

# Is there such a thing as writer's block?

## A new Woody Allen film dramatises the pain of a blank page. But is it all just a pose, asks Rob Hastings

There could scarcely be a more ironic source of artistic stimulation than writer's block. After all, this is the fabled terminator of literary careers, the paralyser of talent, the murderer of the muse.

Yet as well as wreaking havoc inside some of the finest creative minds, the dreaded block has also inspired plenty of books, films and even songs depicting its horrors, firmly establishing the image of the tormented author in the public imagination.

The latest contribution to the folklore is Woody Allen's new movie, *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*. It stars Josh Brolin as Roy Channing, an author whose marriage is suffering after five years of struggling to produce a worthy follow-up to his debut novel — and who turns to devious means to beat his block.

But for all the fictional portrayals of block — see also Spike Jonze's movie *Adaptation* and George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street* — what is it like in reality? Does it even exist?

Ask these questions of some authors and they will say it is just an excuse for a bald lack of ideas and diminished talent. Even Jonathan Franzen, who took almost a decade to write *The Corrections* and was at one point reduced to bleeding out just 30 pages in a year, has labelled the notion "vulgar" and said that he does not believe in it.

But try telling that to one of Britain's bestselling authors of recent years, who

asked to remain anonymous after confessing to *The Times* of his fear that talking about writer's block — which he compared to impotence — would render him powerless.

Encouragingly for our mystery author's sense of sanity, if not his paranoia, Harvard neurologist Dr Alice Flaherty believes that it is very real. She is the author of *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block and The Creative Brain*, and while studying numerous contemporary and historical sufferers — such as Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf — found similarities in brain activity to strokes, depression and mood disorders.

She even ended up treating patients for it, including the late William Styron, the author of *Sophie's Choice*. "I remember joking to my husband while I was writing my book that if I got fired I could start up a 'quack' writer's block clinic," she says. "I didn't get fired, but writers started coming to me, saying: 'Fix me!'"

One of the reasons some people believe that block is just an affectation of the precious and the untalented is that the term is used so loosely. But Dr Flaherty offers a reassuringly clear-cut diagnosis: sufferers do not write despite being willing and intellectually capable of doing so, and they experience emotional pain because of this.

Unwelcome droughts in productivity have haunted other kinds of artists too: Sergei Rachmaninov experienced it, for example. But perhaps because they can describe their pain most directly, writers seem to have claimed this infamous deadlock as their own.

Joseph Conrad, in a letter to a friend in 1898, gives an insight into just how intense this pain can be. "I sit down for eight hours every day," he wrote, "and the sitting down is all. In the course of that working day of eight hours I write three sentences, which I erase before leaving the table in despair.

"Sometimes it takes all my resolution and power of self-control to refrain from butting my head against the wall. I want to howl and foam at the mouth but I daren't do it for fear of waking the



**Sufferers tie themselves up in knots, but may still find it easy to write in other genres**

baby and alarming my wife. After such crises of despair I doze for hours, still held conscious that there is that story that I am unable to write. Then I wake up, try again, and at last go to bed completely done up. So the days pass and nothing is done."

Block can hit authors in a variety of ways. Truman Capote and Ralph Ellison suffered from debilitating perfectionism, whereby they could muster page after page of copy yet believed that what they were writing was worthless, and so kept endlessly scrapping or reworking it. Others begin hyper-editing, suffocating their work

by starting to edit and re-edit before getting more than a few pages in.

This may not be quite as dramatic as block turning Jack Torrance into a psychopathic killer in *The Shining*, but for fellow authors it is terrifying stuff.

The case of Conrad, for example, sounds horribly akin to locked-in syndrome (in which the mind functions normally but the body is paralysed).

In his letter, he went on: "The worst is that while I'm thus powerless to produce, my imagination is extremely active; whole paragraphs, whole pages, whole chapters pass through my mind. Everything is there: descriptions,

dialogue, reflection, everything, everything but the belief, the conviction, the only thing needed to make me put pen to paper."

Conrad's eloquent description of his problem raises another question, of course. If he was so badly blocked, how was he able to document its effects with such remarkable lucidity?

Curiously, the spectre can affect one form of writing profoundly while leaving the author freely able to produce other kinds. Dr Flaherty cites Samuel Coleridge as an interesting example of this. "He had block writing poetry but could still churn out magazine articles," she says. "I think it was because he didn't care about them as much. It does seem that the stuff that's most important to you, that's where the block comes in."

Nobody is going to be anxious about e-mails, but self-criticism focused on one all-important project can put a complete halt to that alone. This is shown in the Sky Atlantic series *Treme* — John Goodman's character can post endless rants about the devastation of New Orleans on YouTube, but finds it impossible to finish a novel on the same subject.

