

Writing: The Profession NO One Respects

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I have debated even posting this – it's a hot topic, I'm angry, and I dare not use names. Under such circumstances before, I have summoned more lightning than I care to deal with.

Nevertheless, this must be said.

Not one, but two, big SF/Fantasy editors have now said, in almost exactly the same words, "I've always thought writers should be forced to get a real job (get out there with the people) – it's the best way to meet characters." Parenthetical phrase said to the other writer; as written, said to me about another writer. In both cases, the editor was pleased at a full-time writer having to go back to a day job to cover slow payments from publishers and the career effects of chains ordering to the net.

Look at this from a number of directions. First – the implication of "forced." In each case, the editor's wish for a levelling effect is much in evidence by the choice of that single word. Writers left to their own devices would obviously never crawl out of the house, talk to anyone, observe anyone. Writers not "forced" to do what someone else thinks is good for them would apparently be too stupid to do what was good for them on their own. Or even to know what is good for them, since obviously these two powerful editors, and perhaps others, know so much better.

Clearly, from this editorial perspective, full-time writers are something to be dreaded, or pitied ... or perhaps just

fixed. The way one fixes a cat. Without consent, for its own good.

Second, that statement reeks of jealousy. Writers meet people all the time, ones we like as well as ones we don't. So obviously the issue is NOT meeting people.

It's control.

Full-time writers aren't under anybody's thumb. They work any hours they want, take off whatever days they want, punch no cards, write in their pajamas or (ick) stark naked, or wearing ratty jeans and sweatshirts. Granted, most people would do anything to avoid my chosen hours, but I like them and they're mine. Full-time writers don't have anyone they call boss – editors are, at their best, collaborators. They can be listened to or not at the writer's whim, if the writer is willing to take the consequences. Many writers are.

But in what other profession does the middleman from your work to its completed state feel that you would be better at what you do if you had to do it while holding down a part-time job to make ends meet?

Do car salesmen think that Detroit would be turning out better cars if the designers were having to flip burgers part-time at Mickey D's to keep the wolf from the door?

Do hospital administrators think they'd be better off in the hands of surgeons who were moonlighting at Wal-Mart?

Have Stephen King's editors ever thought, "Steve should go back to teaching – his characters are getting a little thin?" (If they have, they're obviously post-lobotomy.)

Finally, it demonstrates an amazing, even sweeping ignorance of what writing is and where characters come from. I don't get my characters from people I meet. I use outsiders for window-dressing – expressions, voices, ways of walking, styles of

hair, shapes of bodies. But all my characters come from inside me. They are all aspects of me, and the more willing I am to be honest about myself, to personify my ugliness as well as my goodness, the better my characters are.

Good characters come from the writer's integrity, period, and stand or fall by that measure. Anything I need from other people where character development is concerned, I can get from a half-hour in the mall, or shamelessly evesdropping in shops and at restaurants, or while watching other people work.

Is this what all editors now think? There were editors once who were proud of the number of full-time writers in their stable. They were proud that they were part of supporting and creating something that they loved – for these editors loved books, loved to read, believed in what they did. And – make no mistake – a good editor's hand helps shape the final book in ways readers never imagine or suspect. Talented editors help writers see their own work more clearly, and guide writers to writing better books. Jim Baen was one such editor – don't know if he still is, but he was once. Are there any others? I don't know. I think editors who respect writers and love books are a dying breed, and their passing signals dark days ahead for us.

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