



Release the Bats: Writing Your Way Out Of It

D.B.C. Pierre

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When DBC Pierre burst onto the scene in 2003, he arrived with no particular literary education. Finding he had something to say, he made the journey solo to that place where dreams and demons live, to try and turn feelings into words.

Part biography, part reflection and part practical guide, *Release the Bats* explores the mysteries of why and how we tell stories, and the craft of writing fiction. DBC Pierre reveals everything he learned the hard way.

Release the Bats: Writing Your Way Out Of It Details

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Venky says

Honesty dictates that I begin this review with a confession. This is a book 'on writing' unlike any that I have read till date. No, in fact to lend an even more transparent perspective, this book is unlike all the books 'on writing' that I have read. I cannot say that I have come out all the more wiser or intuitive after reading this book than from where I was before I opened its cover! "Release The Bats" is more a raucous, rambunctious, rabble rousing exercise in freewheeling spontaneity than a how-to-manual for an aspiring writer. As the author himself rightly says, stereotypical how-to-manuals on writing abound freely and are one too many. I personally feel that these dull, drab, run-of-the-mill works sully the bookshelves rather than add tangible value. However, "Release The Bats" is something else altogether! The four letter expletive of choice liberally litters the pages and each expletive is differentiated from the other only by the prefix accorded to it; head or rat for instance. DBC Pierre elucidates that writing for him was akin to 'painting a dictionary on the back of live rats' (how a person can even come up with such a peculiar analogy is beyond the grasp of my limited intellect). But reading his book for me was akin to trying to create a portrait on water! The venerable duo of Strunk and White would be left scratching their hair until their scalps completely peeled away!

Visualise Carlos Castaneda and Fritjof Capra joining together to devise a short and temporary course on the art of modern and postmodern literary criticism! Think about a completely stoned Charles Bukowski meeting the press after a book release! Imagine an inebriated Jean Paul Sartre on a combined overdose of methamphetamines and barbiturates holding forth on the need for proportion, poise and perseverance for achieving success as a writer! A condensed agglomeration of all these events and individuals make for DBC Pierre and his "Release The Bats". For example when he says that one can be crazy but not effing crazy to write a book, I am left genuinely bewildered pondering an acceptable degree of lunacy that I should inculcate in order to begin writing.

In a curious piece of advice for which this Booker Prize winning author of "Vernon God Little" devotes an entire Chapter, I was treated to the pros and cons of imbibing various genres of drugs as an accoutrement if not an accompaniment for writing. I derived the following unique ranking of various deadly substances in the order of their level of acceptance or rejection:

Cannabis – "Weed is a writerly drug. It is the drug of choice for staring at a blank page and watching stories grow in tangents."

Cocaine and Speed – "If you go for it I'd say try to finesse it into a perfect routine: open the page at the same time every day, lay out the lines and write to a specific target every time."

Ecstasy – "I'm inspired to think this might be a playwright's drug"

Opium – "If you take it in the vein you are either going to write a labyrinthine saga or nothing at all."

Hallucinogens – "Not even for a first draft".

Well! I will be damned! Hell even the pioneer of opening the doors of perception the genius Aldous Huxley would be damned!

Finally in an Appendix to the book, DBC Pierre lays down certain guidelines for writing a book. Even here he doesn't hold back. For e.g. one of the tenets advocates "Thomas Wolfe had to stand naked fondling his genitals in order to write well. Do what you have to do"

Bloody hell, in DBC Pierre's own words "F^%K IT!"

Rob says

Among the plethora of how-to-write and how-I-wrote books out there, this one has more to recommend it than most. I have to say I had rather written off DBC Pierre as a one-hit wonder, having read *Vernon God Little* and some journalism and little else. The press office machinations that led to the perfectly-timed revelations of his having "scammed" someone, thus suggesting his novel was a kind of cosmic atonement by a colourful character, actually left rather a bad taste in the mouth and sent my radar away from his follow-up works. It turns out that there is something to DBC Pierre/Peter Finlay that does to an extent live up to the hype: he has been out there, thought about things and come back with a little extra nous. And in doing so has some advice to writers that is heartfelt, often pithy, sometimes funny and overall both useful and enjoyable. Rather than step-by-step advice, this is more about asking yourself the right questions, mapping your imaginary world, running it through its paces, being ruthless with stuff that is pretty but empty. He also looks at the influence - positive or otherwise - of narcotic use and general bacchanalia. It won't take a putative Robert Ludlum to bestseller fruition, but it may help a putative DBC Pierre to take his/her own *Vernon God Little* into the final stages and beyond.

MJ Nicholls says

A handbook for those who want to write like DBC Pierre, a one-time Booker Prize writer of black comedies and winner of the Annual Richard Madeley Lookalike Contest seven years running. This was a foul-mouthed and entertaining anti-writing manual livened up with personal reflections and punchdrunk motivational shrieks from a 2AM barroom floor. The actual writing advice is prosaic and tends towards the usual how-to stuff found elsewhere (something that Pierre seems to realise, and yet continues to serve up, contra to his subversive intentions). But I liked the hard kick in the pantaloons that Pierre was offering. *The Scotsman* reviewer Stuart Kelly wrote an entertaining hatchet job on this one, regardez-vous.

KtotheC says

Interesting. Let's see if it can salvage the unsalvageable...

Lauren Blake says

In the beginning I wasn't too sure how to approach this book -- I'd been told it was a sort of guide to writing, and the last thing I like is being told how to do the one thing I enjoy. I was wary, at first, and almost looked for anything to complain about, a reason to not continue. Accidentally, I pushed through and ended up treating the thing as an actual novel. I imagined Pierre narrating the random events of his life in a sort of detached and blase, but humorous manner. It made the whole thing much more bearable, and I'm glad it was suggested to me. I'm not sure if I've taken any advice from it to heart -- only time will tell, I suppose.

Jason Mills says

This is a happily opinionated guide to the art (if not the business) of being a writer. I found the early autobiographical sections elliptical and a bit bonkers; but then they do address amorphous matters such as why people write and what should or does drive them. If this stuff is sometimes hard to get a handle on, with its wild prose and showers of profanity, it is still valuable and thought-provoking discussion.

From this, the book settles down into more practical matters: structure, character, dialogue, what drugs to take for writing different moods(!)... This is easier reading and much of it is shrewd and straightforwardly helpful to the aspiring writer.

Angus McKeogh says

I found this book extremely informative about the art of writing. I think it was great that Pierre was coming from a "non-university trained" background in writing. He seemed to have much better insights into the craft. And he was a very motivating presence as well. I'd recommend this highly to writers working on their craft.

A.M. says

I saw this on someone's list of writing books to read. I have dozens and I baulked at buying it... but voila, the local library came through.

And honestly I would buy my own copy. If only for the tactile bats on the cover...

It's good. But it's not your standard writing advice book. He writes little short stories about his life and kind of explains how you could (or couldn't) write fiction based on the same incident.

It's often been said that truth or life is stranger than fiction, and I know in my own life things have happened that you would get a shouty one star review for writing if you put them in a book.

At the end, he has 32 one sentence mindbites which are one sentence summaries of each of the things he's written about.

#2 We more easily believe an idea than a fact. So do our characters.

Or

#24 Write in a reckless fever. Rewrite in a cardigan.

And his glossary of publishing terms made me laugh.

4 stars

Steve says

The strangest book about writing I've ever read. The only one to include a guide on how various drugs affect the writing process. Some useful insights in a very badly written book. It just goes to show that inspiration and originality can get you so far, but graft is required to get published and to keep on writing.

Alex Linschoten says

More like 3.5. Useful advice. Some of the stories were a bit rambling. One reviewer here on Goodreads has said that it might have been better to make two separate books out of this (one for the writing advice, one for the autobiography). I wouldn't go quite that far, but DBC Pierre has a unique writing style which took me a while to get used to. Nevertheless, some useful notes on process.

Jeremy says

DBC Pierre in Panteon Dolores, Monterrey, Mexico from Tobias Wenzel's exhibition 'Cemetery strolls with writers'

What the human mind does by nature is look for order, and because self-conscious reality is random and terrifying it makes a lot of it up in the form of ideals, schemes and beliefs.

