The following interview appeared on the Arvon Foundation website in 2007/08

1. What do you write?

A. Novels (*The Lock*, Smaller Sky, 13 February 2002 and *Invisible*, recently finished -- for further details about both titles, visit my website http://www.frankegerton.com) and book reviews and features (various publications since 1995, in particular the Times from 2002).

I also edited The Oxford Writer, the newsletter of Writers in Oxford, from 2001-2004.

2. How often do you write and where's the best place to write for you?

A. When I'm working on a novel, I try to write every weekday, although inevitably there are gaps (I have to write fiction round my part-time job as library cataloguer at the Oxford Union and my reviews -- and from November 2007 I'll also be teaching long fiction on the Oxford University undergraduate diploma course in creative writing).

I tend to write fresh stuff in the morning and do the rewriting in the afternoon or evening. When conditions are ideal I write at a small table by the window in our spare room, which overlooks the street, Cotswold stone buildings and trees. On such days I write on WH Smith A4 using a Berol Venus HB pencil. But mostly I'm tapping into a handheld computer on the 18 and 100 buses. The rewriting gets done on the handheld or my desktop pc.

Reviews and journalism get written directly into the handheld or pc. Pieces get printed up and scribbled over endlessly until I'm satisfied. Most reviews are rewritten a dozen times but the record is somewhere in the 30s.

Curiously, now that I'm a veteran bus-writer (6 years), I find my most productive writing time is tapping away on the bus -- it's something to do with moving along and there being just enough going on around me (generally - just occasionally there's too much) to stimulate but not distract.

3. What are your inspirations and influences for your writing?

A. Places are key inspirations. My first novel *The Lock* was set in Oxford and Gloucestershire -- in particular, on Osney Island, Oxford, where I lived for nearly 14 years, and along the Thames-Severn canal where it passes through the valley below the village of Sapperton, near Cirencester. The novel fictionalises both locations but, I hope, conveys the aspects that made them so special to me. I used to love walking along the Thames from Osney and learning about the birds and plants and the water's endlessly changing colours and moods. At one point in *The Lock* characters visit a pub on the Thames-Severn canal. I first drank at that pub in the late 1970s -- and it is pretty much the same now as it was then, which strikes me as a rather wonderful, and rare, thing.

I'm also inspired by people -- people I see or overhear, friends, colleagues, lovers and relations. I'm fascinated by people and spend a lot of time trying to extend and deepen my understanding of how they feel, think and behave. The stories and jokes people tell, the things they go through and how they survive are essential sources of inspiration to me as a novelist.

I don't tend to use people or places verbatim, as it were, in my stories. Characters and locations are composites of real people and places. In general, the correspondences between characters and real-life people are far less than those between settings and real places.

I am also inspired, and kept on my toes, by reviewing books regularly (about 100 over the last 12 years). One's sense of what novels are, one's creativity and motivation are all refreshed by the experience of reading critically and writing about it.

One of my defining influences was Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. I remember reading the TLS review of it in Chippenham library, ordering the novel from the bookshop in Chipping Sodbury, collecting it a fortnight later and reading it in a sitting. I took my dog for a walk afterwards, my head buzzing, and autumn colours had never looked so vivid, life had never felt so fresh. Not that I was entirely easy about the story -- there are some very disturbing bits in it -- but I was amazed by the power of the writing. Reading McEwan's book didn't make me want to write like him but it made me determined to write. Years later I interviewed Ian McEwan at his house in

Oxford, which was a great privilege.

I've been influenced by writers such as Thomas Nashe, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*), John Cowper Powys (*Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*), Angus Wilson, Barbara Pym, John Wain, Beryl Bainbridge, Patrick Gale, William Rivière and Arturo Pérez-Reverte (*The Queen of the South* has to be one of the most compelling novels ever!).

I'm also a great admirer of Iris Murdoch's work and am grateful to have got to know her a little in her last years. I am indebted to her and her husband John Bayley, who was an enthusiastic supporter of my early attempts at novel-writing. In the late 1990s I used to meet up with Mark Haddon and Kathryn Heyman every fortnight or so for about a year. Although I had a career as a critic I hadn't had any fiction published and really appreciated the feedback that these two established writers gave me (Kathryn had had two novels published and was teaching creative writing and Mark had written the award winning TV series Microsoap, as well as numerous children's books). Incidentally, I remember Mark emailing me about a book he'd written, which was set in Swindon and concerned a dead dog. I thought, it'll never sell. 10 million copies later...

Lastly, my outlook on life generally has been influenced by the philosopher Karl Popper and by the socialists Gerrard Winstanley, Karl Marx and William Morris. OK, I know that the last three are all Utopians and that their dreams don't work in the real world but I admire their idealism.

4. If you didn’t write, what creative art form would you most like to work in and be excellent at?

A. Music. I can't play a note and can't sing but I would have loved to have been a classical musician. I found, by the way, Imogen Holst's *An ABC of Music* to be an inspirational book, as far as novelistic form and structure are concerned. What I mean is that I found in her clear writing many metaphors that I could apply to fiction.

