

# Writing With Integrity: Why Everyone SHOULDN'T Like You

By Holly Lisle

I'd like to discuss *writing with integrity*.

Because you may not hear this today. You may not hear this in the next year. But sooner or later an editor or an agent or your mother or some dude at the supermarket checkout is going to tell you, "You need to change what you're writing to appeal to a broader audience."

You'll hear it from someone who wants to see you do well, who wants your numbers to go up (for her benefit as well as yours), or who thinks you could be doing better if you were writing work "like that vampire girl." Or, sadly, who doesn't respect what you write and wants to change you for your own good (as defined by him or her).

And depending on how much credence you give to the person saying this, you may be tempted to listen.

Be very, very careful. Before you change what you're writing in order to appeal to a broader audience, consider all the reasons why you may not want to. Here are the questions you ask yourself before you expend a gawdawful amount of time and energy doing something different so you can go haring off after people who don't like what you do right now.

## Writing With Integrity Will Make—or Save—Your Career

### Do you have an existing fan base?

Obviously, if no one is buying what you write, you can change

anything and everything about your writing in the pursuit of readers.

But if you have readers who love what you do, you've created a connection. Your readers are real people who have found something that matters to them in your words, in the way you see the world, in the stories you tell and the characters you create and the situations you present.

If you have been writing true to yourself—**writing with integrity—you have connected to people who think the way you do.** In a world where nobody seems to agree about anything, you've found people who understand how the world looks to you, and who share at least some of your view.

This is a rare and precious discovery. You don't throw the people who already love your work under the bus because someone else says you should.

## **Do you like what you write right now?**

If you have no respect for the genre you're writing, the stories you're telling, the characters you create, or the view of the world you're presenting, yes, walk away. You probably got pulled into something because you thought you could make money at it, and failed to consider the price you'd pay for creating work you don't like. You aren't writing honestly—you're pretending to be someone you aren't, and nothing good comes of that.

But if your work comes from you, if your stories pull you out of bed in the middle of the night because you thought of one amazing line you have to get down before you lose it, if you fight right alongside your characters as you're writing them, desperate to know how they're going to move forward, you are living your work, and you are writing with integrity and creating something that matters.

Having been told that I needed to dumb down my work in one

particular genre because I was writing too smart for my readers, I realized that I didn't want to write for readers who didn't want a complex, layered story. I'd been spoiled by my earliest fans, who were up to any challenge—and I decided **those** were the fans I wanted to keep.

I want the latitude to write complex, twisting plots and layered, complicated characters, and have that matter to my readers as much as it matters to me. I want to be free to NOT explain everything, and to know that my readers will look for the subtle clues I plant and get what's happening without having their hands held.

I love the stories I write...and those are the stories I **want** to keep writing. This joy in my work is what makes me keep coming back to it.

If you love what you're doing, evaluate what about it your would-be helpers want you to change, and decide whether you'll be as happy writing what they like as what **you** like.

## **Who likes you now, and who exactly are you trying to reach who doesn't like you now?**

Take a moment to write down a description of your current reader. Age, interests, other authors he likes, type of work he does, what he likes most about the stories you tell. If you appeal to a cross-section of readers, figure out a discription of one person in each group. (These, by the way, are called avatars. There are all sorts of reasons for creating avatars, and figuring out where you want to take your writing career is a good one.) What areas of common ground do you share with each group? Why do you care about these people?

**Now.**

Do the same thing with the readers you think you would like to reach, but don't. Who are these people? What do **they** love, what interests them, where do they work, how do they play, and what do you have in common with them?

## **Why are you trying to reach them?**

A lot of times, you'll discover that the only thing you have in common with groups you think you'd like to reach is that they spend money and you want them to spend some on what you've done.

This is what we call a **Bad Idea**. This doesn't mean it isn't a common idea. "I don't have to like it; I just have to get paid," is a form of prostitution. There is no writing integrity in following this path. You don't sleep with the book you hate for money, any more than you sleep with some scary dude with a wad of sweaty cash in his hand.

If you've identified more people you want to tell stories to, and you have some kick-ass stories to tell them that will matter to them, that's different. If you want to tell stories your current group of readers won't like, by all means expand. Write in both genres. If you have stories you simply can't tell unless you make changes, and you're dying to tell them, go for it.

But if you're pursuing people you don't respect for their money, don't think you're going to be the one Writer Whore who gets a happy ending.

## **And finally, why aren't the folks you're pursuing already reading your work?**

If you're writing true to yourself (and I keep coming back to this because writing honestly is the most important job you have as a writer), the people who are reading you right now are going to be the right people for you. They get you, you

matter to them, they matter to you. You folks deserve each other.

**The people who don't like what you're doing aren't good enough for you.** It isn't the other way around.

The people who are worth knowing are the ones who like you for who you are. They **become** worth knowing **because** they see the value in you and in what you do.

If you have to change who you are to win over people who don't like you, you're going to lose parts of yourself that matter. You're going to lose the people who liked what you did because you turned your back on values you and they shared. Writing with integrity is writing to the people who matter to you, about the subjects that matter to you.

If you look at your life and discover you need to make these changes to be the person you need to be, that's different. You do that, and you don't look back.

But don't change who you are for any reason except that you'll like yourself better in the morning if you do. In the end, your life will come down to whether you made yourself into someone you could admire and someone you could like—and **changing yourself and your work to please people who don't like you and don't like what you do is a guaranteed way to make sure your life will never be what you want it to be.**

**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.**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Holly Lisle

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