I must admit to not having read any of DBC Pierre's work before this one, though I have a first edition of *Lights Out in Wonderland* on a shelf that I just haven't got to yet. (After this, I will very soon.) And I am not a fan of How-to-Write books. I find them very chalky, poor fare in terms of readability (not a good sign, didactically) and usually very narrow—in terms of both ideas and foot-space. But when I perused the cover and the first few pages of this book in the bookshop, I could see it was different. It has 'writing' in the sub-heading on the cover, but no 'how-to'; instead, it adds '...your way out of it'. Your trying to escape something. The something is 'it'. And the first few pages has some great personal writing in it, writer-ly kind of writing, sure, but engaging and fluid alongside the ideas it was beginning to play with regarding the art and craft of it. Or 'it'.

Sold.

...there's strength in our admitting that we want equally to nurture and destroy things.

This is the bare, electric, indifferent heart of life.

What writing must really be for.

At that point, though I was sold on the book-investment, I still did not have great expectations of it as a tool for myself. I expected a decent read. But I got more than I expected. Pierre plays with you through his own work, and slowly buries down (almost apologetically) into some very practical nitty gritty. He uses the metaphor at least twice of the reduction of sauce as important for process, and its exactly what he does in this book. It even finishes with a reduction into single summary phrases of each chapter gone previous. And then some jokes.

...irony grows trickier as our tolerance of the absurd in real life increases.

As someone with writer-ly ambitions who most of all struggles with the idea of structure, Pierre has given me good food for thought on abstract and concrete levels in quite a short span of material. His bristly content is as impressive as his economy. He entertains well as he instructs lightly.

I will certainly be revisiting this book on and off again for some time.

Marcus Hobson says

A no nonsense guide to writing in the modern world by DBC Pierre who won the Booker Prize with his first novel, so he must have a good idea of how it is done.

I enjoyed the frankness of this book and the simple straightforward way the author suggests a good course to chart. He makes good observations and brings in other authors' ideas to help. One concept which is always hard to get across a meaning is "Show not tell". I have heard it said many times in writers groups but only now have a good description for what it really means. A quote from Chekhov "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." Writers are not creating images but suggestions that provoke them.

I found his four steps to structure particularly invaluable, and will return to read these again the next time I am struck by the urge to write my own stories. Most of all Pierre is an advocate for the "just wright" school. Get something down on paper. It is impossible to edit and improve a blank sheet. It is also unlikely that you will make this worse that then were at the start of the process.

Rachel says

It's probably at least misguided to read a writing guide by an author whose actual books you have not read. Never fear, reader, if you find yourself in the same boat, because you get a reasonable sample of Pierre (not his real name)'s writing style in this volume. To demonstrate sometimes farfetched points, he uses mini-stories of his own. Some of them are good, some of them are okay, all of them are very 'this was written by an extremely white dude'. There's a point of description where he says 'even barefoot, she walked like she was in high heels', which points up my problem with this kind of literary writing. It tries to be so clever and so spare that it ends up not making any sense. If he'd said 'she carried herself like she was wearing stilettos,

even when she was barefoot' he'd take more words but get more of the meaning. The first one is poetic and nonsensical, the second one shows how facile a way this is to illustrate character. There's also a whole chapter on how various street drugs affect your writing output. In case you were in the dark about that.

It's not all bad. The bit where he describes how trying out outrun your inner demons is like squeezing a water balloon is accurate. His attitude to writing in general - that it's a demanding inner force, that it means something important for humanity - is also accurate. If you ended up following his advice to the letter, though, you'd just end up writing more extremely white dude prose, and personally I think the world already has enough of that.

Jalen Lyle-Holmes says

I didn't like all the memoir stuff mixed in and the overblown polemics about how the world works. I liked how realistic he was about how the writing process has actually worked for him, rather than an idealised version.

I found interesting the idea of taking any small story as the germ of the writing process and

Andrew Marshall says

Having shared an agent with DBC Pierre and met him on the staircase case outside (and read his Booker winning novel *Vernon God Little*), I was drawn to this book which is part biography and part how to write guide. After all, the author had taught himself how to write - by trial and error - and he had a colourful past. So what's not to like?

Sadly quite a lot.... There is not enough biography to be truly understand the man and not enough nuts and bolts to understand his craft. Having said that, it did help me understand why the characters in the next book I read - *Girl on the Train* - seemed flat and unconvincing.

If you skip the generalised waffle about writing, you will find the author a knowledgeable and diverting companion. It just made me wish he'd focused down on one or other side of the book and delivered something truly satisfy.
