

HOW WORDS GET GOOD

HOW WORDS GET GOOD

THE STORY OF MAKING A BOOK

REBECCA LEE

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 637 9
eISBN 978 1 78283 759 6



In memory of Patricia Mary Lee,
who taught me my first words

‘A book is a version of the world. If you do not like
it, ignore it; or offer your own version in return.’

Salman Rushdie

CONTENTS

Introduction: Welcome to the Gutenberg Galaxy	1
How words get born	13
The beautiful shape of stories: Authors	17
'Singers of stitched words': Ghostwriters	32
The secrets of agents	49
Stet and echt: Editors	68
How words get better	79
'The writer is your natural enemy': Copy-editing	83
Specks in your text: Grammar and punctuation	103
Fight letters from Charlotte Brontë: Spelling	132
Foot-and-note disease: Footnotes	168
Index, Missouri: Indexes	183
How words get free	201
Inspector Maigret and the pogo stick: Translation	204
Blaps, blovers and blurbs	222
And it was all yellow: Covers and jackets	240
Little hands and running feet: Text design	258
'The memory of the loss': Lost words	282
Permanent words: Print	302
Words in the wilderness: Out of print	319

Epilogue: Brave new words	332
<i>Bibliography</i>	339
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	350
<i>Index</i>	353

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE GUTENBERG GALAXY

‘There is no frigate like a book.’

Emily Dickinson

In 1962 Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan published a book called *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. In it, McLuhan explored the role of mass media (and especially the printing press) in human society, and its impact on human consciousness. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* divided history into four epochs: oral tribe culture, manuscript culture, the Gutenberg Galaxy – the name McLuhan chose for the era of movable type and mass printing – and, finally, the era to come, the electronic age.*

McLuhan’s concept of the Gutenberg Galaxy took its name from Johannes Gutenberg, the German printer who changed the world with the invention of movable type and mechanical mass-produced printing in Renaissance Europe. The phrase ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’ reminds us that, in whatever

*McLuhan’s final chapter, ‘The Galaxy Reconfigured’, predicted a decline in individualistic print culture and a shift towards the ‘global village’ (a phrase he coined) of electronic media. Although he died in 1980, he would presumably not have been at all astonished to see his work now available in hardback, paperback and ebook.

format they appear, every word is part of a vast and dynamic universe of all those that have ever been recorded – whether on clay, papyrus, paper or silicon – and all those still to be born.

That's a lot of words. So many, in fact, that if we are to engage meaningfully with written culture, we need a way to sort and categorise all the words swirling round the Gutenberg Galaxy, to separate what we find to be good from what we find to be not-so-good. There simply isn't time for us to deal with all the words that are out there. We take on this monumental task in a variety of ways – every book group, word-of-mouth recommendation, book review or book discussing another book is part of the human instinct to sort the good words from the bad.

We might decide that a collection of words bound together in a book or displayed on a digital screen is 'good' because we find them readable, entertaining, inspiring, life-changing, informative, opinionated or profitable. Because they report history, change history or give a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard.

And the boundaries of 'good' are wide and blurry. Some words are critically acclaimed, studied, analysed and disseminated across borders and across centuries. Others are airily dismissed by the literati, yet wildly popular with readers, who hold them to very different standards: those of comfort, titillation, humour, terror, familiarity, escape, melancholy and every other form of emotional resonance in the vast pantheon of the human experience. A book only needs to succeed on its own terms – a brilliant whodunnit has different aims to a magisterial academic treatise on EU law.

So, every time a reader alights in a new corner of the Gutenberg Galaxy and starts to read, the pleasure and privilege of deciding which books are *good* is theirs. But 'book' is just a name for a collection of words, and we can make

Introduction: Welcome to the Gutenberg Galaxy

those words *better* by what we choose to do with them. All collections of words (from sentences to entire books) can be improved, and in lots of different ways. This book is for anyone who's ever wondered just how words navigate from one side of the Gutenberg Galaxy to the other – from the mind of the author to the eyes of the reader.

