



## Anna Maxted

**Running in Heels**  
**ISBN13: 9780060988258**

### The Seeds of Panic

Part of the allure of writing a book is that it's the route to a wonderful life: you can bludgeon your alarm clock to death, swan to your oak desk at 10am, create magic for a few hours at your laptop while sipping champagne, break for lunch at the Sugar Club with your publisher (she pays, obviously), ride your pony in the afternoon. Sadly, when you are sitting in front of a blank screen with 150,000 words worth of space to fill, you realise that the monster book deal, the glamorous author parties, the rave

reviews in the *New York Times*, are a long way away. All thoughts of ponies are abandoned. So, you don't start writing. Starting to write is terrifying because the prospect of failure becomes imminent. Because of this, I started writing my novel about two years after I'd first thought about it. That's how long it can take to run out of excuses. The possibility that I might actually like to write a novel first occurred to me when I was features editor on UK *Cosmopolitan*. A colleague had sold her book and I thought, ooh, champagne, ponies, lunches, I'd like to do that. The fact that she'd succeeded made the fantasy seem a little more attainable. However, when you have a full time job your day is pretty much taken up with that. I feel hard done by getting up at 8. I was never going to rise at 5 and create reams of perfect prose before hopping on the tube to do a full day's work. Some people manage it. Those people want to write their book more than anything - more than sleep, or any kind of life - which is probably why they succeed. But, at that time I didn't want it badly enough - so I continued at Cosmo until something happened that changed my priorities. My father died. I was 27, it shattered me. A week after his death I was back at work but I wasn't the same person. I couldn't get out of my head that I had missed his last birthday dinner because I had been in the office editing a piece on perfect skin. 10 months after he died, I was still working at Cosmo, but I was still in a bit of a state. I didn't want to be there anymore. I wanted to be at home, getting to know my remaining relatives before they expired. My editor at that time suggested that I write a feature about my grief (a very editory thing to do), and so I wrote a piece entitled *The First Year Without My Father*. I found the actual writing cathartic, although I felt as a feature it was roughly 148 thousand words too short. But it gave me a good opportunity to say things I wanted to say to people, vent a lot of rage. One example - a cousin said to my mother "my husband has gone to South Africa for three weeks - I know exactly how you feel!" The way people behave around you when you are bereaved is funny even if you don't appreciate it at the time, and I wrote about that. A few readers wrote in, and a press officer who worked for a publishing house sent me a card saying 'maybe you should write your novel around this subject.' All this attention was satisfying - one of my fears was that my father would be forgotten, and as long as I wrote about him he was alive in peoples' thoughts - but it wasn't enough - and I know I seem to be going on about this but the point is that to write a good book you have to be passionate about your subject. You can't write a book as a cynical exercise because it shows. You have to respect your readers. You can't patronise them. And for that, you have to believe in and love your characters. Which sounds very pretentious. I always think of the start of *Romancing the Stone*, a film which begins with Kathleen Turner sobbing over what sounds like real events, but turn out to be the end of the bonkbuster she's just finished on her typewriter. It seems laughable but if you don't have that level of involvement with your characters - if you don't see them as real people - the book won't ring true. When I wrote the last pages of *Getting Over It* and *Running In Heels*, I snivelled over my desk. I'm not saying I didn't feel like a berk, but if you don't care about the people in your book, no one else will either. I always give my characters what I believe Robert McKee refers to as 'a backstory' - a life before the novel began which isn't necessarily included within it - so that they're psychologically sound. In *Getting Over It*, Helen, my heroine, doesn't have a great relationship with her