5. Is being published important to you? If so, why and if not, why not?

A. For years I wrote novels that weren't published. And who knows, will the novel I've just finished get published? Getting into print is, however, very important to me. Being published gives me a sense of connecting with other people and I think that's much better than writing in a vacuum. Having said that, I do believe that writing for oneself and one's family can be valuable in itself. When I was writing the stuff that didn't get published, I always felt that I was learning my craft and about myself, and was pleased with these benefits, but the ultimate aim always was to get published one day.

I was published as a critic a long time before *The Lock* came out and being in print as a journalist was a big boost to my confidence and kept me going as a novelist.

6. Do you think writing is in the genes or is the way you are nurtured the factor that determines whether you write or not?

A. I was at prep school with one of my cousins -- the cousin I feel closest to. We were both determined to be novelists from the age of ten onwards. The determination ebbed and flowed but has always been there. He hasn't yet been published but continues to write. We aren't the first writers in our family, though we are the first to write fiction. I do believe that there is a sensitive, perhaps sometimes brooding and slightly withdrawn side to our family's character, which comes out here and there in each generation. This side seems naturally suited to writing. So, there is, I think, something genetic about me writing. It's a kind of inevitability. The same impulse has led me to study English and to be a critic -- perhaps it's led me to be a library cataloguer too...

On the other hand, writing is such a varied, complex, multi-faceted activity, and we all know of people who've had similar feelings to me and of others who have simply found themselves falling into writing and making a big success of it. Perhaps it's truer to say that story-telling is a kind of universal human trait and most of us can develop it if we want to.

7. If you have been to an Arvon writing house, how did you benefit from the experience? What could be improved and if you think Arvon is important for writers' development, say a bit about why you think that.

I went to Totleigh Barton in 2002. It was a wonderful experience: the old house has a wonderfully warm, old-fashioned atmosphere and the countryside is outstanding! I get up early at home and go cycling -- at Totleigh I went for long walks. It was July and there were so many more wild flowers in the verges than at home in rural west Oxfordshire. I also sneaked away on two occasions to the local village, where I looked at the church and had a pint at the pub and read. Totleigh's setting was perfect for writing.

I also loved working with the other people on the course and the excellent tutors Louisa Young and David Flusfeder. We all got on really well and cooking and the evening sessions in the barn were great. It was a memorable -- no, unforgettable -- experience.

Improvements? More computers and an easier way of checking email (I used the office computer but the Internet connection was unreliable) -- but these things have probably improved anyway since 2002. In an ideal world, I'd have liked a single room (no offence Neil -- you were a great person to share with) but I realise that is likely to be an unrealistic wish financially.

The amazing benefits I got from the Arvon course were confidence and the feeling that I really was a writer. It might seem odd to say these things, the latter especially. By 2002 I had an Oxford English degree, had been reviewing for newspapers since 1995 and had completed a novel that was about to be published. I was also editing the Oxford Writer and was a member of both the Society of Authors and Writers in Oxford. And yet, since university, writing had been an intensely lonely experience. The only person I had read reviews and fiction to when I was working on them was my wife -- her support, encouragement and advice were tremendous but there were limits because she often felt uncomfortable about giving opinions (it's too easy for a partner to give an unguarded opinion that's taken the wrong way and then suddenly you're both set against each other...). And as far as feedback on reviews was concerned, it was pretty much non-existent. Editors generally don't give it, they just publish (you rarely meet them in any case). You didn't tend to meet people who'd read your reviews and if you did they usually

didn't comment on the writing of the piece itself but the content -- whether the book being reviewed sounded good or not. And though WiO is a wonderful social organisation, ones work is not generally discussed. You are simply accepted as a fellow writer. So, Arvon was really the first time I had read my work to a group of people. I saw people's reactions, my work was discussed, tutors made comments and encouraged, took the work seriously. Camaraderie developed: mutual respect and support. I came away from the course buoyed up, more determined than ever before to keep writing. It was a watershed moment.

8. Are there any ethical or moral dilemmas for the modern writer? If so, what are they? Do you encounter them in your writing?

A. I suppose the obvious dilemma results from the aftermath of 9/11. Unlike, Jack Straw, I think women who want to wear the veil should be free to do so when and where they want. We live in a free society, which values the freedoms of expression and speech highly. My feelings about writing in the post 9/11 world are similar to my feelings about the veil issue: I think people should be allowed to write what they like and that they should resist censorship and political correctness. By saying these things I mean neither that I am or am likely to be in the front line of political writing nor that I have insanely pluralist views and can somehow accommodate every daft thing that is written by all extremists. On the contrary, I have clear, quite narrowly-defined views. But I respect people's right to free speech, even if I think what is being said is rubbish. I also think that our society is quite mature enough to remain balanced in the face of extremist writing.

9. If you could have a cup of tea and a ginger biscuit with any writer, who would it be and where would you meet them? (You can meet them anywhere in the world.)

