



Illustration: Igor Saktor

To catch an inner novel

Alan Gold

A Novel in a Year

By Louise Doughty

Simon & Schuster, 265pp, \$24.95

WHEN Louise Doughty confided to her local second-hand bookseller that she was going to write a novel, he told her: "Not another book. The world is full of books; why would you want to add to them?"

Undaunted, she has gone on to become one of Britain's most successful novelists, playwrights, broadcasters and newspaper columnists, and this year has been appointed as a judge for the renowned Man Booker literary prize.

Lauded by critics for her captivating style, Doughty is in Australia to give a masterclass in creative writing at the Perth Writers Festival.

Her appearance follows the extraordinary success of *A Novel in a Year*, the weekly column she penned for Britain's *The Daily Telegraph*, in which she advised her readers that if they really wanted to become writers, she would mentor them through her column and the newspaper's website to help them achieve their dreams.

"I had no idea whether or not it would be successful," she says, "but thousands of people responded. The editor was stunned, as was I."

Her book *A Novel in a Year*, based on the column, is a compendium of good ideas to help "those millions of avid readers who know there's a novel in them somewhere, but don't know how to bring it to the page".

According to Doughty, it was Australian novelist Elliot Perlman who provided her

favourite piece of advice to aspiring writers: "Think what you are prepared to sacrifice."

A Novel in a Year is for those who are interested in enhancing their enjoyment of the art of reading just as much as it is for apprentice writers who want to learn the intricacies of the creative process.

Divided into preparatory sections full of anecdotes gleaned from her *Daily Telegraph* column, followed by exercises to develop skills in plotting, character development, tempo and much more, *A Novel in a Year* is vastly superior to so many of the patronising how-to books written by novelists eager to earn a quick buck.

Doughty has written her book in such a way that it seems as though she's sitting beside the writer in the small hours, always there to assist with ways of overcoming blockages.

My favourite exercise, and one that is equally useful for experienced novelists as for beginners, is when she asks her students to pick a section of something they've already written, do a word count, and then cut the words by one-quarter. She suggests initially cutting all the adverbs, then the adjectives, not just whole paragraphs, because "that's cheating".

"I want you to trim sentence by sentence, so that everything that happens in the first version is still there, but pared down to the bone; I'd be surprised if, after honest analysis, you think the longer version is better," she writes.

Ah, if only half the novelists whose books I've read recently had thought of doing this.

Alan Gold has written 17 novels and is still learning.

Louise Doughty will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival.