

SILENCE YOUR DEMONS



SIMON HARTLEY

The Story Behind the Story

By Simon Hartley

Writing a fictional book is one of the greatest challenges I've ever faced. You'll probably have noticed that Seb encounters a few seemingly impossible challenges during his journey. It's been a similar experience for me writing it!

Although I've written eight non-fiction books, this is completely new territory for me.

It's taken me over five years to write this book. During its life, I've completed twelve full edits and it's on its third title (originally it was called *The Dragon Boy* and featured a dragon).

Along the way, I've written a couple of diary entries, to capture my thoughts at a few of my own 'defining moments'.

I hope they're helpful and provide a little inspiration when you need it most.

Part I.
15/06/2019

At the end of January, I committed to finishing and publishing this book. I started it a few years ago but, six or seven chapters in, I stopped. At the time I said it was because “I didn’t have time”. The truth is that I didn’t know if it was any good. I had lots of other projects competing for my time, and I wasn’t sure if it was worth investing the vast amount of time and effort that this book needed.

So, why did I pick it back up again?

Because I remembered why I started writing it in the first place. I’ve noticed my daughters and their friends struggling with life... insecurities... bullying... social pressures... anxieties... self-doubt... etc.

This book is to help teenagers to navigate their life challenges. Of course, it’s not just teenagers that experience these. In fact, I explain that I’ve written this book for the teenagers of today, and yesterday, and tomorrow.

I want to share some really powerful principles from psychology and philosophy, which I know can help. If I write them into a non-fiction book, I’m pretty sure no-one will pick it up... never mind read it. So, I decided to write it into a story.

Of course, for this to work, it has to be a good story!

So, in January, to get the book finished, I committed to doing something... however small... every single day... that would take me towards my goal. Some days that meant writing a decent chunk of a chapter. On other days it might be thinking through the plot whilst driving, and then downloading my thoughts into the voice recorder on my phone when I stopped.

Consistency and momentum are powerful forces! A month ago, I finished the first draft – 83,000 words. I have to admit, I felt pretty chuffed.

However, I had no idea whether it was any good or not.

I’ve found it really difficult to read my own book as a reader, rather than as the author.

So, a couple of weeks ago we printed off copies for Caroline, my wife, and my two lovely daughters. I asked them to read it and give me their honest feedback. I asked them to write comments in the margins to let me know if they found something funny, boring, lame, confusing, etc.

A few days past. Then a week.

Nothing.

I prodded a couple of times.

“Have you started the book?... What do you think?”.

Still nothing.

My intention was to write a book that was hard to put down. It seems I’ve created one that’s hard to pick up!!

So, I sent the manuscript to an editor to get some feedback. It took a week or so, but on Thursday he emailed me. The subject line on his email...

“Book feedback (brace yourself)”.

I think it’s fair to say that his feedback doesn’t make pleasant reading. Caroline couldn’t even bring herself to finish the email.

On a zero to ten scale, it seems that my book is (generously) a 2/10.
83,000 words... 2/10... !!!

To be honest, I felt more than a little deflated.

It’s going to take a LOT of work to get this book into shape. It feels like I’ve just crossed the finishing line for an ultra-marathon and just been told I ran the wrong route.

The problem is, I thought I was running the right route! I didn’t deliberately write a 2/10 book. I wasn’t just being lazy. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. I’ve found this really tough!

With the very best of intentions, Caroline actually asked me if I wanted to keep going or not.

For a few years now I’ve been talking about the importance of character and identity, and how they drive our success. I’ve been working on my own character; particularly consistency, tenacity, and resilience. I challenged myself to get through the “quit points” and to bounce back from set-backs.

And, here I am... face-to-face with another test of character.

It would be very easy, at this point, to conclude that I am no fiction writer. I could tell myself that I was daft for thinking I could ever write an epic story. I could easily get daunted by the sheer amount of work ahead of me. After writing 60,000 words in less than 6 months (in addition to my day job), I’m pretty bloody tired.

Do I really want to dive back in and push on again? And, if I combine all of this negativity together, I could decide to just bin the whole thing.

Or... I could get up... dust myself off... take the feedback on the chin... learn from it... roll up my sleeves... muster some more energy and crack on.

There is one thing I know for sure...

Although this will take a HUGE amount more effort, the book will be better at the end of it!

Through my various challenges, I've learned that it helps to break things down into manageable chunks. So, yesterday morning, I sat down and drew up a plan. There are 13 steps. None of them are easy, but they are all possible. Yesterday afternoon, I started work on the first step.

I'm not sure if I'll be on target for my proposed book launch in October or not. I'm just going to get my head down and graft for the next month or so, and then see where I am.

For now, I just need to keep putting one foot in front of the other!

Part 2. **21/09/2019**

Three months ago, I wrote Part 1 of *The Story Behind the Story*. I had just received my first editorial feedback. Let's just say, it wasn't pretty. It turned out that the book I'd poured hours and hours of blood, sweat and tears into, was a 2/10.

At the time, I described feeling like I'd finished a marathon, only to find that I'd been running in the wrong direction.

So... I put together a 13 point plan to improve the book; working on characters, describing the settings, painting pictures with words and creating more emotional impact.

