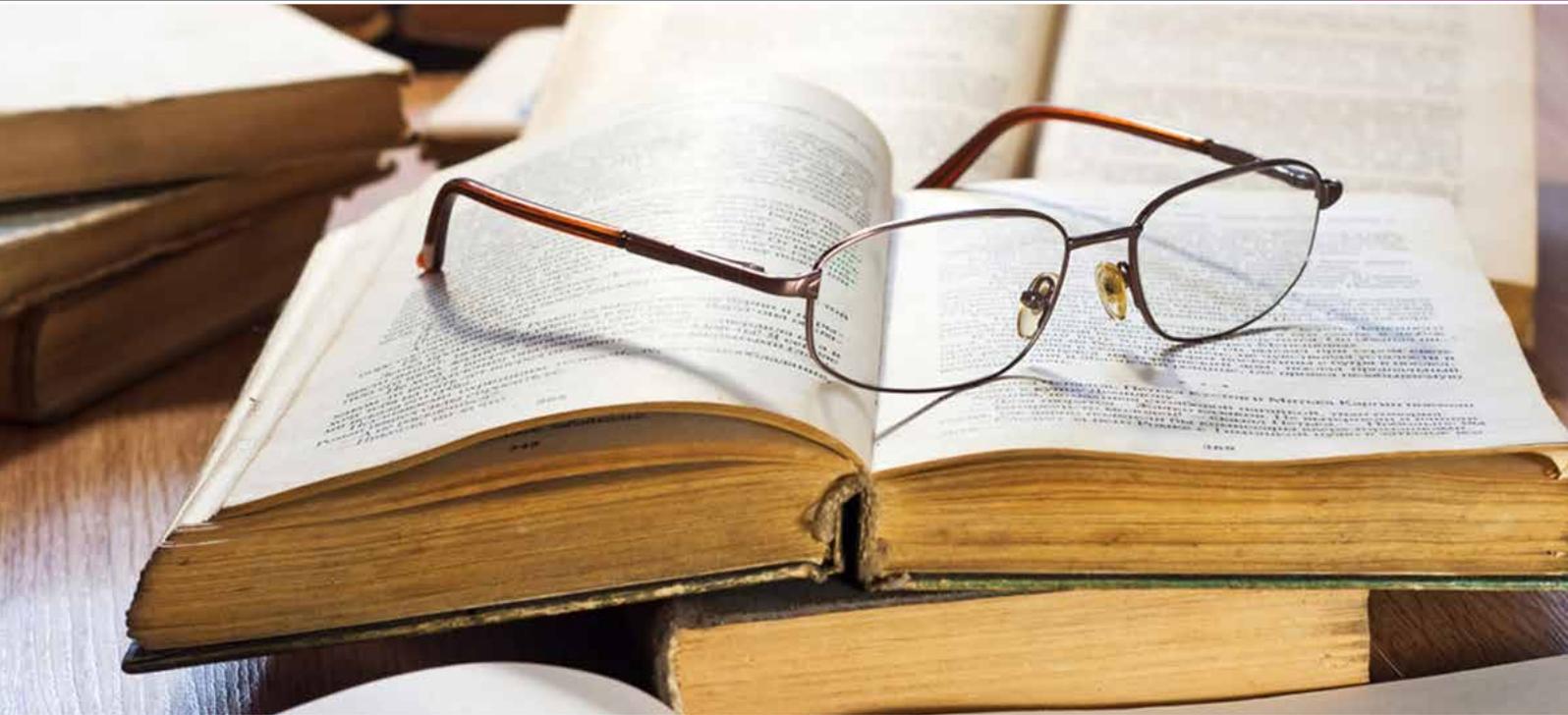


# Writing<sup>MAGAZINE</sup>

## WRITING COURSES



# COURSE PREVIEW: MODULE ONE Fiction Writing

---

*Brought to you by the  
publishers of the UK's bestselling  
magazine for writers*

Writing<sup>MAGAZINE</sup>

[www.writers-online.co.uk/writing-courses](http://www.writers-online.co.uk/writing-courses)

## UNIT ONE

# The market for your fiction

In taking this course, you will be shown how to write a novel more or less from scratch. It may be that you have already written, or at least begun, a novel or piece of fiction, and though this might well have given you valuable practice in the art of novel writing, it could also have put you at a bit of a disadvantage. In just the same way that a writer of articles or short pieces has to examine the markets where he can submit his work and try to find the best places to sell it, so the writer of a novel stands far more of a chance of success if he does the same.

