

Birthing a Book Baby

Talk created by **Paula Gruben**

First delivered at Kingsmead College Grade 10 'Young Readers' Award' prize-giving ceremony

26th May 2017

Hi Kingsmead, and thanks so much for having me.

Now I know everyone in this room loves books and reading as much as I do, but a quick show of hands: How many of you dream of writing and *publishing* your own novel one day?

Well, the good news is, we've seen a major **democratisation of the publishing industry** over the past several years. Authors now have access to both traditional and self-publishing options. And with the kind of technology we have at our fingertips today, we all have access to a truly global market – publishing houses, literary agents, and readers – via a sexy little device that fits in the palm of our hand [hold up smartphone].

But, and this is a big BUT, if you want to be taken seriously as an author, you *have* to do your homework before stepping out into the big, wide world. You owe it to yourself, your readers, and the commercial book publishing industry – which has been hard at work since the **19th Century** – to deliver a professional, quality product. No-one wants to wade through a poorly plotted story, with half-baked characters, confusing points of view, stilted dialogue, sluggish pacing, and loads of clichés.

Today I'm going to give you a fly on the wall glimpse into a working writer's life. Sadly, it's not all coffee shops and moleskin notebooks. But I still reckon it's one of the coolest jobs on the planet. Definitely the most fulfilling job I've ever had. So sit back, relax, and enjoy.

OK, so to start off with, one of the first things people ask me when they find out I'm an author is: 'How long did it take you to write your first book?' And my standard response is: 'Two years.' But that's only half the story.

Yes, the research, writing, editing, and production probably took around two years. But that doesn't take into account the *years* of training and experience it took beforehand, to get to the point of being ready to actually publish that first book.

Like the years I spent cutting my teeth on magazine and newspaper journalism, or the years I spent working in research and marketing in the publishing industry.

Or the half dozen paid writing courses and workshops I've done over the years.

Or the life coach I went and saw twice a month for eight months, to work through personal issues that were hampering my writing process.

Or the hundreds of hours I spent reading dozens of books in the same genre as my own, getting to grips with the craft of creating a full-length book, something that would appeal to my target market.

I think a better way to phrase the question is: 'How long did it take from the time you got the idea to write this book, to the time you actually published it?' And for me, that process took 21 years. From the day I met my birth mom, when the idea about writing a book about my journey started percolating in the back of my mind. To the day I had my official launch party for the book, two weeks before I turned 42 last year.

Publishing your first book is not something that happens in neat little silos. It is a multi-disciplinary process, with a dovetailing of many skills that are usually acquired over many years. Not only do you need to know how to be a good writer and storyteller, but you also need to get to grips with all the essential elements of a novel – plot, theme, setting, character development, perspective and tense, pace, dialogue, tone and style – plus all the components of a narrative arc – exposition, inciting moment, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

You do *not* need to reinvent the wheel when writing a novel, but you *do* need to be original. You need to come up with a fresh concept or angle, and a unique selling point, to help your book stand out from the hundreds, if not thousands of other titles in your genre, all vying for buyers' attention

on the shelves. For example, when I embarked on my own publishing journey, there were already dozens of books written about the subject of adoption, but I could find only *one* written from a South African perspective, and it was published a decade prior, by a now-defunct imprint. It was a compilation of short stories, by adoptees and adoptive parents – just two sides of the adoption triad. My story was unique in that it included the perspectives of all three parties – birth parents, adoptive parents, and the adoptee – as well as insights from the social worker involved in our case. Much of the story is told through letters, which I transcribed from the original handwritten versions, dating back to the 1970s, when my birth mom was pregnant with me. I am confident it is one of the most *balanced* books you will find anywhere on the subject of closed, or private, adoption.

Most importantly though, when writing a novel you need to find your own, authentic writer's voice, and that takes time to develop. Discovering my distinct writer's voice came about quite by accident. I initially wrote this story in the first person. But then, just before I started the submission process, I came across a letter written by Thuli Madonsela to her teenage self. It was from a book called 'From Me To Me', which is a collection of letters written by some of South Africa's best loved personalities to their younger selves, and I was inspired to write my own, to include as a prologue. Ultimately, I ditched the idea of a prologue, but by now I had fallen in love with this new 'voice' which had emerged on the page, and I ended up altering the narrative mode of the protagonist to second person point-of-view. It was a bit of a gamble – most creative writing coaches will tell you to stick to first person or third person – but thankfully it's been very well-received by readers. In fact, it worked out so nicely that I have decided to use second person for the protagonist in my second book as well. It may take a minute or two for a reader to get used to, but if you can pull it off, it's a great little literary device for writers to help readers *really* get inside a character's head.

This was actually one of my most important objectives when I wrote this story. To validate the feelings of fellow adoptees, to let them know they are not alone, and also to help other members of the triad, as well as members of the general public, understand what it actually *feels* like growing up knowing virtually nothing about your biological roots, and who in this world you are genetically related to. I can laugh about it now, but while I was your age, there was always this weird fear that the guy I was with could be a cousin, or even worse – a half-brother! Yeah, pretty gross.