It has not been easy. It's not just the sheer amount of work. All of this is well outside of my comfort zone. It's a brand new skill set for me.

For the last three months, I've invested my heart and soul into this. I finished my fifth draft, which I was pretty happy with. In my mind, this book is almost ready to go!

So, I decided to get some more feedback.

It's a bit like driving over a bed of nails and finding all your tyres instantly deflating. It seems that my book is one that people endure, rather than enjoy. After months and months of graft, I've created the literary equivalent to wading through treacle... almost 85,000 words of it.

I'll admit to having a couple of pretty miserable hours the other night. I did a fair amount of soul searching. I honestly wondered what the hell I was doing.

The blinding truth is... this book is nowhere near ready!

But, there is another truth.

It may not be ready... but it is better!

My 2/10 book is now a 5/10.

It might be too heavy and too wordy, but there are some decent bits in it. The characters are better, although I need to do more with the principal pair. I've probably overdone some of the descriptions, in my attempt to paint pictures. I probably need to let the reader's own imagination do the painting.

In the midst of my misery, I remembered something.

There is always a point in the writing process when I'm done. I'm tired. I've invested so much into it. I'm ready to publish... but the book isn't ready!

This is that moment.

There's also an emotional challenge. When I wrote 'How to Shine', my editor told me to condense two pages down into a paragraph. She said there were a lot of unnecessary words. The problem is, I'd written those words. I gave birth to them. They came from me. I didn't think there were unnecessary. If I thought they didn't need to be there, I wouldn't have written them. And now, I need to cull them.

I also remember that, whilst it's uncomfortable for me, the book is always better for it!

Last time I received feedback, it felt like I'd run a marathon, only to discover I'd been running in the wrong direction. So, I got up... tired... with sore feet... and started running again. I've now run another 20 miles in the right direction. I'm on my knees. I'm ready to stop running. But I haven't reached the finish line. That is another 6-7 miles away.

To be honest, it doesn't matter whether I'm ready to stop or not. The book isn't ready.

So... it's time to get back up... dust myself off... and go again.

Onwards and upwards 😊

Part 3.

05/12/2019

Today's lesson is harsh, but true.

You can't tweak something from a 5/10 to a 9/10.

If you want to shift it that far, tweaking is not enough. As an author, I can't just massage the odd sentence or add a word here and there. That's not enough. To get from a 5/10 to a 9/10 I need a major overhaul!

This is the realisation I've come to following a conversation with my friend Nick. To give you a little background, Nick has written a couple of thrillers. He's an expert storyteller, and someone whose opinion I respect.

I'd asked Nick if he'd read through my latest draft and give me some feedback.

His first words were, "I'm not getting the dragon at all".

What?

"Honestly", he said, "I'd get rid of it".

Bizarrely, my first thought was, "It's going to be tough having a book called *The Dragon Boy*, with no dragon".

And then of course, the penny dropped.

I need to sack the dragon.

This needs a major re-write!

Nick is right. I created the dragon to be the embodiment of Seb's fears and insecurities... the voice for his self-loathing, doubt, and self-criticism. But it's too clumsy... too contrived.

I need it something that's more real... something that better expresses Seb's experiences, and our own experiences. I need something that people can relate to.

It's taken me a little pondering, but I think I've found an answer.

The dragon was supposed to represent Seb's demons. So, why not replace the dragon with a demon.

I feel like I've had another real grilling. I went in hoping that Nick would say, "It's great. I love it. When are you going to publish it?".

Of course, he didn't!

Not for the first time, I've come out a little bruised.

But I'm also optimistic. Whilst it means I have tonnes more work ahead of me, I genuinely think this is going to take me in a better direction.

So... onwards and upwards.

Part 4.

12/10/2020

It's not a coincidence that my greatest emotional challenges come as I receive feedback.

Rollo May once wrote a book called 'Courage to Create'. He talks about the courage required to be truly creative... to pour your heart and soul into something. I've often thought that it could have been called 'Courage to Publish', because the really tough bit is putting your creation out into the world. When we publish, the world sees what we have created.

And it judges.

Almost a year on from sacking the dragon, I've completed another two full drafts. I've slimmed it down slightly. The 83,000 word manuscript is now 77,000, but it's still a beast.

I've also changed the title. The book is now called *The Demon Charmers*. The purpose is exactly the same – to help the teenagers of today, and yesterday, and tomorrow, to navigate their life challenges (particularly the mental and emotional challenges) ... you could say 'to conquer their demons'.

As always, I get to a point of thinking, "I reckon this is ready to publish". But I'm not a fictional author. I have no idea whether it's good enough. So, I need feedback.

This time, I asked a dozen or so friends to give me their honest thoughts. I also wanted to know how engaging the book was. So, I created four PDF files, each with 4-5 chapters. The idea was pretty simple. Once they'd finished the first five chapters, they would drop me a line to ask for the next five... and so on. This way, I could see how far through they got before they stopped asking.

I guess the nice thing about feedback from really good friends is that it's honest.

Most people got about halfway through before they stopped asking. A few didn't ask for a second bundle. A few got right to the end.

