Ars longa, vita brevis. That's the Latin translation of an ancient Greek aphorism attributed to the semi-legendary healer Hippocrates, father of the Hippocratic Oath. The words mean: “Art is long, life is short.” Less succinctly: it takes long years of patient effort–a good portion of our all-too-brief lives–to master any craft.

Anyone who has tried to acquire a complex skill is aware of this conundrum. It can seem as if there aren't enough hours in the day, or enough years in a lifetime, to become proficient in one’s art. Happily, there are shortcuts–proven techniques that can shave years off the learning process. That's what this book is all about.

It's also what this introduction is about. I began writing professionally in the early 1980s, and though my career has had its share of ups and downs, I'm still at it almost thirty-five years later. Unless I'm a total dunce (always a possibility), I should have learned something in all that time. So I'd like to begin by listing some tidbits of wisdom, or at least a few rules of thumb that I’ve found helpful in my own career. Then I'll segue, not very

gracefully, into a method I've recently started using to turn out my books more efficiently.

First, in no particular order, here are pieces of advice I would share with anyone who wants to pursue a writing career.

Watch classic Hollywood movies to learn plot construction. Today's movies have many virtues, but a cleanly constructed plot is not always one of them. Hollywood movies from the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s are typically better structured than films today. Watching the better-known works of Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Billy Wilder, among others, is like taking a crash course in storytelling.

Make your characters intelligent. Unless you're writing a farce, the people in your story should be as smart as possible. They don't necessarily have to be well-educated or sophisticated, but they should be able to think their way out of their problems, come up with logical strategies, and anticipate future developments. Dumb characters make for dumbed-down books. Always ask: What is the most intelligent reaction to this situation?

Keep your style unobtrusive. There's a natural tendency to show off your talent with dazzling displays of linguistic virtuosity. For the most part, it's better to keep yourself in the background. The great Leo Tolstoy had a

straightforward, unpretentious style. Follow his example and maybe you'll write the next *War and Peace.*

Maximize urgency. Stories are more compelling when the stakes are high, the clock is ticking, and options are limited. Often, a short time-frame is helpful in ratcheting up the tension. It's harder to maintain a sense of urgency over a period of months than over a weekend. The more opportunities your characters have to sleep, eat, shower, shave, and perform other mundane tasks, the harder it is to maintain suspense.

Know your genre. Many of your readers will be familiar with both the current bestsellers and the established classics in the field. You need to know at least as much as they do in order to avoid repeating well-worn clichés.

Watch spoofs. One way to find out which tropes have been done to death is to watch parodies like the *Scary Movie* series. Even if the films aren't funny, they'll show you what not to do.

Withhold backstory. It’s tempting to explain everything right away, but explanations are boring and not always necessary. Focus on starting the story with as much oomph as possible, and plug in any required background information only after the reader has been hooked.

Minimize description. In the old days–meaning the 1980s, when I started out–lengthy descriptions were fashionable. Today they're not. A more streamlined writing style is the norm. There are exceptions, but for the most part, keep it short and simple.

Let the reader visualize the characters. Don't go overboard in describing someone's appearance. Your readers will conceive their own mental picture of the character anyway, so any description will be a distraction. Currently I'm writing a series of books about private eye Bonnie Parker, named after the distaff half of Bonnie and Clyde. The only description I've given Bonnie is that she is blonde and blue-eyed, wears hats and tacky T-shirts, and is between 28 and 30 years old (depending on the book). Everything else about her is suggested through her dialogue, behavior, and interaction with other people.

Listen to your intuition. If you find a scene boring or frustrating to write, there's probably something wrong with it. Don't force it. Take a break and come back later.

Let the guys in the boiler room do it. The guys in the boiler room are the hardworking, under-appreciated denizens of your subconscious who will eagerly solve most of your problems for you, if you let them. When

you're stuck, don't overthink it. Just present the problem to the guys downstairs and ask them for an answer. (Ask politely—it's never good to be rude.) Then forget about it for a while. When you return to the problem, they'll probably have worked it out for you. And they don't even charge for this service!

Master the basics: punctuation, grammar, and spelling. This suggestion may seem unnecessary or even insulting, but you'd be surprised how often I get an email message like this: "I want to be a writer but, I dont know how to start? can you give me some advise. thankyou." Some aspiring writers are under the impression that their job is to handle the "creative" side, while leaving the mechanics to an editorial functionary who will correct their mistakes. Not true. These days, you must largely function as your own editor. After all, you may end up self-publishing your work in the growing independent ebook market. Even if you opt for a traditional publishing house, you won't get your foot in the door unless your manuscript meets a certain standard of professionalism. Yes, this means learning boring stuff like the difference between a comma and a semicolon.

Stay more or less in your comfort zone. Remember Hippocrates? It takes a long time to master anything, including a literary genre. If you've

spent years learning, say, the ins and outs of the whodunit genre, you're probably better off sticking with that type of story than venturing into spy thrillers or science fiction. Some remarkably versatile authors can handle almost any subject matter, but most of us will turn out substandard work if we venture outside our area of expertise. Even so, we can continue to expand the parameters of our genre and explore its limits. Which reminds me …

Keep learning new things. If you start to think you've got it all figured out, you're going to get sloppy and stale. Reinvent yourself periodically, not by migrating to a new genre, but by reinvigorating the genre you know and tweaking the techniques you use.

On that last point, I've recently been experimenting with a new technique–one that's new to me, anyway–intended to ramp up my output. These days, more than ever, there's a commercial need to balance quality and quantity in publishing. The top-selling ebook writers are usually extremely prolific. By putting out several books a year, they make sure their readers don't forget about them. To compete with these authors, I have to overcome my tortoise-like tendency to crawl toward the finish line one slow paragraph at a time. In other words, I have to write faster.

Years ago, I read a book called *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg. One of the author's techniques was designed to speed up the writing process. At the time I didn't try this approach, but recently I remembered it and decided to give it a shot. It works remarkably well.

The method is simple. When you wake up in the morning, just start writing. Oh, you can fix yourself a cup of coffee to jumpstart your brain, but don't get involved in any other activities. Sit down at your computer or pull out your spiral notebook, and start putting down words in a stream-of-consciousness manner. If you're working on a novel, you probably have a general idea of the characters and storyline already, and within a few sentences you'll find yourself working on some aspect of your book. It may be a scene that won't come up for a hundred pages, or it may be a scene you've already written which requires more work, or it may be material that doesn't fit into the story in any obvious way–but whatever it is, let the words come. The guys in the boiler room have had a good night's sleep in which to dream up new content for your book, and your job is to record it as fast as possible. If you're anything like me, you'll find that once you get going, you can write for an hour or more and turn out a surprising number of

pages. Sure, these pages will be very rough, but they'll give you something to work with later.

When I say later, I mean weeks later. Now is not the time for editing. Get the book written, even if it's a mess, even if some scenes are out of sequence or certain story points remain unclear. Just get it done. If you write 1500 words a day using this method, you can turn out 10,000 words a week and finish the rough draft of a 70,000 word novel in seven weeks. No, it will not be a publishable novel–probably not even close. But having cranked out the bare bones of the book, you can then switch over to editing-and-rewrite mode. That's when you start to take your time, working meticulously to get it right, scene by scene.

Though I am habitually a slow and methodical writer, I've found that this technique has shaken loose a lot of words I didn't know I had in me. After only a month of diligently putting pen to paper first thing in the morning, I've accumulated 45,000 words of rough draft, and it's been largely effortless. Previously it would have taken me several months, with much sturm und drang, to get that far. If you want to work more productively, or if you just need to get past a case of writer's block, Natalie Goldberg's method is worth a try.

Finally, here's a bit of philosophy to ponder. Most books don't sell very well, and nearly all of them will be forgotten soon after their release. What, then, is the point of all this hard work and mental strain, all this writing and rewriting and researching and struggling with plot twists and character motivations? Is it all for nothing?

Maybe the best way to look at it is that every creative product is a contribution to the accumulated store of creative energy in the world. Literature is like a vast, ever-expanding pool, and every new story, character, and theme enlarges and enriches that pool. Your personal reward may be limited to the knowledge that, in however small a way, you've added to the total. And the splash made when your story was tossed into the pool will produce ripples that will interact with other ripples, which in turn will interact with still others, with results that are impossible to predict. You really have no idea whom your story will touch, or how, or what its ultimate effects may be.

There's a quote by Henry Brooks Adams: “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” It's true of writers too – even the least of us.