Not quite the same, of course, since the publishers of books do not have their products on the shelves of your local newsagent, easily available for you to thumb through to weigh up what sort of publication they are. But in the same way that every newspaper and magazine is different and has its own 'formula', 'angle', 'approach' to a certain type of reader, its own style, so each publishing house handles a certain type, or types, of novel, and it is highly unlikely, for instance, that the publishers of romances will be interested in gruesome war stories, or children's novels.

Even before you start trying to plan your novel, before you put a word of it down on paper, you will do yourself a great deal of good and probably save yourself a great deal of heartache and disappointment if you consider the markets that are available for novels, and also the prevailing fashions (yes, there are fashions in

novel writing) as to preferred lengths and styles. You need to know the requisites for ‘formula’ stories such as romances, which have to fit into a certain pattern and follow certain rules.

But why need you bother with fashions and prevailing styles? Maybe you have already got stuck into a novel – perhaps even finished it – and it is nothing at all like other novels. Why should you have to think about romances and westerns and family sagas and the required lengths for novels, when your novel is one on its own, and does not really fit into any category at all, and you do not want to be confined by length.

One good reason why a novel writer is wise to consider those points, is that if you write a novel that does not follow any traditional standards and goes its own way as, unfortunately, most of the first novels by new writers who are unfamiliar with the business are inclined to do, the chances are that it will remain unpublished and rejected. Whether the novel is any good does not enter into it a lot of the time. If it is so original and different that a publisher cannot categorise it or if it is far too long or too short to be a viable proposition from the publishing point of view, then unfortunately the chances are that it will be turned down almost automatically.

Some new writers of novels secretly believe that their book is so brilliant that, whether it conforms or not, it will be accepted because of its sheer genius. One thing I can guarantee: it is not even remotely likely to happen to you.

This course aims to help you learn more about the world of fiction and to help you make a start to writing good fiction of your own. Some people claim that they do not have to follow the rules, they are artistes who need to express themselves and if publishers cannot see this, it is the publishers’ loss.

Would-be novelists of this sort will end up with their manuscript still at the back of the drawer years later. This course is not for them, nor for people who say they are not interested in publication, and so do not have to bother about publishing trends or markets.

If you want to write a novel that stands a good chance of being published, this course will show you the way. If you want to write good fiction, this course will show you how. But whether you are writing to sell or writing because you want to have the satisfaction of pleasing yourself alone, you do have to accept the first two rules of fiction writing. These are very important and you need to remember them. They are:

1. There are techniques involved in order to write good fiction. Free expression usually results in bad writing.
2. Writing good fiction is not accidental, or even the result of inspiration or genius. The main requisite of a good fiction writer is readiness to take time and trouble and work hard.

As Samuel Johnson said: ‘What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.’

Very probably, this is not what you expected to hear. Most would-be fiction writers have their heads full of their characters, their plots, the thrill of creation, the excitement of bringing their novel to life on the page. Yes, this side of novel writing does of course exist and, without it, a novel would not be convincing. You need to be enthusiastic about what you are writing, thoroughly wrapped up in the creative process. Writers need to care madly about their characters and love them to distraction.

More often than not, new writers – or even experienced ones – are dismayed to have the prosaic facts of commerce, the requirements of publishing houses, the hard graft and techniques by which a novelist fashions the story correctly, brought to their attention. Where is the glamour and mystique? Why has the razzle-dazzle been stripped away?

The answer is that there are two types of fiction writer. There are the amateur writers who find the image more interesting than the prospect of actually getting to grips with their novel, tackling it in a workmanlike fashion and applying technique and common sense as well as the fruits of their subconscious and its inspirational qualities.

The professionals, the writers who are going to succeed in the fiction writing business are, like yourself, anxious to learn from the experience of others, anxious to learn the skills and techniques which will make their novel successful both as a commercial proposition and as a work of art.

### **Choose your novel carefully**

Particularly with new novelists, the germ or inspiration for their novel just comes out of the blue and with no more than this exciting idea in their mind, they begin to work. This may have happened to you if you have begun or even completed a book-length manuscript or two before starting this course.

