

Tip #2. Kill your darlings!

Most writers come across this phrase from time to time, but what does it actually mean? The phrase, as it pertains to literature, has been around for over a hundred years now and has been attributed to many people. Who came up with it is not important. What is important, is why the phrase is held in such high esteem. Here's why. Writers, by and large, are a pretty self-indulgent lot. We forget our goal. Our goal is to give the reader an experience, not ourselves. We sometimes misguidedly pander to our own tastes, not our readers'. New writers may make the mistake that "Kill your darlings" refers to literally killing off characters that the writer/reader loves in order to invoke a gasp from the audience, to insert a twist that not even the almighty saw coming. It means nothing of the sort.

It's an instruction to weed out *anything* in your work that does not *serve* the story. It refers to words, sentences, paragraphs, scenes, descriptions, characters, settings, dialogue, chapters...in other words, anything that you, the writer, clings to dogmatically for no real reason other than that you like it! Just because you like it, doesn't mean it belongs. Whatever it is, it needs to serve the story. It needs to drive the story forward. If it doesn't, nuke it.

In my current book, Zululand Gold, I had such a darling. A scene that I loved, that added a wonderful new dimension to the plot; a new character, with an intriguing ability, and an interaction with nature that gave me goose-bumps. I worked hard on that scene, jiggled it around, played with it and polished it until I really liked what I saw. It was good! It involved an interaction with an elephant. From that scene a pillar of plot sprang and even went on to inform the dramatic conclusion to the book. The problem was, this pillar, at its core, was quite similar to two of the other three supporting pillars of my story (I already had an interaction with a turtle and a leopard). I didn't mind. I liked 'em all. My editor instantly pointed it out to me.

"In book one, we had a crocodile. Now we've got a turtle, a leopard and an elephant! Is this a treasure quest or a David Attenborough documentary?"

I whined. I whined a lot. I liked Dumbo. I liked the intrigue and emotions he stirred in me. I liked the opportunities Dumbo gave me to introduce a build-up of tension...he was my eerie background music. But he had nothing, whatsoever, to do with gold or the lack thereof. No matter. I liked 'em, and I was gonna keep 'em!

Equally as galling was that fact that this pet elephant, while adding nothing tangible to my current story, was actually hogging my time and energy that should have been directed squarely at the story elements that *did* matter. Elements that I was struggling to get under control. In effect, this elephantine ingredient became a crutch that I was using to avoid the real issues plaguing me.

In the end, I cut him loose. It meant I had to spend three more months reworking the plot lines and reshaping events, but it was worth it. The story immediately tensed up with more purpose of direction as well. And the sense of relief I felt was almost intoxicating. Like cleaning out your garage of all the junk that you haven't used in fifteen years yet cling to in the belief that one day...one dayyy.....

To be fair Dumbo didn't just evaporate in a grey puff. He still wanders the wrinkles and clefts of my brain - he'll come if I call him. Maybe I'll use him in a future story, but deciding he didn't belong in this one was the best decision I ever made.