It can be useful to have a set of beta readers who can be relied upon to provide more objective feedback than you are capable of giving yourself. And it is worth figuring out what routine works best for you – whether it is defined by word count, hours worked, time of day or some other criterion. For example, despite years of trying to pull off the "early to bed, early to rise" habit, I have had to face up to the fact that the most productive time for me is between 10 pm and 2 am. Needless to say, it plays havoc with the rest of my life, so I'm still fighting it. And my "routine" essentially consists of squeezing out any block of time that I can find, and using it to work on my current project, of shutting down my overactive conscience when it points out that I need to respond to emails or people, and of prising myself away from the seductions of social media. That's my "three step programme"!

Most of the time this works because it has to. The reality of any writer's life is that there is a host of distractions clamouring to help facilitate procrastination. Someone recently told me that she couldn't write unless she was on holiday, and I had to prevent myself from laughing out loud. The idea of writing only while on holiday is a luxury that most of us cannot imagine; nor would that approach be particularly useful in my case since it's been quite a while since I last had a proper holiday.



With Mila. PHOTO: PRITO REZA

If you come from a developing country, there is yet another set of challenges to be met, not least the pervasiveness of stereotypes.

ChimamandaNgoziAdichie gave a wonderful TED talk on the dangers of a single narrative, describing how many of the people that she spoke to felt that there was only one kind of Nigerian story to be told. Her work was initially greeted with scepticism because it didn't fit the expectations of those in the industry. In her case, of course, what happened thereafter is publishing history. But many of us who write from developing countries in the Commonwealth face similar problems of preconceived notions, including the demand for a writer to tell a story that fits the expectations of agents, publishers and some imaginary audience "out there".

Such external pressures are often detrimental to producing your best work. The preoccupation with what the market wants has led, increasingly, to the idea that a writer must write with an audience in mind. I don't agree. Most writers want their work to be published, and put in time and energy to achieve that end – as they should. But I suspect that most of us essentially write because we have to, because we are driven to, because it fulfils some deep-seated need for expression and catharsis and communication that has very little to do with "the market".

Writing that is issue-driven or market-driven isn't necessarily going to be a writer's best work, because that tends to come out of emotions and ideas that are deeply embedded in their psyche. It's no accident that some of the best "first novels", those that appear polished and almost magical in their clarity, are also those which have taken a while to incubate. So in the end you may have to make a choice – will you try to chase the market with a story that is designed primarily to sell (which in any case can be a dubious proposition in terms of your chances of success), or will you write what you want to write, and focus on marketing it once you have produced the best book that you are capable of?

This is a particularly important question, because in the twenty-first century, writers are bombarded with advice. One of your biggest challenges will be to sift through all of it, and decide what works for you. Not all of it will, however talented the source of the advice may be. Kurt Vonnegut came up with a sound place to start: "Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia." For me, this advice hits home. And I would further suggest that if you do write to please just one person, that one person should, first and foremost, be you.

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