

Ideas: A Hundred for A Dollar

By Holly Lisle

So if I offered to sell you a hundred novel ideas for a buck, would that be a good deal, a fair deal, or a lousy deal?

It would be a lousy deal. Trust me on this one. I can come up with a hundred usable ideas for novels without breaking a sweat. So can you. So can anyone. Novel ideas aren't unique, they aren't rare, they aren't breathtaking. They are the nitrogen of the idea world—plentiful, everywhere, and only useful if you know what to do with them.

Why do I mention this? Because it will be a rare conversation I have with a beginning writer that doesn't include within it the question, "How do I keep other people from stealing my ideas?" or "How do I copyright my ideas?"

If you aspire to write novels and you're worried about protecting your ideas, breathe a deep sigh of relief now. You don't have to worry anymore. Every idea you're ever going to have for the writing of your novels has already been written more times than you can count. And will continue to be written long after you and I are dust (if civilization doesn't blow the planet into oblivion.) And that is fine. Ideas aren't the engines that make novels run.

To prove this to you, I'm going to throw out a free idea for a novel. Here it is. A man falls in love with a woman he can't have, and determines to have her anyway.

Now let's have three different writers take that idea and run with it.

Writer One wants to do a comic novel, so he decides that the man, in order to be get past the overbearing family to the woman he loves, disguises himself as a woman, takes up

residence in the household as a servant, and waits for his big chance to make his presence known to the woman of his dreams. Unfortunately, the woman's brother (who has a thing for rugged women) falls madly and wildly in love with the hero, thus complicating the hero's life. (You could fiddle around with this until it became Tootsie, but you could also run riffs on it that would make it uniquely your own.)

Writer Two wants to do a science fiction novel, and decides that the man and woman are separated, not by family, but by time. The woman was a holo star who lived a lonely, tragic life, and died young and alone before the hero is even born. He "meets" her through her work, and decides that he will find a way to go back in time, make her fall in love with him, and save her from herself. His obsession drives him to develop time travel, though he spends most of his life doing it. He goes back into the past, does indeed meet her before she even becomes a star; she falls in love with him as planned, but after their brief love affair, he dies of old age. She is devastated; she goes on to become a great actress, never loves again, and dies young, tragic and alone. (Or not—maybe writer number two came up with a happy ending.)

Writer Three takes the same idea, and decides that the man may love the woman, but the woman doesn't even know the man exists. He, however, is wacko, and sure that she shares his passion, and starts writing himself love letters that he pretends are from her in order to more completely enjoy this love. And so on ...

It doesn't matter what idea you have (or take from a published novel, or from a how-to book on writing, or whatever)—*the idea is not the core of the novel.*

You are. You and what you bring to the book you're writing will be unique, because the characters will come from you, and their reactions, thoughts and feelings will come from you. And nobody can steal that.

NOTE: I offer a comprehensive introductory class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

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