Looking round for a suitable publisher when you have actually finished the product on spec first, does mean you are very limited and you cannot generally fulfil the publishers' requirements easily. However, all need not be lost. We will examine ways in which the work you have done might be used to your advantage a little later.

Remember that another golden rule so far as fiction writing is concerned is that nothing you write, nothing you think, no research or mental exercise you undertake is ever wasted. Even if nothing further ever happens to your previously written novel, it will have given you valuable experience in putting a piece of fiction together. Even the mistakes you have made will have taught you a great deal about the right way to go about things next time.

The best rule to follow is to try and choose your novel yourself, rather than let it choose you. Before you start to write, even if you are already buzzing with the idea, examine your prospective work for its commercial potential and the chances it would stand if submitted to a publisher.

Often new writers mistakenly think that a story 'exactly like the ones Catherine Cookson (or Dick Francis or Wilbur Smith) writes' will be welcomed in a publisher's office purely because it is like the work of a successful novelist. In fact, the opposite is the case. Publishers who have a Catherine Cookson, a Dick Francis or a Wilbur Smith on their books already will not be even the slightest bit interested in a pale and watery copy by an unknown someone who (let us face it) cannot write even half so well as these experts.

Once a writer has established himself in a corner of the market and become the recognised authority in that type of work, a new writer would be wise to avoid trying to compete. In the same way, if you found you wanted to write a thrilling saga about the American Civil War, seen through the eyes of a wilful Southern belle who was determined, whatever the cost, to survive, you should first read *Gone with the Wind*. You would almost certainly find that Margaret Mitchell had written your novel, only far better than you could have done it. And even if you disagreed and thought you could have done a better job, no publisher will be interested in a new version of *War and Peace*, because you have always thought Tolstoy didn't

handle the subject properly.

Your novel has to be your own work, something that is not a copy, an imitation, 'in the style of' or heavily influenced by the work of any other writer. It has to be, in so far as is comfortable for you, the product of your own original and unique brain, something you have confidence in, but something too, which you have done some preliminary thinking about so that what you have to offer can be displayed to its best advantage. Considering the potential markets is the best way of giving your novel a good chance in the literary world.

You may not be at all sure that you want to write a formula type of novel. You may not be interested in category romances, from such publishers as Mills & Boon and Robert Hale. You may have no desire at all to write westerns. You may feel that doctor-nurse love stories with a hospital background are not for you.

On the other hand, you might also be entirely uninterested in science fiction or science fantasy. You may have no desire to write a crime novel. You might consider the complete range of books which can be categorised into types, and not want to write about any of them. Yet you still have your own story tugging at your heartstrings. So where does that leave you?

The reason why I have mentioned a careful study of the category type books *before* you begin to write is because these are the books that will be easiest to sell. There is (generally speaking) always a demand for romance, crime novels, hospital dramas, for science fiction, for long family sagas that cover several generations and detail the lives and loves of colourful and eccentric families. Fashion for historical novels, particularly those with a factual background, about Henry Tudor, say, or Elizabeth, tend to come and go. As in every other field, publishing follows current trends.

After taking the advice you read in this course and making your own investigations

into the subject, which you cannot begin too soon, you will realise there is no point in writing a novel which will be guaranteed to be rejected because it is not what publishers want. You can rest assured that no publisher will ever change his publishing schedule or take in a novel of the type he never deals in, just because it is good. New writers are disillusioned when they discover that talent and genius will not open all doors. Professional skills and techniques need to be coupled with that precious talent, to open doors in the literary world.

We have considered the category novels and you have rejected that idea. Your novel is going to be something special, something that does not fit into any category. How can you try to ensure that publishers will be interested?

I suggest that you familiarise yourself, first of all, with exactly what is meant by category books. Make sure you have read widely. Not every romance needs to be sloppy or predictable. There can be romances of great wit, charm and realism.

A crime novel, too, does not just consist these days of a battle of wits between the police or detective and the murderer. The crime novel has spread into the realms of deep psychological studies of the criminal mind, and the police officers are allowed to be human beings, rounded characters with flaws, faults and failings which can hamper them or underline their sterling qualities as they attempt to solve the crime.