How do the words that we eventually hold in our hands in a book come to be? What are their stories? And how do those raw words coalesce into readable, recognisable phrases, sentences, paragraphs, pages and chapters? Finally, and in some ways most importantly, what frees those words to make the last step of their journey – to leave their author behind and find their audience?

In between looking at how words get good, better and free, this book will shed light on the practical process of how the insides and outsides of books come together and demystify the alchemy that transforms raw unedited text to smooth readable prose. Every book has a parallel story: that of how it was created. There is the story that the words tell us, and then the journey behind how those particular words came to be on a page. We'll meet the supporting cast needed for words to fulfil their potential, and hear from the people who make it happen; who make it their business and call it their passion to help words get good.

Oh, and every now and then we'll encounter some – if not objectively, then at least arguably – 'bad' words, with which we'll no doubt have a good time. Life, literature and human nature being what they are, we can find real pleasure, interest and humour in reading words that are, by any reasonable consensus, *bad*. Bad words are the junk food of the literary world – we know we shouldn't, but just sometimes, we do. We'll also have close encounters with some lost words – those we know once existed but that have disappeared from our view; and then those that were lost (and in

some cases perhaps should have stayed that way) but have made their way back to new audiences.

Your (largely) reliable narrator

What qualifies me to know anything about how words get good? Over the course of twenty years working in the editorial department of one of the world's largest publishers I've signed off millions and millions of words for print. Words in every conceivable combination, language, tone, style and typeface. I've edited, proofread, fact-checked, copy-checked, rewritten, edited again, indexed, re-indexed, checked corrections, dealt with authors, commissioned freelancers, calmed down commissioning editors, cooperated with typesetters and printers, and, finally, sent words to print.

Have I read all these words? No. Have I understood all those I *have*? Not entirely. Have I experienced the occasional slip along the path to making them good? Yes, indeed. Have I had an author email me (very politely, under the circumstances) to point out I'd misspelt their name on the title page of their proofs? Mea culpa. Have I been part of a team that managed to print 20,000 copies of *The Importance of Being Ernest*? Speaking earnestly, I absolutely have.

As this might suggest, my job is at least as terrifying as it is satisfying. The longer I do it, the closer I must surely be edging towards a truly irrecoverable cock-up. In my worst moments – the 3 a.m. ones, followed by the even worse 4 a.m. ones – I wonder if I can carry on at all. Because I *know* that one day soon 40,000 copies of a high-profile hardback will have to be pulped because of something I did or didn't do. (Which is worse? Both!)

As well as the words I approve and send to print, I spend my days arguing over how to present ellipses. Trying to convince authors to follow our standard endnote style.

Introduction: Welcome to the Gutenberg Galaxy

Wondering why I'm working on a book with 2,000 cross references that need to be cross-checked – or matching 60 trivia questions on one side of a jacket with 60 answers on the other. Everything that is put in front of me – cover, index, text, images, maps, diagrams – must be interrogated, made sense of, checked and re-checked to help make it good.

Before I worked in the world of books, I gave very little thought to the integrity of the printed word. If it was in print, it must be correct. *Ipso facto*. Doubly (ip)so if it was printed in gold foil on the jacket. It didn't occur to me that authors and publishers sometimes got things *wrong*. If I thought about editing or editors at all, it was to assume they might tidy up some grammar and spot the occasional typo. In my mind, manuscripts arrived on publishers' desks in an almost fully formed state. A quick once-over, and off to the printer you go. This was not a view that survived first contact with a manuscript. It was only when I was responsible for producing a book from start to finish that I began to grasp just how complicated the whole business really was.

Initially, it all seemed simple enough. There were rules, you see. Rules for making words good. Copy-editing rules, typesetting rules, house style, style sheets, dictionaries. Authors would send me their art and I, by God, was going to science the sh*t out of it for them.

But gradually I came to understand that the rules weren't the problem; it was the exceptions. And the exceptions were *everywhere*. On top of that, the closer I got to a piece of text the more ephemeral it seemed. No line, paragraph or book was the same as another; no author had the same tone, style or intent. Each book had to be built from scratch from the raw material supplied. Even the rulebook had to be rewritten. Or heavily edited, at the very least.

