

Lisa's doctorate

I

I have always wanted to be a writer. However, I understood fairly early on that few authors make any money out of writing. People don't tend to start off as writers: they do other things and move into it. So that's what I set about doing. When I was trying to figure out what to take at Uni, I looked at a lot of different options and finally decided that there was no point learning more about literature and how to write if I had nothing to write about. Style and technique are useless without content. So, after two degrees in the social sciences, and various jobs, including as a researcher, I set about exploring how I could start shifting my efforts towards the fiction-writing sphere. Although I hadn't been trying to get published at this point, I had been writing full length novels, and doing professional editing and critiquing work, for about 10 years. On this basis, I decided to try my hand at running creative writing workshops through the local council to see if I had any aptitude for teaching. To my amazement, the workshops were a huge success, the students seemed to think I was a really good teacher, and I absolutely loved it. I'd finally found something that I loved almost as much as writing that would fit perfectly alongside a career as a novelist. Next, I tried applying for academic posts; however, while I got to the shortlist for the post I most wanted, I didn't have a PhD and so ended up missing out.

This was all the motivation I needed to decide that not only did I want to study at PhD level (something I'd known since I started my first degree), but that a PhD in Creative Writing would be a good career move and a wise investment of time and money. Decision made, I spent quite a while looking at the options.

Before moving on to the next episode, list the main issues that have arisen

As I couldn't afford to move and do a PhD, I had to pick a university within a few hundred miles of London. I could have chosen somewhere further away, but then I would not have been able to afford the time or money to visit the university every 1-2 weeks during term time. I knew I wanted to get involved in my department, so going once a term to touch base with my supervisor wasn't going to cut the mustard.

The next consideration was whether to be a full- or part-time student. Given my situation, it made much more sense to study full-time on the assumption that I had to complete in three years. I figured that, if I then got a decent post at a university, I would quickly make up not only the fees but, more importantly, the money 'lost' while not working during my degree time. As I was already doing freelance work from home, I had a flexible, on-going source of income to keep me afloat during the PhD (with help on my fees from my parents). Although I applied twice for AHRC grants and received good ratings, I didn't get an award, though I did get a small travel bursary from my university that helped with a vital research fieldtrip.

Another important consideration was the fact that university reputations matter when you are applying for jobs – especially ones in academia. People care about where you did your degree and who the people in the department were. It would have been naïve not to take this into consideration, especially since a PhD is a big investment: I wanted to be sure of getting a good return on it. Therefore, I was careful to pick a university with a good 'name' for both research and creative work.

However, Creative Writing programmes are very different. I actually ended up applying for a couple of places without really looking into it properly and so narrowly missed ending up on a course I would have hated. In Creative Writing, there are two main types of programme. One type is all about group-work: you write a bit of something, you share it with the group, you write some more and edit. I despise reading my work aloud (not least because I'm dyslexic and I find it very difficult to get the words in the right order when I'm speaking and reading), but also because I find it embarrassing. I'm a writer, not a performer. Also, while I love feedback, I really hate getting it before I've figured out what I'm trying to achieve. There's a lot that, if I sit down and think and work at it, I can put right on my own. Why would I want to waste other people's time on making corrections I could take of by myself... especially if I then lose out on their time and energy in terms of problems that I can't fix without help and mistakes I can't spot for myself? For a different type of person, perhaps this works. But one thing I don't lack is motivation: I don't need encouragement or fortnightly deadlines. I need time and space to work hard at my own pace, and then help while I refine.

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I eventually settled on a well-regarded, established uni, with a good reputation for research, that had a course of the second type: one focused on independent research and contact with a supervisory team. The PhD was much more a solo endeavour, but that was what I wanted. I had access to three different academics when I wanted feedback, but I didn't have to share my work every other week and deal with the confusion and frustration that, for me, would have resulted from getting feedback before I'd figured out my own position on my work. This worked very well for me and, looking back, I'm very happy about my choice of university.