A. I think it would have to be Shakespeare and I'd like to meet him for a pint or two at the Fleece at Bretforton, which is not too far from his birthplace and, it being a rather old fashioned place, I think there is a good chance that he would feel at home there.

I'd like to discuss writing and how he composed his plays. But

above all I'd like to put a face, a voice and a personality to this huge void at the heart of our literary culture. And, of course, I wouldn't have the faintest who I would be meeting. As the door to the snug creaked open, would it be Will, or Christopher, or Ben, or the Earl of Whatnot, or even Mistress Such-and-Such (now that would be an intriguing surprise!).

10. What do you do about writer’s block?

A. I go for a walk or a cycle if the block is really bad. Having said that, I don't get writer's block that often (so far), but do walk and cycle every day. I think exercise keeps you sane. If the block is relatively slight, I force myself to write the next bit of the novel or the review, or whatever, even if I think what I'm writing is rubbish. Usually, the result isn't complete rubbish and something can be salvaged and improved. I think writing regularly is important too, as far as keeping writer's block at bay is concerned.

11. What’s the most over-used and over-valued word? What’s the most under-used and under-valued word? Why for both?

A. I've puzzled over this question. I don't know that I think in terms of over- or under-used words. Writing either works or it doesn't. A really repetitive piece, drawing on a small vocabulary can be just as powerful as a well-written highly erudite one.

Having said that, I don't tend to use 'however' very much in fiction -- I think it tends to sound too rhetorical and self-conscious -- and can always be cut, if it does slip in. When I see it in a novel or story, it often irritates.

I also think that in general -- in print, speech, everywhere -- the words 'care' and 'caring' are over-used. I don't criticise the impulse behind the use of the words. We should all strive to care, shouldn't we? But people -- me included -- often say they care about things they can do nothing about. In such circumstances these words are just feelgood phrases. In any case, we have so little time to care these days. Perhaps we should, though, be striving for a simpler, less selfish way of living that genuinely allows us to care more...

Under-used words: can't think of any, although I like the words 'mercurial' and 'vivid' and enjoy using them -- in moderation, of course.

12. If you had three top tips to share with other Arvon Friends for how to write and keep on writing, what would they be?

A1. One of the best pieces of advice Iris Murdoch gave me was to keep flicking back and forth through one's manuscript when one was working to check previous scenes for loose threads that needed to be gathered up and woven into the narrative. I think this is an essential practice if one is going to produce something substantial, effective and aesthetically pleasing. I knew Iris, though, near the end of her life and I sometimes wonder whether she was particularly aware of the need to do this because she was beginning to find holding narratives together difficult. If so, there is tremendous poignancy to her advice. It is nevertheless a terribly important technique, especially for the young writer.

A2. I think dialogue is very difficult to write well. An exercise I found helpful for improving my dialogue writing was to rewrite whole chapters, after I'd done them and revised them several times, as nearly all dialogue. There would be short descriptive sentences but only so many as were necessary to orient the reader. This approach threw the emphasis onto the dialogue and made one think about both how to tell a story using dialogue (useful when you want to vary the pace, say, that longer prose passages move at) and exactly what is being said. When the dialogue is stripped bare of narrative padding, one is often acutely aware that not much real sense is being said by the characters. In which case one really has to work at the dialogue so that one gives the reader a real sense of things being said and reflected upon by real people -- not just according to the internal, sometimes mercurial, thought-processes of the author. Sometimes, you'll read a piece of dialogue you've written and you're completely stumped. What does it mean? What was the logic that made it seem to make sense when you wrote it? If you can't understand what's going on, how can you expect readers to? I'm not saying that there isn't room for ambiguity and moments when the logic of the dialogue is more about a hunch that there is meaning there than anything you can put your finger on. But I don't think one should put much reliance on dialogue that doesn't have much thought-through substance in the hope that readers might somehow

divine deep significance in it.

Writing a chapter in dialogue also makes you think about how people say things and whether your dialogue sounds realistic. Speaking the dialogue helps in this respect too. Of course, though, you can't just set down real conversations verbatim in novels. What sounds real is really a very crafty series of effects, which involve artificial representations of ordinary speech, together with carefully seeded information and twists of thought, which propel the narrative and so on. Learning how dialogue can be both artful and sound natural is a hard lesson to learn but I think the technique of rewriting in dialogue helps.

A3. As does my third tip, critical reading. How do you find out what techniques enable you to write dialogue that's both artful and natural? Partly trial and error and personal judgement. But these things can be guided by the things you notice as you read writers you admire or are thought to be good. Find passages you think work well in terms of particular writing areas (dialogue, description, scene-setting, characterisation etc) and re-read them closely, trying to work out what makes them so effective.

A word of caution, though: writers just starting out -- and indeed some very experienced authors -- sometimes find reading other writers problematic, especially when they are working on their own books. If reading critically doesn't help you but makes you feel defeated or that writing is too high a mountain to climb, stop reading -- but keep writing!