



**HOW I WRITE MY BOOKS:  
RELATED IN A LETTER TO A FRIEND**

**BY**

**WILKIE COLLINS**

**THIS EDITION OF  
HOW I WRITE MY BOOKS  
IS LIMITED TO 300 COPIES**

**THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY**

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## INTRODUCTION

'How I Write My Books: Related in a letter to a friend' was originally published in *The Globe*, a London daily newspaper, on 26 November 1887 (pp. 511-514). It is one of Collins's few pieces of a personal nature and some of the subject matter will be familiar to those who recall the Wilkie Collins Society's earlier reprint from March 2001, 'A Novelist on Novel-writing: an interview with Wilkie Collins' (*Cassell's Saturday Journal*, 5 March 1887, No. 179, Vol. 4, pp. 355-6).

In 'How I Write My Books' Collins uses *The Woman in White* as an example to show how he creates his works of fiction. He obtains the central idea and the chief characters, begins at the beginning, keeps the story always advancing, and decides on the end.

One part of Collins's explanation, however, is not quite true. He claims that the title was not decided until "after the story had been finished." In fact the title was settled three months before the serial began in *All The Year Round* on 26 November 1859. In August Dickens wrote to Collins "Wills has shewn me your note received this morning. I have not the slightest doubt that The Woman in White is the name of names, and very title of very titles" (CD to WC 16 August 1859, Pilgrim IX 106). But we know that the end of the story was not written until 26 July 1860, just two months before the last part was published on 25 September 1860. On 23 July Collins wrote to Anne Procter "I hope and believe I shall finish the book...this week." And three days later he wrote to his mother "Hooray ! ! ! ! ! I have this instant written at the bottom of the four hundred and ninetieth page of my manuscript the two noblest words in the English language — The End — " (*Letters of Wilkie Collins* I, 183, 184).

Although in the style of a letter and sometimes mistaken for one, the text of this work was written down by an amanuensis and is clearly marked up for the press. That indicates it was written for publication and was not a letter to a real person. It has never been republished separately although it has been reprinted as an Appendix to some editions of *The Woman in White*: for example the Riverside Edition (Boston, 1969), Oxford University Press World's Classics edition (1980) and the recent Broadview Press edition (Ontario, 2006).

This version of the piece is taken from the original manuscript in the Huntington Library, California. It is in the hand of an amanuensis but signed by Collins with corrections in his hand. The only major change is in the penultimate paragraph. Instead of 'my labour of correction has come to an end' other printed versions read 'I have done with the hard labour of writing good English.'

Paul Lewis

Andrew Gasson

## **How I Write My Books: Related In A Letter To A Friend**

My dear Miss —

### I

You ask me, Madam, to tell you how I write my books; and you express an opinion that other persons besides yourself may be interested in the result, if I comply with your request. I am not at all sure that I have the honour of agreeing with you. My own impression is that the public cares little how books are written. If the books are easy to get, and if they prove to be interesting, the general reader asks for nothing more. You assert, upon this, that there is but one way of deciding which is the sound opinion, yours or mine; and that way is — to try the experiment. Your will is law. Let the experiment be tried.

### II

All my novels are produced by the same literary method. If we take one book as an example, I shall perhaps be able to make myself more readily understood; and I shall certainly occupy less of your time. When I think of the claims of the toilette, the claims of the shops, the claims of conversation, the claims of horse exercise, and the claims of chat — to say nothing of hundreds of other smaller occupations — my respect for the value of your time is part of my respect for yourself. Which book shall we choose as a specimen? Shall it be the most popular book? Very well. I have now to tell you how I wrote "The Woman In White."

### III

My first proceeding is to get my central idea — the pivot on which the story turns.

The central idea of "The Woman In White" is the idea of a conspiracy in private life, in which circumstances are so handled as to rob a woman of her identity by confounding her with another woman, sufficiently like her in personal appearance to answer the wicked purpose. The destruction of her identity

represents a first division of the story; the recovery of her identity marks a second division.

My central idea suggests some of my chief characters. A clever devil must conduct the conspiracy. Male devil? or female devil? The sort of wickedness wanted seems to be a man's wickedness. Perhaps a foreign man. Count Fosco faintly shows himself to me, before I know his name. I let him wait, and begin to think about the two women. They must be both innocent and both interesting. Lady Glyde dawns on me as one of the innocent victims. I try to discover the other — and fail. I try what a walk will do for me — and fail. I devote the evening to a new effort — and fail. Experience tells me to take no more trouble about it, and leave that other woman to come of her own accord. The next morning, before I have been awake in my bed for more than ten minutes, my perverse brains set to work without consulting me. Poor Anne Catherick comes into the room, and says: "Try me".

