

# On making the most of your time



Writer Ferdia Lennon discusses the importance of deep research, cutting pages from your drafts, and balancing family and creative work.

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As told to Lily Meyer, 1699 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Time management](#), [Family](#), [Inspiration](#).

## Can you tell me your novel's life story?

I studied Classical Studies in university. I've always been fascinated by Ancient Greece, books of mythology when I was a kid, and then reading *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*. And then I read a passage in Plutarch's *Lives* where he talks about the Athenian invasion of Sicily. It was a complete disaster, and at the end, there were so many Athenian prisoners, they couldn't fit them in a prison, so they put them in this limestone quarry outside of the city of Syracuse. Plutarch tells us that some of these defeated Athenians survived because their Siracusan captors would give them food and rations in exchange for quotes from Euripides plays.

So that always stuck with me. I knew I'd wanted to write about that period, but suddenly the story became quite human and specific, rather than a grand historical epic, like I kind of imagined. Who were these Siracusans who were so obsessed with the poetry and art they'll feed these prisoners of war while also dehumanizing them to the point that they're just leaving them to die in a quarry? That contradiction was fascinating to me.

And then I sat down to write it, and the writing process is quite intuitive and mysterious and sometimes quite analytical as well. You know that famous E.L. Doctorow quote: you're driving in the dark, at night, and you can only see a few feet ahead of you, but you can make a whole journey that way.

## Did you do more research once you began writing?

Yeah. I started to write it and even though I'd studied the period, I realized I did not know enough to fully make this world come alive. I just immersed myself, for months and months, in reading everything that I could, particularly primary sources. I wanted to get an insight into the ancient Greek mentality, so I read loads of Homer, all of the plays, all of the comedies, the philosophy. I even read ancient Greek tour guides, people going, "Hey, come to Athens, and when you're there, you should go to this café, it's really good."

But after I did the research, I needed to leave it aside. I think you want to do sufficient research so that you can evoke a world, but also you want to wear that research very lightly. You don't want to be including details just because you spent weeks learning about them. And I think navigating that process of the research and the writing and how much to tell and how much to leave out actually took quite a while.

## Did you write a lot of material that you then abandoned? And what do you do with pages or scenes that you cut?

I wrote over 100 pages that I had to set aside—weeks, months of work, probably, that I had to pare back. I save everything, though. I think it allows me, oddly enough, to let go. If I delete something and I put in a kind of scrapbook document, then I know it's always there. And nine times out of 10, I'll never go back to it, but psychologically, for me, I know that I haven't wasted my time, because I can return to it, even if I very rarely

do.

**What do you do with your research? Organize it? Or just let it knock around your brain?**

A mix of both. I'd put the things that struck me as the most important in a document under different headings, like the food in Ancient Greece, the architecture, the comedy. But I also kind of believe in just *reading* the sources—having them, as you say, knock around in my brain and, in some way, imbue the work with knowledge.

**A huge part of *Glorious Exploits* is the narrative voice, which is very Dublin. Did it come to you, or did you choose and develop it consciously?**

It came to me. Out of nowhere, I had a character—and he sounded Irish. I had to step back and think, "What's the logic? Why does this man sound like a contemporary Dub?" And I realized that Sicily is this island that's been colonized a few hundred years before the novel is set; Ireland is an island that's been colonized by another maritime empire. And the Hiberno-English that we speak is recognizably English, but there are little nuances and differences, sometimes because the native Gaelic is playing underneath it. I thought that was an interesting metaphor, and I doubled down. So it was an intuitive response that I then considered, and then thought about and built upon.

**Do you want your work to be read through the lens of your Irishness?**

In this novel, it's inevitable, both because of the voice and because Irish literature and Irish history are important influences. The history of the colonial past of Ireland was a skeleton key for me to make this ancient past relatable for myself and the reader. But in the next novel I write, Irishness might be far less important.

**Do you feel yourself to be a historical writer, fundamentally, or do you think you'd be happy if you never wrote another historical novel?**

I don't think I'd be happy if I never wrote another one, but I also wouldn't be happy if I only wrote historical fiction.

**That's exactly how I feel. Please explain that, because I cannot explain it to myself.**

I'm fascinated by history. I think it's a very interesting way of telling stories. In Ancient Greece they would just retell the same stories over and over again, and it would be the innovations and the weird slants that the playwright or the epic poet took that made it unique and different. Historical fiction does something similar. Often, we'll take some period of history where people have some understanding or some reference points, but your angle makes it come alive.

Yet, on the other hand, in the same way that I'm fascinated by history, I'm also fascinated by the present moment or by more near history, like the period when I grew up, '90s Dublin and '80s Dublin, the noughties. And I would certainly want to write things in the present and in the more recent past.

**You wrote a lot of *Glorious Exploits* at the start of the pandemic. Do you think COVID affected the book?**

I used to teach almost full-time at a French university, and I was just very busy. What the pandemic did was it allowed me... I don't think this is always possible, but if you're writing a novel, I find it very useful to maintain the chain of days, to not break contact with the work. As much as possible, I do a little bit every day, because I find, if I don't work on something for a week or two, and then I go back to it, there's almost a week just trying to refamiliarize myself with the world in a way that makes it come alive for the reader, whereas when you're working on something every day, you're living it. You just kind of know the world, you know how everyone sounds, you know the pitch.

What COVID did was allow me to completely immerse myself in it. I was lucky. I didn't have kids at the time, I

wasn't navigating childcare solutions—although, ironically enough, the day I found out that I had an agent for this book, I had COVID and my pregnant wife had COVID. I was having a phone call with the person who eventually represented me, coughing with COVID and thinking, "If this is a no, I'm done. I'm out."

**How do you keep in contact with your writing now that you do have a kid and need to navigate childcare?**

I would say it's been more difficult—though the switch to being published and doing all the admin surrounding getting a book out has had an effect, too. But how do I do it? Mornings work well. I just get up early and I try to get a couple of hours in each day. You know what I mean? I think you just get it done.

Of course there are periods where I'm just so busy with family stuff, like this last week, for example, my son was sick, a really bad flu, and I was worried about him and had to help look after him and work got delayed. I mean, that's life. But, in general, I find you can just get on with it. I remember being up at 4:00 in the morning with my son dancing him around and then going to the computer and doing copyedits for this novel. You just do it.

**I was doing my last copyedits for my novel when my baby was six weeks old—just feeding her and editing with the computer wedged under the breastfeeding pillow, and I kept wondering if the experience would change how I write. Do you think parenthood has impacted your work?**

It's helpful in that writing is no longer the most important thing. It doesn't feel quite as all-encompassing, which, to a certain degree, allows me to just get down and do it rather than thinking about the meaning of the writing. I have less time, so I have to be more efficient. I can't pontificate. I also obsess less over the concept of writing.

**What do you mean by that?**

I'm less afraid of it not working out. Or maybe I give less cognitive space to the fears of something not working. I'm always reminding myself that I have a limited amount of time to do this thing that's really important to me, and if I don't do it now, then it's not going to get done.

**Ferdia Lennon recommends:**

Euripides' *Medea*, translated by Robin Robertson

Plato's *The Symposium*, translated by Christopher Gill

Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Rex Warner

*The Iliad by Homer*, translated by Emily Wilson

*The Last of the Wine* by Mary Renault

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Vocation

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