

How To Find Your Novel's Pulse

PART II of The 8-Part BRING YOUR NOVEL TO LIFE Series

The best novels you've ever read---the ones that stuck in your mind and kept you going back to re-read them, that made you think, that made you feel, maybe that scared your socks off---were not about what they were about.

Sound cryptic? It is, sort of. Novels that change the way you look at the world were written by novelists who had things going on underneath that they were working through on paper. Angry divorces, fights at work, health problems, fears for their kids, rage at politics and injustice, fear of war, loss of loved ones---the whole gamut of human trials and tribulations.

Some of these novelists knew they were burying their struggles in their books, some didn't. But while they were writing about running into elves in the deep woods or opening a door to find themselves looking down the barrel of a gun, they were telling two stories. The one you read, and the one they lived. While you were reading, you felt the second, hidden story. That's why you keep going back to the book, and why you can't get it out of your head. Your gut knows there's more in that book than meets the eye.

Do you want to write books that keep readers reading, that keep them thinking, that let them look at the world through different eyes? Do you want to find the stories beneath the stories in your own work, and make sure you put them in there on purpose, instead of accidentally hitting one just right, and never again knowing how you got there?

This is doable. It's not comfortable---few things worth doing ever are. But it is a repeatable process. And here's where you start. Read each step below, and write down your answers.

STEP ONE:

Plato had it right when he said, "Know thyself." You don't get to have a starry-eyed vision of yourself as this nearly-perfect person if you're going to write meaningful books. You have to dig deep.

* You have to figure out what YOU did wrong in every relationship that went south on you. (Innocent victimhood is worthless as a novel-writing perspective. You end up with passive main characters who do nothing, and books that bore readers to death. So accept the truth that you have been and done wrong in your life, and buy your characters some credibility.)

* You have to admit to moments when you lied, and not make excuses about why you did it.

* You have to recall the people you hurt.

* And admit the things you did that you should not have done.

* And face the things you did not do that you should have.

This is a no-excuses zone. You did what you did, you meant to do it, consequences resulted and those were your fault.

Is this process all negative? No. But you'll already remember all your greatest moments; saving a life, sacrificing to help someone else, opening doors for old ladies, teaching Seeing Eye dogs for the blind. Those are great. And your readers will believe your characters do those things when, and only when, you have first proved that your characters are human. Humans are not perfect. We all know this about each other, even if we don't like to admit it about ourselves. But we know a real character when we read one, and this is where you find real characters.

STEP TWO:

You've admitted who you are. Now discover who you need to be, what you need to have, and what you dread. Again, skip the Miss America "I want world peace and free healthcare and kittens and puppies for all the children in the world" routine. What do YOU want...for YOU? What do you NEED? Do you need to be loved and admired? Do you need to be rich, powerful, famous? Do you need to be safe? What drives you? What eats at you at night? What haunts your nightmares? When you look in the mirror and see something wrong, what is the first thing you fear? When you hear a bump in the attic, a scrap at the front door, what do you dread?

STEP THREE:

Who you are and what you need and fear are part of why you write. But writing fiction itself is a strange process that involves baring bits of you that you may not even realize you're baring to complete strangers. It involves creating characters who are the best of what you have in you, and it involves, if you're doing it right, creating characters who are the worst of what you have in you.

You are, while you're writing, your characters. You have to believe in them for readers to believe in them, and you have to find it in yourself to make them do evil as well as good--to do the things you would do IF YOU WERE THEM--knowing that if you make your characters real enough, you'll hit nerves, you'll hear from the readers you've shocked or scared as well as from the ones you've moved to joy and tears. So, why do you want to do that? What's in in for you?

When you've answered these questions, if you've answered them honestly, you have your themes. The things you had the hardest time admitting to, the hardest time writing down, the hardest time facing---those will be your best themes. Because if you can take characters built from your deepest flaws and your worst fears and bring them to transcendence, then, my friend, you will have written a book with a pulse---and a story that matters.

In BRING YOUR NOVEL TO LIFE Part III: Burying Your Novel's Message, you'll learn how to use the themes you've discovered without being preachy or obvious, and without writing a Message Book.

About the Author

Full-time novelist Holly Lisle has published more than thirty novels with major publishers. Her next novel, THE RUBY KEY, (Orchard Books) will be on shelves May 1st. You can receive her free writing newsletter, Holly Lisle's Writing Updates at <http://hollylisle.com/newsletter.html>

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