

# The Typewriter

SOMETIMES YOU ENVY THEM. THE ALMOST SUPERHUMAN, EFFICIENT AUTHORS WHO DELIVER A BESTSELLING NOVEL, ON TIME, EVERY YEAR. WE MET VIVECA STEN AND TRIED TO WRAP OUR MINDS AROUND THE CONSTITUTION OF A HUMAN TYPEWRITER.

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**WHEN I MET** Viveca Sten about one and a half years ago she left me pondering a couple of unanswered questions: Where is the crack in the façade? Is it possible for anyone to be that efficient without there being a negative? Can any one person really be that perfect?

When I ask Viveca she just laughs:

– Of course I am not perfect and I have a humble attitude regarding my authorship. But I am disciplined, solution-oriented and I know how to plan my day.

At that time her life looked like this:

She got up at six in the morning, alone, since her husband Lennart is away for four out five days a week. After half an hour's workout in their basement gym she would get ready and make breakfast for her two sons Alexander and Leo. At eight she would have dropped the kids off at school and set course for work as the General Counsel at PostNord (The Nordic Postal Service) in Solna north of Stockholm. Viveca would arrive shortly before nine and start a workday that seldom ended before 6 pm. Then it would be time to go shopping for dinner, cook, help the kids with their homework and make sure that the sports bags and hockey trunks were properly packed for the following day.

Writing did not start until ten pm and finished around midnight. On week-ends Viveca would get up early and write until eleven when her kids would get up.

A seemingly superhuman tempo that left her unperturbed. Four years after her debut she had released four crime novels that have sold over one million copies in Sweden, been sold to ten other territories and led to a successful tv-production.

**I WAS LOOKING** for the cracks in her façade and found three: As a consequence of several slipped discs at a young age, Viveca has to exercise every day just to be able to stand up, let alone function on a normal basis. She has a hopeless weakness for sweet rolls of any kind. She cannot, because of her size, handle more than two glasses of wine.

Oh well. So much for the flaws.

If one fast-forwards Viveca's life everything appears to have gone almost too smoothly.

The author grew up in an academic home where everyone read a lot. She interned at Bonnier Magazines, went to High School at Adolf Fredrik's School for Music and then earned her law degree and a degree in economics simultaneously. During her university years she was also a writer and editor-in-chief for several student newspapers. Following her studies Viveca began her professional career as a corporate counsel at SAS and ended up with the title General Counsel at PostNord. During that time she also

published two non-fiction works and contributed to two legal anthologies.

When she decided to realise her dream of writing fiction, it did not come as a surprise to many people that this too would be a success story.

– The longing to write has always been there, she says and explains. About the time when she had set up for herself the goal to write a novel, an editor from her non-fiction publishing house, Industrilitteratur, called. She wanted Viveca to write another book on outsourcing.

– I thought: God, that's so boring! Then summer came and the thought of writing a novel grew stronger.

One day Viveca was walking with her daughter Camilla on Sandhamn, the island where Viveca has spent all her summers since childhood. All of a sudden she stopped and started thinking about how people would react if there was a dead body found in the middle of this idyllic setting.

She smiles:

– I wonder what other lawyers think about when they are on vacation. Do they have as homicidal thoughts as I do?

After the walk Viveca sat down and wrote what would become the first and the last chapters of her debut novel *Still Waters* (Swe: *I de lugnaste vatten*).

– That my story would be set on Sandhamn was a given - I love this island. That it would be a murder mystery was equally clear, as a lawyer I am trained in the art of structure and logic and there cannot be any loose ends in my contracts or press releases. The same goes for a crime novel. So I had the main ingredients for a stew already. All I had to do was put in the rest and stir-

The manuscript was soon finished and Viveca prepared to send it to a publisher.

– Please don't laugh at me now, but I was completely stuck in my non-fiction world. I didn't know any of the rules or that Albert Bonniers Publishing house was the place where everybody wanted to be.

Viveca went to her bookshelf, pulled out three books at random and looked for their publishing houses. It turned out to be Forum, Natur & Kultur and Norstedts. Viveca sent her manuscript to all three. Five weeks later publisher Karin Linge-Nordh called and said that Forum wanted to publish *Still Waters*.

– I was about to turn off my phone and go into a board meeting. I was completely bowled over by her call and after the meeting I had to call her back and ask if she wanted to publish the book or not – I was simply not sure of what I had heard.

**SEVERAL EYEBROWS MUST** have been raised at the publisher's when Viveca's manuscript arrived. She had attached a neat

folder with a description of the structural elements of the book, a formal CV and pictures of herself, as well as a target market analysis and a marketing plan for how the books should be marketed and sold.

– When I first met with the people at the publisher's, I brought along a résumé for book two and three. In addition, a friend of mine who works in the advertisement business had helped me draw up a PR-plan that probably would have cost around 50 000 Swedish crowns to develop. I didn't know anything about the publishing business but from my side it was normal to work like this – to be professional.

Viveca is convinced that it is just as important to think commercially in the book business as in the rest of the business world.

– I try to be just as professional about my books as I am about the law. I keep track of my deadlines and always deliver on time. I know a year in advance what date my next manuscript has to be delivered and when I will get the proof back. I always respond to emails and return calls and I know that it is appreciated. That is how you work in the corporate world, why should the book business be any different?

Viveca took a writer's course after her first book had been accepted by the publisher and it only made her more convinced that she would write other books.

After her 2008 debut Viveca wrote *Inner Circles* (Swe: *I den innersta kretsen*), *Guiltless* (Swe: *I grunden utan skuld*) and *Tonight You are Dead* (Swe: *I natt är du död*). Her debut novel was also adapted to film and titled *The Sandhamn Murders* (Swe: *Morden i Sandhamn*).

