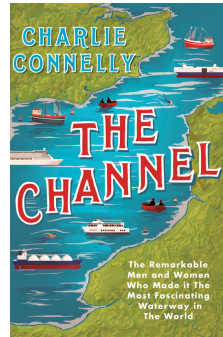


MEET THE AUTHOR

Best selling author and award-winning broadcaster **Charlie Connelly** on reading and writing books and what inspires him



If there was one book you would recommend to a friend what would it be and why? J.L. Carr's 'A Month in the Country' is a book I've given to many friends over the years. For one thing, it's short and my friends are all a bit dim so it means they don't have to concentrate for very long, but mainly, it comes as close to perfection in fiction as anything I've ever read. A First World War veteran arrives in a village to restore a medieval fresco in a parish church in a novel that has everything: history, love, a sense of place and most of all a tangible human warmth, in the writing and the characters, that make A Month in the Country a huge, infinitely rewarding book gathered into a startlingly small number of pages.

Which was your favourite book as a child? I used to devour a series of books by Gordon Boshell about a terrific character called Captain Cobwebb. He was the magical uncle of a pair of twin boys who, whenever they were bored, would rub a pimple on their fingers to summon Captain Cobwebb and be spirited away on an amazing adventure. I've never forgotten the sense of wonder those books instilled. I also read a TV tie-in novel of the American soap opera 'Dallas' at a much younger age than I should have as it was absolutely filthy. I still haven't recovered.

What book are you reading now? 'How Much of These Hills is Gold' by C Pam Zhang, a novel about a Chinese-American family in the American Midwest during the 19th Century. I read it last year when it was longlisted for the Booker Prize and it absolutely blew me away. I've picked it up again to immerse myself in some of the most beautiful prose I've ever read. One of those writers so good that I can't decide if they're inspiring or make me want to pack up writing altogether and be done with it. It's so good I'd be pressing copies on strangers in the street if it wasn't only out in hardback so too expensive to dish out willy-nilly.

Which book have you read that surprised you, and why? 'Moby Dick' by Herman Melville. It's absolutely massive so the fact I got through it at all surprised me at first as I'm a notorious non-finisher of long books. But I was also surprised that what on the face of it is a simple tale – man obsessed with whale goes to find whale – is packed with so much more: philosophy, history, psychology, memoir, comedy, science, adventure, tragedy, it's a book with everything, a work of towering, shimmering, thrumming genius. Bizarrely it barely registered during Melville's lifetime but since the turn of the 20th century 'Moby Dick' has emerged to tell us a great deal about life, the world and the times we live in. Since reading it I have also discovered that I have a tangential but tangible ancestral connection to 'Moby Dick'. So that was another surprise, meaning that you pretty much only have to mention 'Moby Dick' and my eyebrows shoot up.

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What was the last book that made you laugh? I return regularly to 'The Code of the Woosters' by P.G. Wodehouse, the only author ever to actually make me laugh out loud. Any of Wodehouse's books are enough to have my shoulders shaking but 'The Code of the Woosters' is the tippest of the toppest. His gift for hilarious similes would be enough, but no comic writer has come close to emulating Wodehouse's unfailingly immaculate comic timing. Rhythm and timing are the most important factors in humorous writing and, oh man, Wodehouse had rhythm and timing.

Whose biography would you like to write? I've read both volumes of Joyce Grenfell's autobiography which are both beautifully written accounts of a remarkable life by a very funny, incredibly talented woman. She was a bit of a polymath – actor, writer, and a pioneering woman stand-up comedian among other things - and polymaths for some reason never quite get the credit they deserve. I'd love to write a biography of Joyce Grenfell.

What inspired you to want to write? I was a pretty lonely, timid kid who didn't have a clue where he fitted into the world, so I think I started writing in an effort to claim a bit of space for myself, even if it was just in my own head. Then when I was about 12 I read 'The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy' by Douglas Adams and suddenly the universe turned to colour and I wanted to explore it all and write about it all.

What are your top tips for people wanting to write a book? First of all, and above all, trust yourself.

Read a lot and remember the writers you like and why you like them. Don't analyse them and certainly don't try to copy them, the more you write the more their influence will manifest itself naturally as part of your own unique voice. Just read and enjoy. And keep writing, whenever and wherever you have the opportunity. The more you write the better you'll get and the more you'll sound like yourself. Also, don't try to write like you think a writer SHOULD sound. That won't work at all. My barometer for that is the word 'somewhat'.

'Somewhat' is a dead giveaway that someone is trying to sound writerly rather than sounding like themselves. If you ever use the word 'somewhat' I promise I will track you down, sneak up on you and poke you in the eye with a forefinger when you're least expecting it. Avoid 'somewhat' and you'll be on the right track while also not having a sore eye.

Do you have a message for our NHS front line staff? I worked for the NHS for a while as an

operating department orderly and was in awe of everyone from surgeons to porters to cleaners to nurses to consultants to the old ladies who would go round with their trolley every day stocking up the wards with surgical supplies. It's an incredible organisation that manages to flourish and keep the nation patched up, mended and revitalised despite being permanently under extraordinary pressure – even when I was on the payroll back in the olden days of the early 1990s so it's been a permanent state of Damocletian anxiety - of which we can all be proud.

