

How To Write For YOUR Right Audience

By Holly Lisle

A Little Bit Of Me, A Little Bit of You

So I'm writing this story about wizards and magic and treacherous Families and a magnificent artifact lost in a far-away land, and right in the middle of my work, I suddenly discover that what I'm **really** writing about are my beliefs regarding our responsibility for our own actions, no matter what excuses we might think we have, and about the roles that love and self-sacrifice play in our lives, and how we cannot wait for anyone – not even God – to rescue us. I'm throwing stuff in there about my childhood, my kids, my two failed marriages, my previous career as a registered nurse, speculation on what would happen to a religion if its Messiah appeared and all of the religion's adherents knew he'd come . . . and then he was taken away before he could fulfill any of his promises.

I'm throwing in all of my life but the pantry – and it's working. It fits. It may be a little unexpected, but it fits. Still, why is this stuff in a fantasy novel?

Fantasy is supposed to be escapist literature, isn't it? You aren't supposed to burden it down with anything as annoying as your own personal philosophy of life ... right?

And yet I think if we're going to write, that is exactly what will make our books matter to readers; it is only when we invest ourselves in our books and risk the censure of readers not just for what we have written but for who we are that we

stand any real chance of creating something of lasting worth.

Obviously, putting yourself into your work entails some risk, but is still the right thing to do. What is less obvious is how to go about doing it. After all, sitting alone in your room with nothing but your own brain for company as you write, you can start to wonder if what you're putting on the page is telling detail (good) or a tell-all expose that is going to haunt you for the rest of your life (decidedly not good). And the problem with writing is that the same live feedback that can tell you if you have said too much or said the wrong thing entails real-life embarrassment if you have indeed exceeded the bounds of good taste.

Ahh. But there is another way to get the good stuff into your writing and still make sure it's the right good stuff – and it's easy.

The Writer's Right Audience: The Audience of the Mind

No matter how much we might want to pretend otherwise, when we're engaged in the act of writing, we are not alone. We are accompanied by the applause of adoring multitudes, watched over by disapproving parents and acid-penned critics, and driven to speak to **someone**, to connect with **someone**, to bare our hearts and souls and dreams (but not too much of them) to **someone**. We can do little to change or direct – or even use – the wild applause of the cheering hordes, nor will parental distaste for our chosen line of work or dread of malignant critics offer us anything of value as we fight to transfer thoughts to page.

But the person or people whom we secretly write to impress . . . that wondrous audience, whether composed of the living, the dead, or the as-yet-unknown and thus still fictional, have much to offer us all. More, perhaps, than we have to offer them.

Acknowledge that these readers exist and you open some amazing doors for yourself; for suddenly you have someone to talk to, someone to convince, someone to convert to your way of thinking by sheer force of your eloquence and passion. If you are engaged in telling yourself a story, nothing you write from the heart can really matter, because everything you think, you already know.

But acknowledge this secret audience, and suddenly your words take on weight and purpose. Now you are sharing discoveries with your best friend, or revisiting that argument you had with your spouse or boss or neighbor (except this time you are eloquent and convincing and you remember all your best points when you need them, and not ten minutes too late.) And you're never reduced to inarticulate sputtering.

My Faithful "Readers"

My secret audience-in-my-head consists of Mark Twain, C. S. Lewis, my high school Advanced Biology and Honors English teachers (as they were in 1977-79, NOT as they are today), and the person I expected to be but somehow failed to become.

I didn't actually set out to speak to these five people in my books. That just sort of happened . . . but the subconscious has deep reasons for choosing the audience it creates, and what I have discovered about my invisible panel of constant onlookers might be useful to you in figuring out who you are really writing to, and why – and at a deeper level, exploring this may help you understand what drives you to write at all.

Mark Twain asked me questions in **Captain Stormfield Goes to Heaven, To the Person Sitting in Darkness, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Innocents Abroad, Life on the Mississippi**, and uncounted other novels, essays, and bits of correspondence that I will be the rest of my life finding answers for; he changed the way I looked at my life, my purpose, and my universe. He speaks clearly and eloquently

from a place a hundred years back on the road – about things that mattered then and still matter now – and by doing so he has given me a star to shoot for and a voice to listen to when I consider softening my stands on issues that matter to me because those stands might be offensive to some people. Twain leavened his darker opinions with humor and a grace I cannot hope to match; I bury my truths deep in the worlds of fantasy, where people can face as much or as little of them as they choose.

