

On Finding Ideas

SF Said

I believe anyone can be a writer. And I believe you can write at any age. You don't have to be a genius. You just have to tell a story that excites you and make it as good as you possibly can.

Writers are nothing more than readers who take one more step, and write the stories they want to read themselves. That's all I do. I forget about being a writer, and ask myself, as a reader, what story in all the world do I most want to read? Then, whatever the answer, I sit down and write that story myself.

With *Varjak Paw* (2003), I wanted to read about a cat having adventures as he went out into the world, learning all the skills he would need to survive – fighting, hunting, and more mysterious martial arts known only to cats...

With *Phoenix* (2013), I wanted to read a space epic as thrilling as *Star Wars*, bringing together the most cutting-edge science of space with the most ancient mythology.

And with *Tyger* (2022), I wanted to read the very best book I'd ever read! I wanted an unputdownable story that was full of action and adventure, but

also big questions and ideas, things that would make me think, and laugh, and cry.

So my first piece of advice for finding ideas is simple. Write the stories that YOU most want to read yourself. You can find inspiration for them anywhere. *Varjak Paw* was inspired by my own cat's adventures! Whatever you find interesting, whatever you care about and love, that's where you'll find ideas for your stories.

But ideas develop the more you think about them. All writers do more than one draft of their stories. No-one can get everything right first time; stories are just too complex for that. You have to build them over a number of drafts, and your ideas will develop and deepen the more you do.

So I do many drafts. There's a lot of trial and error in my process; I get it wrong a lot before I get it right. *Varjak Paw* took 17 drafts, and about five years of my life. *Tyger* took even longer. It took me nine years in the end – but I really do feel it's my best book so far!

I don't think you should worry about any of this on your first draft. Just tell yourself a story that excites you. Don't worry about getting it wrong; don't think about it at all. And when you finish your first draft, put it away. Go and read lots of other books. Then come back and read yours again, but this time, pretend you didn't write it. Pretend it's a book you paid money to read. Ask yourself: was it worth the money? What was good? What wasn't? Then write another draft, doing everything you can to make it better than the first one, to make it more like a book you'd actually pay money to read. Keep doing this, again and again, until it's the very best version of the story you can imagine.

That's what I do, and I believe you can do it too. Whatever happens, don't give up. Keep writing and keep reading. Because every writer is a reader – and every reader can be a writer!

SF Said

SF Said is a British Muslim author of Middle Eastern origin. He was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967, and came to live in Britain when he was two years old. His first book, *Varjak Paw*, won the Nestlé Smarties Prize for Children's Literature, and was listed by BookTrust as one of the 100 best children's books of the past 100 years. The sequel, *The Outlaw Varjak Paw*, won the BBC Blue Peter Book of the Year. *Phoenix* was selected to represent the UK on the IBBY International Honour Book list, and was shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Award. His most recent book *Tyger* won the Foyles Children's Book of the Year award. Like his other books, it is illustrated by Dave McKean, and is currently being read in classrooms around the UK and elsewhere. SF Said has also written about children's literature for both the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, and is a passionate campaigner for literacy, libraries and reading for pleasure. More information can be found on his website <http://www.sfsaid.com> and Twitter @whatSFSaid.

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

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