The liberation of words

‘Homer on parchment pages!
The Iliad and all the adventures
Of Ulysses, foe of Priam’s kingdom!
All locked within a piece of skin
Folded into several little sheets!’

Martial, *Epigrammata*, XIV

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan argued that the development of the printing press led eventually to rationalism, nationalism, dualism, the automatising of scientific research, the standardisation of culture across the globe, and the alienation of individual men and women. This is what happens when you allow words their freedom: the printing press, then, has been radically accelerating change since it was first invented.

If the *way* we get words onto the page has been a driver of change, then the format we encounter them in has an effect, too. This was a theme that McLuhan explored through his axiom ‘The medium is the message’.* Our response to words can be altered by how we physically encounter them, and the way we record words has meaning, too.

Before the book, there was the scroll. And before that there was the clay tablet, used by speakers of more than fifteen different languages and for over three thousand years. The clay tablet may have held sway in ancient Western civilisations, but in South America (and China) things were recorded in a very different way – on knotted strings. Called *quipu*, these

*When proofs of McLuhan’s 1967 book – which he originally planned to call *The Medium is the Message* – were sent back from the typesetters, he realised that they had incorrectly set the title as *The Medium is the Massage*. According to McLuhan’s official website, ‘After McLuhan saw the typo, he exclaimed, “Leave it alone! It’s great, and right on target!”’

Introduction: Welcome to the Gutenberg Galaxy

strings were used for storing census data, keeping records, and even monitoring how and when people paid their tax. The scroll had many advantages over the clay tablet (and the *quipu*) – it was editable and portable, and once humans had worked out how to make paper, it was much more convenient, especially for long documents.

But although scrolls were the dominant way of presenting written information in the ancient world, by the sixth century they had almost completely disappeared, having been replaced by the codex, which means ‘trunk of a tree’, or ‘book’. Codices looked just as books look today, with the pages stacked on top of each other and fixed to a spine made of slightly thicker material. The arrival of the codex was the most important advance in bookmaking until Gutenberg’s printing press changed the world – and the world of words.

The Romans* were the first to use the codex, and in the same way that the scroll was superior to the tablet, the codex had plenty of advantages over the scroll. The Roman poet Martial wrote some lines to go with gifts of books exchanged during the festival of Saturnalia, demonstrating the benefits of the codex form, as well as sticking in a quick advert for where you could buy his own writings:

You who long for my little books to be with you everywhere and want to have companions for a long journey, buy these ones which parchment confines within small pages: give your scroll-cases to the great authors – one hand can hold me. So that you are not ignorant of where I am on sale, and don’t wander aimlessly through the whole city, I will be your guide and you will be certain:

*And not just any old Roman. Apparently, Julius Caesar was an early adopter of the codex, and would write to his troops on pages bound together like a book.

look for Secundus, the freedman of learned Lucensis, behind the threshold of the Temple of Peace and the Forum of Pallas.

As Martial describes, the codex was an efficient way of travelling with your favourite reading material. Unlike the scroll, the codex was small enough to hold in one hand (it was also easy to conceal among your clothes, which meant that ‘forbidden’ texts could be hidden), robust owing to its covers, and economic – both sides of the parchment could be used. One of the drawbacks of the scroll was that it was sequential access – like a cassette tape, you could only access the work in the order it was ‘stored’. A codex is random access, more like a CD.* By the second century the codex was the preferred form of presenting written material in the Western world, and was used particularly by Christians†; the Bible was presented in codex format, for example, rather than scroll.

The codex was actually an evolution of the scroll rather than an entirely new technology – some scrolls (the Dead Sea Scrolls are a famous example) were unrolled horizontally, which meant that they could be folded up like an accordion. Then someone had the idea of cutting the pages and sewing or gluing them at the centre. Inside, the parchment was folded. One fold to a piece of parchment was a folio. Two and it was a quarto. And if you folded it again, you had an octavo.

