



The Value of Stories That Fail

Good writers aren't born. Okay, well, actually, they are born, since it would be physically impossible to write without being born... but they're aren't born *good*. At least, I've yet to meet a four-year-old wunderkind who's running around writing Pulitzer Prize-winning epics. I know I sure wasn't. Instead, good writers are *made*. Skill isn't a necessity so much as determination, discipline, and dedication. And a lot of bad writing along the way.

I started writing almost twelve years ago. Since then, I've written eight novels, almost two hundred short stories, and over one hundred articles. At first glance, that may seem like a pretty hefty number, but here's two truths I should probably mention:

Truth #1: The vast majority of those novels, stories, and articles (say at least six years' worth) are utter garbage.

Truth #2: The vast majority of that garbage is the reason I can now call myself a decent writer without watching my nose shoot out in front of me like Pinocchio's.

Learning to write is often a messy trek along a road littered with cardboard characters, ludicrous dialogue, and boring plots. Not to mention clunky prose and nonexistent grammar. Fortunately, along with all this detritus also comes an equal measure of blindness, which keeps us from realizing our awfulness. Most of the time anyway.

I can look back at that dusty pile of manuscripts buried in the corner of my closet, and I see the roadmap of my journey as a writer. The first three novels,

although indefinably dear to my heart, are horrible, inexperienced, amateur ramblings. No one but me (and perhaps a few very kind family and friends) would ever care to read them. In fact, it would probably be considered cruel and unusual punishment. All the beginner gaffes are there: POV slips, lack of conflict, overuse of direct addresses, pages of narrative summarization, impossibly far-fetched/impossibly clichéd plots. Believe me, I covered all the bases.

Each of these first three novels showed perhaps, if I was very lucky, minor improvement from one novel to the next. But 'round about the time the fourth novel rolled off my fingers and onto the computer, something happened. I stumbled across a book on writing at the library, started reading, and couldn't tear myself away. Suddenly, the whole business of writing fiction started to make sense. Armed at last with more than mere intuition, I buckled down and finished that fourth novel. And guess what? It stunk. Maybe even worse than the first three. It was more structured, more correct than the first three—but it lacked the spark, the passion, the joy.

I had gained the bones of the craft and lost my grip on the soul. Very depressing, I assure you. In many ways, it was a do-or-die period for my writing. I'd written four novels, and none of them were anything to email the president about. I could so easily have quit writing here; I could have thrown up my hands, thrown a pity party, and thrown in the towel. Obviously, I wasn't cut out to be a writer.

But, aside from that insatiable creative itch poking away inside of me, I just couldn't stand to let the monster of inadequacy beat me. So I sat down and wrote another novel, this one titled *A Man Called Outlaw* (<http://www.kmweiland.com/books.php>). And something happened to this novel, something that hadn't happened to any of its predecessors: the pieces—the wildly varied and often elusive pieces of a novel—started falling into place. Finally, I had written something worth reading.

That was almost five years ago. Since then, I've completed two more novels, each one (I hope) a little better than the last. I'm still growing, still learning, still making plenty of mistakes. But with *Outlaw*, I seemed to cross a threshold: in short, I learned how to write. The scary thing, though, is that if I had quit at Novel #4—if I had given up because everything I'd written up to that point had been dreck—I would be standing just outside that threshold for the rest of my life.

Johne Cook, sci-fi writer and editor of the space opera e-zine *Ray Gun Revival*, (<http://raygunrevival.com>) makes the powerful suggestion that every author has "to write out your million words of dreck before you're at the place where you've learned enough to be really ready to start to publish your works on a regular basis." I'm standing right at that milestone, and I can honestly look back and see how my many words of dreck have piled up to make me the author I am today. And I'm certain they will continue to pile up with every novel I write. In writing, there's no such thing as a failed story. Even the most ghastly are only a stepping stone to that threshold of enlightenment and, eventually, success.



About the Author: K.M. Weiland grew up chasing Billy the Kid and Jesse James on horseback through the sand hills of western Nebraska, where she still lives. A lifelong fan of history and the power of the written word, she enjoys sharing both through her many fictional stories and her novel, *A Man Called Outlaw*. Visit her blog "Wordplay" to read her take on the writing life.

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