

How To (Legally and Ethically) Steal Ideas

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When I read something wonderful, I have varying reactions. Sometimes, I just get huge envious green goose bumps, because I know there's no way in hell I could have ever written that book or story, nor could I have written anything like it, nor am I worthy to walk on the same ground as the Master who created that tale. (Ted Sturgeon did that to me a lot. He also made me cry more than any other writer I've ever read, and I will never forgive him for dying before I had the chance to meet him.)

Sometimes, I am moved to unenvious rapture – I love what I've read, but I have no desire to emulate it. Brilliant books outside of my genre frequently have that effect on me. Robert B. Parker, for example, and Lawrence Sanders' Matt Scudder books both delight me, and I seek them out and read them as soon as they are available, even paying hardcover prices to acquire them – but I have no interest in doing anything like them.

But sometimes I am filled with passion and wicked larceny – what I read thrills me and catches at my gut and at my imagination and I just have to steal some part of it for myself. If you're a writer, you're a reader first – and if you're a reader who writes, you've felt the same way at least once in your life. Something you've read has made your heart sing, and you've thought, "I could *do* that. I could even do *better* than that."

And you should.

The ideas that thrill you will be the ones you write best, and whether they originate with you or with someone else, they're the ideas you need to be pursuing. Stealing ideas is an art; stealing them well is a fine art. I won't tell you what I've stolen because I've hidden my treasures well, and I got away with the thievery – but I'll tell you how you, too, can steal the ideas that set your pulse racing and make them your own. No plagiarism, no seedy ethics, no cheap knock-offs. When you're done stealing my way, you'll have a perfect new gem and the one you stole will still be in place and intact for others to steal, (which is why writing is a cooler career than gem cutting or jewelry design.)

Only steal the gem – don't steal the whole crown.

This is the first step in ethical thievery. You have to recognize exactly what it is that you've just read that gives you goose bumps. You may have loved the whole book (and probably did), but there was only one thing that left you breathless and shivering and hungry to steal.

Was it the way the author inserted vampires into a modern-day, urban setting? Was it the fact that humans and non-human creatures shared a world together as uneasy equals? Was it the idea of little people living beneath the floorboards? Or the plot of a passionate, doomed relationship between two people who could never be together?

Sometimes you'll know right off which perfect little ruby it was that snared you. Sometimes you won't. If you don't, you're going to have to take some time and dissect your emotions, because usually the immediate, visceral response to the idea that grabs you is that what grabbed you was the whole book, and that if you're going to steal what you loved, you're going to end up with your name splashed all over the news with the word "Plagiarist" attached. What grabbed you wasn't the whole

book, though. Really it wasn't.

You find your magical idea the way you weed a garden. First you pull out everything that isn't a strawberry plug or a green bean seedling, and what you have left is what's going to give you a delightful plot. So, in spite of the fact that you loved the book, now you have to tear it apart. Start easy, and work your way into the harder stuff.

For example, maybe you weren't thrilled with the milieu, which took place in Medieval Europe. So weed out everything about castles and knights and women in wimples and chastity belts. And maybe you liked the monk as the main character, but you have no interest in writing about monks, now or ever. So pitch the monk out on his ear. Then there's the bit with the maze-like library – well, damn, that was pretty cool . . . but when you consider it, it was merely window dressing. Not your goose bump generator.

And then you get to the secret relationship between the novice and the stable girl – the relationship that could never go anywhere because he was promised to the church and she was a whore – and BAM!, goose bump city.

This is the thing you're going to steal: a relationship between two lovers who cannot be together and know they cannot be together.

Time to move on to step two in your thievery . . .

Turn your prize inside out and backwards.

Now that you know what you're going to steal, you have to figure out a way to get away with your crime. Granted, you could write a story about a novice and a stable girl who prostituted on the side, but if you did, you would find yourself unconsciously echoing what the author you're stealing from did. Don't do that.

Rethink your idea, (and it is your idea, now, because you're stealing it fair and square), considering all the different ways that you could have two people who love each other passionately but who cannot be together, and will soon be torn from each other's arms.

The way you do this is to throw everything you can think of at the wall of your imagination, and don't stop until something sticks. (This is also known as The Great Pasta Test of Idea Done-ness.)

Let's run through one barrage, just to see how it goes.

You ask yourself, "In what situations can people be forced away from each other?"

And yourself answers, "Well – they could be on opposite sides during a war. What war? American Civil War, War of the Roses, World War I or II, Peloponnesian War, the Irish Troubles, the Vietnam War, the Six-Day War, any Celt invasion of anyone, any Norman invasion of anyone, any Roman invasion of anyone, . . ."

"No more war. What else?"

"They could be of different races. Aborigines and settlers in 19th-century Australia. Blacks and whites in 50's America. Chinese and anyone else in Old China. One of Ghengis Khan's invaders, and one of the invadees."

"But then we're getting back to war."

"Enough about the war already. How about this – they could be of the same sex in a society that doesn't condone same-sex relationships."

"Yeah. Or they could be of different species, like Linda Hamilton and Ron Perelman in that "Beauty and the Beast" TV show."

“So instead of being a historical novel, it could be a fantasy novel . . . hmmm. That might work.”

. . . and on it goes. If you do this long enough, some variation of your solo brainstorming will connect with your enthusiasm for your stolen idea, and you’ll find a story building in your head. Here are the areas you want to question in your brainstorming session –

- Time period
- Genre
- Culture and cultural differences
- Race and racial differences
- Sex, age and other personal details of characters lives
- Background events that effect the characters
- Character motivations
- Character careers
- and so on.

The list can be quite long – you only stop asking yourself questions when you get an answer or two that you love.

And once you have them, you . . .

Bury your gem in a forest.

Spend time building your own world, whether it is a variation on the town that you live in for a modern novel with aspirations to Great American Novel-dom, or a science-fictional swashbuckler with aspirations to future megabucks movie deals.

Put effort into developing your secondary characters, the multiple threads of other storylines that crop up, your main characters’ backstory (what happened to them before they got themselves into whatever mess you’re starting them out with), and the plot that evolves naturally from all of this work.

You’ll discover when you’re finished that the book or story

that you've written bears no significant relationship to the source from which you stole your idea. You will have created, instead, a wholly original, fresh work that, if you're lucky, will inspire someone else to steal from you.

With that in mind, then – happy larceny, and my wishes for a marvelous career of productive pilfering to you.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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