



# From Sports Journalism to Children's Fiction

Article Author:

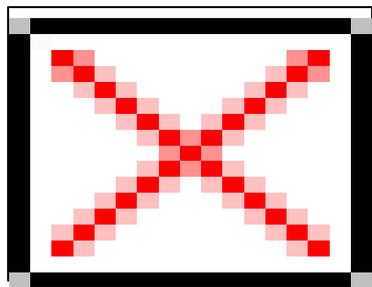
[Joe Wilson](#) [1]

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Byline:

Sports journalist Joe Wilson reflects on writing his first novel for children.

*Author Joe Wilson finds the two are closer than you'd think,*



It's all about telling stories, isn't it? That's the simple truth. If you're writing a piece to be broadcast on the TV news you want people to keep watching. If you're writing a forty thousand word novel for children then you want them to keep turning the pages. The success of the mission depends on the quality of the story telling. It's just the means to the end which is so different.

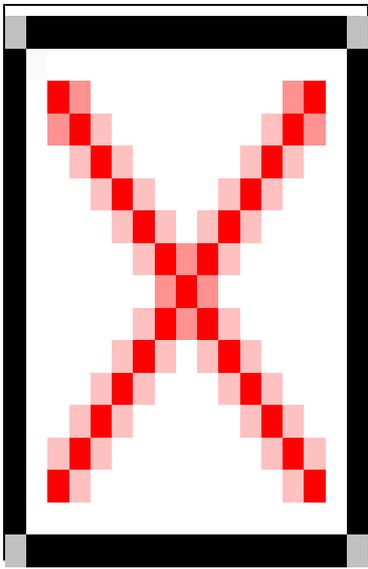
I am in a football stadium in Sofia. It's England versus Bulgaria and it looks like the players are about to walk off the pitch because a group of Neo Nazis are making unrepentant gestures and racist chants in the crowd. England are also winning the game, an important qualifying fixture. All of this has to be condensed into a piece of television. The breaking news has to be matched with the relevant pictures. The wifi has to be strong enough to get the piece back to London. We have to negotiate the hundreds of riot police converging on the stadium to film a piece to camera. The piece has to be on air so quickly we don't even have time to wait for the match to end.

That's the reality of TV journalism.

It is why opening a laptop and starting another chapter of **The Island That Didn't Exist** was so often a refreshing escape. All I needed to satisfy was the scope of my imagination. All I needed were my fingers on the keyboard. It was that easy, it was that difficult.

In my career as a broadcast journalist I've worked on a huge range of output and covered a vast array of stories. But there is always a deadline. There is always a bulletin or a programme that needs to be fed, a tight timeframe that needs to be adhered to. When you begin writing a book, as an aspiring debutant author, you have no idea if anyone else in the universe will want, need or even read it. I understand how people can feel lonely as a writer. The affirmation and advice of an agent (Becky Bagnell) and a publisher (**OUP**) was precious to me. Once I knew I was heading in the right direction I galloped towards it.

There is a sense of liberation that comes with writing fiction.



Journalism demands a deep sense of responsibility. I've always felt that. You must be true to the facts of the story, true to the contributors you've involved, true to the lives you've touched to create a couple of minutes of television. Those lives continue when the journalist has moved on and the news has changed.

The characters in my book, in contrast, behave how I want them to. They have no life other than the essence I breathe into them. There is a responsibility, of course, to make their lives interesting. But they can do whatever I want them to, within reason. I don't need to have the camera in the right place, rolling, when the key bits of action happen.

I'm fortunate that I specialised in sport as a journalist. Sport is supposed to be exciting. It is often uplifting, sometimes funny. It can also be nerve wracking and frequently leads to sickening disappointment. Above all it is supposed to be unpredictable. This makes it perfect for storytelling. Sometimes it makes it extremely challenging too.

If you were aware of the **2019 Men's Cricket World Cup** final, for example, you'll know that England won, lost, and then won again in a matter of minutes. Even when they won we weren't completely sure how. And then, within seconds of it finishing, I had to explain it on the news. Great fun but challenging.

The idea of unpredictability and excitement at the core of storytelling has obvious benefits when it comes to writing children's fiction. It must be the best way to engage the younger reader. To be frank, I think it must be the best way to engage any reader.

But my years in journalism have taught me one key skill which I think it must be vital for any writer; discipline. I have trained my mind to turn ideas into words and to do it, quickly, whenever the need arises. Not just when a whim takes me. It may not be the most important skill for mankind but it is most certainly the product of 20 years on the news. Over the course of writing, and perfecting, **The Island That Didn't Exist** it's been priceless.

**The Island that Didn't Exist** by Joe Wilson, is published by OUP August 2020. £6.99 pbk

[www.joewilsonfiction.com](http://www.joewilsonfiction.com) [3] @JoeWilsonWords

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