Another huge advantage of this university was getting the opportunity to teach and to obtain a postgrad teaching certificate as part of a free programme. I had been researching doing a similar (City and Guilds) programme at an FE college alongside my PhD, but coming up with two sets of fees was impossible. I was more than thrilled when the university gave me the chance to do an even better programme free of charge. This was one of the very best bits of doing the PhD at my university and I'd suggest that anyone considering something similar should give the issue of teaching and teaching qualifications serious thought when picking a university: if you know you want to teach, getting experience and a qualification is a really big CV boost.

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The one downside to the teaching and the teaching certificate was that it took up much more time than I had budgeted for when planning to complete within three years. I hadn't realised how much unpaid time I'd have to spend preparing lessons and materials and reading/re-reading texts with a teacher's eye as someone new to teaching at this level: I'd only budgeted for paid time. In fact, I didn't know until mid-way through my first year that I'd get the option to teach at all, so, to begin with, I hadn't budgeted any time and followed this up by budgeting too little! However, it is well worth teaching during a PhD if that's what you're going to do afterwards. It's wise to budget 6-9 months full-time work if you're teaching 4-6 hours per week for your second and third years. Basically, expect to get little to no PhD work done in the Autumn and Spring terms for these years. Remember that, even if you're not on a teaching programme, you'll still have to do some classes unless you already have teaching experience and/or qualifications. Plus you'll need to become familiar with the course, the course lectures, the texts, the teaching methods, the administrative requirements... not to mention the actual teaching. The classroom bit of this isn't a problem: it's learning how to juggle reasonable and unreasonable student demands outside the classroom that's the challenge.

However, in the end, and despite illness and several other major commitments that placed a considerable drain on my time and energy, I managed to finish my PhD in just over three years. I didn't manage to do all the 'extras' that I'd hoped for in terms of research and reading, and I also didn't manage to write up any new papers for publication. This was the one big disappointment in terms of what I'd hoped to accomplish during my PhD. However, during my PhD a number of 'now or never' opportunities came up that have proven very important for my CV and the work I'm doing post-PhD, so I'm glad that I choose to focus my efforts on the things that I had one shot at, rather than on publications since there's (usually) no issue of 'windows of opportunity' with academic papers in the literature/creative writing field.

All in all, I feel I made good use of my three (and a little bit) PhD years and I completed pretty much when I'd planned, mostly as a result of pure stubbornness and an ability to slog through the work and not allow myself the option of running late (apart from a small amount of planned lee-way I decided on when I realised my health was not holding up quite as I'd hoped).

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In terms of the PhD itself, most of the actual work, writing and research went about as well as I could hope for. Hard work covers a multitude of sins and problems, as does an awareness that, at PhD level, you need a clear understanding of what you're trying to accomplish, how to go about it, and what questions to ask your supervisor when you get stuck. Having done a research MPhil (while working as a research team leader), I was able to hit the ground running with a detailed, practical research proposal and also a timetable listing all the work (initial reading, fieldtrips, analysis, writing up of notes, follow up to research, drafting, redrafting, editing, checking, etc.) needed to complete my PhD within three years.

My supervisor (and supervisory board as a whole) were great at being hands off and letting me get on with it, knowing that I was working hard, asking questions when needed, and generally staying on course. It didn't hurt that I tend to have a clear idea of what I am good at and what I'm bad at; it means I can spell out very clearly exactly what I need help on. Above all, I know what works for me or, rather, how I need to work to get things done. For instance, as I am dyslexic, I tend to be slow at putting things down on paper. I need to get it right in my head first and this takes a while. However, once I'm ready, I write very quickly and can produce lots of good work within a very short period of time. I explained this to my supervisor at the outset and so he was great about supporting me in taking my time, especially when my methods proved to fit my madness. Although I sometimes had to write more than I wanted before I felt I was ready in order to fulfil the requirements for supervisory board meetings every 6 months, the demands weren't unreasonable and I could see the importance of proving that I was on track.

One slight difficulty was that, because I produced a lot of material quite late in the day (as I'd always said I would), it wasn't possible to run everything past all three people in my supervisory board before submitting. Since I hadn't taken up much of their time previously, it would have been great if they'd budgeted extra towards the end of my PhD, especially since they'd had advance notice that this was how things would go. However, it wasn't a big problem and I did get a reasonable amount of input. I could have chosen to push for more, but decided that this was the price of needing to do things in an unusual way. It wasn't ideal, but it wasn't a major problem either and was at least partly the result of my own choices.