I asked what they thought. One person said they absolutely loved it, but most said...

"It's okay"

"There are bits I like"

"There are bits I don't like as much"

The feedback could probably be described as "overwhelmingly underwhelming".

One person said, "When I saw the cover design and read the title, I expected this to be a fantasy novel. It wasn't. I think that might be a problem for you".

Wow.

Bombshell!

My initial reaction was, "That's just her opinion. She's just one person. You've already changed the title once. Keep going".

But the problem is... she's right!

This is going to need a new title and a new cover design. And, if it's only "okay", it's also going to need a LOT more work.

Bizarrely, the prospect of spending yet more time and energy on it isn't the biggest issue. The biggest issue is that I don't know where to go next.

I've hit a brick wall.

I've used up all my ideas.

I've laid down my very best.

I've given this absolutely everything I've got... and it's only "okay".

To do its job... to fulfil its purpose... to have an impact and help people overcome their demons... the story needs to be good enough. Right now, it's not. And I don't know how to get it there.

Part 4.5

14/10/2020.

Question: What do you do when you're lost?

My answer: Find someone who knows the way.

After a few long walks and plenty of pondering, I've made a decision. I need some professional help.

I've decided I need to find a proper editor. So, I contacted Jenny. She was my copy editor when I wrote *How to Shine*. She's not a fictional editor, but I figured she might know someone who was.

Thankfully, I was right.

Jenny has introduced me to Lucy, a development editor who specialises in young adult fiction.

After stumbling in the dark, this feels like a light at the end of the tunnel.

Part 5.

06/12/2020.

I think I might be developing a little trace of conviction in my own work. Until now, I have really struggled to know whether this book has been any good, or not. There have been so many times I've thought, "I think I'm there", only to find that I've been a million miles away.

Now, I think, I'm getting more of an idea.

Lucy has just sent back her complete development edit, with comments. In short... there's tonnes of work to do.

It needs a new title.

It needs a new opening chapter.

There are loads of 'schoolboy errors'. It reminds me that whilst I've been writing this book for years, I'm still a novice!

The characters still need more work.

The story needs rounding out.

There are still too many words.

And that's just the start.

So, head down... crack on!

However, I'm not going to take all of her advice onboard. There are some changes I'm not willing to make.

And it's not because they'd require a huge amount of work. To be honest, they don't actually require that much.

It's because they would compromise the purpose of the book.

I do want this to be an engaging story, but that's not the sole purpose of the book. It doesn't exist purely to entertain. It also has to help! It needs to equip people to conquer their own demons.

I feel like I'm in the final home straight now. I know I've been wrong about that before, but I say it more in knowledge than hope this time.

p.s. I have settled on a title too. This will be the final title!

The book will be called *Silence Your Demons*.

Part 6.

14/03/2022.

Today I send my final draft and cover design to the printer. In a few of weeks, we'll have actual printed copies delivered to the door.

It's been a mammoth journey to get here. It's cost me thousands of pounds and thousands of hours.

I guess the question is... Was it all worth it?

I've given this question a lot of thought recently. And, I've concluded, it depends what measure you use.

If I judge the success of this book by the number of copies it sells, the answer right now is, "I have no idea".

But that's not the only, or even the best, measure of success.

Writing this book has tested my character. It has taken me to my 'quit point' many times. It has knocked me down and challenged me to get back up. It has put me back in the shoes of a novice, taken me way outside my comfort zone and reminded me how valuable it is to fail.

It's all character-building stuff!

So, I've come out of the process as a stronger, more tenacious, more resilient person.

I can also say that I've emerged as a better author. I'm no J.K. Rowling, or J.R.R. Tolkien, but I'm definitely better than when I started.

More importantly, I've begun to see that this book really can help teenagers with their life challenges!

It is already living its purpose. It's having the impact it was designed to have.

My youngest daughter, who is thirteen years old, has been helping me to write the 'How to Silence Your Demons' pages at the end of each chapter. We've spent a few hours here and there, reading a chapter at a time, and talking about how the lessons can be applied to everyday challenges.

I've already seen her start learning how to diffuse her own fears and anxieties, and build her courage.

If this book can help my daughter... how many others could it help too?

My dream is that this book can help many thousands... perhaps even millions... of people with their own challenges.

The next job... making that dream come true.

If you'd like to silence your own demons, or help others to silence theirs, hit the link below.

<http://silenceyourdemons.co.uk/>

About the author

Hi, I'm Simon.

I'm passionate about helping people overcome their mental and emotional challenges... and become masters of their own heads!

My background is sport psychology. I've spent much of my career working with elite athletes and sports teams, helping them to get their mental game and their mindset right.

After a few years I started to realise that what I called 'sport psychology', is actually human psychology.

It doesn't just work for athletes. It works for everyone!

Since then, I've been using exactly the same approaches in business, education, healthcare, charities and the military.

Over the years, I've written a few non-fiction books, to share what I've learned about mindset and world class performance.

I also share these lessons through my coaching and speaking work, and through a few digital programmes.

If you fancy finding out more, feel free to check them out.



And hit the Be World Class website for more

<https://be-world-class.com/>