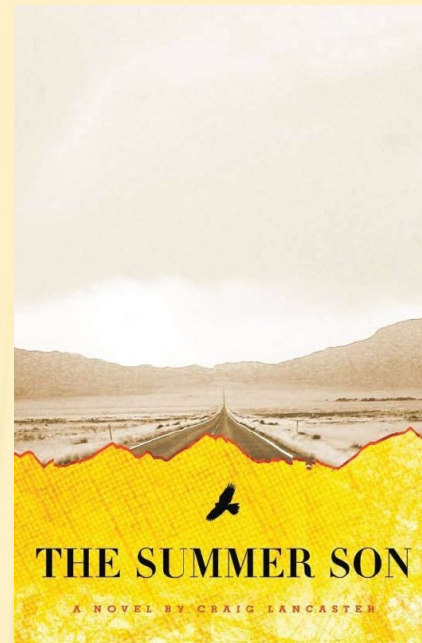


Written: 2008  
Published: 2009



Written: 2009-2010  
Published: 2011

# IGNITING THE NOVEL INSIDE

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*Strategies for finding and developing the story you want to write*

## **IT'S NOVEMBER, A WRITERS' PARADISE ...**

Every year at this time, thousands of would-be novelists launch themselves into National Novel Writing Month ([nanowrimo.org](http://nanowrimo.org)), taking on the challenge to write 50,000 words in 30 days. (That's 1,667 words a day, on average, if you're into the numbers.) The goal, for most, isn't to finish a fully fledged novel; it's simply to do a massive brain dump and get started. As Yogi Berra might have said, you have to start before you can finish.

# IS A MARATHON AT SPRINT SPEED VALID?

The short, simple answer: Yes. The nuanced answer is that beyond the next couple of minutes, I'm not really going to worry too much about NaNoWriMo, per se. What we want to do is get you launched on your project – and our interest in that would be the same in December, January, February, March ...

The strictures of NaNoWriMo do have some universal validity, and here it is: The whole point is to write. Just write. I hear all the time from people who are certain they have a novel inside, just waiting to get out. Invariably, I then hear all the obstacles in the way of getting it out. The obstacles have to disappear. You can't write a novel without, you know, writing.

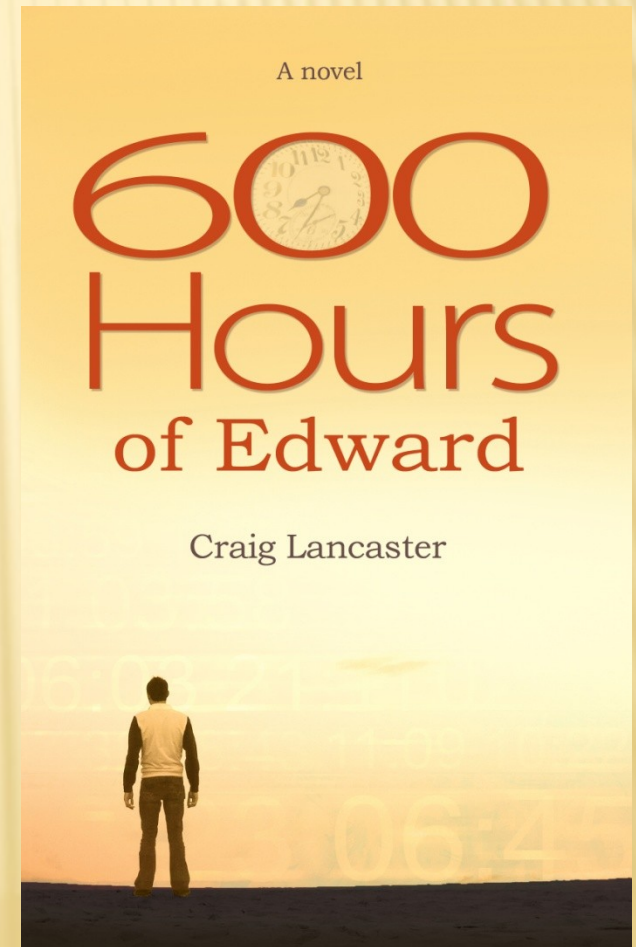
So, the first thing you need, beyond an idea that you can begin to build, is a commitment to putting in the time. Find a portion of your days that you can set aside for writing. Protect this time. Make sure people in your life know it's important to you. And write.