*Will future readers even know what a CD or cassette is?

†The random access nature of the codex is part of the story of St Augustine’s conversion to Christianity. When Augustine picked up his copy of St Paul’s Epistles, he records in his *Confessions* that ‘I took hold of it and opened it, and in silence I read the first section on which my eyes fell’. The passage that Augustine read was from Romans 13, and at the end of it ‘the darkness of doubt’ disappears from his mind and he embraces Christianity.

Introduction: Welcome to the Gutenberg Galaxy

Of course, although a codex is recognisable to us as a precursor to the book, producing even one was a time-consuming effort. Before the printing press, manuscripts were copied out by monks. And inevitably this method of producing text led to many errors and variations in each version. Punctuation, spelling and grammar weren't standardised, and in classical manuscripts *scriptio continua* was used – which meant that there were no spaces between words.* The time it took to create written material meant that codices, and hence the ideas, knowledge and opinions that the words inside could pass on, were confined to the elite: monasteries, the universities and the well off. It was the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century that changed all this, and more.

From scroll to codex to bound book, the people who have written, edited, crafted and produced them have faced similar issues: how to make sure the information is correct, how to reduce errors, how to entice readers to stay with the story, and crucially, to stay with the story until the very end. The story of *How Words Get Good* is the story of how these problems have been solved.

An odyssey from front to back

Something that remains a source of awe even to these jaded eyes is the sheer distance it is possible to travel between the covers of every book. One of the joys of reading is the ability to bridge time and cultures in just a sentence. That's the

*As a reader this might sound challenging, but it was nothing compared to trying to read something written in Boustrophedon. This excellent word means 'in the manner of oxen turning in ploughing' and is a bi-directional text – alternate lines are read in opposite directions. As if that weren't enough, the individual characters are also reversed. It was often used to carve on stone in ancient Greece.

remarkable power of words. But, every line of printed matter demands huge quantities of energy, time, imagination and expertise from those involved in the world of words to successfully construct that bridge.

These expeditions are undertaken by the editorial team I'm part of: the section of publishing I fell into and a career that's always been fairly opaque to my family and friends. There are lots of things that I *don't* do to words: I don't find them in the first place, or commission them, and I don't get to be their first readers. That unmarked trail is broken for us by agents and commissioning editors, who between them do the initial exploring and scouting for words across the Gutenberg Galaxy. But once those words have been captured, they are fed in at one end to our department to emerge from the other in a form that can be safely released to the reading public. The words that were 'good' at the start should have been made 'better' by the time they leave us; what happens in the intervening months is between me, the author and a set of shadowy professional wordsmiths – copy-editors, indexers and proofreaders – each with their own arcane specialisms, interests and quirks.

While a manuscript arriving with me is the start of its journey, before that the words have already been thought about, edited, re-edited, drafted and revised by the author, their agent (if they have one) and their commissioning editor in a process that always takes months and often takes years. And after the words leave us, they continue to be refined by designers, typesetters and printers, all of whom have their own complex and fascinating sub-worlds (which we will dip a toe into), with their own history, foibles, stories and traditions.

Just as every book has its own unique genesis in the mind of its author, it has its own unique journey into the hands of its readers. To help words get good, I need to scurry back and forth between these two points to make sure we never lose

sight of either the author's vision and intent or the reader's ability and willingness to receive it.

The Prime Directive of Publishing

'The first sentence you write will be the most important sentence in your life, and so will the second, and the third. This is because, although you – an employee, an apostle or an apologist – may feel obliged to write, nobody has ever felt obliged to read.'

This is from a *Guardian* article by Tim Radford called 'A manifesto for the simple scribe – my 25 commandments for journalists'. But true to form, I might as well have edited this more expansive erudition down into the blunter form preferred by American copywriter, screenwriter and novelist Steven Pressfield for his guide to professional writing: *Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t*.

So this book is really all about you: the reader. The simple single truth – the Prime Directive of Publishing, if you prefer – is that all the work that goes into making words good is for nought if it doesn't ultimately persuade someone to *read* them. Because the only real, true and meaningful way to measure how good words are is by liberating them from the publishing process and disseminating them in their most accessible form, so readers everywhere can encounter and respond to them in the way the author imagined when they were writing them.