If you study the sort of novels which are currently being published and read, you will find that, far from any new novel (even yours) being one on its own, something completely different from other books, it will generally fit, however loosely, into some category or other. Is it basically a love story? Then it might well come under the category of romance. Is it the study of a criminal or of anyone involved in a crime? Then it could almost certainly be categorised as a crime novel.

If you have created a new world and peopled it with strange civilisations, losing

yourself in the minutiae of every detail, your novel could well be a wonderful example of science fantasy. If you have spent hours on the technical side, detailing the way the gadgets on the spacecraft work, you are probably a writer of science fiction.

There is nothing wrong with writing a book which can be fitted into a category. In fact, it is difficult to write a book which does not in some way have a suitable slot it can slip into. And this is where you can consider any novel you have completed or started so far, to see whether there is any chance of putting your early work to good use. Consider all completed work as well as your new ideas, against the background we are currently investigating.

### **What publishers want in a novel**

If you were able to ask any publisher: ‘What are you looking for in a novel?’, he would almost certainly not be able to tell you. Publishers can explain at great length what they are *not* looking for but they only know what they are really keeping their eyes open for when it actually lands on their desks.

This makes things very difficult for aspiring writers – but fortunately we are able to narrow the field a little. As we have already seen, no publisher will take a novel in a category he does not handle: children’s publishers will not consider romance or science fantasy, for instance, and publishers of romance will not take advanced feminist novels or crime. You can find out something about each publisher in the *Writers’ & Artists’ Yearbook*, published annually by Bloomsbury. Back up your research here by examining books in libraries and bookshops, noting who the publishers are and forming a catalogue of your own of publishers you personally think you might be able to write for and ones you want to avoid.

It often helps if you write to the publishing house in question and ask whether they provide guidelines for new authors. A polite letter and a sae cost little, and might give you just that piece of valuable advice you need to stop making

an unnecessary mistake that might cost a sale. Some publishers are extremely helpful, and will consider a book on the strength of a synopsis or summary of the plot and the opening two or three chapters. They will sometimes give you help and advice as you proceed, and encourage you to progress in the right direction for their requirements.

And even if this type of personal encouragement is not forthcoming, the guidelines publishing houses send out can be worth their weight in gold. They will explain the sort of books the publisher considers, and details like the preferred length, the style, whether to write in the first person or the third person, whether explicit sex is allowed, and so on.

The length of a novel can be very important. As we have already seen, fashions change in the publishing business, largely to accommodate the requirements of the printing and publishing costs. It may not have occurred to you that the length of your book really matters, and you might well have no idea how long your completed novel is, nor how long your new one will be. But this is something that should always be at the back of your mind.

If you do not have a word count facility on your word-processor, the way to calculate the length of a manuscript is to take a sample of the number of words in each line (over about twenty lines) from anywhere in the script. The average of these line will give you, roughly, the number of words per line. Then count how many lines there are on a page. Multiplying the number of words per line by the number of lines per page, will give you, roughly, the number of words on each page. You can then multiply this by the number of pages in the manuscript in order to find the number of words in the book. Or, if you have not already completed your book (or even started it) and want to know how many pages it will need to be, you can work out roughly how many words you would normally use on an average page in the way we have discussed above, and multiply this by an appropriate

number of pages to give you the answer you need – 200 pages, for instance, might give you a manuscript of 50,000 words.

So what is the best length for a novel today? Even this simple question cannot be answered in a few words. In the past, people often wrote very short novels (novellas or novelettes) which were acceptable to publishers, but nowadays, nothing under about 45,000 words stands much of a chance, and even then, a novel of less than 55,000 words or so does have to be written especially for a certain market or it will be regarded as too short by the average publisher.

On the other hand, a type of novel very much in demand is the family saga which has to run to a phenomenal length of 120,000 words plus. These books again are specially written to suit the requirements of the market and a new writer would be foolish to embark on such a lengthy book without having at least a good idea of who it was intended for, their guidelines and, if possible, an encouraging word from the firm in question.

It may seem ridiculous that a writer will expend a lot of time and trouble on a book that might take months or even years to write, before even considering the potential publishers and readers, but amazingly this is so very often the case with new writers of novels. The myth that a novelist exists in some sort of ivory tower, along with the novelist, and never actually comes into contact with the rest of the world until it miraculously appears in bookshops and on library shelves, has been responsible for a great deal of disappointment and heartache.