One of the only major problems was the fact that there were no official guidelines or regulations about my PhD at all! I started asking about these even before I arrived at the university and nothing ever materialised in writing. This actually turned out to be a huge problem for a number of reasons, the main one being that, when I went to submit my PhD, I was told that the Registry had never accepted a novel plus a commentary as a PhD submission before and they'd have to consult with the Dean of the Graduate School before it could be accepted! My supervisor was very reassuring about the fact that such PhDs *had* been accepted and processed before, but it was still very nerve-racking waiting to get confirmation.

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It turned out we also had to get confirmation on a raft of minor issues I'd asked about from the start, including silly things as font size and spacing; there were 'thesis' rules that worked fine for the commentary but double-spacing a novel makes pages look very silly indeed in point 12! Word counts were another problem: in theses, word counts include quotations. I'd been told I should aim for roughly 30,000-40,000 words but it turned out that 40,000 was an absolute limit.¹ I was within this... except if you counted excerpts from the novel that I quoted in order to provide in-depth analysis. This also had to be approved. Then it turned out that the normal guidelines hadn't been specific enough about bindings, so I had to get the whole thing re-bound. Part of the problem was that they hadn't anticipated that the novel part of the submission might be so long (140,000 words), despite the fact that there were no regulations about word limits for creative pieces. The Registry insisted that the entire submission had to be bound in no more than three volumes; this was a bit of a problem as more than a ream of paper was involved and they refused to allow double-sided printing or single-spaced printing or a smaller font size to accommodate the difficulties of finding someone who could bind so many pages at once! There was a lot of unnecessary stress and hassle, especially right at the end, that could have been avoided if the university had had detailed, specific instructions for Creative Writing PhD students. To my mind, a university shouldn't accept students on a course that they don't have appropriate regulations for. However, in the end, all these things were sorted out and I was able to submit only a little later than hoped.

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¹ The word limit for the Commentary was 40,000. No guidance at all was given for the novel on the understanding that, as a creative work, it might be very long or rather short, and it might take an experimental form/format. At present there are two poets doing Creative Writing PhDs in the Department. They will be submitting collections; however, since most collections are around 100 pages at most, the word count for their creative work will likely be significantly under 30,000. One of my supervisors, who did his PhD in the Department, submitted a novel/novella of 40,000, so I definitely seemed to be an 'outlier' on the scale, though no one apart from the Registry seemed to take exception to this.

The other big problem was that, via a communication failure on *both* our parts, it took a year for my supervisor to get me to understand that my proposal wasn't suitable for a Creative Writing PhD. However, if I had received clear, written regulations and guidance from the outset, I doubt the problem would have arisen. The moment of realisation came when the first chapter I produced turned out to be far too 'traditional' and not suitably 'creative'. Before applying to the university, I had spent a lot of time thinking up a Creative Writing PhD concept that would give me the opportunity to produce rigorous, substantive research: I'd planned to write a thesis about the methodological and epistemological issues behind my creative work, using my novel as an example. It turned out that wasn't what was required at all. The 'norm' for Creative Writing PhDs, and here the issue of not having any regulations came to the fore, turned out to involve a creative work accompanied by a 'commentary' (instead of a thesis) describing the place of the work in the literature. I rather balked at this concept: it seemed rather presumptuous to me, as a writer who wasn't published, to spend 40,000 words talking about the place of my novel in the literature... especially when my field of literature involved Primo Levi's work!

Instead, my supervisor and I agreed that my commentary (and it was a real wrench to abandon my thesis chapters) could focus on the practical and creative process of researching and writing the novel. This, at least, seemed something that could add to the field and be useful to others, though I remain somewhat uncomfortable about whether something so wholly reflexive is suitable for a *research* degree: a problem equally inherent in 'relating your work to other works in the field' Creative Writing commentaries. All in all, I would have been much happier about the written work I submitted for my PhD if I'd been on the same page as my supervisor from the beginning. The upshot of this was that I had to radically revise my expectations, dump my first few chapters, and plan a true commentary instead of a thesis.

In the end, my supervisory board was divided about whether the work was ready for submission. It didn't help that only my supervisor had read the full, revised novel and the full commentary. One of the supervisory board, someone I have immense respect for, was not at all convinced I was ready to submit; he felt that I'd lost too much of the theory from my original thesis chapters. I rather suspect that he shared my views about the commentary being too reflexive. However, as my supervisor was the head of the Creative Writing programme, and the supervisory board member was a literature expert, I felt I had to go with my supervisor's views. Before submitting, I visited the supervisory board member to explain that while I very much respected his views (and agreed with them in substantive terms), since his position couldn't be reconciled with my supervisor's, on issues of what a Creative Writing should be and where it should focus, I had to follow my supervisor's views. The supervisory board member agreed that this was for the best and that my supervisor would not have agreed that I should submit if the work was not suitable and of an appropriate standard. However, I took the opportunity to outline my plans about how to defend myself in the viva if either or both of the examiners took the same view. This was very reassuring for me in terms of proving to a colleague I admire that I did have more to offer that he would value; it was also a good way to ensure that he knew I had listened to his excellent advice and found a way to act upon it, while avoiding conflict with my supervisor's input.

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Going into the viva, this conflict of opinion was my one big worry but I figured that the best defence would be to discuss the requirements and expectations that my supervisor had outlined, and then to discuss the thesis chapters that I had abandoned, but had recently given conference papers on. If the issue came up, I was, thus, relatively confident that I could prove that I had done enough theoretical work of a sufficient standard to satisfy the examiners that, if they requested, I could add something quickly and easily enough from my 'old' chapters and conference papers to merit a pass and not a referral.

However, the viva was disastrous. The worst bit was that I learnt next to nothing. I hardly got a chance to talk about my work and didn't get any useful answers to the questions I was really looking forward to asking about how to edit my book.

I'm usually impossibly enthusiastic and find it very hard not to explode with excitement about new information and new chances to talk to people about their thoughts and ask them questions (mainly the question asking). However, I ended up being near silent for much of my own viva. Both examiners were so negative (and, as one of them acknowledged in so many words, insulting: it's time to be worried when your examiner starts a sentence with "You might find this insulting but...") that I came out while they conferred positive that I'd failed. I'm rarely inclined to tears, but ended up bursting into them (though very briefly!) when they told me I'd passed; I had been so sure the news was bound to be "complete disaster, no coming back from this muck". I wasn't sure where I could have messed up that badly, but thought that I must have done so and somehow my supervisor had missed it. Even the supervisory board member who wasn't sure I was ready to submit hadn't thought that I was likely to fail!

I'm still gutted about the whole thing. I was so excited about it and to have missed out on an opportunity to gain new insights into my work was hugely disappointing. I feel like I somehow blew an important opportunity, but I'm not quite sure exactly where I went wrong.

I ended up going down to Student Support a few days later to talk it over with someone as I felt absolutely wretched and had spent the weekend being ill from reaction (again, not very like me but it was all such a disappointment and the shock of having felt that I might have wasted three years of my life and a lot of money I'd never been able to repay my parents without a PhD just turned me inside out for a while).

One of the worst bits was that both examiners were rather discriminatory about the fact that I'm dyslexic. I made a stupid mistake (despite the fact that it was something I checked then double-checked) on a name (the external examiner's!) and, when I tried to explain that it wasn't carelessness and that I really had gone back and tried to check it (to no avail, which sometimes happens because I don't always see the letters), they told me to not mention my dyslexia again because I should stand on my own merits and not make excuses. I probably should have stood my ground and said that it was an explanation not an excuse because, if I hadn't been dyslexic, I'm pretty sure I would have seen the error when I went back to double-check! However, discretion seemed the better part of valour.