I have got my idea; I have got three of my characters. What is there to do now? My next proceeding is to begin building up the story.

Here, my favourite three efforts must be encountered. First effort: to begin at the beginning. Second effort: to keep the story always advancing, without paying the smallest attention to the serial division in parts, or to the book publications in volumes. Third effort: to decide on the end. All this is done, as my father used to paint his skies in his famous sea-pieces, at one heat. As yet, I do not enter into details; I merely set up my landmarks. In doing this the main situations of the story present themselves; and, at the same time I see my characters in all sorts of new aspects. These discoveries lead me nearer and nearer to finding the right end. The end being decided on, I go back again to the beginning, and look at it with a new eye, and fail to be satisfied with it. I have yielded to the worst temptation that besets a novelist — the temptation to begin with a striking incident, without counting the cost in the shape of explanations that must, and will follow. These pests of fiction, to reader and writer alike, can only be eradicated in one way. I have already mentioned the way — to begin at the beginning. In the case of "The Woman In White," I get back (as I vainly believe) to the true starting point of the story. I am now at liberty to set the new novel going; having,

let me repeat, no more than an outline of story and characters before me, and leaving the details, in each case to the spur of the moment.

For a week, as well as I can remember, I work for the best part of every day, but not as happily as usual. An unpleasant sense of something wrong worries me. At the beginning of the second week, a disheartening discovery reveals itself. I have not found the right beginning of "The Woman In White," yet.

The scene of my opening chapters is in Cumberland. Miss Fairlie (afterwards Lady Glyde); Mr. Fairlie, with his irritable nerves and his art-treasures; Miss Halcombe (discovered suddenly, like Anne Catherick), are all waiting the arrival of the young drawing-master, Walter Hartright. No: this won't do. The person to be first introduced is Anne Catherick. She must be already a familiar figure to the reader, when the reader accompanies me to Cumberland. This is what must be done, but I don't see how to do it; no new idea comes to me; I and my manuscript have quarrelled, and don't speak to each other. One evening, I happen to read of a lunatic who has escaped from an asylum — a paragraph of a few lines only, in a newspaper. Instantly the idea comes to me of Walter Hartright's midnight meeting with Anne Catherick, escaped from the asylum. "The Woman In White" begins again; and nobody will ever be half as much interested in it now, as I am. From that moment, I have done with my miseries. For the next six months the pen goes on; it is work, hard work; but the harder the better, for this excellent reason: the work is its own exceeding great reward.

As an example of the gradual manner in which I reach the development of character, I may return for a moment to Fosco. The making him fat was an after-thought; his canaries and his white mice were found next; and the most valuable discovery of all, his admiration of Miss Halcombe, took its rise in a conviction that he would not be true to nature unless there was some weak point, somewhere in his character.

My last difficulty tried me, after the story had been finished, and part of it had been set in proof for serial publication in "All The Year Round." Neither I, nor any friend whom I consulted, could find the right title. Literally, at the eleventh hour, I thought of "The Woman In White." In various quarters, this was

declared to be a vile melodramatic title that would ruin the book. Among the very few friends who encouraged me, the first and foremost was Charles Dickens. "Are you too disappointed?" I said to him. "Nothing of the sort, Wilkie! A better title there cannot be."

You are kind enough to allude, in terms of approval, to my method of writing English, and to ask if my style comes to me easily. It comes easily, I hope, to you. Let a last word of confession tell you the rest.

The day's writing having been finished, with such corrections of words and such rebalancing of sentences as occur to me at the time, is subjected to a first revision on the next day, and is then handed to my copyist. The copyist's manuscript undergoes a second and a third revision, and is then sent to the printer. The proof passes through a fourth process of correction, and is sent back to have the new alterations embodied in a Revise. When this reaches me, it is looked over once more, before it goes back to press. When the serial publication of the novel is reprinted in book-form, the book-proofs undergo a sixth revision. Then, at last, my labour of correction has come to an end, and (I don't expect you to believe this) I am always sorry for it.

You have enjoyed, Madam, a privilege dear to ladies — you have had your own way. How I write my books, you now know as well as I can tell you. If you have been able to read to the end, show these lines, if you like, to any friends who care to look at them. In the meantime, I make my bow and my exit.

Wilkie Collins.

