

## Evelyn Toynton

One of the continual surprises about writing fiction, for me at least, is how much peculiar research I find myself doing along the way. Some of the questions that arise are purely factual, and therefore relatively easy to answer: When do the tulips come into bloom in Regent's Park? What was the price of leather gloves, or butter or a first-class stamp, in America in 1937?

But others are trickier. The heroine's lover is a violinist in a second-tier chamber ensemble touring the lesser metropolises of the American mid-west. Does he get his own hotel room, or does he have to share with the cellist? And – since he is living in an age before computerized music – can he supplement his income between tours by playing music for, say, deodorant ads on TV?

I once had a character who was a junkie from a relatively affluent background; assuming she still retained some middle-class sense of self-preservation, how would she get hold of clean syringes? Is it possible that heroin dealers provide them for an extra fee? And how could I find out?

In one of my novels there was a creepy leftist agitator in Ann Arbor; in another, a womanizing Russian mathematician obsessed with an alternative set theory based on mystical religious practices outlawed by the Czar. There was also a geneticist studying an unusually promiscuous species of

vole. Grappling with Marxist jargon, stumbling around in Cantor's theory of transfinite numbers, investigating the sex life of rodents: who would have thought that writing a novel required such unromantic labours as that?

The hope, of course, is that the research will help make the book come alive – make it richer and truer rather than weighing it down. But quite often it proves completely useless. In later drafts my left-wing agitator was reborn as a Finnish anthropologist. The violinist became first a magazine editor and then the head of a philanthropic foundation endowed by his rich father-in-law: away with deodorant ads. After a year, the junkie morphed into a poverty lawyer with insomnia (the one subject on which I, like many other novelists I know, might be called an expert); six months later, in her final incarnation, she was a philosophy graduate student editing translations from the Khmer language. So a memoir called *Heroin from A to Z* and a monograph entitled *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States* nestle against each other on my bookshelf.

I suspect that every fiction writer has similar stories of literary metamorphosis. But my own favourite concerns a poet. Jean Stafford always claimed that when she converted to Catholicism at the behest of her then-husband, Robert Lowell, the poem Lowell embarked on as a gift for her confirmation transmogrified into something called *To a Whore at the Brooklyn Navy Yard*. Interestingly, there is no trace of such a poem in any of Lowell's published collections. Did the whore, too, mutate into someone (or even something) else? Or did Stafford, a writer of wickedly comic fictions, simply make her up?