Wider psychological causes for the complaint are rife. One writer, for example, imagined his dead father reading everything over his shoulder and saying "This is terrible".

Environmental influences can play a part too. Last year the British musician

## The case of Joseph Conrad sounds akin to locked-in syndrome

Damon Gough (stage name Badly Drawn Boy) told how the room in which he normally writes all his music — the kitchen — was taken out of action for several months by building work. Suddenly forced to work in unfamiliar surroundings, he simply could not get going.

Jane Smiley, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1992, is one of few modern writers to have talked openly about suffering from block. Hers occurred when the narrative for her novel *Good Faith* began to unravel two thirds of the way through, and was then exacerbated by the shock of 9/11.

Rather than stewing on it like Conrad, however, Smiley took a break from writing and began reading again to regain inspiration. She believes that authors who become tied up in block should take a breather and refresh their minds, but feels that there may be a masochistic element of the American literary psyche that makes writer's block a badge of honour.

"In England the ideal writer is the productive one, but I think in America the ideal writer is the tormented one. People seem to be suspicious of the value of your work if you are productive," she says.

"When I was growing up and taking various writers to my heart, the ones I loved were the productive ones, and they were usually English. They saw their writing as their work and they didn't have this perfectionist attitude towards it. Somerset Maugham wrote 1,000 words a day, and if he finished his 1,000th word in the middle of a sentence he would just stop — which is actually a good idea, because tomorrow you'll get up and finish the sentence and you're off again."

Sometimes tips such as that are not enough when the brain's biochemistry is working against you, though. Dr Flaherty found that a common cause of block is a low level of dopamine, a molecule that encourages creativity and can be suppressed by antidepressants, so a change in medication is often necessary.

"So many writers have bipolar disorder and shouldn't be treated with antidepressants at all, or they're on the wrong type of mood stabiliser," she explains.

But the neurologist is keen to underline that she does not believe chemicals are the only trigger for artistic inspiration — there is a place for magic, too. For all the scientific research available, sometimes it can be little and even inexplicable things that help to cure block.

Dr Flaherty was surprised to find that one severely blocked patient was cured completely after following her suggestion to stop drinking so much coffee. Perhaps all those writers sitting with their laptops in Starbucks need to watch out.

## Take the acid test

Amanda Ursell



**Q** A new campaign says that any woman who is capable of conceiving should take folic acid. Is this "blanket advice" right and should I be doing anything else?

**A** Any woman who has a chance of conceiving is advised to take a folic acid supplement containing 400mg of this B vitamin. This is because folic acid is crucial in the development of a foetus's neural tube during the first four weeks of pregnancy.

A lack of it can increase the risk of neural-tube defects, leading to spina bifida and hydrocephalus. Research suggests that 70 per cent of the 900 UK pregnancies affected by these defects each year could have been prevented if the mothers had taken folic acid.

Women usually discover that they are pregnant around six weeks after conception. Also, about half of all pregnancies are unplanned, so you can see why campaigns encourage women to include it in their diets — just in case.

You can get folic acid in foods such as beetroot and oranges, black-eyed beans, peanuts, broccoli, spinach, avocados, wholegrain foods and fortified breakfast cereals. However, even a well-balanced diet provides only about 200mg a day, so you still need a supplement to boost your intake.

If you are trying to conceive you should also keep an eye on your weight, alcohol consumption and the amount of caffeine you have each day.

While we all know people who fall pregnant whatever their weight, as a rule you have the best chance of conceiving when you have a body mass index (BMI) of between 23 and 24.

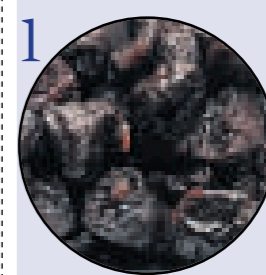
Regular alcohol consumption appears to alter levels of female hormones and prolong the time that it takes to conceive, as well as upping the chances of spontaneous abortion. It may also increase the risk of developing endometriosis, a condition that in itself makes conceiving harder.

Abstaining is probably the best option but if you can't manage that, stick to between one and five units of alcohol a week. A unit is the equivalent of half a standard 175ml glass of wine, half a pint

## Pecking order

### Canned fruit

Canned fruit is better for you than you think. These are rated in order of nutritional value. Add 20-30 calories for syrupy versions.



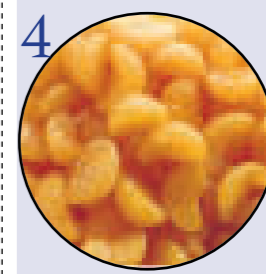
**Prunes**  
79 calories, 2.8g fibre per 100g  
This serving provides 2.2mg of iron, which is about a seventh of a woman's daily requirement and about a quarter of a man's. Prunes are also well known for their ability to prevent constipation thanks to their fibre content and the "sugar-alcohol" sorbitol.