# THE DREAM DEBUT

My first novel, *600 Hours of Edward*, was born during National Novel Writing Month in 2008. I wrote the entire first draft in the first 25 days of November. Here's a look:

Nov. 1: 5,763 (5,763)	Nov. 14: 39,886 (5,328)
Nov. 2: Off	Nov. 15: Off
Nov. 3: Off	Nov. 16: Off
Nov. 4: 11,183 (5,420)	Nov. 17: Off
Nov. 5: Off	Nov. 18: 43,846 (3,960)
Nov. 6: 13,721 (2,538)	Nov. 19: 51,811 (7,965)
Nov. 7: 16,963 (3,242)	Nov. 20: 54,816 (3,005)
Nov. 8: 20,439 (3,476)	Nov. 21: 60,837 (6,021)
Nov. 9: Off	Nov. 22: 63,957 (3,120)
Nov. 10: 23,085 (2,646)	Nov. 23: Off
Nov. 11: 27,293 (4,208)	Nov. 24: 73,208 (9,251)
Nov. 12: 30,744 (3,451)	Nov. 25: 79,175 (5,967)
Nov. 13: 34,558 (3,814)	



# THE OBLIGATORY CAVEATS

1. Writing 79,000-plus words in less than a month is an INSANE pace. Consider: Ivan Doig considers a full day of work 400 words. Hemingway would often spend an entire day on just a handful of sentences. Even if your aim is something more pedestrian than high art, the pace is ridiculous. I don't expect to ever replicate it.
2. Even more insane: The manuscript I emerged with on Nov. 25, 2008, was pretty close to what published in October 2009. That just doesn't happen.



*The keyboard upon which I've pounded out two novels, several short stories and an untold number of essays and Facebook status updates. Amazingly, there's not an indentation in the middle from all the times I've dropped my head heavily to the desk.*

# WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

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*With good friend Connie VonBergen at a 600 Hours of Edward event hosted by Parents, Let's Unite for Kids.*

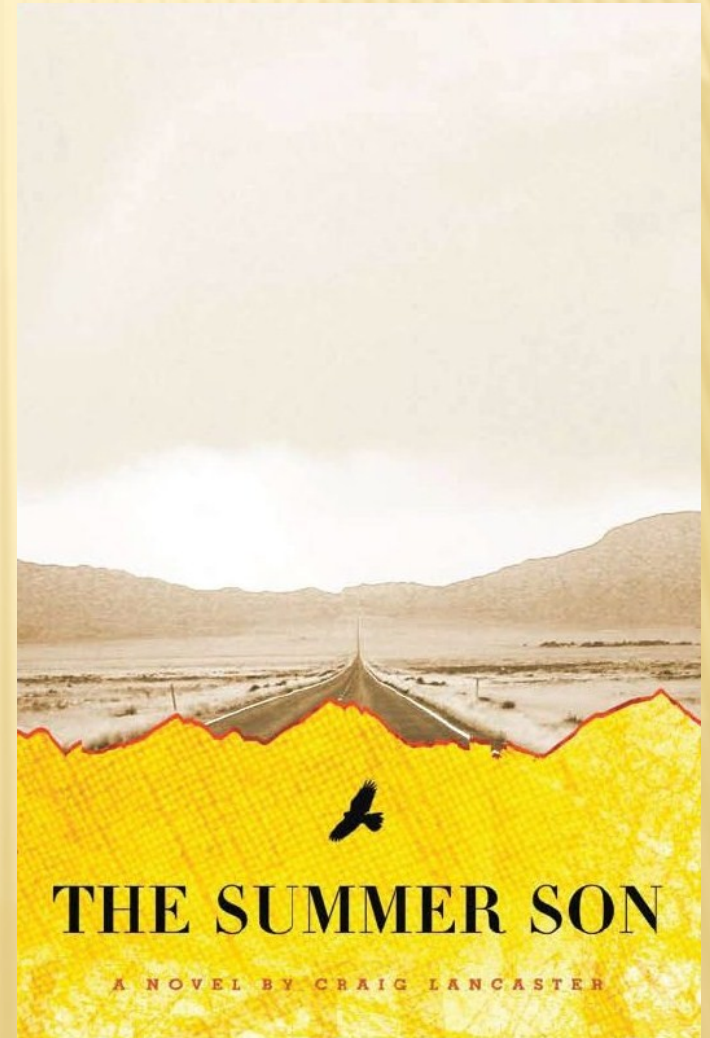
The book was picked up by Riverbend Publishing of Helena in August 2009 and released in October 2009. In February 2010, it was named a Montana Honor Book, and in October 2010 it won the High Plains Book Award for best first book in 2010. I've traveled the state in support of the book, talked with countless book clubs and library groups, learned how to get comfortable with being interviewed (as a journalist, I'm used to being on the other side of the notebook), and basically changed my life. All because of 25 days in November 2008. I say it again: If you think you have a novel inside, now is the time to start writing it.

# THE SOPHOMORE SLUMP

In June 2009, while *600 Hours of Edward* was still wending its way to its literary destiny, I started work on my second novel. While I certainly wasn't cocky enough to think that I could dash another one off in 25 days, I wasn't quite prepared for how arduous the manuscript would be.