father. When he dies at the start of the book, she thinks she can continue as normal... And she does for a while, until her life and family start to fall to bits around her. While this book is essentially about grief, it's also a romantic comedy. At the beginning, Helen is attracted to men who are emotionally distant - it's what she's comfortable with, what she's used to, because of her relationship with her father. Part of Helen's grieving process is accepting the fact that she can never repair the flaws in the relationship with her dad. As she learns to live with this fact, and it's a long struggle, she is able to accept that her romantic relationships with men do not have to be like this... Until my father died, I don't think I felt strongly enough about any one subject to write a book about it but this was something that I couldn't get out of my system. Eventually, I resigned from Cosmo and went freelance. This gave me time to delay a bit longer. I wrote one or two more features about grief but I realised it wasn't enough. I wanted to write a novel for the person I was when I lost my dad - a 27 year-old who had other things on her mind that Monday morning, when she turned around from her desk, to see her fiancée with this terrible look on his face and heard him say 'Your father's had a stroke.' That one moment changed my whole life. Now, a year on, I had some distance from the acute bitterness and rage, and knew I wanted to communicate something. I think this is the next step - you have to want to write your book enough to stop faffing about and actually do it. Being a freelance makes that easier, but I still don't think I would have written it if not for the friends who encouraged me. I was very fortunate in that I had several friends who knew people in publishing. One, who worked for *National Magazines* (the company that publishes UK *Cosmopolitan*) had seen the manuscript I'd written for a lighthearted Cosmo book entitled '*How To Seduce your Dream Man*.' She kept badgering me to write a proper book. She kept saying 'Oh, soon you'll be a bestselling novelist la la la.' Unless you possess a monstrous ego that needs no outside input, this kind of thing is just what you need - people who convince you that your dream is achievable. I'm sure this is page three of the Ladybird book of Psychology, but you have to reach the stage where you believe you can do it before you can actually do it. Avoid people who don't believe in you, who, for some warped reasons of their own, would rather you didn't write a book and get it published. In the end, my friend told a publisher about me, who rang and invited me to come and see him. This guy's last name was Lancaster, but I was so excited I misheard it on my answer machine as Van Castor. I had nothing to show him so I rang back, arranged an appointment for seven days' time and started writing. There was a book inside me but alas, at this stage it was rubbish. It was as my husband said, just a lot of typing. However I think Lord Van Castor was feeling charitable that day - he later said he thought there was a kernel of something there - because he offered me a two-book deal. I was tempted to accept it but I felt it might be wise to speak to some authors first. I spoke to two - both said don't go straight to a publisher - find yourself an agent. One said that her current bigshot agent didn't speak to "the little people" but she did put me in touch with the agent who'd negotiated her first deal. After reading my manuscript this agent wrote me back a very nice letter saying 'Go away.' Fortunately a friend of a friend knew a literary agent, Johnny G. He suggested I send him my work. I got excited again, and ignored my husband who had read the typing and told me I hadn't got a plot. I saw this new agent who was very kind and gave me five minutes of great advice. He told me I didn't have a plot. He also told me that a novel has to kick off with a dramatic event. Somehow, I'd missed that. In the gobledgook version I had the father die halfway through the book, which was - I now see - the decision of an idiot. Johnny suggested that the book began with the father dying. My heroine was also a tabloid journalist. Johnny said that readers didn't tend to be very sympathetic to tabloid journalists. He told me to go away and come back when I had something proper. So... I rang the publisher and told him that I'd like to do a bit more work on the book before

