

Writing at Varuna

Bo Henley looks at how residencies can help get your project up and running and on to another level.

Four months on, and I still can't quite believe I was one of eight bright-eyed emerging authors selected to take part in Crime Writing Week 2011 at Katoomba's writing mecca: Varuna, the Writers' House. Wow!

Let me explain. Varuna offered a one-week residency of intensive professional development for unpublished authors of crime novels. Those chosen would work in consultation with established crime and literary author Marele Day with the aim of developing the author's manuscript to the next level. Applicants sent in a pitch for their novel, a short bio and the first fifty pages of the manuscript.

I arrived at Katoomba loaded with computer, pens, paper and a bucket of enthusiasm. I'd just completed the third draft of my novel, 'The Fatal Span', and couldn't wait to improve under Marele's guidance. So how did it work? Marele allocated two group sessions and two one-on-one sessions over the first five days. Joining me were Tamara Pratt from Queensland, and Catherine Lee and Ben Pratt from New South Wales. Our first group session critiquing each other's work produced some entertaining and insightful ideas, suggestions and comments from all of us, and thankfully my colleagues detected those idiot errors I missed – even when reading it out loud!

The following day we each had our first one-on-one manuscript critique with Marele. After discussing the premise, story and character arcs of the novel, Marele suggested I could improve the escalation of tension by 'feeding threads of (subplot) information' through my first ten chapters. From her local knowledge of what Sydneysiders would or would not accept as plausible, she also recommended I set the story a few years in the future and relocate the bridge. Simple! Not quite. How do you relocate a bridge when you've set the story around it? Bridges are kind've big, especially when the antagonist's history is woven into the same area. Well, it was time to put that science and navigation background to some practical use. Out came the paper maps, the Google maps, the map scales and calculator, and a scrawled

plan for hiking new suburbs on my return to Sydney.

The verdict: yes, it could be done – provided I repositioned the bridge a small distance to the east, lengthened the bridge spans and extended the feeder roads further to the north and south. Wouldn't the locals get a surprise in the morning? But with fictional bridges you can do that. And it had its advantages. It brought the bridge closer to a local landmark central to the third book in the series, 'Black Kite', and the bridge's physical presence proved 'less disruptive' to the local residents and therefore a less irksome read for Sydneysiders. In the end, it proved tough only to my brain – I'd grown rather fond of disrupting Birchgrove and Balmain!

'Feeding the thread' proved more difficult than I'd anticipated. It took some time to allocate the first hint of one particular subplot to the right scene, then to decide which subsequent scenes and chapters I'd use to expand the thread. As with all editing, I tossed pieces back and forth until I believed I had a more interesting mix of the subplot clues. Phew!

But Varuna's not about working on two changes to a manuscript. To keep my brain firing, I intensified the motivations of the three central characters, restructured two of the early chapters, amended the opening and catharsis sections to include the new location changes and accentuated how the overall theme affected the major players.

The extent of the group's improvement was evident by Friday's second group critique session, and reiterated by Marele's discerning and instructive comments as well as her generous praise. And yes, my efforts to build tension in the subplot earned a compliment from the great lady. I felt ten metres tall!

So how did Varuna make a difference? Two words – belief, inspiration. For the first time, I truly believed I could achieve my writing goals, a big change from my half-hearted, 'Yes, I can do this.' Now it's: 'I can see where I want to go, I can see how to get there, and I'll do whatever it takes to achieve my goals.'



From that week at Varuna, I was inspired to work even harder on the manuscripts and short stories, to enter more competitions – even if only for the achievement and the discipline that entails, to actively hone down that elusive 'elevator pitch', and to develop my book proposals.

So, did I overcome my usual procrastination ploys and achieve this? Yes. And it feels so good saying that. I made re-editing the manuscript by November 2011 a priority so I could forward it to the Minotaur/MWA First Crime Novel competition. It's in – at last! After that, I reworked the synopses for 'The Fatal Span', plus a second (unrelated) story, 'The Isthmus', and packed the two off to the CWA's Debut Dagger competition.

Over the Christmas break, I planned one small achievable project a week (or else no Charlesworth's chocolate raspberries). Top of the list: my much-promised outlines for the second and third books that follow 'The Fatal Span' – 'Hell's Bells' and 'Black Kite' – in the now renamed Max Murdoch Series. After swapping around a few subplots and a couple of the characters, I now have two vastly improved story arcs and, yes, two satisfying outlines. I'll commence expanding those chapters in late April.

Currently, I'm completing the first draft of 'The Isthmus', a whodunit set on the west coast of the UK in 1878 on, you guessed it, a dark and stormy night, and have two other short stories in the outlining stage. As a follow-up to last year's A Decent Proposal workshop at SAWC, I've enrolled in an online course through AWM Online to develop my book proposal. I intend to get published, and I'll learn all I can to make sure I get there.

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One other thing I've learned is to promote myself as a brand, and by that I mean promotion across the various social networks.

While at Varuna, I scribbled a daily blog about life, writing and everything. You can check it out on my website <http://www.bohenley.com> under Bo's Blog. It's a fun account of my stay, and you'll quickly notice two of my other passions: bushwalking (to clear my head – so I can refill it with more story ideas) and feathered bird-watching.

Oh, and there might be the casual mention of the Katoomba azaleas, the Blue Mountains, Sydney, bridges, old power stations, steam trains, hot chocolate at the Guylian Cafe in George Street – and how much I missed Pappadino's restaurant in Katoomba which was damaged by fire early last year. I really hope it's rebuilt by

the time I return; their lasagne is to write murders for. Next up: facebook. I couldn't write about Varuna and not mention the wonderful Varuna staff: Lis, Vera, Kathy, Rod, Joan and the unforgettable Sheila – you made us so welcome, assisted and supported us so much – I thank you.

I would like to thank Arts SA for the opportunity to attend Crime Writing Week and am grateful for the IMP Grant that funded my travel expenses.

For me, Varuna wasn't just about the writing: It was about new friendships, camaraderie, sharing struggles, laughter, advice, suggestions, networking, keeping in contact, learning from Marele, liaising with the wonderful Varuna staff – and my early morning hikes along the Prince Henry Walk to Echo Point – to view one of the most awe-inspiring vistas nature can offer.

Now that's an inspiration to write.

Don't Forget Our Website

As we're going quarterly you'll now find our information pages on the website. On our homepage at www.sawriters.org.au under the drop down menu 'What's On' you'll find 'Launches, Events, Meetings', 'Opportunities and Competitions Listing'. You'll also find our Workshops and Seminars there. Under the 'Members' drop down menu you'll find 'Book Donations' and 'Member Achievements'.

We've also got a 'Groups' page. If you're interested in talking to fellow writers, then joining one of the listed groups is a fun and productive way to make the most of the writing experience by sharing the ups and downs, the challenges and delights with others of a like mind.