

Write about what you know

This is the most common piece of advice given to budding writers ...and the one which puts most people off. How many of us can claim to lead exciting and adventurous lives? How many of us have been to the jungles of Borneo, or stalked the mean and dangerous streets of inner city Los Angeles? You may well have done so and will no doubt have a wealth of experience to draw upon – but I suspect that many of you will feel that, like most of the people you know, you have led relatively peaceful lives.

Relatively peaceful they may be, but that doesn't mean dull or uninteresting. You may have spent your whole life in the same town, but what is commonplace to you may well be the most exciting place on earth for someone living in Borneo or Los Angeles (for whom the mean streets may have long since been cleaned up). And, in any case, just think of all the experiences *you* have had.

To convince you of this, try the following exercise.

Make a list of all the roles that you have played in your life. At one time or another you will certainly have been either a son or a daughter, and you may even be a parent. You could be married, single or divorced, and at various points throughout your life you will have made friends and lost some of them, and made enemies and become reconciled to some of them. You will probably have had a job – perhaps even a succession of them – or you might have spent weeks and months seeking work. The list can be as short and general or as long and detailed as you wish.

Now select one of those roles and examine it in more detail. Each role that we play in life has a complex network of rules that govern the way we behave in that role. Nobody writes these rules down, yet we still manage to absorb them as we go through life. How do we do this? Well, think about the role you've selected – how did you learn to behave in the appropriate way? Did you copy the behaviour of other family members or of friends? Did other people in that role offer you advice? What happened if you broke the 'rules'?

Now focus on an event that illustrates one of those 'learning' occasions. This can sometimes be a disturbing thing to do, so pretend that it is happening, now, to someone else. What leads up to the event? Will this person do the same as you once did or something different? How will their actions affect the way their life progresses from now on? How will the episode affect the other people they're involved with?

Congratulations! You now have the makings of a short story, a novel or a play... and it's based entirely on your own experience.