

**Minette Walters**

LET YOUR CHARACTERS TELL THEIR STORY

The best way to write a book is to start with an idea and develop your characters, says **Minette Walters**. But then do check they've got their facts right...

Was told to Mary Hogarth

It's much more exciting to ask your characters to develop a plot. Every writer should try this process at least once. Whether the people are good or bad, you have to become involved with them, and the minute you become involved with your characters you start to fall in love with them. If you write by just concentrating on the plot, the story is everything and the characters take second place, becoming mere people on a stage.

It can be difficult and frightening to set out with just an idea and then have to find people to carry it. Going down the character route is experimental and exploratory. You have to be prepared to discard

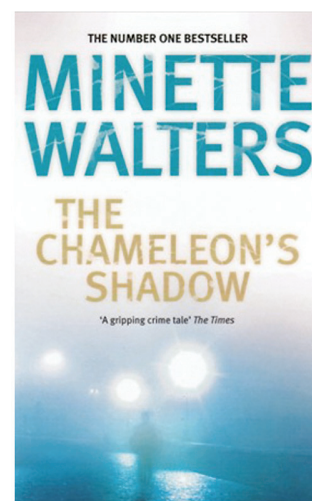
lots of work because sometimes characters won't develop the story in the way you want them to. When that happens you have to be brutal – discard characters if they don't take the story forward. Several times I've had a good idea but not found the right characters to carry the story and have had to abandon it after two or three chapters.

Sometimes I can find the characters but not the plot. My agent says: 'Why don't you keep them and put them all in one book?' But as Doris Lessing says, if you don't like it, tear it up, because a story doesn't improve. It's best just to cut it out of your head.

For me the hard work is at the

beginning and a lot of the work I do at this point may not appear in the book. Writing through your characters is all about imagination. First imagine the kind of person they are, then start to have a conversation with them. I do experimental dialogue, getting characters to talk to me first, then to each other. This gives you character traits, which bring people to life. What type of people are they – clever, cunning, interesting?

In real life when you meet someone for the first time, the only way to find out about them is to talk, ask about their lives, their backgrounds. Find out who they are and where they come from. That's the process I use to get to



know my characters.

It's important to have at least two characters in your head when you start. If they begin talking to each other – one might be an introvert, the other an extrovert – then they develop as they talk to each other. At first I don't picture what a person looks like, it's more to do with personalities, but by the time you've got them talking you know how they look.

Keeping the cast small is also important. Although I don't set a limit on the number of characters in each book, I don't tend to have too many. I work with a smaller cast of characters than say Tom Clancy, who has a diverse mix of many characters all over the world. Generally I think British authors have more tapestry than American writers because we live in smaller environments – families don't tend



Celebrating the prized CWA Gold Dagger for *The Scold's Bridle*

Continued overleaf ►

Minette Walters continued

to live that far apart whereas in the States they can live thousands of miles away. For the heart of the story I very much doubt I would ever have more than 10.

If you are a character-driven writer, it is important to give them integrity and backgrounds, although it's not essential for an ancillary character to have depth: a policeman in a murder story doesn't have to take centre stage,

‘Edit your own work. If it doesn't move the story on or slows the pace, it's no good. Be brutal’

for example. Plays and books aren't hugely different – on stage you've usually got a handful of characters carrying a story and I think novels are like that.

By the time I have developed the characters and got into the story my subconscious has already been working hard and much of the plot will fall into place.

Editing, however, is crucial. As Ernest Hemingway said, the only thing a good writer needs is a built in crapometer. Edit your own work and take out any bits that don't work – even if it's your

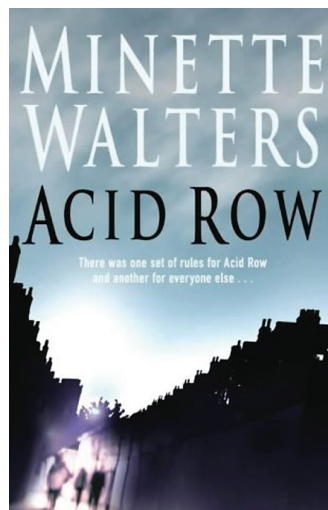
best writing – because if it doesn't move the story on or slows the pace, it's no good. Be brutal.

A lot of new writers don't understand the publishing process. They think an editor will do that for them. But if an editor reads a raw manuscript that has flaws, then he or she is not going to publish it. A novel has got to be as perfect as it can be when it goes to a publisher so that he is impressed and just wants to tweak it.

New writers need to notice bits that shouldn't be in the book, this is how you get the idea of editing. But it is personal. Tom Clancy writes in a way that doesn't appeal to me – giving in-depth descriptions about how atomic bombs are made. I skip those parts. Quite often you read a description of a person's physical appearance that doesn't need to be there, two pages describing one character's appearance is excessive.

You also have to check your facts. There are two methods. One is to do it up front, by finding out everything you can. But I suggest first-time writers don't think about specific research until after they have written the story. Just set it down using the information you already have gleaned. It's only once I've written a novel that I will do my research to check the facts are correct. For example, exactly how long it takes to kill someone with arsenic by giving them a dose of 3mg a day.

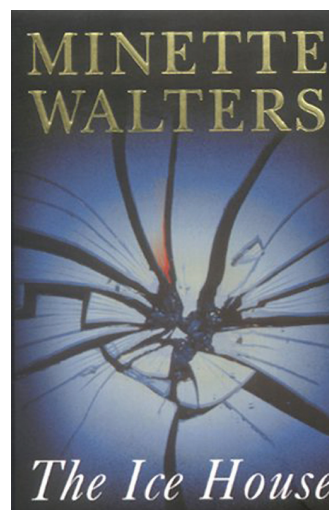
General information about police stations and the collection of evidence you can pick up by watching *The Bill*. The police are very helpful too, particularly if you go through their PR department.



You can also use the internet and your contacts; if you know any solicitors – or pathologists! – approach them. But remember, just because one of your characters is a forensic scientist, it doesn't mean your readers need to know exactly what he does every day.

My oddest research experience was when I wanted to know what it felt like to drown. I held my head in a bucket for as long as possible and my husband thought I'd gone mad. But sometimes you have to try things out on yourself because you need to know what a sensation is actually like.

Writers have to be interested in everything. If you want to write crime novels, read them. Read books by forensic experts. Watch TV crime dramas and documentaries to pick up as much information as you can, so that you know about and understand the process of collecting evidence at a crime



scene. Then when you embark on your story you are using information you have already gathered in your subconscious.

I have always been interested in criminology since becoming fascinated by the A6 murder [for which James Hanratty was hanged in 1962]. My mother used to buy the *Telegraph* every day and I read about the Hanratty trial. I was 11 or 12 and was too young to understand rape. There was no explanation for his crimes so I became interested in motivation.

'It is an amateur interest, but I read a lot of true crime and, of course, watch *CSI*.

• *Minette is now working on her latest novel, but declined to give Writers' Forum readers an insight saying: 'I never discuss plots until they are finished.' For more details on her writing career visit www.minnettewalters.co.uk*



With husband Alec

To be a writer, says Minette, you need to:

- Recognise it's hard work, but be committed – it's no good having great ideas if you don't have the commitment and stamina to finish manuscripts, otherwise you end up with a pile of unfinished work in a bottom drawer.
- Be a good editor of your own work and be highly critical.
- Read voraciously. I am constantly amazed by people who say they want to write books, but have only read three in their lives. You can't be a writer without reading prolifically because you need to understand the format, and you can't do that without being interested in books.