selling it. I also wanted to say that I couldn't really afford to take his offer but I was slightly ashamed - after all the main goal here was to be published - to get the chance to tell the story I wanted to tell - what was I doing quibbling about money - didn't this make me a hypocrite? Probably. But. You have to know what you want to get it - if I was going to be a novelist I wanted to be a full-time novelist. I wanted to give up the day job. I didn't want to start my novel feeling hard done by and cross. And this story was very personal to me - it was like being told your baby is quite ugly so he's not worth much. Also, the publisher had sent me a contract which I'd read out to Johnny. One of the phrases on it entitled them to world rights and use of my kidneys on days ending in Y - when I read this out, Johnny made a noise like this - phhhhhh! I sulked. At this point I'd also made the gross error of telling quite a few people that I was writing a novel. Never tell anyone that you're writing a novel until you've written it and sold it, because - especially if you're a journalist, it's like a waitress saying 'I'm really an actor. Everyone says, every other day, 'how's it going, have you written it yet?' and you feel like a fool before anyone's even turned you down. I decided to abandon the meagre residue of pride I had, and to buy a book on novel writing. It was entitled 'Bestseller'. I felt such a squit, I was mortified beyond belief at the cash register - it was obvious the till guy thought I was a loser - and I couldn't bring myself to open it for three weeks. But finally I did, and I recommend it. After all, if you want to become a barrister, you don't just barge into court wearing a wig. *Bestseller*, by Celia Brayfield. It's very good on the structure of a novel. It really helped me to order my thoughts. It also convinced me of the paramount importance of plot. So I took a month off to devise a proper plot. So note that it had taken me 18 months to actually commit to spending time and losing money on this thing. I managed the plot, but still couldn't quite start the writing. It took a chance meeting with Johnny G at someone's engagement party to goad me that bit further - he said 'How's the novel going?' and I said 'I haven't started it yet,' and he went 'Ah well.' As in 'Ah well, you deadbeat, you smell of whiskey.' It worked. I almost started writing. I found another excuse. I hadn't done enough research. I had enough distance from my own experience by now, to have created characters and a story that wasn't actually me or my family. A lot of the emotions were based on mine, but the people and events were mostly made up - and this is important from a 'Sorry but you're being sued for libel and we're pulping your book and can we have our advance back?' point of view. So, I'd decided that the fictional dad would die of a heart attack in chapter two, and the heroine would have to organise his funeral in chapter three. I found I couldn't write because I blimmin well didn't know what happened when you had a heart attack - I've not had one - and I didn't know how to organise a funeral - ditto. Horror. This meant leaving the comfort of my sofa and ugh - speaking to people. After much footling around, I found a doctor, who showed me round the local hospital, talked me through symptoms, hospital hierarchy etc. He was brilliant. Knowing the facts makes it much easier to write fiction. You can be cleverer, funnier, wiser - you can build the fancy house because you have strong foundations. It's important though, to check what you've written. Probably through laziness, I made my heroine work on a magazine... and one little scene I particularly liked was the one where the heroine sees her father, lying in hospital, attached to a drip, and is appalled at the sight of his full catheter. To her, it's a gross symbol of that stripping of dignity, that this powerful person was now weak - so I wrote this cute paragraph about my heroine being horrified by 'this orange wee bag..'. And yet, despite her shock, her womens magazine instinct wonders why the bag has to be transparent and couldn't the state commission Gucci or Prada to design a more upmarket wee bag..... anyway, my doctor read this juvenile piece of wit and said, "After a heart attack, the kidneys malfunction.. he wouldn't be producing urine!" I think what goes onto the page is not the work, it is the culmination of a great deal of invisible work. You might sit down and work for five hours at the typewriter, but you should be working on your novel 18 hours a day... thinking about how to make that confrontation more dramatic, choosing the best word to describe something - yes you have a workable word, but you could do better. Of course, before you can write your story, you have to concentrate on finding your tone. For that, I think you have to know who your reader is. I was lucky because I had a fairly exact reader in mind. I wanted to write for women. Maybe it sounds cynical to say you have to know your market, but you do - it's the first thing that publishers think about. If they can't see the market, then they'll hesitate to buy your book, no matter how good the writing. And there's no crime in wanting to be commercial. That's a dirty word but it doesn't mean you have to compromise your integrity or write badly. All it means is that you want to communicate to a lot of people rather than a few. I write in first person, because I write emotional books, and first person means you are as close to your characters as it's possible to get. With my third book, *Behaving Like Adults*, I had to chuck away three months work. This was because I tried to write in the third person. It was rubbish. It distanced me from the characters, I found it harder to communicate, it was stiff and unrelaxed. I hated it. But for other writers, it suits. You'll know when you've found your voice because the words will flow. The final dilemma is whether to write about what you know. I met with a couple of male authors who both swore that nothing from their personal lives leaked into their books. One of them turned to me and said 'Do you leak?' Well.. yes. sometimes. And one famous female author recently said that she felt her first two books weren't proper as they were really about her - there is this school of thought that you have to get rid of your own hang ups before you can be a real writer - the literary equivalent of running the tap until all the rust and gunk is out and you have clear water. But I disagree - I think you work through your hang ups in the course of writing the book - the protagonist goes on a journey and so do you - you learn and grow with your characters - don't think there's any special merit in having a lofty distance from them. Your books will always be about you to some degree - they will always reflect your view of the world in some way. In the end it doesn't matter where your creativity comes from - whether research, imagination, real life - in the end you always write about what you know, wherever your knowledge has come from. Your main concern should be, can you translate what you know into entertainment? Do you have empathy for your characters, or empathy, full stop? Anyway, two years of procrastination, and I finally had a plot, a synopsis, and my first three chapters. I remember sending it off to Johnny, ringing him to expect it, and thinking, 'That's my best effort. If he doesn't like it, then I'm back to writing pieces on the cabbage soup diet for the Daily Express and being grateful.' Thank goodness, he did like it, and he sent it out to four British publishers who also, thank goodness again, liked it, and bid for it. Nine days later, I had a two book deal with Random House, and insomnia, from excitement. A few weeks after that, Johnny sold the American rights to Harpercollins. The slight problem is that after you've got your deal, you actually have to be able to continue to write. The advance isn't a wager - 3 to 2 she writes us a book! It's frightening, because the potential for public humiliation is so vast but you panic for a bit, and then you calm down and actually start to enjoy it. Because forget the parties, the ponies, the rave reviews - once you actually start writing a novel you realise that that is the best bit. And by the way, I don't own a pony. Read ch 2 of *Behaving Like Adults*... It's the first book written in past tense. Holly, my heroine reluctantly ended her engagement to Nick, because he refused to grow up. He also dawdled over leaving their house. She runs a dating agency, and allowed herself to be persuaded to date one of her clients Stuart, to encourage Nick on his way. And it all went terribly wrong...