

On finding ideas

Courtia Newland

I woke in the middle of the night, convinced I'd heard a noise. Low, steady thrumming came from my left wall. At first, I thought I was dreaming. I listened harder, trying to place it. It was soft, barely noticeable, a little creepy. I unlocked my phone and tried to record it, heartened by seeing the soundwaves rise and fall in darkness. After recording for a full minute, I opened the notes app on my phone and put down my thoughts. I'd been asked to write something for a charity but hadn't found a story. The thrumming was a good enough start.

I don't really try to find ideas for the most part, and yet looking at the world in hope of making discoveries is a daily habit. It feels like I'm lying in wait, almost like a fisherman, hoping the idea might take the bait, and pull. From a vague point of intention – I'd like to write something about this – I generally write this down, and wait for further instruction. Sometimes, as in the case of the story that night, guidance comes right away. With other stories I wait months, even years. But that's okay. I get on with other projects, and forget.

The next building block for the story came when I saw a pile of books posted on Twitter, and one title caught my attention. It set off the train of

thought I'd been hoping for. I researched the book and its writer, read the synopsis and found the story itself. The premise wasn't what I'd first imagined, but now I had an image. Stark, horrific, filled with the tension I'd felt when I'd woken, listening to the noise in the otherwise silent night. Now I saw characters who moved and took action, strands of structure began to form. With the characters came intention, what the story could be about. A current theme lived out at precisely this time that deserved being written about, becoming a means of capturing the moment. Short stories are an excellent way of achieving this, much more than novels, quite like poems. With 2,000 words maximum to play with, I could get this done pretty quick, perhaps in two sittings or a morning session if I was really fast. I went back to my notes and tapped in five lines of discovery.

Looking back now, there's barely anything there, although inside my head a whole world had been conjured, but I think I'm getting to the point where I could start writing. I've deliberately shied away from plot points, or overthinking. My structure feels quite stream of consciousness and immediate, so I've chosen to let that come through in the writing process. I have a vague sense of character and backstory, what they do in the course of a normal day, though I'm guessing this will be mysterious throughout. I've moved from a vague idea to the precipice of a beginning. There's nothing else to do, but write.

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Courtia Newland has published eight works of fiction including his debut, *The Scholar*. His latest novel, *A River Called Time*, was published by

Canongate in 2021. A forthcoming collection of speculative fiction stories, *Cosmogramma*, will also be published this year. Newland's short stories have appeared in many anthologies, and have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and included in *Best of British Short Stories 2017*. He has been awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. He was previously associate lecturer in creative writing at the University of Westminster and is completing a PhD in creative writing. As a screenwriter he has co-written two feature length films for the Steve McQueen BBC series *Small Axe*, of which *Lovers Rock* was jury selected for Cannes, and opened New York Film Fest 2020. *Small Axe* won the LA Critics Circle award 2020 for Best Picture. *Impact*, an original feature, and *The Future Isn't What It Used to Be*, a science fiction short, are currently in development with Film Four.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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