

By Invitation

Musing on vampires and writing a teen novel

A law professor learns to tweet and to write from the heart



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For *The Straits Times*

As an academic and as a lawyer, I am paid to organise words. Given the limitations of the alphabet and of space, enough monkeys at enough typewriters would eventually produce not only everything that I have ever written but the entire works of Shakespeare as well.

"Eventually" is a fairly long time, however. In the interim, most of us like to think that the words we produce are unique expressions of our thoughts, rather than the random tappings of simian scribes.

Socrates famously warned that writing would make us lazy. If everything could be written down, he said, no one would bother to remember or really understand anything.

Yet writing has vastly expanded the realm of human knowledge – indeed, we only know what Socrates thought because his student Plato wrote it down. If each generation had to come up with its own Socrates, whole fields of human endeavour would never have been possible.

Today, access to computers and the Internet has transformed the way we interact with words. It makes it easier and harder to write and to read. Easier in the sense that everyone can publish their thoughts and access virtually all of human knowledge; harder in the sense that for all practical purposes most of what gets "published" on the Internet will never be looked at by more than a couple of people.

Attention spans are also shortening, leading us to skim across the surface rather than to read in depth.

As someone who makes his living

with words, this dynamic of writing and reading has always fascinated me. So over the past two years I decided to conduct an experiment of sorts. In addition to my usual academic writing (earnest journal articles and a book or two), a couple of legal opinions and the occasional newspaper piece like this one, I began to use Twitter. And I wrote a novel.

Twitter offered the provocative discipline of its 140-character limit. I used to think that newspaper columns were confining: No footnotes? Only a thousand words? But reducing anything coherent to two dozen words is even more of a challenge. The result, of course, is that much of Twitter is garbage.

There are diamonds in the rough, however. As the Japanese poetic form of the haiku demonstrates, it is possible to find beauty in 17 syllables.

Ernest Hemingway has been credited with writing the following six-word novel that reduces some people to tears: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Alas most tweets (including mine) do not rise to such levels. But it has been interesting to try.

The novel offered a different kind of challenge. As a teenager, I had written two terrible novels that – mercifully – were never published. Quarter of a century later, I now have children who are approaching their own teenage years; I wanted to write something that they would enjoy, but that would also appeal to adult readers. I briefly toyed with the idea of a law professor who teaches classes by day and slays vampires by night, but apparently that is a saturated field.

So instead I delved into some of the most successful young adult fiction of recent years, ranging from Harry Potter to *The Hunger Games*, as well as award-winning authors like Michael Morpurgo and David Almond. I also re-read some of my favourite stories from my youth, in particular Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes and Tolkien's tales of Middle Earth.

And then, at night and on weekends, on long-haul flights and on trains, I began to write.

NO ONE NEEDS LITERATURE

Writing a good academic piece is



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hard. The best journals and publishers demand work that is original, significant and impactful. One must demonstrate that one has read and understood a body of literature and that one's own piece makes a genuine contribution that is worthy of publication.

At the same time, the audience for which one is writing is a professional one. Those who read the published piece – other academics, students, a policymaker if you are lucky – do so with a workmanlike attitude that seeks to learn what they can from the piece with a view to using it themselves.

Writing good literature is impossible. Not in the sense that it cannot be done, but in that there is no objective measure of success before the work finds its readership. There is no defined market; novels are not normally read as part of someone's job. No one needs literature. Quite the opposite, a good novel is something that people read purely for pleasure.

A disturbing amount of middle grade and young adult literature pursues this end to an extreme, with puerile jokes and absurd plotlines. (My survey also included *Captain Underpants* and the *Diary Of A Wimpy Kid* and *Big Nate* franchises. It is better that children are reading such work rather than nothing – but not much better.)

There are techniques to master – the centrality of character, "show don't tell", and so on. But the nagging question at every step is whether the reader will care enough about the story to carry on. Without that reader, as Michael

Ende demonstrated so beautifully in *The Neverending Story* (which I read for the first time last year), the characters and their world simply cease to exist.

Writing fiction is also hard because one is vulnerable. In academic and legal work there is a certain formality, a professionalism. Readers might disagree, but they rarely ridicule you. The novels that one remembers try to get at some larger truth – though they do so via an indirect path, raising questions about the human condition rather than advancing an argument as such. If those questions are facile, the novel is uninteresting; if they are irrelevant, then it is pointless.

By the time I had a complete draft of my own novel, I knew that I needed some feedback before it would be ready to show any publisher.

My son was the first to read the manuscript of what is now *Raising Arcadia*, all 240 pages of which he devoured in one sitting.

I had left him to read by himself and came back to find him lost in thought after having turned the final page.

"Well?" I said at last to break the silence. "What do you think?"

He looked at me for a moment and frowned. "Dad," he said. "I think it's a bit short."

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