



how I write:

the process of creating a book

This is a brief overview of how I go about writing a book, which may well be quite different from many other writers and different to how you like to work yourself. However, in amongst the cries of 'how could he work like that!' there may be some useful pieces of information to help with your own writing.

To me, there are four stages to writing a book, though they do overlap each other, swap places at times or even take over for far longer than they should. These stages are: thinking, planning, writing and revising.

Thinking

Most of my books seem to stem from a single image or thought that lodges in my brain and slowly grows into something that needs to be expressed. That thought may be a 'what if?' or perhaps just an image. *Sabriel* largely began from a photograph I saw of Hadrian's Wall, which had a green lawn in front of it and snow on the hills behind it. Many other thoughts

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conscious or otherwise, grew out, upon and over that single image, both before and during the writing of the book.

I seem to think about a book for a year or so before I actually start writing. In this thinking stage, I often write a few key points in my 'ideas' notebook. At this stage, I merely put down bullet points or mnemonics that will remind me of what I was thinking. This can be very useful later on, particularly if the gestation period for a book is several years.

Planning

For all my longer works (i.e. the novels), I write chapter outlines so I can have the pleasure of departing from them later on. A chapter outline is a great discipline for thinking out the story and it also provides a road map or central skeleton you can come back to if you get lost. I often write the prologue or initial chapter first to get the impetus for the story going and then write the outline. Usually, I have to write a revised chapter outline two or three times in the course of writing the whole book, but once again it does focus the mind on where the story is going and where you want it to go.

Writing

I write my novels longhand first. Nowadays I use a Waterman fountain pen, though I used felt-tips earlier. The advantages of writing longhand are several, at least for me. First of all, I write in relatively small handbound notebooks which are much more transportable than any sort of computer, particularly since you can take them away for several weeks without having

to consider power supplies, batteries or printing out. Parts of *Sabriel*, for example, were written on a trip through the Middle East. Parts of *Shade's Children* and *Sabriel* were written at the beach.

The other major advantage is that when I type up a chapter from my notebook, I rewrite as I type, so the first print-out is actually a second draft. Sometimes I change it quite a lot, sometimes not so much, but it gives me a distinctive and separate stage where I can revise.

The first page of the first chapter of *Sabriel* was actually written in a spiral-bound notebook, which I tore out and pasted into my preferred black and red notebook. What follows are the first five pages of my handwritten draft of *Sabriel*.

Garth Nix

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SABRIEL

The ~~rabbit had been~~ rabbit had been run over minutes before. Its pink eyes were glazed and blood stained, its clean white fur ^{visibly clean for, for} ~~in fact~~, it had just escaped from a bath, and still smelt faintly of lavender.

A tall, ^{woman} ~~person~~ girl, unusually pale ~~girl~~ of ~~that~~ ^{of that} ~~about eighteen~~ indeterminate age somewhere ~~between~~ around the end of adolescence stood over the rabbit, her black hair hanging slightly over her face, despite the fashionably short bob. She wore no makeup ^{or jewellery} but ^{save for an enamelled prefect's badge pinned to the breast pocket} ~~couldn't be expected to~~, as ~~she~~ the ~~wore~~ ~~dark~~ navy blue cloth blazer, shirt ^{coupled with a} and long skirt, and stockings and sensible shoes proclaimed her to be a schoolgirl. Out of that uniform, she could have been taken for a ~~street~~ considerably older woman. ^{The nameplate under the badge read 'Sabriel', in ~~ans serif caps.~~}

~~Shirley~~ Sabriel

The ~~girl~~ looked at the rabbit again, then back up the bricked drive that left the road and curved its way up to an imposing pair of wrought-iron gates. A sign above the gate proclaimed (in gilt letters on royal blue) 'Wyverly College ~~for~~ Wyverly College' and in smaller letters, 'Est ~~the~~ Established 1652 A.W for ~~the~~ Young Ladies of Quality'.

As Sabriel looked back at the gate, a smaller figure came running out, pigtails flying, shoes clacking on the ancient bricks. Her head was temporarily down as she gained momentum, then she looked up, saw Sabriel and the dead rabbit, and screamed.

'Bunny!'

Sabriel flinched as the girl screamed, hesitated, then bent down by the

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rabbit's side and reached out with one pale hand to touch it just between the ears.

She grimaced as she felt the ~~sharp~~ sudden cold.

A second later, she closed her eyes with visible effort, and her face relaxed into a sleep set as if she had suddenly turned to stone. Frost formed on her fingertips, and rimed the bricks beneath her feet and knees.

The other girl, still running, saw her suddenly tip forward over the rabbit and almost fall face-down on the road — but at the last moment, her hand came out and she caught herself.

Then she caught the rabbit, now inexplicably lively again, its eye bright and shiny, as eager to be off as when it escaped its bath.

'Bunny!' shrieked the younger girl again, as Gabriel stood up, still holding the rabbit by the scruff of its neck. 'Oh, thank you, Gabriel! When I heard the car skidding I thought ...'

She faltered as Gabriel handed the rabbit over, and blood stained her expectant hands.

'Oh! Bunny!' Jacinth

'He'll be fine,' said Gabriel, wearily. 'A scratch. It's already closed up.'

Jacinth ~~to~~ examined Bunny carefully, then looked up at Gabriel, who saw the beginnings of a wriggling fear at the back of her young eyes, behind her own reflected face.

'There isn't anything under the blood,' stammered Jacinth. 'Did you ... did you ...'

'No!' snapped Gabriel. 'I didn't. Now, perhaps you can tell me what you are doing

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out of bounds?'

'Chasing Bonny,' replied Jacinth. 'You saw ...'

'No excuses are acceptable,' recited Sabriel. 'Remember what Mrs Wyverley said at Assembly last week.'

'It's not an excuse,' insisted Jacinth, forgetting her sudden fear of Sabriel. 'It's a reason!'

'You can explain that to Mrs Wyverley then,' said Sabriel.

'Oh, Sabriel! You wouldn't! You know I was only chasing Bonny. If he hadn't escaped from the bath ...'

Sabriel held up her hands in mock defeat, and gestured back to the gates.

'If you're back inside within three minutes, I won't have seen you outside.'

Jacinth smiled, whirled around, and sprinted back up the drive, the rabbit tightly clutched against her neck.

Sabriel stayed behind, and started to shake — small tremors giving way to bigger ones, till she bent-over, sobbing. A moment of weakness, and she had broken the promise she had made herself. But Jacinth loved the rabbit so, and it had been only just killed. Sabriel had caught it