to read it. When I finally plucked up the courage my heart sank, the first few lines smelt of rejection. However, the more that I read, the more I realised that Carolyn had actually come very close to putting a big smile on my face. In the end it had come down to the fact that she did not feel that Hodder would be able to sell it in sufficient volumes because she felt that the subject matter was "too niche", too specialised. My immediate reaction was to phone her and challenge her to go out in the street and ask passers-by if they enjoyed the film *Zulu*. I know she would never do it, but I know that 90% of the over 25's would probably say "yes". But rationality returned and I soon realised that she had a point, large publishers need to sell significant volumes just to break even. Some unknown bloke writing his first novel about an often forgotten conflict from two centuries ago is not ideal.

With this in mind I started looking at smaller publishers and stumbled across Authors Online. They are not a vanity publisher, and use the new "Print On Demand" technology. This allows them to take bigger risks with titles that they publish since they don't actually have to retain any stock other than the copies that are on order. They were immensely helpful and, after a short consultation period, a contract was signed. In June 2002, the first copy of *The Zulu and the Lion* arrived on my doorstep. Since then I have never looked back. The only down side of a small press publisher is that they do not invest in much promotion, so the authors have to do it all themselves. There are many ways to do this, but it is important to consider how much money and time you want to invest in this sort of activity before you sign on the dotted line. I am in a privileged position, compared with most authors embarking on this course of action, since I am a member of a society whose principal interest is the very subject of my book and whose consultants were immensely supportive of my writing career. I cannot thank them enough.

Would I do it again? Hell yes, in fact I am about half way through writing the sequel to *The Zulu and the Lion* right now. It is set in the Belgian Congo, ten years later, and I think it is going to be really exciting. Will I use the same publisher this time? I don't know...maybe. But I will probably try some of the bigger publishers again first, just in case one of them thinks that the atrocities of the Belgians in West Africa has more of a mass appeal than the tragedy and heroics of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. And finally...will I ever stop writing? Only if you stop reading.

The Zulu and the Lion is published by Authors Online Ltd and is available for order through all good bookshops (ISBN No: 0-7552-0044-6) RRP: £11.95. It can also be ordered directly from Authors Online Ltd. by calling 01992 586788 (All major cards are accepted). Alternatively it can be ordered through its own secure website: www.thezuluandthelion.com