That was bad enough, but they then proceeded to quiz me, not about my PhD reading, but about every book I'd ever read. Seriously. They wanted to know about everything I'd ever read. Then, they both told me that I didn't read... which is ridiculous because my supervisor actually ordered me to stop reading at one point and give myself a break. But it was also excruciatingly humiliating. I do read. I just read slowly. I haven't read every single one of the classics that I will eventually read at my slow pace, but I've probably read as much, if not more, than most of my PhD peers. I love to read; it's one of the most important things in my life. I spent much of my time at school being told off for reading when I was supposed to be doing something else. My parents even had to ban me from reading more than a book a day at one point. So it wasn't a fair comment at all but I didn't feel I could prove otherwise... Not to mention the fact that I didn't really want to make a terrible situation even worse by arguing with two people who had a tremendous amount of power over the rest of my professional life.

Above all, I didn't know how to explain myself without being accused of making excuses. Neither of the examiners seemed to understand that, as a dyslexic, I am not always good at matching author names to book titles... Sometimes I get the names backwards or I can't pronounce them (even after I've asked people how to say the names because I just can't remember how the letters relate to the sounds) or I've misread the title and call the book (or the main characters) something peculiar... All very embarrassing but not the same thing at all as not reading and not having something of substance to say. Lacking a facility with names and titles should surely come under the Disability Discrimination Act provision that allows 'reasonable adjustments for people with a disability to be made to allow them to study and be assessed without disadvantage relative to their peers'. After all, a viva isn't a pub quiz: if the content of my work is there, should it matter that I stumble over a very specific category of minor facts like names and titles?

All of this meant that, when they asked me about various authors ("Which books by X have you read?"), I was too nervous to say anything in case I got it wrong. Given how nervous (and upset) they'd already made me, I was terrified I'd suddenly be all backwards and say Dickens had written *Far From the Madding Crowd*. After all, it was my PhD viva: I was 99% confident on who had written what, but I didn't feel able to take even a small chance that I would make a hideously embarrassing (and unimpressive) mistake. I still don't know how I managed to give such a bad, and inaccurate, impression but, at the time, I felt that it couldn't get worse so I'd be better off saying next to nothing.

After all, "Have you read X?" is rather a loaded question in a viva. I had read a lot of the books they mentioned (or at least a couple of things by the authors), but not well enough or recently enough to answer a PhD viva question, so I said "No" when the answer was really "Yes, but...". I was mortified when they said I could have at least skim read the books because of course I had actually read most of them (well, not every word of some things but certainly more than skimming!). However, I was so worried about being accused of making excuses again that I didn't feel able to explain myself. Given that my period is World War II, it was more than a little frustrating to be told off for not having read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which, actually, I have read, just not while I was doing my PhD and so not to viva-level, especially when the question was "Don't you know about Hardy's approach to paragraph structures?".

I'd been re-reading core texts from my period and area of interest, which my supervisor said was excessive but, as I'd forgotten quite a bit about the books I'd read at the beginning of my PhD, I felt I should revise them before the viva since I did actually talk about in my thesis and so it wasn't unreasonable that the examiners might ask about them to check my work. I didn't think of reviewing Hardy or Dickens or Elliott or Austen or... any of a hundred other classics that I hadn't even imagined they would want to ask me about (not least because I'd made no mention whatsoever of them in my PhD). Perhaps these questions about things that were only relevant in the most general sense had something to do with the fact that I'd had the temerity to move fields and start studying literature as a PhD student, having been a social scientist previously.

Before moving on to the next episode, list the main issues that have arisen

However, there were a few highlights in the viva. From the external examiner, I learnt that when writing historical fiction a writer should "forget the history". I also learnt that, having burnt one person in my novel to a crisp (in the blitz), I really had to barbecue some more.

Later, I discussed these comments (though, of course, not saying who had made them) with my writing students to explain that, even when a comment seems ridiculous, you can find something useful in it if you think about it carefully enough and don't dismiss it out of hand. What I took from the comment about not enough people going 'sizzle-pop' was that the scene with the fire wasn't tied into the narrative enough: it didn't form part of the pattern, the 'weave' of the story. I didn't have to fix this by charring more characters, but perhaps I need to make the connections between this scene and the narrative arc a little clearer and more explicit.

