

Bob Fear

8 TOUGH TASKS FROM MY WRITING MENTOR

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Be careful what you ask for – because you might just get it...

For months I had been hankering for some incisive criticism on 'The Girl In My Attic' manuscript. I know it's a work-in-progress; it's just that I was faltering on the progress bit. So the timing of the announcement that I'd won the Spotlight First Novel competition couldn't have been better. My prize is a healthy slice of some tasty mentorship from the Adventures In Fiction literary consultancy. Bring it on.

So here I am having a coffee in The British Library with the lovely Marion Urch – she who thinks my little story ain't all bad. But it ain't all good either. That's fine, honestly – I can take it. That's the point.

Talking to Marion teases out and articulates those instinctive little niggles that have been there all along (as it turns out). But were it not for this first stage in the mentoring process, I would never have achieved the sense of clarity that Marion has put firmly in to focus for me... and she did it with such unassuming charm.

My initial reaction to a few of the things she said was to be a bit resistant. Firstly because it meant undoing a whole heap of hard work I'd been striving at. Secondly because it meant doing a whole heap of hard work I'd been avoiding. But when someone who's far more in the know than you tells you to do something, chances are that you should just do it.

Next time I'll get to the pertinent questions she asked me about my manuscript which have forced me to reconsider a few key factors, but in the meantime – here are the **8 no nonsense, hard graft tasks** Marion said I should do before trying to progress any further:

- 1) Go through my manuscript and write **a list of the main plot points** and an outline covering what happens in every scene
- 2) Make **a list of the main actions** and dramas
- 3) Write **a new story outline**, dividing my material in to new chapters of 8-10 pages each
- 4) Make sure that there is **action and drama in each chapter**
- 5) Write **a detailed description** of my main character
- 6) Write his **back story** out in full
- 7) Write **a complete description** of every room in the house where the novel is mainly set

8) Write **back stories** for the rest of the main characters

I guess I kinda shoulda done all this stuff before. Yup. Seems obvious now, doesn't it? It's like being caught cheating on your homework. And the lesson of the day? No short cuts. If I'd have gotten my shit together and done all of this in the first place I'd probably never have got so stuck along the way.

Come back soon for the tough questions my writing mentor asked...

WHY 'KILLING MY DARLINGS' WAS A GOOD THING

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'Kill your darlings' – it's one of those writing advice quotes often bandied around and I always nonchalantly sidled around it, naively confident I'd never have to perpetrate such an illogical, counter-intuitive thing.

I could never conceive of anything so malformed and dysfunctional that would later beg for a merciful culling... could I? Whoever coined the term must have been one hell of a drama queen (er, sorry William Faulkner) and I'd just rather not go there, thank you very much. I don't do confrontation.

Then along came Marion Urch, my much respected and trusted Adventures In Fiction writing mentor, and – after

reading the latest draft of *The Girl In My Attic* – what did she say? Kill your darlings. And Marion is no drama queen. She's very calm and very direct. So when she said it – I kind of just agreed: 'Right you are. I'm just going to off them, then. Nice one. Thank you.'

I like to think it was nothing too personal about my particular darlings. The order to kill came about as a result of asking three seemingly simple questions that proved surprisingly tough to answer.

The **three big questions** Marion asked could be asked of any writer:

1) Why is the story set when it is?

I've set mine in the late 80s/early 90s – initially because I didn't want to have to write about people using mobile phones for everything – boring! But no – turns out that, as I'm dealing with the contemporary theme of persecution within the community, making it nostalgic takes the edge off. Time to slash and burn all that meticulous period research I did (watching old episodes of 'Grange Hill' and 'I Love 1989' on YouTube etc).

2) What is the time frame?

I've set it over a few years to justify the dramatic ending that I thought needed a huge build-up. Turns out it just meant that the pace was sagging.

3) Internal subjective narrative or conventional narrative structure?

I've tried my hand at a bit of both in one. You've got to have a bit of ambition, yeah? Well – maybe, but this is my first go at a whole novel and I was just trying to be too clever too soon. I love Ali Smith – but perhaps I should try that kind of thing later. I have a quirky first person narrator so best to keep a straightforward structure (as indeed Audrey Niffenegger also recently advised).

I'd been so in love with the parts of my manuscript that had blossomed as a result of my initial key decisions of setting, time frame and narrative structure. But hey – love is blind. I was the only one who loved them. So get real, get confrontational, get murderous. Kill your darlings. It feels good.

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