The first draft of what became *The Summer Son* was finished in about three months. I sent it off to a trusted friend and adviser, who wasn't impressed.

"It feels like a competition between Craig Lancaster the novelist and Craig Lancaster the essayist, with the result an unsatisfying draw," he wrote.



# THE SOPHOMORE SLUMP, CONTINUED

So I rewrote it. Took out massive chunks of narrative. Moved things around. Inundated my printouts in red ink. And it was ... better. But not yet good.

By that time, I was in full-on promotion for *600 Hours of Edward*, so I set the manuscript aside for long stretches, occasionally picking it up and marking it, or taking new cracks at reworking scenes. The first draft checked in at about 79,000 words. The novel itself comes in around 71,000. As it lost weight, it gained focus and sharpness.

Finally, in June 2010 – a full year after I started – I sold the manuscript to AmazonEncore, the new publishing house of the ubiquitous online giant. Writing gave me a story; rewriting gave me a novel worthy of publication. Learn to love rewrites.



# BUT BEFORE YOU REWRITE, WRITE

Here, alas, we head into some highly subjective territory. Do you have an idea for your novel? Have you done necessary research? Thought about your characters and secondary characters? Have some idea of the direction the story will take? If so, it's time to start putting down words. In the next few sections, we'll take a look at some key junctures: finding an idea, preparing to write, staying on track, finding reliable feedback, rewriting. I'll share what has worked for me, but I'll tell you now that every writer works differently. Part of your journey is figuring out the best approach for you.



*Every single book, at some point, was just an idea. So, it stands to reason that if you have an idea, you might just be on the verge of having a book. How cool is that?*

# CULTIVATING AN IDEA

Writers, whether they truck in literary fiction or genres, tend to have their brains geared toward seeing narrative possibilities in everyday life. I pull ideas from all kinds of places – memory, overheard conversations, news items, etc. Once an idea is sparked, I'll spend some amount of time just turning it over in my head, again and again, until its possibilities start to emerge. When I reach the point where the idea is dominating my thoughts and I'm itching to start putting it to paper (er, pixel), I know it's time to start making tracks. Only you can make that decision.



# BUILDING CHARACTERS

Because my fiction is highly character-driven, the first bit of writing I do is detailed sketches of my primary and secondary characters. I use this exercise to orient them in my head, to give them personalities that I will try to bring to the page, and to help myself see them in my mind's eye.

A lot of what I write in the sketches is for my own direct benefit, not so much for the eventual readers. For example, imagining a secondary character with red hair might help me to focus, but unless the hair color is essential to the story I write, it won't necessarily appear in the narrative. Part of the fun of writing a story is leaving plenty of room for the readers' interpretation of things. If you can see your characters clearly, you can write them clearly – and your readers can enjoy their own discoveries.



# A SAMPLE CHARACTER SKETCH

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Here's the character sketch I wrote for Mitch Quillen, the lead character in my forthcoming novel, *The Summer Son*:

**Mitch Quillen, 39, medical-sales professional, San Jose, Calif.**

Mitch is in the prototypical midlife rut. He's deeply dissatisfied with his life, his career, his marriage. He's been cycling through tough times at home, rooted in an online dalliance by his wife, and is on the verge of losing his job, so the intrusion of his estranged father, Jim, will loom as a possible breaking point for him. He grew up in Olympia, Wash., and went to school at Berkeley. A former athlete who's woefully out of shape. Bitter. Will have to walk a fine line between making him darkly compelling and repugnant, so be sure to hint at underlying sweetness and self-worth.

**Physical characteristics:** A substantial man, one who holds some vestiges of his former life as an athlete.

**Psychological characteristics:** Mitch has suffered a lot of losses in his life, and he's absolutely dogged by memories of a summer 28 years in his past, where his relationship with his father came apart.

# STARTING - AND STAYING ON TRACK



*The first chapter of The Summer Son, in a word cloud.*

So ... you're ready to write. Where do you start? I like Ernest Hemingway's advice best: "Start with the truest sentence you know." It helps me – with plot and with pacing – to think cinematically. If you can play a movie clip in your head and then replicate the setting, the angles, the point of view, the characters on the page, you'll be on the right track. Thinking cinematically helps with creating the dynamic tension your story will need to propel readers from page to page.

# OUTLINING, YAY OR NAY?

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There is no right or wrong answer here. Stephen King starts with an idea and a blank page. C.J. Box writes incredibly complex outlines of his mysteries. Novelist Carol Buchanan uses a white board and sticky notes to plot her scenes. I write two- or three-sentence chapter synopses – just enough to keep the action moving and keep my eyes on the road.