I don't know what to say about the "forget the history" comment. I later had another major disappointment when I realised that the external examiner's book, which I was reading at my usual slow pace (and very much enjoying) around the time of the viva, was not actually historical fiction but 'based on a true story'. The preface (which I'd saved until the end) was a complete let down and showed that he'd ignored most of the known facts in favour of making up something that, in his view, was more exciting. I can understand embellishing and building on the truth, but not ignoring it. Why bother writing about a real person if you're going to make most of it up anyway? Why not just be honest about what you're doing and write fantasy? Probably because fantasy is frowned on as not being 'good' literature: a distinction I was soundly criticised for not making when, in discussing my reading, I said that I try to read bits of all sorts of genres, rather than just sticking with literary fiction. I think being well-read means a little more than just reading the Booker prize long list. In any case, one of my main plans for the future is to be immortal: I read too slowly not to live forever.

But, the thing that sums up the viva was this:

External: On page 24, you talk about various films, despite the fact that you're writing a novel. Me (thinking): Wonderful! He's going to ask about how the two media relate and what the cross-over is. He'll want me to defend the fact that I've borrowed from screenwriting technique in the novel and talk about how 'visual' elements differ in a novel versus a screenplay, which, by definition, is intended to be transformed into images.

External: You do know that film is a vacuous medium... it's for turning your brain off.

*Me (thinking): I wonder if he knows that the department's name includes the term 'film studies'? (beat) I wonder why the **internal** examiner is smiling and nodding!*

[In the end, I made my expression as blank and bland as possible. At which point...]

External (to internal): Oh, you take over. I'm obviously not getting through.

External (to me): You can write, so I just want to shake you because, you know, writers who bore their readers should be taken out and shot.

Me (thinking): Now I feel all enthused about going back and editing the book again before seeking my publishing fortune.

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As it turned out, I passed with minor corrections. These turned out to be very minor: 5 typos on my commentary and a longer list of typos on the novel (it was 140,000 words!). The viva was on November 11th and I had my official 'you've been graduated' letter less than a month later. So, really, I should be counting it all as a success.

However, even when the examiners told me I'd passed, I was sure that I had a long-term referral and thought I'd misheard them when they told me to just sort out the typos they'd mentioned. I was quite sure someone was going to tell me "the pass was just a joke: of course you've failed, you moron" until the moment I received my graduation letter.

After the viva, in the common room, where several of my friends were trying to get me to celebrate (I was too shell-shocked to know which end was up), the internal examiner, who seemed to feel rather embarrassed and perhaps even a little guilty, apologised for upsetting me and said, "Well, we've got to be hard on you otherwise you wouldn't have earned it." I very nearly said the first thing that came into my head: that I rather thought I'd earned my PhD through three years of hard work and research, rather than 90 minutes of putting up with people being unpleasant to me.

At the end of the day, I have my PhD. I am very happy about that. However, I'm still disappointed about the viva. I wanted to learn from it. I wanted to work for it and have to explain myself. I can't see what the point of just being made to feel inadequate was when they gave me the PhD with nothing to add or change as such. I didn't even have to write one new phrase!

As with most PhDs, I'd really hoped for some tips and guidance about how to set about getting both academic and creative work published. I gave this up as a lost cause about 10 minutes in. However, I didn't give up on the idea that I might get some helpful feedback; however, although I asked some very specific questions about solving narrative problems that had had my supervisor stumped, I received no (useful) answers. The specific feedback I did get had nothing to do with what I wanted to achieve in the book (e.g. sticking to the facts as regards the big picture) and the general points that I did manage to take away were so general I had no idea what to do to address them. All in all, I was further along before the viva, despite the fact that I'd approached it (and looked forward to it) as an opportunity to advance my knowledge and figure out where to take my work next. It was a really bad end to what had, mostly, been a very enjoyable and stimulating period of my life.

However, while I didn't get what I'd hoped for from the viva, I got what I hoped for from the PhD: a qualification, awarded within 3 and a half years of starting, that should, in the long run, allow me to have a good career in the field I love.

Team task

On the acetate provided list the main lessons here for

- 1. Postgraduate research students**
- 2. Supervisors**
- 3. Institutions**