

Murder Your Darlings

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Do you want to have the right professional attitude to ensure your writing career? Then you must be ready to "Murder your darlings", a phrase coined by F Scott Fitzgerald (or Quiller Couch or Nabakov or even Stephen King, depending on who you believe).

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"Murder your darlings" was a phrase coined by F Scott Fitzgerald (or Quiller Couch or Nabakov or even Stephen King, depending on who you believe). They're all referring to what you might call your "best bits." The "bits" you should edit out of your work. As Elmore Leonard once said, "If I come across anything in my work that smacks of 'good writing,' I immediately strike it out."

The theory is that writing you're particularly proud of is probably self-indulgent and will stand out. You might think this is good. Wrong.

You will most likely break the "fictive dream." (This is the state of consciousness reached by readers who are absorbed by a writer). And breaking your reader out of this fictive dream is a heinous sin! Editing out "the best bits" is the hardest thing a novice writer has to do - after all, isn't it counterproductive to write good things down only to cut them out?

Look at it this way...

When you start out, every word you write is precious. The words are torn from you. You wrestle with them, forcing them to express what you're trying to say. When you're done, you may have only a paragraph or a few pages - but to you the writing shines with inner radiance and significance. That's why criticism cuts to the core. You can't stand the idea of changing a single word in case the sense you're trying to convey gets lost or distorted.

Worse still, you have moments of doubt when you think you're a bad writer - criticism will do this every time. Sometimes you might go for months, blocked and worrying over your words and your ability. There is only one cure for this - to write more; to get words out of your head and on to the page. When you do that, you're ahead, no matter how bad you think you are.

After all, words are just the tools - a collection of words is not the end result, it is only the medium through which you work. In the same way that a builder uses bricks and wood to build a house - the end result is not about the materials, it's about creating a place to live.

As you progress in your writing career, you become less touchy about your words. You have to. Editors hack them around without mercy. Agents get you to rewrite great swathes of text they don't like. Publishers cut out whole sections as irrelevant.

All this hurts - a lot.

But after a while, you realize you're being helped. That it's not the words that matter so much as what you're trying to communicate. Once you accept that none of the words actually matter, and have the courage to "murder your darlings," you have the makings of the correct professional attitude to ensure your writing career.

This is a tough lesson to learn.

But, as always, the trick is...to keep writing!

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THIS WEEK'S WRITER'S QUOTE:

"Writing is the only thing that, when I do it, I don't feel I should be doing something else." Gloria Steinem

Best regards and keep writing!

Rob Parnell

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Your Success is My Concern

The Easy Way to Write