The fact is, being adopted is not all unicorns and rainbows. A lot of adopted kids struggle with identity issues, and sometimes bullying. The main theme of this book is the search for identity. Like the story of 'The Ugly Duckling'. Trying to figure out who I was and where I fitted in. I hoped to be able to pass on what I had learnt over the years, in an effort to educate, empower, and inspire others who may be facing similar challenges in their own lives.

During the research and writing stages, I used Pinterest to help me compartmentalise and organise my rather haphazard thought processes. Genre, theme, plot, characters, setting, soundtrack, exposition, ideas for cover art and marketing, inspirational writing quotes, anything you can think of really – each had their own virtual pinboard.

I typed most of the raw material into a Word document on my desktop PC, or the Notes section on my phone. Then when it came to sorting and structuring the work into scenes and chapters, and eventually a complete, coherent manuscript, I copied and pasted everything into the free and very user-friendly **yWriter** programme. It was quite a challenge deciding what to leave in and what to chuck out, and then weaving it all together. You guys may have heard of **Scrivener** writing software, which is similar to yWriter. I had a chance to compare yWriter with a demo version of Scrivener during my first **NaNoWriMo** challenge in 2015, and I far prefer yWriter. When I started the book, I didn't know how the story was going to end. It was only during the process of structural manipulation in yWriter that the idea for a satisfying ending emerged, and I finally knew I had it all sewn up.

The title came to me in one of those lightbulb moments, quite a way into the writing process. For me, my belly button was the last point of contact with my birth mother. Growing up I always felt a spiritual connection to her, and the word 'Umbilicus' just fitted the 'tie that binds' thread of my work so perfectly. I jumped on Amazon and Goodreads, and when I couldn't find another adoption-related book with the same title, I knew it was THE ONE.

Umbilicus



An autobiographical novel **Paula Gruben**

I designed the cover myself. This little figure represents the main character – the teenage me; a lost and broken soul – her heart torn between loyalty towards her forever family, and longing for her blood family, whom she doesn't yet know. The silver cords connecting the two floating hearts to the central figure signify predestined spiritual links, and the subliminal triangle between the three hearts symbolises the adoption triad.

When it came to making a choice between traditional publishing and self-publishing, I looked into both options. Each have their pros and cons.

Traditional publishing is when a publisher, like Penguin Random House or Pan Macmillan or Jonathan Ball, decides they are going to invest in a book, by carrying the publishing costs, when they feel the estimated returns on the sales of the book outweigh the costs of producing it. The author will get paid an advance, which is usually around R20,000 for a first-time author, and royalties of around 10 per cent of the cover price once the book is said to have 'earned out' its advance.

In South Africa, we authors are lucky enough to be able to approach publishing houses and their imprints directly. You just go onto their website, follow the submission requirements, and wait to hear back from them, usually after about three or four months. If you want an American or British publisher, you will have to first find yourself a literary agent who then approaches publishers on your behalf. It can be a very lengthy process.

Like most budding authors at the start of their careers, I was lured by the thrill of potentially securing a publishing deal, which supposedly meant utter validation of my worth as a writer. The first local imprint I approached with my completed manuscript was very keen on publishing my story, but said I needed to make 1,000 pre-sales before their publisher – they who held the purse strings – would take a chance on me – a debut author, a virtual unknown. At this point my book was still a memoir.

I'm sure most of you know who Neil Gaiman is, and you're probably also familiar with his wife Amanda Palmer's work. Inspired by her well-documented crowdfunding success on Kickstarter, where she raised over a million dollars to release her solo album, I threw myself into my first Indiegogo campaign. Kickstarter wasn't available in South Africa, and our very own **Thundafund** hadn't been born yet. To my shock and horror, it was a complete and utter flop. I only managed to raise 11 per cent of my target by deadline, which meant I wasn't able to *prove* my book's viability, that it would make the requisite number of sales to be profitable for the publisher.

Undeterred, I spent the remainder of that year submitting to every narrative non-fiction publisher and imprint I could find locally, plus a few literary agents overseas. Six months and a dozen rejection letters later however, I was growing increasingly impatient, and finally decided to call it a day. I figured I could spend the next year, two years, *five* years even, embroiled in the submission process, with absolutely no guarantee of *ever* securing a publishing deal. Or I could take the bull by the horns and self-publish instead. It was a no-brainer.

Self-publishing is when an author publishes their book independently – without the backing of a traditional publisher – and covers all of the related costs themselves, or with the help of funding. In other words, you have to ‘pay to play’. The major benefit of self-publishing is that you, the author, retain all of your rights. You control every aspect of the book, and can make all of the decisions about the content and creative elements. Any revenue from sales is yours to keep, and the profit margin is much higher on the sale of both ebooks and paperbacks.

After analysing all the feedback and constructive criticism I received from industry professionals during that gruelling submission process, I made the decision to change the names of all the characters and repackaged my book as a Young Adult novel instead of a memoir.