At least three-quarters of the people who set out to write a novel will stop before the halfway mark. Another large chunk will find that halfway is as far as they can go. Perhaps one in fifty, or even fewer, will reach the end. And even then, they might be faced with the heartbreak of rejection after rejection, never knowing why they are being rejected, or what they have done wrong.

This is why we are looking at the market for your novel before we even consider the writing of it. Regarding previous novels you may have written and had rejected, you will have to look them over with a critical eye. Do they fit into some slot or category, or could they be edited to do so? It is highly likely that a first novel will benefit from some editing, and if you know what you are doing – cutting your manuscript to the required number of words to suit a certain publisher for instance, or emphasising the love element to fit into the category of romance – you might be able to pull a previously unsaleable manuscript into a shape that will stand a far better chance of success.

Many new writers imagine that the writing of a novel involves putting down exactly what you like, how you like, and at the end laying down the pen and considering the task complete. In fact, as we have seen, there is a lot of skilled technical work involved, and it is this attention to detail and tidying up which can make all the difference between a good, saleable novel and a self-indulgent waste of time. The professional novelist learns to take time and trouble over technicalities, market study and presentation. The artistic amateurs are the ones who write masterpieces that never get anywhere, and complain bitterly because nobody can see their potential. In fact, what the publishers see in their work is carelessness and lack of discipline.

### **How to tackle your own novel**

The basic reason why beginners prefer to plunge straight into their novel with little or no consideration for publisher, reader and suitability for the market, and to lose themselves in their creation to the exclusion of all else, is that not only is this far more pleasurable (avoiding boring commercial considerations in the joy of creating freely) but it gives them the sensation that they are completely immersed in the artistic world and are therefore above what seem like the more vulgar aspects of the business.

New writers are often discouraged if they are asked to regard their precious novel as a commodity to be sold in the market-place like one more can of beans. Surely this is not what art is about? Did Hemingway and Jane Austen and Henry James examine publishers' lists and haunt bookshops pawing through the latest bestsellers and making notes before they sat down to write? Apart from creating restrictions, such commercial considerations (it is felt) not only cheapen a writer's work in some way but take away its originality.

If it is pointed out to beginners that they could have improved their work immensely if they had tackled parts of the story differently, editing out certain threads which did not belong or underlining other elements that would give the romance or the suspense more emphasis, their reaction is often resentful.

'Why should I alter it?' I want it the way I have written it, otherwise it won't be my novel, my own story.'

You might well feel the stirrings of such rebellious thoughts yourself and want to ask how the novel you are proposing to write can indeed be yours, your very own personal creation, if you have to keep such a tight rein on your ideas and bear so many considerations in mind all the time. So let us consider a few more angles on the novel you are going to write.

It does not matter how many books have been previously written of the same type as yours, nor how many may follow. If yours is well written and bears the demands of the form you have chosen carefully in mind, then there is no chance at all that your book will lose its originality.

The ingredients you will put into it will be your own special style, the unique way in which you think and express your ideas which are personal to you alone. No writer has the same style, the same approach, the same creative spark, as any other.

Accepting the expert assistance of publishers who know the markets and editors who can reshuffle the words you have used to slightly better advantage, does not represent a threat to the concept of your novel. In the same way that a polished performance by a great actor is heightened by the support of the whole cast and production team, the publication of a new book is not accomplished by the author entirely unaided.

It is only with writing that some beginners imagine that, completely untrained, with no experience of the literary scene, they can compete with professionals who have been in the business for years and be successful at their very first attempt. Would a would-be pianist apply for the position of soloist with a great orchestra after only two lessons? Would someone taking evening art classes send their first sketches to the Royal Academy? Yet, amazingly, so many would-be writers sit down to produce a novel even though they have never before written a word, and refuse to accept that it might not be of a professional standard. Not only that, but they will continue to claim to the bitter end that they are better informed than people who have spent their whole lives in the business.

We have established how necessary it is for your own special, unique novel to be planned and written in accordance with the rules we have outlined, and with the prospects of its future – being accepted by a publisher and being enjoyed by the readership at which it was aimed – always there somewhere at the back of your mind.

