

The Waiting Room

by
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Anyone who says writing is a lonely business has yet to spend time with a headful of fictional folk, each bent on having his or her way. Characters are not like boring, predictable humans. For effective story, conflict and change, characters must be ego-tripping demigods. The writer's job is to turn them into minions with omnipotent appeal. This is at best a neurotic, symbiotic relationship. However, over the past decade or so, one of my characters helped me find a sane way of working together, discovered during early morning walks. This routine began in September 2001 when my family started homeschooling. That hour or so before our school day began was the only time I had completely to myself, or at least I assumed I was alone. I worked on lesson plans, wrote songs, designed ways to integrate history, science, math, and literature, into experiential learning for our only daughter, now twenty-three and officially launched. I relished the solitude and creativity of those walks, but it wasn't long before I realized—I was *not* alone. Three years into homeschooling I joined Left Coast Writers, which pushed me happily back into an active writing process. I dusted off stories languishing in computer files. As soon as I started stirring those simmering pots, many idle characters sprang to life, infiltrating my peaceful walks. "*What the hell are you waiting for?*" they yelled as I

contemplated cool ways to introduce third grade algorithms. “*What good is this immortality you keep promising us if it’s spent shut away in a file? You need to get busy...*” On and on they raged, high jacking my solitude. The tirades worked. Like the old days when I was single and living in New York, words pushed me out of bed again. In 2005 I began a(nother) new novel adding a host of fresh characters to the fray. Motivated by opportunities to read at Left Coast salons, I split my evenings between lesson plans and fiction. It felt good, but did not stop the noise from my disgruntled crew. I imagine that they congregate in a Character Waiting Room. The most irate stand in front holding forth, others lounge in chairs, on sofas napping, dipping snuff, smoking, listening to iPods or transistor radios, reading by candle light or from Kindles. The noise from the front is deafening. The veterans infuse the new comers and now they are *all* pissed. So one morning I call them out. “*Dang!...what more do y’all want?*” I ask. “*I’m workin’ again, got a pretty productive schedule going, even had a couple of readings.*” That isn’t enough; the rants escalate. Then *Indicca Bright* speaks softly from the back of the Waiting Room. She’s 23, the demure single mother of 3-year-old “*Cricket*”, and one of my favorite characters from the current work-in-progress novel, *Peach Seed Monkey*.

“*You oughta interview us*”, she suggests, “*that way everybody can have they say AND we can get some peace and quiet ‘round here.*”

“*That’s a good idea!*” I reply, and start interviews right away, wondering why I never thought of this.

For years on my walks I jotted notes in a small pad, before switching to a digital recorder and finally to voice memo on my iPhone. Over time I learned that I’d become a neighborhood fixture: the black woman in the red ski jacket, baseball cap, walking and

writing or talking to her cell phone. People are genuinely interested to learn that am writing a novel. The middle-aged blond woman with a black, vintage Mercedes in the driveway wants me to find a place for her in my book—even though she’s never asked what *my* story is about. Not worth explaining that there’s no room for her villainess in this family saga centered around the rediscovered love of a black, 70-something couple separated for 50 years after terrors of the Civil Rights Movement in Albany, Georgia—which, by-the-way, happens to be my birthplace.

As the word count increased, characters lined up for interviews, proving *Indicca Bright* to be right, this idea brings order to the chaos and—inadvertently—turns my characters into writers. Even the most mutinous still wait pensively with pads and pens, prepping for interviews; and they—as much as I—look forward to my annual research trek back to Georgia.

Since my parents and sister passed away in the 1990’s, going home is bittersweet. Gone are my mom’s signature pats on the back, my dad’s hearty laugh and my sister’s infectious creative zest. Gone is the “home house” with its smells, meals and memories. Morning walks in Georgia are now from the home of dear friends and I’m a tourist in my hometown. The interviews continue, but my characters up the ante on this home turf. They *seem* humbled by place and hungry to know more about the real folk of my life—living and deceased—who populate my research and inform my stories. But I know exactly what they are up to. The writer in each of them is ruthlessly pursuing new material; looking for stuff to give his or her interviews zing in hopes of ensuring a spot above “minor character”.

With each trip back my (our) research deepens. I stroll the campus of Albany State University remembering the days in the 1960s when it was still a college, and my childhood house—now a parking lot (for real)—stood across the street from the girls’ dorm. College Avenue, the single street that leads to the campus, was then called Hazard Drive, one end occupied by the campus, the other end lined with mostly wooden houses filled with folks raising families and renting rooms to college students. The street was a *mélange* of those two cultures. The sounds of kids playing pitched against the distant, early morning singing and chanting of sorority and fraternity pledgees as they *crossed the burning sands* of humiliation in initiation rituals. Student teachers, football games and homecoming parades, Hazard Drive was a lively, magical place to grow up. I mentally reenact civil rights marches across the old bridge. I pull my hero couple—*Fletcher Dukes* and *Altovise Johnson*—from the waiting room and place them in the pews of Shiloh Baptist Church the night Dr. King spoke.

Sure, some may never leave the waiting room, but together all of my fussy characters and I find new ways to process story.