

Life Changes Writing; Writing Changes Life

By Holly Lisle

I don't know a writer whose life hasn't influenced his writing. We all borrow heavily from the angst and joy in our past. I know that I've strip-mined large sections of my weird childhood in Alaska, Guatemala, Costa Rica and small towns throughout Ohio to fuel the collisions of cultures and people that fill my books. Trekking through the Costa Rican rain forest gave me the Wen jungles (though not, thank God, the mobile trees). My own kids gave me Barney and Carol, Kirtha, Karen, and bits and pieces of other kids in my books. My friends have strolled across my pages in many guises; they are never exactly like themselves, because characters *will* come to life, but those characters would have been very different if I'd never known the people I used as models.

It's that way, I know, with every writer. You cut out chunks of your own memories, rework them, bleed into them, breathe into the raw clay, and hope the creature lives.

That isn't the miracle of writing, though. That isn't the secret that keeps so many of us at it.

This is the secret.

Writing will change your life and influence the way you see the world more than your life will ever influence your writing.

I've made this assertion. It's a big one. So how has writing influenced my life?

In a million tiny ways, and a couple of huge ones. Let me tell you a story. I had exactly one month from the time I started

Sympathy for the Devil until I had to hand it in. This wasn't a cruel publishing trick—the book was supposed to have been a collaboration, but my collaborator couldn't do the book I needed, and I found this out late, and ended up doing it alone. I was pushing through the novel at twenty pages per day—for me, that's fourteen to sixteen hours a day on good days. I'm steady, but I'm not a blazingly fast writer. I submerged myself in the book, and it started to flow. I was writing, but the part of me that had a lot to say in that book wasn't my conscious mind. My subconscious took over, feeding me scenes, and I reworked and shaped them at a feverish pace. My subconscious self was furious at the injustices I recalled from my years in nursing, and that fury fueled the opening of the book.

Dayne Kuttner, the hero of the book, was basically me. She was a nurse who'd seen hell on Earth while working in the intensive care unit, and who got angry with God over the very idea of Hell, and who challenged God to make things right.

Well, at this point in my life, I (unlike Dayne) wasn't on speaking terms with God or my faith at all. The unfairness of Hell and the cruelty of any God who could condone eternal torture under any circumstances had sent me away from religion years ago, and I'd written off spirituality and God entirely. But as I sank deeper and deeper into the novel, and as Dayne challenged God and God answered, I began to find, through their interactions, the answers I'd been fighting to understand for most of my life. Even though I'm still not on speaking terms with religion, I relocated my faith through the process of writing that book ... and just in time.

Halfway through the book, my kids told me that my ex-husband (their biological father) was molesting them when they were at his house. We called in the police and Social Services immediately. I kept writing because I had to. A couple weeks after I finished the book, my parents walked out of my life. The week after that, my nine-year-old was hospitalized for

symptoms of acute depression. While he was hospitalized, we moved out of the town where I'd lived for fifteen years and started trying to sell my house. The next month my daughter was hit by a car (both kids are fine now, by the way). The following month my second marriage started to fall apart. That same month we bought another house to replace the one we'd had to sell, and went deep into debt. Five months after that, the second marriage fell completely apart and I had to pack up the kids and move again, and I lost everything I owned.

And all of this might sound terrible, but in fact the things that happened were necessary—and underneath the pain and the suffering, they were good. At first I looked at those months as a curse—I wrote **Sympathy for the Devil**, got back on speaking terms with God, and God exploded my tranquil life. In fact, though it took me time to see this, my life was already poisoned under the surface, and the explosion that followed the writing of the book and the changes that wrought in me blew open the terrible lies that were destroying my children and me and endangering our lives. The explosion removed a lot of people I loved from my life, but those it left were the ones who loved me, too. It made my kids and me stronger, brought us together, made it possible for us to be honest with each other in a way many parents and children never find.

And what did that have to do with writing? I don't know that I could have survived the two terrible years that followed the revelations of August 7th, 1994, if I had not found my faith. I could not have found my faith without my writing. I had forgotten that things happen for a reason; that life has both meaning and purpose; that we always have the choice to use the events of our life for our own good; that we become stronger not when times are easy, but when they are hard. I remembered these things because I was writing them, and finally I felt the truth of them.

Writing fiction is a fire that burns inside of you, and burns you from the inside out. It sears away the lies you tell

yourself, it sears away the masks you hide behind, and in the end it refines you the way fire refines gold. What you put into your writing you get back a hundred-fold. Your characters teach you how to live, how to love, sometimes how to say goodbye.

When you write honestly, you give a gift to yourself that will change your life for the better.

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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