THERE comes a strange period of time in the life of many novelists -- when the work of writing is done, and what has been produced is in that interim stage between draft and novel: the manuscript stage. Manuscript is a word which I always feel dissociated from; I can think of myself as having written a draft of a novel, or a novel itself, but manuscripts always seem something distant, autonomous.

There's no great mystery as to why -- the manuscript stage is the stage when your work as writer ends and everyone else's work begins. Literary agents, foreign scouts, publishers, translators, jacket designers, sales and marketing departments, distributors -- suddenly this thing you've spent months and years working on passes out of your hand into theirs, and though you may still have some involvement in certain parts of the process your role is, at best, peripheral.

It should be evident already that I'm presently in this manuscript stage. I've finished editing a novel, and it'll be a year before its published in the UK (the dates of publication in other countries still haven't been decided). So a year, then, before this work of mine finds its way into the world -- and yet there's so much work to be done between now and then. None of it by me.

Writing a novel may be the work of a single person (though in my case, the assistance of an editor, or editors, is crucial) but the business of publishing a novel involves mini-armies, consisting of many divisions, many specialisations, some of them entirely mysterious to me.

How do decisions get made about which font to use? I have no idea. What do marketing departments choose to say about my book to try and get as many copies of it in the bookstores as possible? I really don't want to know. And yet all this goes on, while I sit at home and write columns about all that goes on without my involvement.

But what do you do, my friends who aren't writers ask. What happens in the life of a writer when the writing is done? Do you end one novel on a Tuesday evening and start the next one on a Wednesday morning? I do know writers who function like this, but I'm certainly not one of them. At the moment I have no idea what I'm going to be writing next, which slightly gets in the way of my ability to start writing it. Previously I could at least say "it'll be something set in Karachi" since that was true of each of my first four novels. But this recently concluded novel jumps around the globe -- from Japan to India to Pakistan to Afghanistan to America -- and as a result I have no certainty of even the geography within which I'll set my next book.

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I'm close enough to having just finished the last book to feel I can take a bit of a break before having to worry too much about the "what next?" question. And there has been enough else going on in the last few weeks to keep me occupied -- books to review, essays to write, columns for different papers, radio shows, literature festivals. Somehow in the last few years being a writer has, for me, started to involve a lot more than writing novels. And even when there's a lull in all these other demands and commitments there are always always more books to read than time in which to read them. ("Don't you get bored?" I was asked recently by one of my friends with an office job. Bored by not having to sit at a desk all day? Where's the logic in that?)

But really, the reason I'm able to enjoy this "time off" is because I know it's merely the prelude to starting work on another novel. After five novels, there still remains something mysterious to me about the process of starting a novel. When I try to explain it to anyone the words sound false or incomplete to me. What does it mean to "keep your mind alert to anything, any image, any tiny scrap of a story, that feels like it could become something much larger?" And yet, that's as much as I can do to explain beginnings.

Wherever I find my beginning, I'm determined to do it well before the novel I've just finished is published next year. The best way to avoid getting caught up in worrying about reviews and sales is to already be well immersed in writing the next thing, your attention so firmly fixed on what is unfolding in your mind that the book just being published starts to seem like something that you let go of long ago.

This is not to say that the finished novel is something from which I feel distant in the same way I feel distant from a manuscript. The manuscript is in the hands of people who work on it. The novel -- when it's lucky enough to find itself picked up off the shelf and taken home -- is in the hands of a reader. As a writer, you are entirely separate from the relationship which then develops between your book and the reader. But as a writer you are also someone who became a writer because, first, you were a reader. The thought of some other reader -- perhaps one who will one day become a writer -- settling down with the book I wrote and taking pleasure in it: there's an image that fills me with the deepest joy.

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