

# QUIZ: Your Unfinished Manuscript: Burn It, Bury It, or Let It Live?

By Holly Lisle

Your short story or novel has not been going well, or maybe you've even finished it but now discover that you hate it. At the moment of your greatest frustration, you conceive a delicious plan – you'll print it out in triplicate and feed each copy into a fire one hated page at a time.

If this is your situation, you have my sympathy: I recently tanked 283 pages of a novel that was going to all the wrong places, and even with a brutal deadline hanging over my head, I've never been so happy to see something go. Never been at this stage of dissatisfaction with your work? Don't worry – if you keep at it long enough you'll get there.

Big question, though? If you burn the thing, will you hate yourself in the morning?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Let's take a look at what you want to cook and see if there's anything in it worth saving. Answer the following six questions, actually taking time to write down the answers to each one (don't just do them in your head) – and keep track of your points for each answer.

## 1. Where's the theme?

- Can you write down, right now, in ten words or less, the theme? If you can, do it. (Examples of theme are: Love conquers all, good triumphs over evil, young man overcomes weakness to find himself, etc. ) If you knew

your theme right away, give yourself **ten points**.

- If you don't know what the theme is, can you locate some possible themes as you read through the material? Write the possible themes down as you find them. If you find one or more possibilities, give yourself **five points**.
- If you don't know the theme and can't find signs of a theme, give yourself **zero points**.

## 2. What's the story?

- Can you sit down immediately and write one sentence that sums up the story? Do it in thirty words or less. If you can, **ten points**.
- Not certain. Can you get the story in three sentences and under a hundred words? **Five points**.
- Neither one sentence nor three will untangle this thing and sum it up in a coherent fashion. **Zero points**.

## 3. Who's the hero?

- Can you name the single character who matters most to the story, and write down in one or two short sentences what this most important character wants or needs most of all? And is fulfilling this want the main point of the story? **Ten points** if you have all of this nailed down. **Subtract five** if you can list the single character and his needs, but your story is not actually about fulfilling them.
- If not, can you limit the story to two most important characters? Can you write down in one or two sentences their most compelling needs and wants? Is the story about fulfilling them? You get **seven points** if you get the characters and their needs, and if the story is about meeting those needs. **Subtract five points** if the story is about something other than meeting the most compelling needs of the two main characters.
- If you can do all of the above, but have to do it for

three or more main characters, you get **two points**. If your story isn't about meeting the needs of your crowd, **you don't get any**.

## 4. Where's the conflict?

- Can you find conflict (defined as the character or characters dealing with obstacles that stand in the way of their meeting their compelling needs) on every page? Look. If you have to, look with a microscope and a pair of tweezers, and on a disposable copy of the manuscript, go through with a highlighter and mark every instance where conflict occurs. (Note that conflict is not thinking about problems – it is dealing with them.) If you have marks on at least 80% of your pages, give yourself **ten points**.
- If you have marks on at least 50-79% of your pages, give yourself **five points**.
- If you have marks on less than 50% of your pages, your characters are spending too much time thinking, traveling from place to place, and drinking tea and coffee. **No points**.

## 5. Why does it matter?

- Can you write out, quickly and clearly, why this story matters, and to whom it matters? Are your reasons convincing? Do you care about them? Will anyone else? If you could write out reasons, and they mattered, either to you or to anyone else, **ten points**.
- If you had a hard time with this, but you finally came up with something, and you think with a bit of work the story could matter to someone, **five points**.
- If you had no reasons why the story might matter, either to you or to anyone else, or if the only reason you could come up with was that it would make you some bucks if it sold, **zero points**.

## 6. What do you love?

- Are there sections that, even though you're frustrated with the material, absolutely sing for you? Are there places where you can read through it and catch a taste of magic, a promise of wonder, something that makes you yearn to know what happens next? **Ten points.**
- Are there things about it that you like, characters that you care about even if you're not sure what to do with them, images or scenes that seem, if not compelling, at least pretty close? **Five points.**
- Nothing that you love, nothing that you like, nothing that makes you want to go on? **Zero points.**

All right – that's the whole thing. Add up your points. Let's go over the final tallies.

### **40-60 points – Let It Live**

You're tired, you're frustrated, you've put a lot of yourself into the story, and you are too close to the material. Back away from it for a while if you need to, but have faith that you have at least the bones of something that, with revision, is going to be worth your time. It might not even need much revision.

### **20-39 points – Bury It**

Stick it in a drawer, or slip it into your "I'll Get Back to This" file on your hard drive. Let it sit. If it starts to call to you and you start having dreams about how you could really bring the thing to life, go for it. Resurrect it, rework it, and be glad that you saved it. If you never manage to get back to it, you haven't lost anything but a few kilobytes of hard drive space or a few square inches in a drawer.

## 0-19 points – Burn It

Yes, really. Burn it. You are flailing at a dead horse, and if you keep up, you'll manage to burn yourself out on writing over something that isn't worth your time, your passion, your hopes, your effort. Watch it go up in flames, sing, "I'm Free, I'm Free, You Miserable Monster!" and move on to something that isn't eating you alive. (You can still keep a back-up copy on your hard drive, if you want, but file it under "Toxic Tales of Pain and Woe" and then just don't go there.)

Cutting a project loose is hard. You've already put work and blood and sweat and hope into it, and walking away is admitting defeat. But, honestly, sometimes you do lose one and not even endless rewriting will bring it to life. Writing is like everything else – sometimes doctors lose patients and sometimes marriages crash and burn and sometimes businesses fail... It's a part of life. Learning to tell a dead story from one that can be patched up and sent out into the world is a critical writing skill. Without it, you can lose yourself and your writing forever to one bad book that just won't let go.

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**NOTE:** Along with website articles like this one, and small writing classes, I offer a handful of big writing classes. If you need in-depth, step-by-step help revising your novel, take a look at *How to Revise Your Novel: Get the Book You WANT from the Wreck You WROTE*.

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