Releasing one book a year is an achievement even for a fulltime author. Doing it alongside a fulltime job, maintaining a home and a family appears almost superhuman. But for Viveca it felt more or less natural-

- I am a good administrator and making everything work is a question of organizing your life and your hours properly. I love to write not least when I get to sit alone at Sandhamn. But when I left that bubble, took the elevator to a meeting with my co-workers and we were analyzing a particularly difficult problem or completing a complex transaction I was having just as much fun! I got a lot of creative energy from being a skilled lawyer, it was fun to find solutions and I wanted to remain in both worlds.

Nevertheless Viveca agonized over her life. She knew that she would have to choose one day, if only for physical reasons – she has a weak back and would in reality have needed 30-hour-days or ten-day-weeks to have time for everything. In the end she decided to leave her work as General Counsel at PostNord.

- I realised that being up and running for 23 hours a day would not go unpunished, she says.

- Life's too short to kill yourself in order to get everything done. In 2011 my daughter graduated from high school. Time moves so quickly and soon it's the boys' turn. It feels important to be there for them. I am not working less than before but at least I own my time now.

**SINCE I LAST** saw her Viveca has had new successes: *In the Heat of the Moment* (Swe: *I stundens hetta*) was released in 2012, it was number one on the hard cover book charts, the audio books charts and the e-book charts for two months in a row. Last Christmas her second book was shown as a mini-series on TV and seen by over 1.7 million viewers.

At the same time her audience has grown both in Sweden and abroad. Viveca has five books out and the sixth, *In Harm's Way* (Swe: *I farans riktning*) will be published in May.

So, how is Viveca's life different now from when she worked as general counsel?

- I am able to write during the day, which is wonderful- And I get a lot more sleep – you can't sleep as little as I did in the long run. Now I am able to spend much more time on the other parts of my authorship, the non-writing stuff. I travel to book fairs and visit publishing houses that publish my books abroad. This year I am going to Spain, Iceland, Germany, Norway and Finland. I have taken on a couple of board memberships and I hold many more lectures than earlier. At the same time I can be a more involved mother to my children.

**TODAY, VIVECA'S MORNING** starts at seven instead of six. She works out and has breakfast with the kids. If she has a "manuscript-day" she will write for ten hours. If it is a "work-day" the hours are set apart for PR and publishing house meetings, or interviews and events. Viveca is active on Facebook, communicates with her readers and still tries to answer all her emails within three or four days.

So, still full speed ahead.

- Yes, because I love what I do. My son thought that my new year's resolution should be to be better at doing nothing since apparently I am "always doing something".

Are you a control freak?

- I you had asked my former colleagues they would have said no. I am a big fan of delegating responsibility and allowing people to make their own decisions as long as they deliver. But I like orderliness, and I know it takes good planning to achieve your goals.

We are talking discipline here. It is obvious that words like anxiety and writer's block are completely alien to Viveca. She states that neither creative crises, nor alcohol or waiting to get inspired has anything to do with her writing, and adds:

- For me it is all about starting to write and never quitting. If it doesn't turn out well, then I will have to re-write. Sure, there are moments when I have trouble getting started but on those occasions I spend half an hour editing what I have already written and then I can continue. When I have finished writing one novel I have the résumé for the next one ready. I am taking a vacation in May and then I will start with the new manuscript. The first fifty pages are the most difficult to get out – I walk around at home, complaining and saying that this will never work- My family just laughs at me and in the end a new book will be written.

Viveca compares writing to running a marathon.

- You're excited but it's an uphill struggle in the beginning. At half distance things lighten up and the two last kilometres you dance your way towards the finishing line.

What is the secret to conquering the adversities?

- I have always been able to focus – my double academic degrees demanded it. In five minutes I can shift from being a lawyer, to Viveca the author, to the mother who helps her son with his homework.

Her ability to adjust has enabled Viveca to write at airports, on airplanes and on trains. Noise from her surrounding does not bother her, even though she would rather write at home or in her family's house on Sandhamn. And always to music:

- Last time it was Patrik Isaksson, Uno Svenningsson and Melissa Horn. This time it has been Petra Marklund, Peter LeMarc and Miss Li.

That sounds easy, but Viveca makes sure to point out that she works hard.

- I put in many hours. As a lawyer I have learned that working more than others leads to good things. I put in huge amounts of time on each book. When they are finally published I have probably gone through them around ten, twelve times. Writing is no walk in the park – I take all aspects of my authorship seriously, from writing a reply to my readers to doing an interview. I would never leave anything behind before it is as good as I can possibly have made it.

**SO, HOW LONG** will Viveca be able to write about Sandhamn? She laughs:

- Someone told me that I had killed off about five percent of the population on the island so far, so there are quite a few people left. However, there is a limit to how long you can keep writing about the same place, both the readers and I will eventually get tired of it. I have said, however, that I will write ten books, and I still have a lot of interesting venues left with respect to my main characters – Tomas and Nora. I am currently also working on another secret project and I have always

thought it would be fun to write a historical novel about the archipelago.

Viveca continues:

- I love to write, that is the base of it. If I have nothing to do I reach for my laptop and write a lecture, a speech, a column for a rainy day that I can publish later – anything. And even if I won hundreds of millions on the Lotto I would still not switch jobs or change my life, I love it just the way it is.

What would happen if the passionate writer Viveca was hit by writer's block, how would she overcome something like that?

- I am ruthlessly solution-oriented. I would sit down and analyse the problem from a logical point of view. What tools would I need to resolve it? Take a writing course, hire a coach, ask to work at my publisher's office to be less alone? The last thing I would do would be to remain at my desk sitting staring at an empty screen.

There you go.

Problem. Analysis. Plan. Tools. Solutions.

Action

Now you know how to do it.

Any questions?