The Power of Allegories

written by Holly
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By Holly Lisle

"A side note: I always thought **Vincalis** was an environmentalist allegory."

Good. I could have hoped for no better outcome than that you found your own meaning in it.

I'm reminded of the lyrics of a song.

> *You can't always get what you want*
> *But sometimes …. you get what you need.*

Once upon a time, you see, I wrote *Bones of the Past*. Like most of the rest of the books I've written, it was about the story, but it was also about *something*, a dark, real-world issue that ate at me and gave me nightmares and still does, frankly (but not so much since I wrote that book). I sank myself in the story, the theme, the characters and issue that obsessed me, and I wrote my third book (second solo), and when I was done, I could see a little too clearly what it was really about, so I buried the allegory deeper. Sent it out. Let it go.

And a friend of mine read it. She was a little older than me and had been married to a man a little younger than me, and he had died of cancer. She was devastated. She'd crawled into herself and was having a hell of a time clawing her way back out. She read *Bones of the Past*, and she told me she got it, and better than that, it had helped her. She found in that story an allegory about cancer, about how it destroys, about how it could be fought, about how those who survived picked up the pieces of their lives and moved on.

It had been the book she needed at the time, because it was about something deep and dark and scary, and how to come to grips with that terror and pain. It had mattered to her.

Thing is, cancer never crossed my mind when I was writing the thing. I got what I needed out of the book by writing it, but if I had pushed to force everyone else to take *my* message from it, the book would have been worthless to *her*. By being willing to bury my message behind allegory (and bury it deep), the book still had deep meaning, and layers. It still had a passion to it that reached her, because allegories ring true on a lot of levels, and can be viewed in a hundred shades of meaning, and applied to a thousand different situations.

For you writers, here's a writing recommendation. Put your heart and soul and self into your story, give it everything you've got, and rip out any bit of writing that clearly tells the reader what your story means. Accept that you will be the only person who ever knows the true meaning of your story, and give your readers permission to find their own meanings, knowing when you do this that they will take away from it a hundred things you did not mean, and that fifty of those hundred will be things with which you vehemently disagree. Write your issues out on the page just for yourself, then give up control, and let the story go, and hope that someone out there will get what he needs. The best thing you can do as a writer of fiction is to allow your readers to meet their own needs with your work, rather than attempting to force them to meet yours.

For readers, take what you need from the stories you read, but understand that what you found there may not be what the writer created, but what **you** created. When you read, you are collaborating with the writer, and what the two of you come up with will be something neither of you may have expected or intended.

THE ALLEGORY GAME

And for those of you who have read some of my books, here’s a little game. To the first three of you who correctly guess *my* allegory (that is, what I meant when I wrote it) for any of my books listed in the essay linked above, I’ll send you an autographed copy of TALYN (or another book that I have copies of, if you already have an autographed copy of that one).

Those of you to whom I have privately confessed meanings of a particular book may not guess on that book, of course, but you’re welcome to guess on any others. This game will be open until there are three winners. NOTE: Make sure your e-mail address in your blog account here actually works, because while I’ll announce when all three winners have been selected, I won’t publicly name who they were. It’s important to me that readers get what they need from the stories, and that means not telling them what I want.

LATE NOTE: ALL THREE COPIES OF BOOKS HAVE BEEN WON, AND THE CONTEST IS CLOSED.

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