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black
dress

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JONATHAN DRAPESMacmillan
New WritingFather Frank ▶ PAUL
BURKE

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GO TO WORK ON AN OEUVRE

JOHN TYLEE

campaign

They may be the kings of copywriting, but can agency creatives make the huge literary leap into novels? John Tylee discovers that although some skills are transferable, it's harder than it looks

You'd have bet your pension on David Abbott making a smooth transition from adman to novelist. Surely so eloquent a wordsmith and the creator of some of the most well-crafted ads Britain has ever seen should have no trouble writing a work that tugs at the heartstrings with dazzling literary eloquence.

Yet it's been eight years since one of the finest copywriters of his generation retired from Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, declaring his intention to write a novel.

Will it ever appear? Abbott isn't around to answer. "He's always saying that it's nearly there," a friend says.

More importantly, will it be worth reading after such a long wait? Tim Waterstone, the founder of the bookstore chain that bears his name and author of three novels, says he doubts Abbott will ever finish his book and that, even if he does, it's possible nobody will want to publish it.

Even from somebody who knows more than most about what makes a bestseller, this may seem like an overly harsh verdict. Others, however, suggest it may be an accurate one.

Winston Fletcher, the former agency chief, has authored 13 non-fiction books as well as an advertising-themed novel called *The Manipulators*.

He says: "There's a fundamental difference between copywriting and writing novels. Copywriters in general, and Abbott in particular, chisel away to get their words perfect. It can be

'I realised that if I struggled and struggled, I might just become a second-rate novelist'

Winston Fletcher

hard for them when it comes to plotting and writing dialogue."

What is beyond question is that fiction-writing for ad people can prove to be an exhausting and frustrating experience. It may turn out not to be liberating, but rather a brutal reminder of your limitations.

"I realised that if I struggled and struggled, I might just become a second-rate novelist," Fletcher admits.

However, such a daunting prospect hasn't stopped a significant number of agency people taking up the challenge over the years – some of them winning both fame and critical acclaim in the process.

Fay Weldon (ex-Mather & Crowther), Salman Rushdie (ex-Ayer Barker), Dorothy L Sayers (ex-S H Benson and the author of *Murder Must Advertise*) and Len Deighton (a

one-time art director at Robert Sharp & Partners) lead the field.

To them can be added James Herbert, one of the world's biggest-selling horror writers, who produced his first book, *The Rats*, more than 30 years ago, while he was Charles Barker's creative director.

Whatever their literary styles, all are manifestations of a tradition going back to the 20s, when many English-literature graduates saw copywriting as way of paying the bills *en route* to penning "The Great English Novel".

It was perfectly natural that advertising should attract such people. With commercial TV still a long way off, print was king, and highly literate copywriters were much in demand.

Some writers did manage to fulfil their wider literary ambitions. Most had to resign themselves to the fact

that advertising wasn't going to be a means to an end, but an end in itself.

The arrival of TV advertising in Britain resulted in even fewer creatives pursuing literary careers. Suddenly advertising became more visual and less verbal. This gave rise to a new breed of creatives from wide-ranging social backgrounds, who regarded advertising as a career in its own right and not as a stepping stone to joining the *litterati*.

To be successful between the covers these days, you'll need not only talent but also an agent who knows the ropes and a publishing house that knows how to market. (A lot of authors with advertising backgrounds frequently complain about how bad many publishers are at this.)

Finally, you'll need luck in spades if you ever intend giving up the day job.

Peter Souter



back from his daily responsibilities at Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO.

His first radio play, a romantic comedy, was broadcast on Radio 4 last Christmas, and his six-part comedy series, *Married, Single, Other*, will air on ITV this autumn.

Had it not been for a bout of the 'flu, Peter Souter might not have set out on a fiction-writing career that's already successful enough for him to step

Meanwhile, he awaits the BBC's verdict on an "unconventional" comedy series about God's wife, and has had a £10,000 advance to work on a screenplay that's been picked up by Pathé.

It's been quite an impressive start. Good enough, he says, to have made his stepping down as AMV's deputy chairman much less scary – and not much of a financial sacrifice.

Curiously, it all began when 'flu forced a period of inactivity two years ago, and he began writing a play to pass the hours.

Since then, Souter's success has been sufficient for the former executive creative

director to cut his obligations to BBDO Worldwide to a minimum. However, he concedes that having an agent who also represents the likes of Alan Bennett has been an incredible stroke of luck.

Souter is sure his advertising background has stood him in good stead for the new writing career opening up to him at the age of 45.

"It's been a great preparation because, just as in advertising, you can't write something without being able to sell it," he says. "Also, knowing how to capture and hold people's attention comes in very handy."