Once you are aware of these considerations, you need not dwell on them continuously. The subconscious plays a large part in the creative process, and your subconscious mind will not forget that you have set yourself certain rules. In fact, you will find that it will actually work on these little problems for you.

For the moment, enjoy the pleasure of planning your novel, beginning to work on

your setting, characters and the story itself. Do not keep your creative instinct on too tight a rein. You are going to have to live with these people and in this setting for quite a long time, so forget about being commercial and circumspect now, let yourself go. Any novel which does not grip you by the throat with its story, fascinate and seduce you with its characters, draw you into the setting, is not worth writing. You are aware of the rules in the background but, more important before you plunge into the actual writing of your book, is the anticipation of how much you are going to enjoy the adventure.

Some people want to write for money, for kudos, as an exercise. But the best possible reason for setting out to write your novel is because you just have to, you cannot explain why. It is something you feel you have to do. Make sure you have some of this irrational urge driving you forward when you start off. You need to keep going for a long way, and you will have to be devoted to your characters and their activities or you may never make it to the end. Be sure you are not just going through the motions: write about people and situations which will enthral and absorb you. If you do not love your novel, it is highly unlikely that any disinterested reader will.

### **Useful notes**

Though you can apply many of the rules of novel writing to children's books, the children's market is very different to the market for adult fiction which we have been considering. Be aware of this if you have a children's book in mind.

### **Boring subjects or themes to avoid at all costs (they have been done to death):**

Secret formulae

Invaders from space holding Earth to ransom

Identical twins

A girl masquerading as a famous singer/dancer/heiress  
Lost Continents or other variations on the Atlantis theme  
People suffering from amnesia  
Unexpected discoveries of priceless treasure  
Mysterious wills or other cryptic clues, and chases by rival claimants to all corners of the globe  
Master criminals determined to conquer the world  
Survivors of the final holocaust getting together and starting to create a brave new world

However, if you think you could write a brilliant new novel on any or all of these themes, go ahead. But remember, novelists need to be far more sophisticated today than they ever were in the past. You need to include far more background and authentic detail to make your novel convincing nowadays. You will stand a better chance if you aim at relatively new markets which have not been fully exploited, or where there is a current demand.

As we have mentioned, fashions change, so keep an eye on the bestseller lists, check out the titles on special display in your local bookshops and, above all, read, read, read.

# Assignment One

Complete this assignment when you have studied and thoroughly understood Unit One, and send it to us to forward to your tutor.

1. Summarise the plot of a novel that you would like to write, keeping the length to two pages or less.
2. Why would this particular book/story interest a publisher? Why would it attract readers in a highly competitive market? Give a short explanation of why you think this would sell.
3. Examine the various types of novels currently being published (look in libraries, bookshops and so on) ie: romance, crime, science fiction etc. Try to get a picture of the fiction market and write a report of what sort of books are currently being published and where your book would fit in.

## Note:

1. Send your assignment as a Word doc attachment by **email: [writtingcourses@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:writtingcourses@warnersgroup.co.uk)**
2. To send your assignment by post, please type in double spacing on single sides of A4. Please write your name and student number at the top right hand corner of each page. Send to: **Writing Magazine Creative Writing Courses, Warners Group Publications, Fifth Floor, 31-32 Park Row, Leeds LS1 5JD**. Please enclose a stamped and addressed envelope for the return of your assignment.
3. If you have any questions or wish to raise any queries with your tutor, please use a Tutor Query sheet and send it with your assignment.

# ENJOYED THE FIRST MODULE AND ITCHING TO CARRY ON?

- **Continue your course at home**, in your own time with up to two years to complete
- **Receive each assignment designed especially for you** and your requirements
- **Learn and improve your writing skills** with the help and advice from your tutor

GET  
**20%**  
**OFF**  
THE FULL  
COURSE

**BOOK ONLINE:**  
<https://writ.rs/fiction>

\*Once you've booked, please email us at: [writingcourses@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:writingcourses@warnersgroup.co.uk) and let us know your full name and confirm you have taken the first module so that we don't send you it again!\*

Published by Warners Group Publications, West Street, Bourne, Lincolnshire PE10 9PH. Revised 11/14.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in Great Britain