

# Your Book Is Not Your Baby

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I've heard a lot of writers refer to their books as their babies. And many have even extended the analogy further—they say they gestate the thing for nine months, go through terrible pain to get it out into the world ... and then it never calls or writes, and when it's out on its own, it doesn't become a rich doctor as they had hoped it would, but instead bums around the beach and drinks cheap wine out of a paper bag.

It's a cute analogy. But it doesn't have much to do with writing a book. I've written books, and I've had babies, and as I, (and a whole bunch of chagrined sixteen-year-old girls) could tell you, once the baby is planted, you don't really have to do a whole lot to make sure it arrives nine months later. It will come whether you're ready or not.

Unlike babies, books will not arrive if you sit around on you butt watching soap operas or reading the funnies or talking on the phone to your girlfriends. Books arrive only if you expend concentrated effort over a long term. Every day you have to hold what you wrote the day before and the week before and the month before in the back of your mind, and simultaneously you have to keep a part of your focus on what you intend to write the next day, and the next week, and the next month.

If short-story writers are like sprinters, and the writers of novellas are like milers, then novelists are marathoners. The ones who write books over 150,000 words are the Iron Men of the writing world.

Thinking about writing your book as running a marathon doesn't feel quite as charming as that image you had of popping out a

cute little hard-bound baby, does it? I think the image helps, though. It keeps you honest with yourself. If you acknowledge that what you're doing, and what you intend to keep on doing, is hard work, you won't be so shocked when, thirty pages or a hundred pages or two hundred pages in, writing the novel stops being unalloyed fun and starts hurting. You hit walls with writing, the same way marathoners hit walls in their running. You exhaust the inspiration that got you through the first part, and you're nowhere near enough to the finish line to find any comfort or encouragement there. You have a hundred or so pages behind you and four-hundred or so pages ahead of you, and all of a sudden you realize that somebody stuck a hill in the middle of your track. And it goes up, not down.

So what you need to hear now is that after a little bit the adrenaline kicks in and you get your second wind, right? That the hill turns out to be an illusion. That it gets easier.

Bad news. There ain't no second wind; the hill is real; nothing ever gets easier. Completing a novel is hard. Really hard. As hard as running a marathon. You're impressed with the people you know who have completed marathons, whether or not their times were any good? You should have the same admiration for the folks you know who have completed novels, whether or not those books have sold. Even crappy novels require a faith and a dedication and a commitment that says good things about the folks who wrote them.

What gets you (or any writer) to the end of the book is not inspiration, or second wind, or a visit from the Book Fairy. It's process—and dogged, unswerving, stubborn commitment to process. It's promising yourself that you are going to write every day, by god, whether you feel like it or not. And it's keeping that promise when you don't feel like it. It's doing ten pages a day on the days that you can, and at least one page a day on the days when you think you can't do any. It's putting bad words on paper if you don't have any other words, just to meet your goals and keep your promise to yourself.

It's trusting that better words will come, even if only in the rewrites.

It is accepting that writing a book is not about finishing the thing and sticking it in the mail, because that happens only rarely, and lasts for only a moment. Writing a book is no more about typing THE END than running a marathon is about crossing the finish line. Running the marathon is about picking up your feet and putting them down, one step at a time, for twenty-six miles—every one of those steps is exactly as valuable as every other one. Writing the novel is about filling five hundred double-spaced pages, one word at a time, day after day, until it's done. And every single word matters.

When it's done, you don't have an infant to love and gush and coo over. You have a piece of work that will require fixing—demanding more words, more pages, more patience. But you also have an achievement that you and you alone can claim. The woman who gives birth to a baby can claim credit all she wants, but you know and I know and she knows that she didn't make that baby. It grew without any input from her, and she can no more change the color of his eyes or the curve of his smile than she can give him wings and make him fly.

You, on the other hand, made your book. You built it one word at a time, and you can take credit for every cell and molecule and atom of its existence. You and you alone gave it life, and you did it the hard way.

One word at a time, plodding up the hill, going on because you promised yourself you would.

One word at a time. Process. Promises. Commitment.

When you finished it, you earned the right to be proud. And you probably were. Until you got an idea for another one. Writing books is like running marathons in another way, too. It's addictive. You crave the challenge after a while. You crave the "writers' high" that you get on those days when the

pages flow from your fingertips. And you crave the pleasure that comes from knowing that you can do something most people only dream of doing.

So go write.

You aren't hatching a baby.

*You're building your own trophy.* And you can make it exactly the way you want it. "This is mine," you'll say.

And you will have earned the right.

**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.

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