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DOES WRITING CHANGE THE WRITER? READERS WANT TO KNOW

Craft | What I Learned

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by Mary Hutchings Reed

Does Writing Change the Writer? The Question

At a recent book signing event for my sixth book, *Free Spirits*, a historical novel, a man asked me a question: “Did writing *Free Spirits* change you in any way?” Perhaps apologizing for the invasiveness of the question, he added, “Did you learn anything about yourself in writing it?”

It was a big, soul-searching question to answer in front of an audience of more than thirty. My first reaction was that, because it was a historical novel, I had learned a lot about the history of women and the spiritualist movement in America, but then I realized that the questioner was seeking a deeper answer. I gulped and came up with something about all writing was soul-making and added that writing in general forces the writer to try to see the world through a different lens.

Does Writing Change the Writer? What I've Learned

Later, I noted in my journal that because of Fred Shafer's "Reading Like a Reader" lecture series (September 2023 at OCWW), the first thing that came to mind was how much readers love the "stuff" of novels. While we are often told to write what we know, it is often the "stuff" that readers don't know that engrosses them in a novel. Sometimes we think it is all about the story or the character, but what can make a character interesting is the world they live in, their ethnic background, their travels, their unique lifestyle, their profession or job skills, their hobbies, their obsessions—the stuff our readers may not know much about.

For *Free Spirits*, I had to learn about the marriage laws, the upscale boarding houses where the most successful prostitutes worked, early birth-control methods, the practice of Spiritualism and spirit photography as well as what magazines women read, what they wore, what employment opportunities were available to them, and many other details that immersed me as a writer, and hopefully, the reader, in a real world.

I thought about my next novel, *Harmony's Peace & Joy*, now being edited. I found my research file for that work, which is set in the present, and was surprised to find that I'd looked up articles on how to fight with one's fists, how to harvest and cook with purslane, historic preservation laws, strip-mining reclamation methods, Wisconsin endangered and protected species, federal internet liability laws, Native American prayers, and techniques of Japanese artisans.

I hadn't appreciated before how important this "stuff" was, and how it entertains a reader while I, as a writer, learn much beyond my immediate experience. I also told my journal that after Fred Shafer's lectures, I realized that the kind of novel I like to read (and therefore write) also does two other things, in addition to entertaining and informing: It amuses with its creativity (in language, style, or a fresh approach to an old subject) and on some level, it inspires.

In thinking about my reader's question about change, I realized that "inspiring" may be that ineffable something that sticks with a reader and changes the writer. So I was back to that deeper question: Apart from what I learned about writing, did writing *Free Spirits* change me in any way? Did it inspire me?

Does Writing Change the Writer? How Writing Changed Me

I told my journal that writing has changed me. Over the years, and particularly with *Free Spirits*, I have become less judgmental of others. Having walked for several hundred pages in my character's shoes, I realized that all of them—prostitutes and their gentlemen customers, spiritualists and possible frauds, photographers and circus freaks—were doing the best they could under their individual circumstances in New York City in 1865. To give them full respect, I had to try to

> understand their perspectives, circumstances, and societally imposed limitations, and I had to empathize with the terrible problems, choices, and dilemmas I forced them to confront. Whether they made the choices I would have made didn't matter; what mattered was that I could understand how they came to make their choices.

And that's a biggie for me. Not only have I changed, but also I am grateful to the cast of *Free Spirits* and to the writing process for having faced those circumstances and problems instead of me!



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MARY HUTCHINGS REED has self-published four well-received novels and an awarded collection of short stories as well as a number of short stories in print and online journals, and prefers the term “indie-publishing.” She has participated in Fred Shafer’s novel workshop for more than 20 years. Learn more at maryhutchingsreed.com.

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