Top Writing Tips

Melissa de Villiers shares some valuable advice on how to enrich your writing…

DO: gather story ideas wherever you can: from old family stories, from newspapers, from the people you work with, from snatches of conversation you overhear on the bus. You're waiting to find something that resonates strongly inside yourself, an idea that won't leave you alone.

DO: read as much as you can and as often as you can, from the classics to contemporary works. And try to read for technique. Work out what you think the writer is trying to achieve, and how. Focus on the first moments of a story and see how the writer sets up their central idea and how they carry it forward until the end.

DON'T write about anything you don't really care about. Life is simply too short.

DO: observe how people behave! Go somewhere you can sit quietly and listen to how people speak to each other. Make notes. Notice the "ums" and the "ahs", the unfinished sentences. Would they work as dialogue in your story? If not, why not?

DO: write every day, if you can, rather than sitting around waiting for inspiration to strike. Even if you feel completely stuck, scribbling down just a few sentences a day will give you a foothold into your story that can be developed later.

DON'T: worry about where a story is going, or it won't progress. It's essential to get a full first draft down if you want to achieve a form that can be polished.

DO: experiment with tense, voice and point of view. Write and re-write the opening paragraph of a story to find the version that feels just right.

DO: edit your piece down to remove as much superfluous detail as possible. You've got to allow your reader some space in which they can imagine your story for themselves.

DON'T be stubborn about criticism. It's good to have self-belief, but be open to the criticism of those you respect and whose comments you know, deep down, are true.

DON'T follow my advice too closely! Teach yourself by your own mistakes; people only learn by error. There are no shortcuts.