

So ... Why DO You Write?

By Holly Lisle

Do you think it's accurate to see writing a novel as being creative, but being so over and over in a rote, machine-like process?

I know you said it's a bittersweet symphony, being a writer, to project my own words onto it. Like, it's a lot of pain but in the end it's worth it. What is it that's worth it.. WHAT do we get out of it?

The quotes above are clipped from a significantly longer letter, but the writer's two questions are complete in the selection above. And his questions are good, deserving of serious, meditative thought by anyone who writes.

What DOES the writer get out of writing?

Note, the main question is not "Why do you write for a living?" The answer to that one is easy. I write for a living because I'm good at it, I enjoy doing it, and people are willing to pay me to do it.

But I had to do a **lot** of writing before I became good at it, a lot more before I was sure I enjoyed it, and a **hell** of a lot more before people were willing to pay me to write. I did all that early writing for the same reasons I still write – because, quite frankly, if writing were about the money, there are ten thousand easier ways to get by, and many of them pay much more.

The main question, boiled down to essence, was, "Why do you write and what do you get out of it?" with "Doesn't it stop being truly creative?" thrown in as the opening teaser. Those issues form an entirely different beast.

I cannot speak for any other writer here. I only speak for myself. For me, the act of writing is mystery, communion with the part of myself and the universe that I don't know. It is my search for the seams that lie between what is and what might be, the seams that could tell me the answers to my own deepest questions.

- Why are we here?
- What is life? What is death?
- What is God?
- What is good, what is evil?
- What are our obligations to our fellow human beings?
- What is hatred? What is love?
- How do we matter?
- How is heroism different from villainy, and who can be heroic? Who can be villainous? What paths and choices take human beings to each state?

Without exaggeration, every book I have ever written has been a search for the answers to my own personal list of whats and whys, a search for what it means to be human. Genre is, for me, a tool or a form: Like the careful structure of the sonnet, with its iambic pentameter and neat, fixed rhyme scheme and requirement for a two-line twist ending, genre is simply a set of rules and expectations into which I can frame my search, and create limiting terms that will give me a small set of useful answers, rather than a huge set of useless ones. Genre tightens the scope, and pressures the direction of the search. But the search itself is the same.

Could I have found everything I needed to find in writing one book? No. Are all the following books just reworkings of the first book? No. Well, why not?

Life is learning, and the more I've lived, the more life has had a chance to kick the shit out of me, and teach me interesting and painful new things. I've discovered that, not only do my answers change as I get older, but so do my

questions. I am a very different person from the young woman who wrote HEARTS IN STITCHES twenty years ago, or FIRE IN THE MIST (my first book that sold) fourteen years ago. Each day I see the world through new eyes, and the world I see now shares only a few basic themes with that earlier world of mine.

So what do I get out of this? Of what value to me (or anyone else) is this monastic discipline of early hours, concentrated focus, soul-searching, hard and sometimes heart-breaking work, to create works that I then push away from myself and label 'product?'

As with life itself, the value is not in the destination, but in the process. Searching, questioning, struggling, redefining and refining – all are their own reward. If my work is not then labeled art, I'm fine with that, because I don't seek the value of the soul of the artist. I seek the value of my own soul, and I'm a kid who grew up in trailer parks and mission fields, who asked "Do you want fries with that?" and sold newspaper advertising and worked the bloody hands-on job of the staff nurse. I don't write about the literati or the glitterati, nor about kings and presidents and their places in the world. I write about ordinary men and women thrown into extraordinary circumstances – forced to face the same life and death issues I know from my own life and know from the lives of those with whom I've worked.

And I write **for** people who are like me, which means I'll never win the accolades of academe, nor the praise of literary critics. Academe and critics see little of beauty and little of worth in common lives and ordinary people, and especially not in the books read and liked by ordinary people.

I like daisies better than orchids, though. I most respect people who, without riches or privilege, seek to make their lives matter, who live with courage and compassion for their fellow human beings, who embody honor and honesty, and who face hardship without a golden umbrella, daddy's money, or

tenure.

Is the writing process I follow rote or machine-like? No. Of course not. Getting up early, sitting down before I've eaten or drunk so much as a sip of water, breathing to clear my mind, focusing on the words I wrote the day before, putting myself into the state of readiness wherein I can ask myself my questions for the day and hear the answers – those acts form a familiar routine. But they are, like meditation, like breathing with purpose, a way of clearing space for the part of the work that is essentially mystical. They form the bridge that permits communion between the me I know and the secret, hidden, wordless me that hides in shadows – the me that knows how the universe works, and knows where truth dwells.

I write to find that other me, to find the value of truth and beauty, to understand the value of pain and grief and loss. That's what **I** get out of it.

I write to be more human, and hope only that, along with the entertainment that is built into the genre forms in which I work, some of the secrets from my journey bleed through.

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