

# The things we were not born to do

By Holly Lisle

I asked a question on the **Discussion board**, (it's the current survey question), that goes "At what age did you discover you were a writer? **The discussion part of the survey adds, "And what were the circumstances?"** Those aren't the exact words, but I'm composing this offline, so close is going to have to do.

Judging by the survey results so far, I was a really late bloomer. I spent my childhood thinking I was going to be an artist, my teenage years thinking I was going to be either a musician or an artist or somebody's wife, and my late teens and early twenties becoming an RN, and thinking, "What are dreams if you starve for them? Nursing is challenging, interesting, useful, to some extent idealistic, and practical. And a regular paycheck comes with the gig."

I discovered I was a writer when I was twenty-six. Which is not to say that I hadn't written before then. In second grade, a teacher loved my story so much she read it – and only it – aloud to my classmates. I remember writing my own book of the Bible when I was nine and living in Alaska, because I wasn't too crazy about the contents of the rest of the Bible, and I thought I could do better. I sat on the long bus ride home in 7th grade writing babysitter-in-peril stories and passing out the pages as I wrote them to a number of my fellow bus-prisoners, for whom I could not write either fast or copiously enough. I won prizes for my writing throughout school, and once, after a compliment from a teacher on a particular piece when I was in high school, said I was going to have it published. (Ah, the naivete.)

When I hit my early twenties, I was writing a lot of twenty-five page Tolkein clones and hard SF short stories. I even took a course from Writers' Digest. On January 1st, 1985, I wrote a New Year's resolution for myself, that I would finish a novel before my 25th birthday. (Oct. 8th). I sat down and started working through it, eventually typing on a manual, and then an electric, typewriter – final count one thousand-plus pages, from which I got a three-hundred page romance novel. Before my birthday. I sent it out. It got rejected. I got a really good rejection, but I didn't know that. I quit writing – in my mind, I had walked away from it forever. Except I kept having ideas, and the occasional hideously bad short story kept popping out.

Through all of that, however, I did not make that critical identification – that “Aha, I'm a **writer!**” connection – until I joined a writers' group over in Fayetteville, NC, in late 1986 or early 1987. I was twenty-six at the time. And suddenly, there was an audible click inside my head: This writing thing was not a hobby, it was not insanity, it was not wasting my time, it was not another bizarre fetish (like reading) that I needed to keep hidden in polite company because real people watched stock car races and soap operas and if they read anything, read Penthouse or Cosmopolitan. Writing was something real, that real people aspired to, and something, as well, that real people did. Sometimes even for a living. More importantly, it was something that I **wanted** – the first thing in my life that I discovered I wanted enough to fight for. (There have been others since, but that was the first.)

I might not have to be an RN for the rest of my working days. There might be an alternative that would let me find an audience for the endless stories my imagination constantly spun out, **and** let me escape the vilest concatenation of administrative dickheads ever assembled on the face of the Earth. I **loved** to write – the physical act of sitting down and

finding words, discovering story, throwing characters I liked into corners that I hated and seeing if I could figure out a way to get them back out. (I still love this.) And some lucky bastards got **paid** to do this.

Hot damn. At twenty-six, I said, “Eureka! I’m a writer!” And decided that come hell or hard luck, I was going to join the lucky bastards.

I became an unpublished writer – but I was a writer, and said so. (Though still not always in polite company.) It was, for me, a change as huge and life-altering as anything else I have ever done. No part of my life has been untouched by writing, and no part of my writing has been untouched by life.

May it ever be so.

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved