

Lockdown not great for creativity

FIRST PERSON

Oxford author Zoe May on the struggles she has faced while continuing to write during the coronavirus pandemic

Writing can be difficult at the best of times, but writing during a pandemic is particularly challenging.

Despite this, I'm sure by now, we've all encountered overzealous people claiming that lockdown is the perfect time to upskill or write that novel you've always daydreamed about.

As an author, I strongly disagree.

I've had four romantic comedies published with HarperCollins, I'm self-publishing a rom com this summer, and I have a thriller out with Bloodhound Books in November, and I definitely don't think pandemic lockdowns are conducive to writing.

The best books I've written have been written during times when I'm not too stressed or worried, since it's difficult to let your imagination wander freely if you're under too much pressure or strain.

Global pandemics, therefore, present far from ideal writing conditions.

And anyway, good writers tend to be curious people, so anyone who is not totally distracted from writing by watching the pandemic unfold probably doesn't have the inquiring mind necessary to produce good fiction.

That being said, as lockdown has gone on and on, and we've all started adjusting to the new normal, writing becomes a possibility again.

I spent the first few weeks of lockdown in a total panic, unable to stop reading news, but then I began working on my latest novel again.

I was tentative at first, wondering if my brain would be able to function under these

conditions, but in the end, I found myself being swept up in my imaginary world, and in fact, it provided some much-needed relief.

My writing process during lockdown has been different though.

With the underlying stress and worry, I've not been able to be as productive as usual and haven't quite managed to put in the hours that I was doing before, however, I'm not beating myself up about this.

I think prioritising self-care and well-being is important during these difficult times, so if I feel like watching YouTube videos or trashy shows on Netflix, I haven't been fighting the urge as much as I would have done before.

I've also adopted a writing method I'd never tried before pre-lockdown.

I've started using a dictation app that translates speech to text. I've found this has really helped boost my productivity.

When dictating a chapter, I'm not clicking out of my Word document and going on Twitter and getting distracted, as has been the case for me recently.

It's been a real game-changer for my lockdown productivity.

I've also found talking about goals online to be helpful. Sharing your intentions with your followers or friends and family provides a sense of accountability that can keep you focused.

Catching up with someone on Zoom and being able to confirm that you did in fact do the things you said you were going to do provides a sense of achievement in these isolated times.

Despite these tips, I think it's important not to be too hard on ourselves. These are strange times and there's a lot to cope with as it is.

If you manage to write during lockdown, then great, but if you don't, don't beat yourself up.

The most important thing is to stay healthy, rather than coming out of lockdown with the next bestseller.

Zoe May is an Oxford-based author of romantic fiction novels.

Her next book, *Flying Solo*, will be released on July 6.

For more information on her published works visit her author website at zoemayauthor.co.uk



Author Zoe May

Rising to the challenges of social distancing

Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support (OBS) is a registered charity that aims to promote breastfeeding and increase the provision of breastmilk and responsive feeding for babies throughout Oxfordshire.

Like many charities in Oxfordshire, they have had to alter the way they work due to the pandemic. However, as a small charity with a geographically dispersed, self-employed team and trustees who are used to working together remotely, they have been well placed to respond quickly and creatively to the challenges of social distancing.

At the beginning of March, they started creating what they thought was a 'contingency plan' for if the unthinkable happened and they had to close their drop-in sessions.

The plan recognised that it was crucial for them to continue to deliver their services and that it was important to keep babies breastfeeding during the pandemic. Breastfeeding maximises health for both mothers and babies, reduces the burden on the NHS, and relieves parents' anxieties about how to keep their babies safely fed while food supply chains are being disrupted

VOLUNTARY VOICE

OBS are learning fast, and envisage that many of the systems and skills they are developing now will make them a better, more responsive charity when the crisis has passed

and money is tight. Moreover, when feeding is going well, it helps keep mothers and children calm and connected.

That's why, during the first week of the lockdown, they actively collaborated with OXPIP and The MotherKind Café postnatal support group, to get positive messages out to families who are in a state of shock as a result of the lockdown.

More importantly, within a few days, they switched the capacity of their specialist facilitator team to providing virtual one to one consultations. As other services such as community midwifery, hospital outpatient and health visiting services have become less available, the need for skilled feeding support has significantly increased.

For example, even before the pandemic they had a closely moderated, private, women-only Facebook group. The group was already a major platform for OBS with over 1,600 members to support families but the number of members has increased rapidly since the start of COVID-19 emergency. With hard work from their volunteers and facilitators, they have been able to adapt the way that they work and maintain the group's quality and ethos.

Facebook is their preferred way of giving support, because it is efficient and enables mothers to support each other, as they do in their face-to-face drop-in sessions. In addition, they have started a weekly Facebook "Happy Hour" (with real-time text chat) for the public on Monday mornings, combining this with a Zoom meeting for their facilitators and their volunteer teams.

This provides a positive start to the week, helps maintain the strong team spirit among their volunteers, and the forum has already generated new ideas for meeting the needs of families.

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