The person for whom I am struggling to define the universe in fiction is Mark Twain.

C. S. Lewis is another matter. I read his **Screwtape Letters** as a child of ten, his **Narnia** series as an adult in my late twenties. Early on, his work shaped my view of religion, faith, and deity, but as I grew up, I found myself disagreeing more than agreeing with his premises and theses. He became a sounding board and debating partner; someone whose integrity I respected while disagreeing with him on most particulars.

The two teachers who had – and still have – such a profound effect on my career are Jim Rose, my junior and senior English teacher, and Jim Kerr, who taught me biology my junior year and anatomy my senior year. They challenged me, debated with me, encouraged me, and demonstrated by their own lives that one's work could be one's passion. They were the high school equivalent of Marine boot camp, and in my head all the time I carry the gifts they gave me: a critical eye for any poorly-developed logic, any sloppy science, any linguistic abuses that I might commit (though I can't blame them for my mistakes – those are all my fault.) They are the voices of my storyteller's conscience, reminding me to love what I do and do what I love, and to take the time and make the effort to get the details right.

And then there is the person I intended to be – the one who was going to do things right, who wasn't going to make a hash

of my life, the one who looks with shock and dismay at the shambles I have made of her idealistic view of the world and high ideals. For her, my books serve as a sort of apologia – a careful exploration of where I went wrong, and what I might have done differently, and what I still hope to accomplish in spite of my fairly impressive collection of screw-ups.

And Why It Matters

As you sit down and give this some hard thought, you'll discover an elite band of people you're truly speaking to when you write. If you acknowledge each of these people and what you have to say to each one in your project, you'll discover several things.

- **First, you'll have an easier time pulling relevant incidents from your personal experiences and translating them into meaningful fiction.** When I'm talking to, (or more realistically, arguing with) my private audience, I care deeply about my outcomes. I know when I've been glib or facile, when I have put myself or my situation in a better-than-deserved light in order to win a point; but more importantly, the audience I carry within knows. When I lose face with them, I cannot easily win it back. So their presence – and my awareness of it – keeps me honest, forcing me to dig deep into the events of my life, both good and bad, and demanding of me that I honestly evaluate the meaning of each one I choose, and my role in it, and how that event affected not only my life but the lives of those I care about. This sort of soul-searching, painful though it always is, has enriched my fiction. (And has proven invaluable to me on a personal level, too, but that is another story.
- **Second, you'll find that you're more satisfied with the work you're producing.** The instant I become wholly involved in my fiction, I become a much happier person. The most miserable writing experiences in my life have

been those that carried no personal risk for me. With those projects, I could barely drag myself to the keyboard each day, and I gritted my teeth and wrote word after word by sheer force of will, kept at my task by immutable and unforgiving deadlines. I could find neither joy nor challenge in these projects because they had nothing of me in them, and no matter how much I wanted to care about the outcome of my hard work, I simply didn't.

- **Third, you'll find that essentially straightforward, simple plots become complex, developing multiple storylines and erupting with characters and details that you had not planned and could not have anticipated.** This is because "why" matters, and as you're developing these tales that you're telling to your private audience, you'll dig deeper into the why, so that you can show it to them. When you write only for yourself, you think you know why you're telling the story you're telling – but it's my experience that I never do. I never know the truth about what I'm writing when I start, and if I weren't digging into it for that private audience, I would probably fail to dig deeply enough to find the truth.
- **Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, your fiction will matter to others to the extent that it matters to you – and by putting yourself into what you write, you will ensure that you have something to lose. When you risk yourself, you care about the outcome.** (If you don't care about the outcome when you risk yourself, I have friends who know some very good therapists who would be happy to tap-dance through your psyche for a while.) You're talking to people you care about. You're telling them in metaphors that you have devised about you, about what you think, what you believe, why you are who you are. You want them to understand your work, because if they can understand your work, they will understand you. It's

apologia, confessional, world's longest monologue disguised in a pretty coat, but it's also story at its heart, the storyteller laying bare his soul, his life experiences, in search of meaning not only for his audience but for himself.

Writing is touted as a lonely business. It doesn't have to be. Find the people you're writing for, bring them into the writing process, show them your heart. Give them a little bit of you.

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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