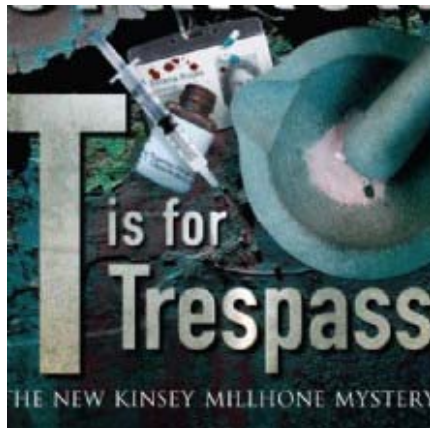


## FEATURE: Expertise needs effort: the write experience takes time

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub

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As a new writer you expect to face challenges in your work – too many characters, the voices aren't authentic and whatever happened to the plot? With disturbing frequency, a tidal wave of issues can rise to the surface, threatening to overwhelm you. But if you're an established author, with a long list of books and testimonials to your credit, it's easy, right? Well, that's where you'd be wrong.

Sue Grafton, bestselling US author of the alphabet mystery series (*A is for Alibi*, etc) and recent winner of the Crime Writers' Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for 2008 is certainly a veteran in the creative field. Her most recent book in the alphabet series, *T is for Trespass*, starring feisty PI Kinsey Millhone, was published in the UK earlier this year. Before beginning this series, Grafton worked for a number of years as a screenwriter in Hollywood and wrote several other books, some unpublished. *A is for Alibi* was her eighth book.

'It took me five years to write *A is for Alibi*', she explains. 'I'd never written a mystery novel before so I was teaching myself the form and structure, while at the same time I was teaching myself about private eye procedure, police procedure, toxicology, and lord knows what else.'

Grafton is meticulous about her work. Despite the books being part of a series, she is focused on ensuring each one is different, with a fresh approach, and a sharp, new storyline. Producing work of the highest quality is essential and she is quick to highlight the challenges involved. 'One of my biggest struggles with writing is getting out of my own way so the book can come through me. I get busy trying to second-guess myself, hoping to look bright and well-informed, when writing is really about being truthful, cutting close to the bone,' she says.

Grafton's books are finely honed, with realistic and effective plots and lively characters, as well as being rich in detail. She undertakes extensive research for her novels and puts considerable effort into the work. As part of the process she spends a lot of time experimenting with ideas and storylines – developing a coherent structure and plot. And she uses journals to explore her thoughts and ideas in depth – some of these can be seen on her website, [www.suegrifton.com](http://www.suegrifton.com).

But for most writers, no matter how dedicated or experienced, the birth of a new book is not without its difficulties. As Grafton explains about her latest work in progress (*U is for ...*), ‘I was happily “discovering” away and finally realised I’d talked myself into a story I couldn’t tell. I had 353 single-spaced pages of notes and no narrative. Oops. I finally understood that there was never going to be a story there so I dumped those journals and started again.’ She was then faced with discarding *U* for the second time. ‘The second run at the book...is only about a hundred single-spaced pages of notes, but it was still a tough call to throw it all in my mental trash can.’ She goes on to say, ‘...while I welcome the clarity, I really hate having to give up on something I’ve worked so long and hard on. The point is, it wasn’t good. It wasn’t going anywhere and as long as I was determined to tinker with it, there wasn’t the room in my head to find the story I’m supposed to tell. Whatever that may be.’

However it’s not all doom and gloom. Writers frequently wax lyrical about that special moment or moments when the people in the novel take on a life of their own and start to control the story. Grafton concurs, ‘In some books, certainly, there are characters who rise up and conduct their own scenes. I love that process. Similarly, certain sections of any given novel seem easier than others. What’s required is enormous patience to reach those easy stretches because the rest of the book is old-fashioned hard work.’

For Sue Grafton, one of the main challenges she faces in her writing is wrestling with the conflict between ego and subconscious, or shadow as she calls it. ‘What I work on is trusting the process, really hearing what [shadow’s] saying, instead of insisting on doing everything myself like a stubborn three-year old. I first learned the difference between Ego and Shadow when I was writing *J is for Judgement* and the concept has served me well. The trouble is that I have to learn the same damn lesson all over again for every single book. This is why writers turn to drink and drugs.’

The concept of getting in touch with your shadow or inner voice puts a whole new perspective on writer’s block. As Grafton notes, ‘Shadow is like a guide, moving me through the story and keeping me on track. When I veer off the straight and narrow, she simply sits down in the middle of the road and refuses to move until I do as she says.’ Rather than being something to be feared, therefore, writer’s block becomes a flag, a warning sign that something isn’t right, or that more information is needed.

It seems it’s official then. Writing is difficult and remains difficult, no matter how far along the road you are. There are good times and there are bad times but it’s the work itself and the experience of writing that’s important. New writers need to take time – time to hone their craft, time to develop their skills, rather than rushing towards publication. Grafton comments, ‘Writing a novel takes time and energy, honesty, imagination, and the ability to step back and look at the flaws and failures that appear along the way. The beauty of revisions is that you have the chance to correct your mistakes.’ And through the process, a writer also learns other things, apart from the craft of writing. ‘A writer learns self-discipline and an excruciating honesty about one’s work,’ says Grafton. ‘I’ve said on other occasions, 29 days out of 30 I’m dumb as a slug and couldn’t slime my way out of a paper bag. Then along comes the one day – that one day – which is magical. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. The problem is that I never know which day will be the magical day so I have to sit here and slog through my own self-made mud.’

Grafton also offers a comforting insight into the experience, dreaded by most budding authors, of rejection. ‘I was always passionate about writing and I guess I was just too dumb to understand what rejection was about. When I’d get a manuscript back in the mail with one of those Dear Dummy letters, I would, of course, burst

into tears. Then I'd get mad and I'd start to work again. Looking back on some of my early rejection letters, I can see that editors and agents were being extremely encouraging, but I couldn't see past the "no, thanks". Happily, there was always that next idea, that next book that I was sure would do the trick.'

Grafton's optimism, along with her upbeat approach and the sense of humour that is visible in her books, is one of the most valuable assets an author or would-be author can possess. That, and persistence. She shares this final thought: 'I love writing – when it's working. Honestly, there's nothing better. It's getting there – feeling my way to that magical place – that takes up most of my day. Twenty books into the series and each one is harder than the last. Not to sound resentful about it, but you'd think somebody could have warned me!'

**Further Information**

*T is for Trespass (2008) is published in the UK by Pan Macmillan.*

