

## **The Perilously Painful Path to Publication**

### **Being an Apprentice by Sheila Bugler**

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The plan was simple. During my one-year maternity leave, I would write a novel, get it published and give up work. I would become a writer. What could be so difficult about that? I'd been thinking about it, on and off, for years. Now, my moment had come. Three months to the day after my second child was born, I started...

A year later, I was still writing. This blasted book was taking longer than I'd imagined. In the meantime, time and money had run out and I had to go back to work.

I had read about a scheme aimed at nurturing developing writers. It was called **Apprenticeships in Fiction** and appealed to me for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, it was partly funded by the Arts Council so I wouldn't have to remortgage my house or sell the kids if I got accepted. Secondly, you are paired with a mentor - someone already established in the genre you're writing for. Over the course of a year, your mentor helps you get your novel to a standard that's ready for submission to agents and publishers.

The mentorship arrangement sounded ideal as I had no desire to spend time (or money) on creative writing courses. I'm a pretty practical person and believe that the best way to learn about writing is, well, by writing. On a whim, I applied. A few months later, I got a letter telling me I was one of a handful of writers accepted onto the 2007/08 Apprenticeship scheme.

A prerequisite of the scheme is that you have a good first draft of your novel

already written. I had a draft but it was far from good and I spent a frantic few months trying to get it ready in time.

To state the obvious, the success of a mentoring programme relies on the relationship you have with your mentor. Mine was crime writer, Martyn Waites. Prior to our first meeting, I read two of his novels. They were very good and, for the first time, I felt nervous. What if he thought my writing was rubbish and I was a deluded idiot?

As it turned out, there was no need to worry. Martyn was good company and we broke the ice by talking about the important things in life – Dr Who, Johnny Cash and good crime novels – before turning to my opus.

It needed work, Martyn said. A lot of work. Everything from the title onwards, in fact. But what about my opening chapters, I bleated pitifully. The ones that everyone has said are so good? Even my husband likes them and he's my harshest critic. Martyn kindly conceded they did have some merit but pointed out that 'rather a lot happens' to my heroine very early on (in the first chapter her dead father appeared to her, she was accused of murdering her boyfriend, and she failed to save her friend from throwing himself off a high building –all before lunchtime).

It killed me to admit it, but I knew Martyn was right. He was also very encouraging, didn't make me feel a total failure, and convinced me my book still had (some) merit. I went away with a long list of things to do and got to work. Over the year, I slogged my arse off. With Martyn's help, I got the novel to something approaching a finished piece of work. I also had a submission pack (first three chapters, introductory letter and synopsis) which I thought was pretty good. Through Martyn, I got an introduction to an agent. Around the same time, a publisher contacted me directly after seeing a sample of my work online, asking to see the completed novel.

So where am I now? Well, my apprenticeship is finished and so is the novel.

Would I recommend it? Absolutely. It's no guarantee of success – ultimately, that's down to me and no one else. Above all, though, it has helped me keep going over the last year and a half. Writing is a lonely business and the support offered by this scheme is a great boost to a struggling writer's fragile ego. I've made some great friends, learned so much about writing, and am several steps closer to being published than if I'd tried to go it alone.

In the meantime, my husband still believes in me and I continue to get up at 5am to write before the kids get up. I dream of giving up the day job and being able to spend all day doing what I love most – writing. Thanks to the apprenticeship scheme, I'm a little closer to fulfilling that dream.

(Edited version)

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