

Sarah Waters,

On the writing process sidebar of the article:

"Select a historical period and focus on a corner of society that fascinates you or an issue topical at that time.

"Steep yourself in the writing of that time: fiction, journalism, diaries, letters. Try to absorb how people thought and spoke. Continue this reading throughout the writing process to ensure your mind stays saturated in the right atmosphere.

"Make meticulous notes on historical trivia and turns of speech, recording the title of every source, its author, date and page number, as though footnoting a PhD.

"Write 'Thoughts' at the top of a separate sheet and jot down ideas for the book as they arise from your reading.

"Decide on a structure, based on one of the dominant literary forms of your period, and begin sketching out a three-part plot and embryonic characters.

"Divide each of your three parts into six chapters of around 10,000 words apiece and map out the detail of what happens in each chapter.

"Now begin writing, starting with one of the scenes you like best as a way of discovering the voices of your main characters.

"Return to the beginning and start moving your half-formed characters through the labyrinths of your plot. Write in past tense, in the first person (try a diary format) and watch their personalities develop as they kick against the things your plot requires them to do.

"Your weeks will start to take on a pattern: a slow agonising start gradually easing into the steady production of 1000 words a day until the scene is complete, then back to the agony of the blank page.

"If a scene is particularly complex, you may use finished dialogue to create a skeleton for it; and flesh out the details when you're happy with its shape.

"After three months, review what you've written, incorporating notes you've made in the margins and taking time out to fill in any gaps in your research.

"Send the revision section to the one friend you trust to be the first read

6 mos min  
to write  
180,000  
words.