

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

DEAR ALLY, How do you write a book?

Congratulations! You've asked the question that all writers ask themselves at some point. But do you want to know a secret? It's a question most of us never really *stop* asking.

Every time I sit down to write a new book, I convince myself there must be a way to do it faster, more efficiently, *better*! Surely, after ten years in this business and with a total of fifteen books under my belt, I should know what I'm doing by now.

But I don't, I'm afraid. So I can't really tell you how to write a book. There is no single way to do it, you see.

Every author is different. Heck, every *book* is different. How I wrote my first book is different from the process I'll use to write my next book. Why? Because they're different books. Because I'm at a different place in my life and in my career. Lots of reasons.

Luckily, there are some things that always stay the same, and I'm going to try to cover as many of the basics as I can in this book—things like creating characters, making sure your story has enough conflict, and building a world that feels real to you and your readers.

But just know that what works for me might not work for you.

Really, there's only one thing I can say with absolute certainty: This process will take time.

A few years ago, I did the math and figured out that I spend at least nine hundred hours plotting, researching, writing, and editing every book I write.

STORYBOARDING/BREAKING THE STORY: 4 HRS/

DAY FOR 20 DAYS: 80 HOURS

RESEARCHING/THINKING/BRAINSTORMING:

50 HOURS

FIRST DRAFT: 5 HRS/DAY FOR 30 DAYS: 150 HOURS

SECOND DRAFT: 5 HRS/DAY FOR 80 DAYS: 400 HOURS

LINE EDIT: 5 HRS/DAY FOR 25 DAYS: 125 HOURS

COPY EDIT: 6 HRS/DAY FOR 5 DAYS: 30 HOURS

FINAL "PAGE PROOF" EDIT: 8 HRS/DAY FOR 4 DAYS:

32 HOURS

CRYING: 30 HOURS

Nine hundred hours. And that's for just one book. That doesn't include all the hours I spent learning the basics.

A lot of new writers—especially writers in their teens—start out full of ideas and energy, but when they don't immediately write something perfect, they give up. They tell themselves they just can't do it. That's certainly what I did.

I remember when I was in middle school and I got the writing bug. I sat down at our kitchen table one night to write my first novel. My mother (an English teacher) was so proud. I could see her watching me as she cooked dinner. I wrote really hard for a really long time—like

ten whole minutes! And then I read what I had written and burst into tears.

“What’s wrong?” Mom asked as she stopped cooking.

I could barely catch my breath, I was crying so hard. “It’s just . . .” I started. “It’s not . . . It isn’t as good as the opening paragraph of *To Kill a Mockingbird!*” I exclaimed, and then cried some more.

That’s when my mom gave me the best writing advice that anyone has ever given me. She said, “First, that’s the greatest novel ever written, so maybe we lower our standards? Second, you should never compare your first draft to someone else’s finished draft.”

That advice is probably the only reason I was able to write a second paragraph. And a third. And a . . . millionth.

You see, in a lot of ways, writing is like turning on a garden hose that hasn’t been used in a really long time. The first water out of the hose is always rusty and dirty and full of gravel and all kinds of gross stuff. But it doesn’t stay that way.

Nope. The longer the water runs, the clearer it will be. Writing is the same way.

That first paragraph that I wrote at our kitchen table was dirty water. The story that went with it was dirty water, too. So were the four screenplays I wrote in college and the six short stories I wrote after grad school and the first book I wrote, which to this day has never been published.

Even now, the first draft of every book I do is my “dirty water draft,” and that’s okay. No one gets to the good stuff right away.

No. To get to the good stuff, *you have to let the water run.*

Writing takes time. It takes work. It takes putting in the hours—sometimes more than a thousand of them—to get the story and the characters and the words just right.

You have to put in the time, is what I'm trying to say.

And that time is up to you. To find it. To use it. To make the most of it because this thing—this writing thing—it's *optional*.

It's something you do because you want to do it. It's something you do because you like to do it. It has to be something that you do for *you*.

Because ultimately, the answer to your question—"How do you write a book?"—is this:

You write a book by putting yourself in a chair and not getting up.

For approximately nine hundred hours.

How did you come up with the idea for this book?

Writing isn't just what I do for a living. It's what I . . . do. Most writers are the same. We've always dabbled or scribbled or played around with stories and words.

When I was in middle school, I started wanting to be a writer, but there weren't a ton of resources available in the small library in my small town. As I got older, I came across some really amazing books about the craft and business of writing—books like *On Writing* by Stephen King, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott, and *Screenplay* by Syd Field (all of which I highly recommend).

I also had the opportunity to join some great organizations and online communities and attend some fantastic conferences.

Most of all, I've been lucky enough to get to know some of the best writers in the world, and whenever two or more of us get together, inevitably we all get to talking about characters and plots and all our favorite tricks. (Not to mention the mistakes we hope we never make again.)

