

You're never too young or too old to start writing – says Steve Rogers.

An advantage in starting later in life is that you've had many more experiences to write about.

Although if you wait until you're my age to write romance novel, you'll probably have to Google the sex scenes.

My stories are all character driven, and you've met many many more of them when you reach your late 60's, which is when I started, than a literature graduate at 20.

I started my working life as somewhat of a romantic. The romance of farming, the poems of Banjo Patterson, the books of Ion Idriess, a fascination with the outback.

I started at the bottom, as a Jackaroo on a station in NSW I certainly met plenty of characters - old cooks, ringers, shearers, sheep classers, drovers. I didn't know it at the time but all these characters would someday influence my writing, but I wasn't a writer back then.

Then I returned to WA I went farming working for farmers then farming on my own. Plenty of characters and what they call character-building experiences - ie I went broke farming. I wasn't a writer then either.

I went back as an instructor to my old college at Muresk for a number of years - teaching students and farmers - another rich source of characters. I even taught farmers artificial insemination of cattle - that's really starting at the bottom.

When I started my own video production company, which I ran for 35 years, I travelled all over Australia - producing programs for mining companies - and that really gave me a taste of the Australian character and the nature of outback Australia. Apart from scripts that told facts and left little room for creativity I still wasn't really writing.

So what possessed me to become a writer 6 years ago at the age of 68?

Well, I reckoned I was too old to be lugging equipment over mine sites, and competition from younger more technically savvy young people were making it too competitive I looked for something else to do.

I had been asked to write a couple of family histories, and that was a bit easier than a 10-hour day at Telfer, Mt Isa, Wiluna or Koolan Island.

It was interesting, but it didn't test any creative urge I had, so I started writing a novel.

How do you do that? I hear you ask. I really had no idea. I googled a few writers for advice (after I had researched the love scenes I decided I wasn't cut out to be a romance writer) thinking there might be a formula.

Here is some of the advice I got

W. Somerset Maugham - "There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

Octavia E. Butler "You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it's good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it."

Jack London - "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." -

Steven Pressfield - "Start before you're ready." -

Jodi Picoult "You can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page" -

Ruth Rendell - "I get a lot of letters from people. They say, "I want to be a writer. What should I do?" I tell them to stop writing to me and get on with it."

So the advice seemed to be, there are no rules except having a go.

One bit of advice I did like was from Shannon Hale -

When I'm writing a first draft, I keep reminding myself that I'm simply shoveling sand into a box so that later I can build castles."

So I started writing my first novel. **An Artifact of Interest** about a young jackaroo (probably me) working on a Kimberly cattle station, who met a female anthropologist who had a theory that there may have been another stream of first nations people that came from Africa - washed off course. In my story They were identified by a style of painting different to the Wadjana and the Bradshaws

Fiction of course. I was shovelling sand into a box - I would build the castles later.

The discovery of the new rock paintings caused dissension amongst rival factions - Another group of American anthropologists (boo hiss) who were also investigating the cave paintings and a lost tribe of aboriginals in the Kimberley - descendants of the hypothetical African people, who didn't want to be found.

I drew on my experience as a jackaroo and my fascination with station life.

First draft done. I was feeling so pleased with myself. I gave it a quick read - not bad - and I was so full of myself I published it online on Amazon.

The feedback wasn't good.

It was then that I realised there is more to writing a book than sitting at a word processor and putting it down.

You need reviewers, editors, an agent, a publisher, distributors.... I had seriously jumped the gun.

Serendipitously I met through a friend of a friend, a bloke who had just started an organisation called the New Authors Collective, whose aim was to get new authors published.

He read my draft, believed I had the makings of a story, and agreed to become my agent.

Through him I had the book reviewed, rewrote huge sections of it, and then he took it around to his growing list of publishing contacts. Not an easy task getting publisher

Here are some facts of publishing.

Editors and publishers agree that the odds of being published are only 1-2%. That is, they only accept, and publish, one or two out of every hundred manuscripts they receive.

In Forbes magazine, an article by Nick Morgan cites these figures - **“somewhere between 600,000 and 1,000,000 books are published every year.** Which means there are a hell of a lot of books written, and rejected!

JK Rowling sent her 1st finished manuscript to 12 different publishers only to be rejected by them all.

William Golding's Lord of the Flies was rejected 20 times before becoming published.

Zane Grey self-published his first book after dozens of rejections.

John Grisham's A Time to Kill was rejected by 16 publishers before finding an agent who eventually rejected him as well.

Margaret Mitchell: Gone With the Wind was faced with rejection 38 times.

I was in good company - I got heaps of rejections.

Finally a vanity publisher (one who agrees to publish if the author subsidises the printing) took it on.

Before I describe how unsuccessful it was, let me tell you of the great delight in getting the first printed copy of your first novel. The smell, the look the feel - It felt like when I had googled the research for a romance story

I sold - I don't know, maybe 200 copies - to friends and relations mostly. I have the first royalty cheque for Ten Pounds 17 pence. It was going to cost me more to cash it than that so I've kept it.

Encouraged by my agent, Michael, I kept on writing. Who knows, Spielberg could see it as a major Hollywood movie.

Despite the pleasure of having the first book published, it wasn't the reason I kept writing. I'd got the bug.

A quote from a writer called ~ Burton Roscoe eased my conscience

“A writer is working even when he’s staring out of the window.”

While undertaking this arduous task I remembered a video documentary I had done for a mining contractor who had the cartage contract for hauling manganese from Woodie Woodie in the Pilbara, back to Port Hedland.

The Woodie Woodie Run it was called and introduced me to a laconic truck driver called Peter Thompson - who spoke in the outback vernacular and who eventually became the truck driver I have used in two novels. Thomo became Carter De Freitas (Whose name started as a joke between a friend and I) I fell in love with the name. How to develop the characters?

Every man's fantasy seemed to be to meet a beautiful Swedish back-packer - so Elise Alquist was born.

Because I identified with the age of Carter as a seventy-year-old, it felt creepy putting him with a twenty something Swedish back packer, so the relationship had to be platonic, and in order to give them something in common, I gave them both an interest in painting. So they became painting companions.

De Freitas had to spend a lot of time alone in his truck, so I gave him a companion he could disclose his thoughts to, Carpenter the dog, so named because as a pup he did little jobs around the house.

I had a dog that lost his back leg in an accident when I was about 10 years old, so I removed a leg from Carpenter, to give him a bit of character (Sorry Carpenter). Now I figured I had a cast that could act as a vehicle for a range of outback stories.

A friend had told me a story about a cache of gold reputedly buried on a mine site near Bullfinch - and so I embellished the tale. It became a murder mystery - **Death In A Matchbox**.

The story took about six months to write and another two and a half years to edit, re-edit, re-edit again, be hawked around to publishers, be rejected by a dozen before it was picked up by a publisher in the USA, and finally printed for distribution. It is now selling steadily - although I'm still waiting for the call from Spielberg.

Deciding on a career in writing fiction will not necessarily bring you overnight success.

But once you get started you might find the satisfaction I have got from making the attempt.

And it has always been the people I met or worked with that left the greatest impression - and characters to me are the greatest resource a story teller can have. And that's how I see myself, as a story teller rather than a literary artist. I'm no Tim Winton.

I have been paying bills by ghost writing people's memoirs - for their families - transcribing their interviews and embellishing them with stories from other members of the family or friends.

Rather than retiring - have a try at writing. Even if it is your own family history. If you can let your imagination and creativity take over - who knows where that might take you.

As Henry Ford said - 'If you think you can, or you think you can't - you're right.

It takes an awful lot of time to not write a book.