Find what works for you. Experiment. Talk to other writers about their strategies. For what it's worth, I never completed a novel until I did one with an outline. So I'm a believer.



# KEEP MOVING FORWARD



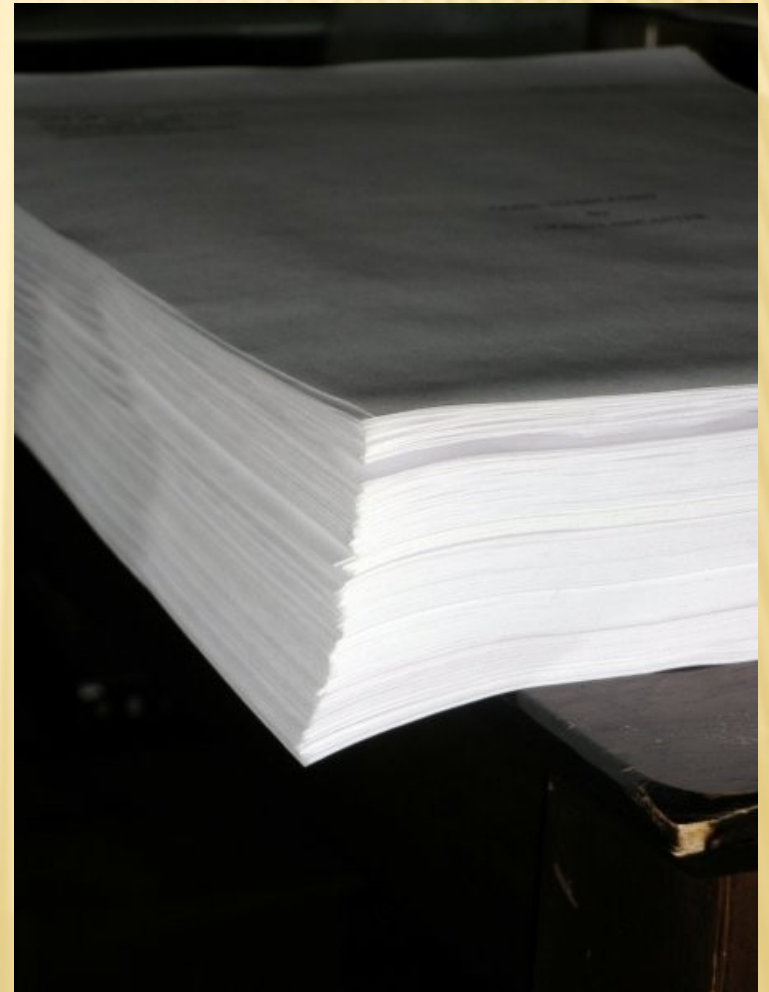
My approach to first drafts: I write directly, starting with the first scene and working my way toward the last, with very little backtracking or rewriting. I want to get the basics down as quickly as I can (without rushing), then use rewrites to draw out the bigger turns, excise the unnecessary stuff and punch up the writing. Others are more meticulous as they go, continually doubling back and massaging the story. Again, there's no right or wrong way – only the way that's right for you.

# YOU HAVE A DRAFT. NOW WHAT?

After you reread your work and take some well-deserved time to decompress, you're probably going to be thinking about how you can improve it. This might also be a good time for a trusted reader – one who will be brutally honest (not your mom) and offer actionable advice – to take a look.

I strongly encourage joining a writing group, either formally or ad hoc. I have several people who I approach with my early work, because I know I'll get a good, honest perspective and they'll tell me if it's horrible. If you need further help – and you believe your story is worth the money – engage the services of a freelance editor. They can help.

Once I gather the information I need, I start in on rewrites. I'll say it again: Learn to love rewrites. For me, that's where the best work happens.



*The first draft of what became The Summer Son. I wasn't near done.*

# PUSHING INTO PUBLICATION

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This is an area that warrants a workshop onto itself, so I'll be brief. You'll need to acquaint yourself with the various options: finding an agent, selling a manuscript direct to a publisher, self-publishing, etc. There are great resources on the Internet for all of these things. Some starting points:

## Agents, queries, etc.

AgentQuery.com  
QueryTracker.com  
PublishersMarketplace.com  
Pred-Ed.com

## Writing and publishing resources

Publetariat.com  
SelfPublishingReview.com  
JAKonrath.Blogspot.com  
Smashwords.com

# THANK YOU VERY MUCH!



*The best I can say for myself: At least I wasn't wearing an ascot.*

There's no way to be comprehensive in an hour, but I hope you've at least found some strategies for getting your novel-writing dreams aloft. I'll let you in on a little secret: Posing blithely for photos, like the one at left, aren't even close to the best part of the gig.