It then took four months of intense production to get to the point where I was ready for my soft launch online. **I did everything myself** – the copy editing, the interior layout, the proofreading, the ebook conversion, *alles!* During the editing process, **Editsaurus** and **The Punctuation Guide** were both invaluable tools. It was also during that pre-publication phase that I built **my author website** with WordPress, and started actively engaging with my target audience, and book reviewers and book bloggers on social media.

As it turned out, my Indiegogo campaign wasn’t a complete waste of time. I ended up using the 500 dollars I managed to raise to cover almost all the costs of my first print run, for my official in-store book launch, which I live-streamed on Facebook for everyone who couldn’t be there in person.

Now I do understand that for many, if not most authors – both traditionally published and self-published – much of what I undertook singlehandedly is simply not an option. That’s where companies like **Staging Post** come in. They are the self-publishing arm of Jacana Media, which is one of South Africa’s most reputable traditional publishers. They can do it all for you. For a fee, of course. And whatever they don’t do in-house, they can refer you to freelance professionals, like marketers and distributors and book publicists, who do offer those services.

To self-publish a 200-page novel like mine with Staging Post will cost you around R36,000. To print 100 copies will cost you around R6,000. Total cost: R42,000. That doesn't include any marketing or publicity services. They will, however, provide you with a marketing guide to assist with the planning of your strategy and campaign.

So yeah, it doesn't come cheap. But at the end of the day, you will have a self-published book that is of equal quality to and virtually indistinguishable from a traditionally published book. As far as I'm concerned, that makes it worth every cent. If you don't have the money, you can try doing a crowdfunding campaign to raise the capital you need.

As far as bricks-and-mortar bookstore distribution in South Africa goes, a self-published author can approach independent bookstores directly, but if you want to get your book onto the shelves of national retailers like Exclusives, you have to go through a registered distributor.

Most bookstores work on a sale-or-return, also known as a consignment basis, for both traditionally published and self-published books. As an indie author working with a distributor, you will need to supply the distributor with stock of your book, as well an Advance Info sheet, which is basically just an A4 page showing the book's cover, title, and author bio, plus the blurb, a couple of testimonials, some technical details – like ISBN, number of pages, and recommended retail price – as well as the distributor's name, so the retail buyers at bookstores can easily place orders.

A retail buyer makes decisions in the same way a publisher does. The book's design, the author, and local interest in the subject matter are each factors that will persuade a buyer to order and stock a particular title. This is why it is so important you don't try and cut any corners in the production process. Your book baby will need to be able to sit comfortably alongside its traditionally published counterparts on the shelves, without sticking out like a sore thumb.

After three to four months, whatever stock hasn't been sold is returned to you, to make way for new stock. This timeframe goes for all titles, whether traditionally published or self-published. Remember, bookstores only have a finite amount of shelf space, and there are new titles coming in all the time.

For my second book, I have decided to give traditional publishing another bash. Many authors nowadays are both self-published and traditionally published. They are known as hybrid authors. But if it doesn't work out, I'll self-publish again. At least I know I have the skill set to do everything myself.

The biggest problem I have with self-publishing is the amount of time it takes to market your work. It really is all-consuming. And I'm sure I speak on behalf of all authors when I say I would far rather spend that time writing. Then there's the issue of self-published books not being eligible for major prizes, like the coveted Sunday Times Literary Awards, with a chance to be shortlisted – which really puts your name on the map – and an opportunity to walk away with that R100,000 first prize. With the amount of stiff competition in this country, I know that's aiming high, but hey, you never know.

Anyway, I have booked a seat on another writing course in August, to help polish my second manuscript to publishable, marketable spec. It's a two-day intensive workshop, and a birthday present to myself. Education is something that can never be taken away from you. Whether it's formal, informal, degrees, certificates, workshops, whatever – anything where you can acquire and apply new knowledge – it's all an investment in yourself and your career. And writing courses are always tons of fun.

If there is one piece of advice I'd like to give you guys today, it's to journal, or blog – if you aren't doing so already. It's a great way to put in those 10,000 hours, whilst keeping a record of your innermost thoughts and feelings, which you can draw on one day. If not writing your own memoir, perhaps as inspiration for characters in one of your novels. Write colourfully, use the five senses. I have two South African author friends whose blogs were spotted by traditional publishers and turned into books. One was a memoir, the other a cook book. You could also try uploading your work to [Wattpad](#). It's a great way to get feedback from readers, and build up a following. I have another South African author friend who landed a traditional publishing deal for her chicklit after proving her mettle on Wattpad.

You guys have the luxury of youth on your side. Your whole lives are ahead of you. You are incredibly lucky to be part of a school community which is so progressive, so forward-thinking when it comes to literature. I would LOVE for each and every one of you to go home this weekend and start brainstorming some ideas for your first novel. Just remember: You can only be a debutante once. First novels are all about making a splash. If you take everything I've said into consideration, and you do your homework, you're bound to make a good first impression. I wish you the very best of luck!

Thank you!