

# The Novel Approach

*At only twenty-seven, Tom Chalmers, managing director of the Stoke Newington-based Legend Press, is the most influential young man in mainstream publishing. He founded Legend in 2005, and since then the company has gone from strength to strength. It already boasts an impressive novel list, and also publishes a highly acclaimed annual short story collection. Below, Tom reveals his top tips for writing and submitting that bestselling novel.*

Running a book publishing company, I inevitably spend a fair amount of time criticising other people's work and saying submissions simply aren't good enough (or far too often, not submitted properly). While this is an essential part of my job, at times, particularly when reading work that has clear merit and a great deal of effort invested in it, I feel a bit hypocritical as I have never written a novel and will be surprised if I ever do so.

In consequence, I have quickly realised that it's a huge achievement to complete a novel. Just putting down those many thousands of words under one heading is a testimony to determination, willpower and a certain amount of craftsmanship. Being privileged to view so many manuscripts, however, there are clear patterns that develop and, as a result, I have come up with a few fundamental pieces of advice for those looking to get published.

To start at the start, it often frustrates me when writers feel there is a prescribed way to go about constructing a novel, whether they have read that they should tackle 5,000 words per week or undertake some formulaic planning that such-and-such bestselling author uses. Taking examples from our writers, Luke Bitmead wrote the first draft of *White Summer* in six weeks, while it took Candi Miller a total of ten years to perfect *Salt & Honey*.

One of the unique and most inspiring aspects of novel writing is that no one has yet come up with a definitive way of doing it. It is therefore dangerous to copy others who have completed their novel in their own way, although, by all means, writers should use others' experience to find the method that is best for them. In my opinion, method should be central to good creative writing courses, rather than teaching quick-fix templates that will create enthusiasm followed by frustration as writers fall behind in their ill-fitted plans and eventually turn to something else.

The novel, you see, can be an inflexible bulk. It is difficult to completely change something, or even start again, after 20,000 words – not to mention hair-tearingly frustrating. So until the novel's style and structure appears in clarity to the writer, it is worth experimenting with other forms.

This is where the short story, and other new quirks such as 'flash fiction' (even at twenty-seven, such new-fangled terms make me feel like an ink-and-quill Victorian) come in use. The short story in particular is currently en vogue and there are countless competitions, prizes and initiatives for the form. Not only does it provide an opportunity to work on writing, honing skills or trying new approaches, it is also a chance to build a profile and meet some good contacts that could prove useful once that novel is finally ready. In fact, a new novel I have just commissioned started out as a short story that I liked the idea of. The writer has stayed in touch and developed the story into a full novel, which I think could be a big hit.

Another point that always turns a publisher right off is the dreaded and all too common self-proclaimed 'mix' of influences: 'a cross between Tolkien and Rowling' (orcs with wands?) or 'Dan Brown meets Charles Dickens' (made that one up, but would actually like to see the attempt). Trying to be someone else who has already grabbed a big market segment and who is probably a lot better at being them than you ever could be (as they are, indeed, them) is not going to go down well.

Of course, influences are important and it can be handy for the publisher to know where the writer sees their novel placed, but it must be their place, not someone else's. While I hate terms like 'brand', it is vital, if the

writer wants to be published, that they sit down and think ‘I am “x” and this is what my writing/novel offers’. It doesn’t have to be wildly experimental but it has to be original and provide something unique. Publishers simply aren’t going to take on half-decent writing and mould it into something that will sell tens of thousands of copies. It has to be ready to be a big hit.

Furthermore, it is often worthwhile keeping a reader (or readers) in mind – writers should give some thought as to who will actually be picking their book up. Again, publishers aren’t going to take on a nice story and then look for a market – the market must already be there. While they won’t want pie charts and demographics, it will also do the writer no harm to point the publisher in the right direction on the covering letter with a simple sentence, ‘Will appeal to ...’ etc. We’re not always the smartest bunch!

I mentioned earlier that the novel should be ‘ready’ and this is another important point. Notes such as, ‘I know it needs some improvements but ...’ are always irritating. It may be self-deprecation but it smacks of laziness and these are the easiest pieces to dismiss. One method that does seem to pay universal dividends is leaving the manuscript and coming back to it – writers can then tighten small parts of it and do a little tinkering where necessary. They can also show it to trusted friends or colleagues and incorporate their feedback. While over-pedantic tinkering can go on forever, once the writer reads it with a smile and thinks ‘I could see this being published’, then is the time to send it in. (And stick to the basic submission guidelines, please!)

So these are my basic tips for getting published. Far too much time can be wasted on things that aren’t important. A decent short covering letter, one-page synopsis and a sample of a great, original novel is what’s required. Maybe one day I’ll write that novel and put my theories to the test ...

*Tom Chalmers*

Legend  Press

[www.legendpress.co.uk](http://www.legendpress.co.uk)

[www.myspace.com/legendpress](http://www.myspace.com/legendpress)