

## **My experience of doing the Faber Academy ‘Writing a Novel’ course**

When I first applied for the now famous Faber Academy ‘Writing a Novel’ course, it was the summer of 2011. Having suffered a period of ill health two years previously, I had resigned from a stressful and increasingly frustrating job as director of quality at a large college of further education and was at a crossroads in my working life, doing bits and pieces of part-time teaching and consultancy work and wishing more than anything that I could fulfil my long held ambition to write a novel. In actual fact, I’d already written one, but despite several encouraging rejections from literary agents, it was languishing in a box at the bottom of my wardrobe along with all my earlier attempts – some of them produced in the days of my old Amstrad dot matrix printer. Yes, I really am that old!

So when I saw the Faber Academy advert, I knew I had to give it my best shot. The day I received the letter telling me I’d been accepted onto the course, I was thrilled and as soon as I started, I knew it was the right decision. One of the benefits of doing a course like this, is that you start to take yourself seriously as a writer. Because that’s important. It doesn’t matter if you haven’t got an agent and aren’t yet published: if you write with intent then you’re a writer.

I loved those Monday nights, travelling into town and walking up Great Russell Street past all those wonderful Georgian buildings and black railings to Bloomsbury House. I just felt in my bones that this is what I should be doing and I loved every second of those two hours a week and one full Saturday a month. I was lucky enough to be placed in a group of interesting, friendly and supportive people, several of whom I still meet up with. We carried on meeting and critiquing each other’s novels long after the course finished and though I no longer attend those meetings because I’ve now moved out of London, I can’t imagine I’ll ever lose touch with my Faber friends.

The course is advertised as a practical alternative to doing a creative writing MA and though I cannot comment on whether this is a fair description, having never done a creative writing MA, I can say that the way the course is structured, with its emphasis on workshopping extracts of each other’s works-in-progress, is a brilliant way of learning how to improve your writing. It’s not just the feedback you get on your *own* work – and that’s feedback from fifteen unique individuals/readers, including your course tutor who is always an experienced and successful novelist themselves (mine was Maggie Gee who has published no fewer than twelve novels and has an OBE for services to literature) – but reading your fellow students’ writing and seeing what works well and what doesn’t, helps you look at your own writing with an equally critical eye.

I was writing a comic novel at the time and although the feedback from my peers was generally positive, one particular comment is engraved in my mind: ‘it feels like this is just a vehicle for gags’. I remember smiling politely, but inside I was fuming. The thing is, when I sat down with everybody’s written comments and started to rewrite that passage, I realised that he was right. I was trying too hard to *inject* humour into it, rather than allowing the story and the situation to unfold naturally and for the humour to come through in a more subtle manner. (If you’re reading this, Brandon, thank you for being so honest. I needed it!)

Maggie Gee also taught me so much about editing my own work. I would give her what I thought was my leanest, sparest prose and it would come back literally *covered* with those

infuriating square brackets that indicated which bits she recommended cutting. The worst thing was, they were some of my BEST LINES!! But again, once I'd stripped out the offending phrases, it read so much better. The lesson was invaluable: less is more. Always.

We had an impressive roll-call of visiting writers and industry professionals to inspire us too: Louise Doughty, Sarah Dunant, Tobias Hill, Mick Jackson, Ali Smith and Chris Wakling, plus industry professionals such as the late (and utterly lovely) Becky Swift who founded The Literary Consultancy (TLC), and various agents and publishing directors – all of whom gave us fascinating insights into the world of publishing. I took something useful from every single one of these talks, but it was our session with Louise Doughty that resonated with me the most. She was generous enough to share with us the problems she encountered writing her novel 'Whatever You Love' and how she overcame them. I learned so much about structuring a novel from that one session and it was so reassuring to realise that established authors like Louise encountered the very same problems we novices did, and that there *are* ways to fix seemingly insoluble problems.

I don't think a creative writing course like this can teach you *how* to write, and it certainly won't guarantee you an agent or a publishing deal. But it can help you understand more fully the *process* of writing a novel and harness the skills you already possess to develop your craft and improve your chances of success. And, most importantly, it allows you the space to take your ambitions seriously - to write with intent.

I might be fortunate enough to have a novel coming out in December, but that doesn't mean I'm not still learning from other writers, both published *and* unpublished, and continually trying to write better. I even started my own writing group when I moved out of London, because I missed the support and constructive feedback I enjoyed first on the Faber course and then afterwards, with the writing friends I made there. So if you can't afford the fees for a Faber or similar course and aren't eligible to apply for one of the funded places, I'd recommend doing the next best thing and joining a writers' group.

And if you can't find one that suits you, start your own!