Well, we've come this far together. That's an encouraging start. I hope you'll keep turning the pages as we explore how words get good.

HOW WORDS GET BORN

‘Times are bad. Children no longer obey their
parents, and everyone is writing a book.’

Cicero

When you work in publishing, it can feel as if everyone you meet is writing a book. And if they aren’t writing one, they are asking your advice on how to write one, how to make one better, or if you’re thinking about writing one yourself. But this is what feeds the Gutenberg Galaxy. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that ‘Writers aren’t people exactly. Or, if they’re any good, they’re a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person.’ And that ‘one person’ can only come to us through what a writer allows us to see. But every word, and the story behind its birth, is a clue.

Ernest Hemingway described the process of writing in *A Moveable Feast* in these terms: ‘The story was writing itself and I was having a hard time keeping up with it.’ E. L. Doctorow’s take was slightly different: ‘I have found one explanation that seems to satisfy people. I tell them it’s like driving a car at night: you never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.’ I like to think these explanations demonstrate the spectrum of how words get born. From the enviable animus of a story that is ‘writing itself’ to one that’s gradually revealed like the next few metres of tarmac on a late-night car journey, how does being an author *work*?

Many books attempt to tackle the question of what writing is, and how it happens. It's a vast topic: on Amazon, searching 'how to write' throws up more than 60,000 titles on the subject. Since the dawn of time, humans have enjoyed telling stories – and those stories have followed predictable patterns. In fact, the pattern of the story – its structure – was sometimes more important than the author. For a long time, authors were generally anonymous – they retold and embellished classical stories rather than inventing new ones (a process that still happens today), and it didn't matter who was doing the telling – only that the story was absorbing.

One of the earliest and most enduring story structures was the epic: a long narrative poem in a time set outside the author's own, which described the extraordinary lives and events of humans encountering gods or superhuman forces. Epics evolved into poems of courtly love and romance, then into travel literature and stories about conquests, with the same themes and structures appearing again and again, and laying down the foundations of what eventually became the novel as they did so. That's why, in this section, I have chosen to focus on a few key ways of telling stories: these recurring structures and ways of writing tell us a lot about how words get good.

THE BEAUTIFUL SHAPE OF STORIES: AUTHORS

Man in hole: what to write

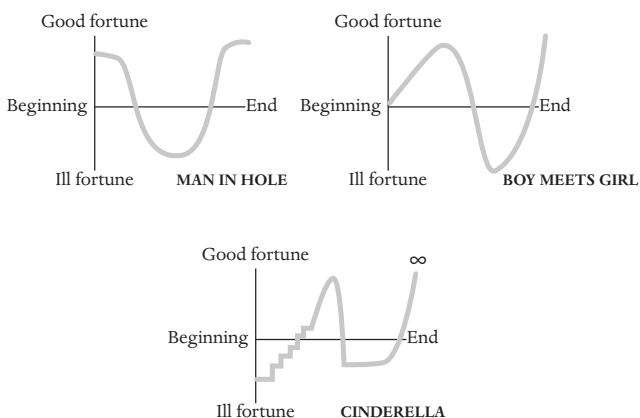
In his autobiography *Palm Sunday*, American novelist Kurt Vonnegut explained that his ‘prettiest contribution to culture’ had been his master’s thesis in anthropology, ‘which was rejected because it was so simple and looked like too much fun’. So simple was it that Vonnegut was able to explain the concept of the thesis in one sentence: ‘The fundamental idea is that stories have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper, and the shape of a given society’s stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads.’

Stories, as Vonnegut says, have simple shapes, which can be plotted on a graph (*overleaf*) by humans – or computers. If you search on YouTube for ‘The Shape of Stories’ (the title of his thesis), you’ll be able to watch just over four minutes of him drawing (and explaining) some of these story shapes on a blackboard.