Which is why, whenever I'm at a book festival or tour stop or school visit and someone says, "I'm writing my first book. Do you have any

advice?” I want to scream, “Yes! I do! I have so much advice!” but it’s hard to answer in a few sentences what, in a way, I’ve been learning to do my whole life—what I’m *still* learning to do.

When I started looking around for books to recommend to these young aspiring writers, I realized that while there are a lot of great books by adult authors, written for adult writers, there aren’t a lot of things written by YA authors for teen audiences.

So that’s why I’m doing this: to change that.

Do you have to get good grades in English class to be a great author?

This is an interesting question. And the short answer, I suppose, is: not exactly.

Were most authors pretty good at English in school? My guess is yes. But no publisher is going to ask to see your report card before they offer you a contract. Nope. What they’re going to ask to see is your *book*.

Is your book good? Does it have compelling and interesting characters and a well-paced plot and a vivid world? Those are the questions that are going to matter most.

But there will be other questions, too. Like, does this person make silly grammatical mistakes? Is she so obsessed with sounding smart that she uses words she obviously doesn’t understand? Is he the kind of person who is going to send out a really important letter without proofreading it first?

Ultimately, publishing is a professional business. You will be expected to write and speak professionally.

And let’s not forget, English classes aren’t just about writing. A lot of times, they’re also about *reading*, and the ability to read carefully and

thoughtfully is absolutely essential for anyone who wants a career in this business.

So even though no publisher is going to ask to see your report card, now is the time to develop the skills you're going to need down the line. Just like someone who wants to be a doctor needs to pay attention in science class and someone who wants to be an engineer needs to take good notes in physics, writers pay attention in English class—almost as if our job depends on it (because it kind of does).

I always seem to run out of story before my work approaches book length. How do I craft a story that can go the distance?

First, it's great that you've already started writing! That's the first step.

Second, you should know that not everything has to be a novel. You might not be doing anything wrong at all. Maybe you're simply writing a short story or a novella. There are lots of really great stories that are only a few pages long. And I think, in the beginning, the most important thing is that you actually finish what you start. So if your story is finished after a few pages, that's fine.

But if you think you're ready to try to do something longer, this section might be able to help with that.

First, I'm going to assume that you've read a lot of books. If you haven't, then take my word for it: *Your first job is to read a lot of books!*

Do you have any idea how many people tell me, "So, you're an author? I'm going to write a book someday." And then when I ask them what books they like to read, they almost always reply that they don't

have time to read a book. *Then how are you going to have time to write a book?* I want to scream.

So if you take the time to read, you're already way ahead of the game.

Read funny books and serious books. Read long books and short books. Read bestsellers and award winners and dusty books in your school library that only your librarian has ever read. Read everything.

If you're already doing this, awesome.

But your new assignment is to stop reading like a *reader* and start reading like a *writer*.

How do writers read? We pay attention to details, to what is—and isn't—on the page. What happens? When does it happen? Why does it happen?

So how do you do this? It's actually pretty easy (and fun).

STEP 1. Pick up one of your favorite books.

STEP 2. Get ready to take some notes.

STEP 3. Start reading.

STEP 4. As you read, make a list of every big thing that happens. Your job here is to identify all the *scenes*.

For example, if you are reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, your list might start like this:

- Dumbledore shows up on Privet Drive.
- Hagrid brings baby Harry to the Dursleys.
- Harry wakes up in the cupboard under the stairs on Dudley's birthday.
- Harry talks to a snake at the zoo.
- etc., etc.

STEP 5. After you've finished writing down all the scenes from your favorite book, dig out a fresh piece of paper and do the same thing for the story you're writing.

STEP 6. Put your two lists side by side and compare them.

My guess is that the list for your favorite book is going to be a lot longer than the list for your book . . . but you already knew that, didn't you? The point of this exercise is to illustrate that your problem isn't that your book doesn't have as many *pages*.

Your problem is that your book doesn't have as many *scenes*.

Again, it's possible that your story is just smaller. Instead of taking us all the way to magic school and thwarting a terrible villain while saving unicorns and flying around on brooms, maybe you told the story of a kid who blew up his science lab one day.

If that's the case, you've written a short story. Which is great. Go, you! The only way to turn that into a novel is to have that be the opening scene of a much bigger story. Maybe by blowing up the science lab he turns the class hamster into a dragon that gets loose in the city and he and his friends have to save it? Maybe he opens up a hole in the floor that leads to a secret world beneath the school? Maybe he switches bodies with his twin sister?

You get the idea. *Something else has to happen*. More things have to go wrong. Your characters need more hurdles to jump, more dead ends, more false starts.

You need more conflict.

And you need more scenes to resolve all that conflict.

Look at your lists again. This time, I want you to mark every time the character in your favorite book had something go wrong. Now do the same for your story.