

Dark Cave, No Candle

by Laura Preble

I use a DVD called SO, IS IT DONE? to help my students learn about the revision process. It features a number of very well-known writers (Robert Olen Butler, John McNally, Elizabeth Dewberry) who discuss all the various stages of creative writing. Today, we were watching the part about polishing, and the Famous Authors were flinging metaphors right and left. But they resonated with me, so I've been thinking on them all day. (Ever notice that people who get National Book Awards and such are authors, while people who publish obscure books are simply writers?) And, on another tangent, Patti Smith is nominated for a National Book Award. I know this goes afield of what I was just writing, but I religiously read Betsy Lerner's wonderful blog (Forest for the Trees) and she mentioned that "Patti" was wonderful at the nomination ceremony. I looked up Patti, and it turned out to be Patti Smith. Yeah, the rock-and-roll, punky-leather stringy-haired Patti Smith. This amazed me. And then I thought, "Crap, Patti Smith. You have "Because the Night" and a bunch of other stuff...why do you have to write too?"

Back to metaphors. One of the Authors said that writing is like going into a dark cave without a light. You just feel your way around, letting shapes and contours reveal themselves as you search slowly, hands outstretched. You don't even know when you enter the cave exactly what you will find. As a run-of-the-mill writer, though, I have that ground-penetrating radar, so I actually know every single contour of my story before I go into the cave. I also have bat shit repellent, something I bet Robert Olen Butler never got with his Pulitzer.

Another great metaphor from the Authors was that writing is like the controlled crash of military aircraft on the deck of a carrier. He noted that the plane is going about a million miles an hour (my estimate), the ship is moving, and the pilot has to maneuver (often in the dark) to land the plane on something the length of two football fields (or, to a person flying a plane at a million miles an hour, the

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approximate area of a Barbie shoe.) Somehow, most of the time, they make it. That's like writing.

And then I thought about my own metaphor for writing. What would it be? Some kind of food-related thing? A consumable resource that can give you indigestion and make you fat while simultaneously giving you a virulent case of diarrhea? Kind of gross, though. How about those SAW movies I've never watched? You're trapped in a little room with a creepy, unwashed man (playing the role of the unwashed man: my cat and her butt worms), and you have an unsolvable dilemma: write something brilliant or cut off your arm. I'd be limbless in no time. But that's kind of a brutal thing to pin on the innocent act of writing fiction, don't you think ?

How about something a bit more gentle? Writing books is like raising children. You do your best, nurture them, discipline them, coddle them, feed them, patch up their injuries, sing to them, try to sell them, but no matter what you do, they are what they are. Sometimes they are sheer perfection and transcendental joy; sometimes you want to stuff them in the freezer and pretend that you're single again, perhaps living alone in a nunnery with a cat with butt worms.

In the unlikely event that none of my half-dozen readers reports me for child endangerment, I think I'll go with the child-rearing analogy. The butt worms are just a bonus.

(FYI: If you are a writer, check out these resources. Thanks to Danny Tricarico for pointing me toward the hilarious and wonderful Betsy Lerner. The DVD is through the Gotham Writers Workshop.)

So, Is It Done? DVD

Betsy Lerner's blog, The Forest for the Trees

