Write What You (Don't) Know

The advice given in many writing books, articles and workshops is to 'Write what you know.'

What implications does this have for novelists?

If you're a mother, can you only write about family life? If you live in a small village, does that stop you setting your novel in a city? If you think of all the films and books about fantasy, time-travel, vampires and far-away galaxies, you'll realise those writers didn't take this piece of advice.

I'm not totally knocking this guidance, but I'd advise against taking it too literally.

I'm often intrigued about a character who has a job I know nothing about, or a book that is set in a country I've never visited. After a little research I often discover the author has worked in that profession, or lives in the country where the novel is set. What is ordinary to them is new and exotic to me. They are writing what they know.

So how can we write what we know, but take it out of the ordinary. After all no-one is going to be interested about me getting up and sitting at my laptop after eating my breakfast. That's called blogging – when it's done badly.

Among the cute aliens, unicorns and time-travel there are always elements of what the author already knew. Things they've experienced. There has to be, or the story wouldn't reach out and grab us. Star Wars might seem very far from our everyday lives, and yes, the setting is different, but the real story is about human relationships. The Time Traveler's Wife has a character with Chrono-Displacement Disorder, but at the core is a love story.

However extreme the outward settings or disorders, the emotions displayed are human. We understand the emotions and are pulled into the magic of the story.

So what things do we know?

We know ourselves. We know our feelings. We know what it is to be sad or happy or angry. We know some of the things that generate those feelings in us.

As writers we should be observers, and we should observe ourselves. What happens to us physically when we get angry? Or happy? Or miserable? Some of those emotions are going to happen to our characters. As humans, our physical (chemical) reactions to emotions are mostly the same, but the way we react to the emotions will not be the same as someone else. Indeed our own reactions can change in different circumstances. We might laugh at something one person says, but get angry if another person said the same thing. Our actions make us individuals. Make us unique.

If we decide what we know about ourselves, the place we live and the experiences we've had isn't enough, then we come to research.

For my 'day' job, I write technical manuals and develop training workshops on a wide variety of topics. Among other subjects, I've written manuals on computer systems, hazardous substances, leadership, presentation skills and working with troubled children and youths.

For some of these topics, I had limited knowledge when I approached the project and so research was a must. The research tools I use mostly are the internet, libraries and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

The internet is a wonderful tool, and because it's so accessible we tend to turn to it first. If you get your facts from a website, check it out. Make sure the information is fact and not somebody's guess. Is the website a professional source? Is the same information on other websites? Although this doesn't necessarily mean it's correct.

Libraries and librarians are a great source of knowledge. Become familiar with your local library and make friends with the librarians.

For writing technical manuals, the best source is a Subject Matter Expert, although you'll still need to check some facts, and make sure you absolutely need all the information the SME has given you.

You're probably thinking that's all very well for her, but where am I going to find a SME? Subject Matter Experts are all around you. They may even be disguised as family members and friends. When you talk to people and really listen, you'll be amazed at the places they've lived or visited, and the things they've done.

For example in *Lives Interrupted*, Rosa and Ellie work as business consultants in London, although originally it was going to be the Stock Exchange. During a discussion about something else, I discovered a friend of mine had actually worked in the Stock Exchange for a number of years. One evening we had dinner, and I 'interviewed' her. The work the characters did was not a main component of the story, but I needed to have a feel for their average workday and the tasks they'd complete.

Mechanically-minded friends are used to questions such as, 'What could you do to a car that is relatively quick and simple, but would cause it to crash.'

In *Driftwood* the main character works with dysfunctional business teams and managers. Through work colleagues I found two people who did this as their business. Both were more than happy to talk to me in general terms about their work, and how they would go about resolving the scenarios I had devised for Juliet.

One of the characters in *Lives Interrupted* is travelling on the underground when a bomb explodes. Because of her injuries she has her leg amputated. I researched this from the personal perspective of people who've had limbs amputated, as well as the medical aspects.

As I write this article, I have my leg encased in plaster after an accident that resulted in several broken bones. This has given me a new perspective on the *little* things that are so difficult to do when you only have the use of one leg. Fortunately for me this is just a temporary adjustment, but it has been an eye-opener in respect of my character, and I am busy rewriting.

Learn from life's lessons – and write them down.

Write about your passions. Write about what interests you. If you use this as your starting point you'll be keen enough to find out more. Then when you write, it will be what you know.