

Write What You Hate

by Bill Cameron

I have a problem with authority. When Stephen King said, “the road to hell is paved with adverbs,” my response was to feverishly lard up my own work with these pestilent parts of speech. It’s not that I disagree with King; rather, I suffer from an instinctive contrarianism, even in response to someone I respect and admire.

Which has made writing about cops a problem for me. At my most thoughtful, I see the police as doing a challenging, dangerous, thankless job, often with courtesy, professionalism, and courage. But according to my intestines, cops are all power junkies who use their position in society to commit blunt force acts of domination against a helpless citizenry. And my gut, I’m afraid, beats my brain two out of three falls.

I’ve loved crime fiction all my life, but it wasn’t until recent years I attempted it—mostly because I didn’t want to write about cops. And when I finally tackled a crime story, I purposely chose a tale in which the cops were antagonists. The problem, evident to me and to early draft readers, was my cop characters came off as little more than punching bags. To call them one-dimensional is an affront to the shortest distance between two points.

Wherever you fall on the plot-driven vs. character-driven spectrum, no story is well served by poorly drawn characters. One reader suggested my problem was one of knowledge—you *don’t know anything about police work*. But that wasn’t it. Ignorance can be remedied and in any case, it wasn’t police work I didn’t understand. It was the police themselves, the men and women who do the work. Not only did I not know them, I didn’t want to know them.

And therein lay the solution to my character problem.

Write what you know may be the first advice aspiring writers hear, and not without merit. Of late, *write what you don’t know* has gained cachet. The great thing about writing what you don’t know is you get to do research, one of the most beloved ways to avoid actual writing. True enough, I knew next to nothing about police procedure. But even research wasn’t enough. If I was going to write compelling, multi-dimensional cops, I would have to deconstruct

my visceral distrust of authority, to dig into not only what police officers do but who they are.

At its foundation, character development is not about likability, or relatability, or about sympathy, or pity. It’s about empathy. It’s not enough to write what you know, or what you don’t know. You must write what you hate, and to write it as if your own beliefs and values are on the line.

Another favored *bon mot* of writing advice is the dictate to know everything about our characters, even details which never appear in the story. We can’t limit ourselves to the person on the page, but must see the person beyond the page. That means getting to know them on their terms, not through the distorted lens of our own assumptions.

For me and cops, the trick was to spend time with them. I took classes offered by the local police, and went on ride-alongs—and broke through not only my prejudices, but made a number of friends in the process. The result, I believe, is a diverse cast of cop characters, some just as bad as I always imagined them, but the rest rich and complex and conflicted as the best of us.

You won’t need to be so hands-on with every challenging character you tackle. Often, a thought experiment—imagining yourself in a stranger’s place—will take you a long way. Hate dirty hippy socialists? Spend some time inside their flea-infested scalps. Or is it right wing nutjobs which set you alight with a white-hot rage? Break bread with one, in your mind if not your dining room—and don’t neglect to say grace.

None of this is to say you must like or approve of those with whom you differ—though you may surprise yourself. But as an author, you do need to portray their fictional versions well enough they will recognize themselves in your work and feel your representation to be genuine.

Just as the opposite of love is indifference, the opposite of hate is understanding. If you want to write polemics, straw men and caricatures may be just what the doctor ordered. But if you want to write effective fiction with wire-snap tension, you need to understand the characters you hate at least as well as those you love.

Maybe even a little more.