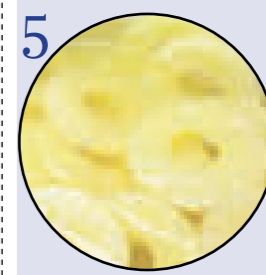
**Strawberries**  
65 calories, 0.7g fibre per 100g  
Although a 100g portion of fresh strawberries (about six small fruit) has 77mg of vitamin C — we need 40mg each day — canned ones nonetheless manage to hang on to 29mg of this important antioxidant, which promotes good skin health.



**Peaches**  
39 calories, 0.8g fibre per 100g  
Peaches provide supernutrients including carotenes, which are more easily absorbed once the fruit has gone through the canning process. Beta carotene is converted into useful levels of vitamin A, which promotes healthy eyesight and boosts immunity.



**Mandarins**  
59 calories, 0.4g fibre per 100g  
Like other canned fruits, levels of potassium — a mineral believed to play a role in balancing blood pressure — are left virtually unchanged during the canning process. Mandarins also provide plenty of vitamin C.



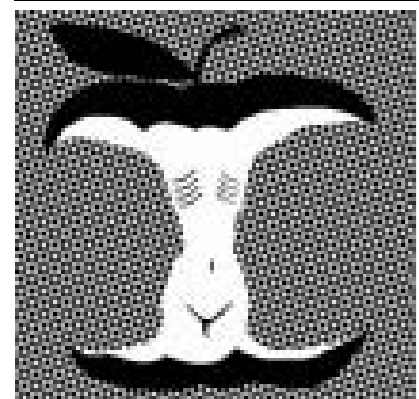
**Pineapple**  
47 calories, 0.5g fibre per 100g  
Pineapple contains an enzyme called bromelain, which can help with the digestion of protein. Unfortunately, it is destroyed when the fruit is heat-treated during the canning process. But all is not lost — a 100g serving of tinned pineapple still provides about 13mg of vitamin C.

## Even a balanced diet will provide only 200mg of folic acid

of normal lager or beer or one shot of spirits. As for caffeine, having more than 500mg a day appears to interfere with the implantation of a fertilised egg in the lining of the uterus. An espresso shot has around 75mg of caffeine, a can of cola or diet cola 40mg, a small bar of dark chocolate 50mg and milk chocolate 25mg. Energy drinks can have anything from 80 to 200mg of caffeine and cold remedies 40mg.

For further reading, a new book — *Bumpalicious* — by Denise Van Outen (Headline) gives more easy-to-follow pre and post-pregnancy nutrition advice.

If you have a nutrition question, e-mail [amanda.ursell@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:amanda.ursell@thetimes.co.uk)



## AN APPLE A DAY

Emma Woolf

Spring is officially here and it's my favourite time of year. And this week, I have decided to be happy. I sense that I've been negative lately, but that is not really me. After all, this column is all about new beginnings.

My weight is back on track and I'm not freaking out about it. I'm counting my blessings and staying positive. Blowing a kiss at the lorry driver who nearly knocked me off my bike (instead of swearing at him); carrying my neighbours' cardboard boxes down to the recycling bins (instead of raging at them). It's true: smiling makes you happier.

One of the best things about this journey has been the new people I've met. You lose a lot of friends when you "come out" about something such as

anorexia (they know who they are). If you've ever had cancer, gone through a bereavement or divorce, you'll know what I mean: people get embarrassed, they don't know what to say.

I don't mind. I've been here before — when my lover committed suicide — and I know that the friends who stay close are the real ones. And the new ones are pretty good too! This morning a woman e-mailed me out of the blue, relating her experience of tackling anorexia: "Half of me feels amazing to have energy, laughter, the ability to sleep and read. But I feel this loss, as my anorexia is fading little by little. I still have scary moments but I realise that my anorexia is terrified as it loses its grip on me. . . . Do you find that you have the joy in the simplest things



To follow Emma Woolf's diary online, go to [thetimes.co.uk/appleaday](http://thetimes.co.uk/appleaday)

again? I hope you get those moments as they are truly motivating. The other day I sat in front of my bowl of porridge and thought 'Wow porridge is the most amazing thing ever!' and ate the lot. My love of reading has returned; I can sleep through without bruising my hipbones on the mattress. It's amazing, to feel this contentment again."

It galvanised me, this e-mail. She sounds so happy. So anorexia isn't all doom and gloom. Recovery is a struggle, but it's also an awesome process of rediscovery. I had one of those moments of intense happiness this afternoon, sitting on my balcony in the sunshine eating raspberries.

It's important to keep things in perspective. Single or coupled-up, baby or no baby, life is precious.