

Consider: your life so far has been jam-packed with event, drama and occasional tragedy. You've learnt lessons, and, yes, many of your life experiences can be recycled, quite easily, for the purposes of fiction. As a writer, you are not afraid to scavenge anecdotes and episodes from your past to augment a character's back-story, or use occasional fragments of real-life conversation to add colour to a scene, or section of dialogue.

Some of you will have had extraordinary lives, or witnessed momentous events – either by default or by design – and in such cases you might have enough material to form the basis of an extended narrative (and here the form might begin to spill over into the realms of memoir). By and large, it is the universal things – birth, death, love, loss – that the skilled writer uses in their storytelling by drawing on their own experience. However, in most cases, when fictionalising real events or real people, the writer must learn to recognise the advantages of using personal material whilst navigating a minefield of issues.

fact, a compassionate understanding of the things that make up 'ordinary lives' can resonate with a broader readership if they are written with wisdom and sensitivity.

#### Privacy

So, using general, procedural knowledge about your profession is one thing, but what about using a specific episode from your private life? Perhaps you've had a messy divorce or fallen out with a parent or sibling, or had an affair with your boss. Perhaps it was an excoriating experience but you feel you can convey something honest and powerful about the human experience by detailing it and your responses to it. All you have to do is change the names and the locations and no one will be any the wiser, right? Right? Wrong! Let's not beat around the bush: your friends, family and colleagues will recognise themselves in your fiction however hard you try to disguise them. (Be warned: they will, in fact, be reading your work with an eagle eye).

Occasionally an individual will feel

artistic control. Your friend or relative might want to see early drafts of their 'scenes' and try to exercise what they consider to be their editorial imperative. The priority for them will be how they are portrayed rather than whether or not the material works in the piece as a whole.

The legal implications, when portraying the lives of others, are pretty confusing too (and vary from country to country). There have been high-profile settlements here and in the US, where individuals cry defamation of character, and where, despite the writer's attempt to conceal identity, the alleged victim feels that fictional information can be triangulated to arrive squarely at their door.

Bear in mind that truth is a defence in libel, so you can't be prosecuted for telling your side of a story. But truth is subjective and the emotional consequences go beyond the legal ones. You may find yourself *sans* a friend (or family member) or, worse, people may be wary of revealing their secrets to you in future, for fear it might end up in your fiction.

## From fact to fiction

**A writer's real-life experience can provide ready-made material for fiction. But what are the pros and cons of writing what you know? Novelist Mez Packer on when real life is the story.**

#### Authenticity

Many successful writers have carved out literary careers by mining the wide seam of 'what they know.' Most authors, for example, have had other jobs before they became writers and use their professional experience to underpin their fiction. Law, policing, forensics, medicine (among many other professions), offer the potential for dramatic tension and give the reader a nuts-and-bolts insight into a world they wouldn't otherwise have access to. So what if you've never been a criminal or a politician or a spy? Seemingly prosaic occupations have possibilities too. Your audience might not want to wade through the details of working as a supermarket cashier, but they will be able to identify with finding themselves living a life they hadn't planned – or what it feels like to be overworked and underpaid. Ordinarity does not exclude the exploration of universal principles. In

honoured to have a walk-on part in your novel; after all, you've deemed them worthy of being immortalised in print and you have bothered to observe them affectionately – or, at least, minutely. Actually, a number of writers report basing minor characters partly or wholly on real people, and this technique can be particularly useful if the references are descriptive rather than revelatory. Having a real person to visualise – their traits, tics and mannerisms – can help us put flesh on the bones of a character; we are not using their private lives, merely painting their image in the same way an artist might use a model. But beware the misrepresented friend who feels you have been unfair in your descriptions, or lackadaisical with the facts. Or who is simply aggrieved at having the details of their life exposed for the sake of your art without their permission.

Asking permission is one way to go, obviously, but here you risk compromising

The same applies for private, or confidential information, which is specifically about you. People close to you will recognise you as easily as they recognise themselves. Perhaps you have spent time in prison, or worked in the sex industry many years ago and a character in your novel is struggling with similar problems or experiences. People *will* talk.

#### Full disclosure

My novel *Among Thieves* details all manner of criminal activity from credit card fraud to drug smuggling. Full disclosure: I experienced 80s alternative sub-culture first-hand. I was angry and rebellious and believed (and still do), that a person's lifestyle could be a political statement. But like some of the characters in my novel, I was naïve and began rubbing shoulders with people whose criminality was born of greed or desperation. Nevertheless, bearing witness to those things meant I was able