Vonnegut uses one axis to represent fortune, good and bad – the *y*-axis – and the *x*-axis represents the progression of a story from beginning to end. If you’re wondering what the ∞ in the ‘Cinderella’ graph means, it’s there to show unending good fortune.

‘I have tried to bring scientific thinking to literary criticism and there has been very little gratitude for this,’ said Vonnegut in a lecture on the topic. But we should be grateful. Who could resist the simple but elegant story shape described by the line on the graph labelled ‘Man in hole’? As

How Words Get Good



The shape of stories

Vonnegut says in 'The Shape of Stories', it doesn't necessarily need to be a man, and he doesn't have to be in a hole – but we can all relate to and follow the structure of a story where the protagonist loses his good fortune by encountering some sort of depression (literal or figurative), and then against the odds finds a way to escape it. The plot is as old as storytelling, and structure is what provides the shape of that descent and escape, using words as the scaffolding.

Sentences and paragraphs in a book arrange the author's meaning for the reader. The patterns that words follow once they are born, and the way we organise them, help them to convey something useful, interesting or emotionally involving.

When we begin the adventure of reading, we do so immersed in a cultural and sociological context – we experience how stories work as we learn to read when we are young. If the structure that we intuitively expect is not there we have to work hard to follow the story – or the argument – and we start to feel lost. Without structure, there would be no logical direction of travel, no plot for a reader, and no

sense of adventure or suspense. Words would be scattered about with no shape to them at all: structure is what helps a writer guide a reader along the path of their words.

In *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Christopher Booker analyses and breaks down stories into . . . well, seven basic plots. They are: 'Overcoming the monster', 'Rags to riches', 'The quest', 'Voyage and return', 'Comedy', 'Tragedy' and 'Rebirth'. The book took him thirty-four years to write, which means his own story might fit into 'The quest', or perhaps by the end, 'Overcoming the monster'. What these seven plots have in common is that they present a dramatic turning point which creates a conflict that must be resolved, which gives them a beginning, middle and end that we can follow and understand, with a sense of satisfaction. We set out on a journey, are presented with a problem, and then there is resolution. What could be more pleasing than that?

Some genres of writing have even more specific rules: during the golden age of detective fiction (broadly, the 1920s and 1930s in England), mysteries were considered to be games that the reader could play along with, and hope to solve. In this way, the reader was an active participant in the plot, and writers of these types of stories understood that part of their job as author was to fulfil this expectation.

As Ronald Knox,* author of a number of detective stories, wrote, 'A detective story must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end.' If the author didn't

*Knox also came up with a 'Decalogue' of commandments for detective fiction; my favourite is the very specific no. 3, which states that no more than one secret room or passage is allowable in a story.

play by the rules, then the mystery couldn't be solved by the reader, and dissatisfaction with the storyline would ensue. The book would, in some important way, have failed.

Telling the story backwards

But, of course, rules – literary or otherwise – are there to be broken. This chapter started by looking at Kurt Vonnegut's ideas about predictable story structures. But Vonnegut often played with and subverted those very notions. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, part of the plot is viewed backwards by Billy Pilgrim, the unreliable narrator:

It was a movie about American bombers in World War II and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this: American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans though and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France though,

German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

Despite these words being used to describe the exact reverse of the story we might be expecting, there is still a structure to them which allows us to follow along. It's simply 'Man in hole' flipped upside down in order to make a point about the madness of war. Pleasingly, it manages to do so while also being rather uplifting. And as Vonnegut explained in his lectures on the topic of structure in stories: 'The story is "Man in hole" . . . somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again. It is not accidental that the line ends up higher than where it began. This is encouraging to readers.'

Below the waterline: How to write

One of the difficulties in storytelling is how and when you reveal things. Most fiction depends at some point on suspense – will our hero ever escape from the hole? – or the reader finding out something about the characters, or a situation being revealed. When you write fiction, you often suffer from the curse of knowledge: *you* know what's going to happen next, but your reader doesn't. The clues you leave, what you show, and when, can't be too oblique – or too obvious. To structure fiction successfully you may have to do the