

Striking a balance

With a foot in both the publishing and psychotherapy camps, **Kathy Gale** has a rare perspective on the emotional side of writing—and believes a new workshop can enlighten publishers and authors, too

After decades of working with authors as an editor in publishing, and over 12 years as a psychotherapist, executive coach and writing coach, I've learned a lot about working with people, and writers in particular. What I have learned has completely changed my attitude. I've come to realise that, given the right support, by far the majority of people can realise their potential—and that potential is much greater than many of us publishers realised. Unleashing that talent requires two things—a particular kind of skills training, and a respect for the emotional in us all.

To take the skills training first, I've noticed a widespread myth among writers and publishers that authors don't need training. That baffles me. You wouldn't expect to play lead violin with the London Philharmonic or have your paintings in the Tate without learning any skills and spending years practising them. Why would writing be any different? There are a huge range of techniques that authors need to know and practise: structure, characterisation, atmosphere and theme to name but a few. And published writers are executing these with an extremely high level of experience and skill. This gets obscured by the fact that many published authors are self-taught, but they are taught nevertheless. When published authors say that they just sit down and write, I feel a little sceptical. The truth, I believe, is that most successful writers, one way or another, have spent years perfecting their art.

There are many ways of teaching authors skills—there are courses, books, magazines—and there has been a proliferation in recent years of offers available to writers. And yet I've met a great many authors who have gone to many courses, read magazines and books, but their ability to execute those skills is low.

I believe this is because most people cannot learn a creative process in theory or at a distance—they have to learn it in practice. Although books and courses have a place, most authors need someone to sit down with them and their writing, and explain how to improve their work by implementing skills and techniques. I often ask authors to compare



how they are creating atmosphere, for example, with how a skilled author does so—this is one of the most effective ways of teaching a new writer to write. The best skills training, I believe, is detailed, face-to-face and interactive.

But is it the case that if you teach a writer skills and technique they will become a brilliant author? No. And why is that? Because human beings are not purely rational creatures. We are also emotional. When a book does not “lift off the page”, this is often not because the author is missing a particular technique, but because they have some emotional difficulty or issue that is effectively blocking their creativity. I don't mean extraordinary traumas—we all have blocks and none of us can be wholly creative unless we are, in some way, aware of and accepting of the feelings we have.

I do not behave like a psychotherapist with my writing clients—it would be intrusive and inappropriate to do so—but I am comfortable with emotional issues and, informed by my therapy training, I may ask a question or make a suggestion that can lead the writer to identify something emotional that is standing in their way. This often has an extraordinary effect—I've seen writing transform after a coaching session where this has taken place.

And there are other ways of being as a psychotherapist that can be transformative to authors: honesty and straightforwardness combined with unconditional positive regard; the use of open questions; a quality of reflectiveness; and a belief in the human being's innate tendency towards self-actualisation. These can have an extraordinary effect on the creative process.

OPENING UP

Writers, like any other people, are also social creatures, by which I mean not that they are party animals necessarily, but that they thrive and grow in relation to others. Because of this, group work can be particularly rich. As a group leader in my coaching work, I have often noticed increased engagement and excitement when people work in groups, and enormous value in the combination of working on the areas the individual needs to explore with listening how others tackle similar issues. With this in mind, I have just begun Writers' Studio, a series of groups for writers which includes both skills training and an openness to exploring emotional challenges.

This way of working with writers—a blend of detailed skills training and willingness to engage with emotional issues—is highly effective and transformative. I'm passionate about this and I'm intending to offer training to others to work in this way. This could benefit authors, publishers and readers. Publishers do not have to rely on a small pool of unusually talented writers—we are all talented and work on skills and emotions combined can unlock that talent. We live in an emotion-phobic society. If we do something different we have the potential to build a thriving and expanded next generation of writers.

Kathy Gale has been editorial director of Pan Books, marketing director of Simon & Schuster and joint managing director of The Women's Press. She is now a psychotherapist, executive coach and writing coach. Her next Writers' Studio group starts in September and submissions from writers are now being accepted—either published writers wanting to go to the next level or prospective writers. For further information, contact kathy.gale@kgpublishingservices.co.uk