



# Laptops are write pain for authors

**Georgia Graham**

IT HAS replaced the humble notepad as the author's tool of choice, but prolific writers hunched over laptops are beginning to suffer for their art.

Anthony Horowitz, creator of the Alex Rider series, has written 40 books. After delivering *Russian Roulette* — his latest manuscript — last week, he revealed how writing has become a pain in the neck.

Twelve-hour days before a laptop screen have left him one of the "walking wounded" with sore eyes, backache, neck pain and repetitive strain injury. "As a writer you become obsessive, wedded to the position you place your notebook in relation to the laptop," he said. "But you don't realise your body is awfully contorted."

Despite ensuring that his

desk is exactly 82cm (2ft 8in) high and spending huge sums of money on an ergonomic chair and a special laptop stand, writing on the computer is "so much more painful than writing with a fountain pen ever was," he said.

"You are always peering down at your laptop and it is a big strain on your neck. Back and neck problems are the bane of the modern age and it is something we really need to look at. It is astonishing the number of people injured — the walking wounded."

Writers are not the only sufferers. Research by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) shows that almost a quarter of Britons complain of back, neck or shoulder pain while using or carrying gadgets and some three-quarters of adults use a laptop daily for work. Chiro-



Shriver and Horowitz, inset, have suffered for their art

practicers are treating children as young as 11 for problems resulting from laptop overuse.

Laptops were designed to free deskbound workers and are now replacing desktop computers in many homes. But the unified body design of most of them brings its own problems, according to medical experts.

Awkward positioning of the fingers and body can cause nerve injury to the wrist, while a poor neck position and shoulder posture may give rise to muscle strain and soreness.

Signs of trouble typically come in the form of headaches, wrist pain, tingling in the fingers or thumb and neck and shoulder pain.

Lionel Shriver, 55, the author of 12 novels including the Orange prize-winning *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, took dramatic steps to avoid aches

and pains by refusing to sit at her desk 18 months ago. "I stand for everything now for up to 10 hours a day," she said.

"I had read so many things about how living a sedentary life sitting down all the time is terrible for you. I have been using a laptop to write since the 1980s and I figured if you are allowed a certain number of hours sitting down, I had certainly used mine up over the last few decades."

Shriver's laptop sits on two volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary on a normal-height desk and she sits down only for a daily cup of tea: "At the beginning there were aches in my legs and lower back, but all those pains have gone now."

Children are also presenting symptoms of chronic pain from laptop overuse. In one recent case an 11-year-old was treated

for chronic neck pain after spending his evenings doing his homework with his laptop balanced on the armrest of a sofa and with the television on in the background.

Rishi Loatey, a BCA spokesman, said: "Fifteen years ago we would typically see people with neck and back problems from a bad night's sleep or a car accident. Now we commonly see them after [they've been] using technology in contorted positions."

Dr Karen Jacobs, an occupational therapist at Boston University and founding editor of *Work*, the academic journal, is so concerned about the amount of time children spend on laptops that she has designed an app that reminds them every 30 minutes to take a break from the screen.

Last month she published a

study showing that while half of all schoolchildren use a laptop at a desk, one fifth use them on the floor and almost a quarter on their bed.

The study also revealed that an external keyboard and a mouse are less likely to cause neck and shoulder pain than the fixed input devices of a laptop.

"Laptops were designed for portability," Jacobs said. "I don't think anyone foresaw the explosion of their use among young people and their portability means they are ergonomically disastrous."

She advises users to "sit on a chair with the screen raised so the top of the screen is just below eye height. Sit directly face-on with a portable keyboard at a height where your arms are straight out in front of you. And use a portable mouse."

# Giant pearl linked to Bloody Mary

**Dalya Alberge**

HISTORIANS believe that one of the world's largest pearls, bought at auction in London for £155,000, was owned 450 years ago by Mary Tudor, Queen of England, potentially adding millions to its value.

Documentary evidence suggests that the pearl is the spectacular gem worn by Mary I (1516-58) when she posed for iconic portraits by Antonis Mor and Hans Eworth. A smaller pearl, "La Peregrina", also linked to Mary, sold for \$11.8m (£7.7m) in 2011.

The large stone surfaced a decade ago at a London jewellery auction, where it was bought by the current owner, the London dealer Symbolic & Chase.

No previous owners were known and in the catalogue it was thought to be "18th century or earlier".

However, evidence from European royal inventories suggests that it is a Renaissance pearl that was an opulent gift to Mary (the eldest daughter of Henry VIII) from her husband, Philip II of Spain.

It is the world's third-largest well formed pearl. Researchers found a reference to its exact length of 3.6cm (nearly 1½in), and

weight of 257.41 grains (a little over half an ounce).

Its story was pieced together by historians, including Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, who is curating a Renaissance exhibition in London for the Wallace Collection.

Research confirmed that the pearl had belonged to Empress Isabella of Portugal, the wife of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and mother of Philip II.

Philip gave it to his wife. After her death the pearl was returned to Philip who passed it on to his sister, Joanna of Austria, because it had reminded him of his "loveless marriage", according to Gschwend. It disappeared after being sold to a silversmith in 1581.

Martin Travis of Symbolic & Chase said: "It's almost like finding a new painting by one of the masters."

The Victoria & Albert Museum hopes to exhibit the gem in the autumn, after its unveiling at the Masterpiece London fair next month.

Beatriz Chadour-Sampson, co-curator of the V&A Pearls exhibition, said: "It is rare to find pearls with a heritage going back so many centuries and that have been in the possession of various royal households. It represents a part of European history."



The pearl as worn by Mary in a portrait by Hans Eworth

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