

GO KNOW

Written By Hannah Louise Shearer

Write what you know. The mantra of the story gurus, the creative writing teachers, the critics. I wish I knew what the hell it meant. Certainly, it can't mean that only men can write men, women write women, lawyers write lawyers, cops write cops, the young write the young, the old write the old (Oops, I almost forgot, nobody writes the old). And what about period pieces? Even if you'd been there in another life, it's kind of hard to remember the details. So what would you do, hypnotize yourself back into, say, the Scotland of Randall Wallace's *Braveheart*?

As if.

As if. When Amy Heckerling wrote those words in *Clueless*, she wasn't a teenager. But she beautifully portrayed how teenagers thought, spoke, behaved.

So I guess I've moved from 'write what you know' to 'make it your own.' And the only way I know how to make it my own is by doing research, the solid foundation upon which I build my characters, my stories, and give vent to my passions.

I *love* doing research. I love traveling to a location to be inspired, even if it's only Sherman Oaks Fashion Square. It forces me to stretch my legs (if only that could add a few inches), but more important, it forces me to stretch my mind.

I love finding out about professions I could no more practice than fly through the air on a trapeze. I love to listen to the rhythm of different speech patterns, I love to smell the air of a new place, eat the food, absorb the culture through my skin. I love to find a

different sense of place, which leads me to those other places in my heart that are hidden or forgotten.

Sometimes a tiny, peripheral piece of information takes me in another direction altogether, changing my entire perception of my project, pushing me into even more untested waters. That's okay with me. It's like the martial arts, where you learn how to fight and attack with a plan, but keep your eyes open for any opportunity to strike. In karate sparring, which I *do* know, but no one will pay me to write about, you move in concentric circles, farthest out to closest in. The process of research is the same, from the general to the more specific, to the core of the matter.

I've spent hours learning about hurricanes, how to set fires, how different explosives work to create different explosions. I've spent days with uniformed cops on domestic disputes, beatings, gang fights, robberies. I've picked the brains of detectives on homicides, bunco, fraud and general mayhem. I've sat in emergency rooms, watching doctors work on cardiac patients, gunshot victims, accident survivors. I, who get dizzy at the sight of a nasty paper cut, have watched surgeries and Code Blues. I can sleep at night because, thank God, I have a selective memory.

I almost flunked physics at Berkeley, but I've since learned more than I ever wanted to know about the core of nuclear reactors, their problems, and potential disasters. And I'm sure my professor would be horrified that I ended up writing for *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. True, they were essentially morality plays that took place in our unknown future, but they still had to be grounded in some kind of scientific reality, especially when you were opposing current conventional wisdom. You had to understand the science so you could figure out a rational way to turn it upside down. I spent days researching with

brilliant scientists who helped me deal with the concepts that time is not linear, that there are wormholes in space, and how a ship like the Enterprise could repair a hole in the atmosphere of a planet that doesn't exist. (That we know of.) For someone who hit a brick wall at geometry it was all quite a leap.

Not everything I've done has been so alien. On a research trip to London for an action script that didn't sell (yet), I took a break and stopped at the Red Lion Pub in Mayfair. There I met the best-looking man in the world: a black-haired Irishman who taught me all about warm ale and Indian restaurants, then broke my heart. Now I stick to imported beer, which leads to Tsing Tao, which leads to Shaolin monks, but that's another story and another script.

When I was flown to Nashville to do a pilot about the police department, I knew nothing about the city. (I *hate* flying, but it was For The Work.) The budget allowed me to spend only three days researching. I rolled on calls with the cops, ate grits in diners, dashed through the Grand Ole Opry, and toured the rolling suburbs. Mostly I listened. I was lucky enough to hear Garth Brooks sing and play his guitar, alone, leaning against a wall in a private dining room, before he became *the* Garth Brooks. I learned a little about country music, even though I can't carry a tune. When I finished that script, members of the Tennessee film commission wanted to know how long 'my people' had lived in Nashville. The ultimate compliment. Well, no, actually, the ultimate compliment would have been for the series to go.

I've even lived with a guy who swore he'd been a spy for the Defense Intelligence Agency -- okay, so I'm naive and a tiny bit gullible -- sue me. But he sure knew a hell of a lot about spy stuff, and I figured even if he wasn't telling the truth, *he* thought he was,

and that was almost as good. Anyway, I got two spec movie scripts and a terrific snapping front kick out of it.

This year I wrote about cops who ride Trek-y series bikes with a gazillion speeds (actually 24). The last time I had a bike, I was 11 and the bike had foot brakes. I wrote about chasing crooks on roller blades: I've never been near a roller blade, I can barely walk in high heels. Weak ankles, the doctor said the 15th time I fell on my ass trying to ice skate.

Then I wrote a show starring two adventurers on a schooner in turn of the century Tahiti. The two leads help lepers, discover pearls, and have a run-in with a nasty female pirate. The closest I've come to the South Seas is the old Kahala Hilton, my pearls are cultured, and I've never met a leper. I don't know a thing about boats, let alone schooners, I've never met a pirate, unless you count the Pirates of the Caribbean, but thank God I do know a lot about tough, strong, bitchy women. The historical information I needed came from the Internet, the Britannica, the PAGE BBS research forum, but the characters came from my imagination, and the emotions came from my heart.

Over the years I've learned what I'm good at in my life: kids and spirituality, empathy and tension. I'm good at loss and death, tempered by moments of intense happiness. Hey, maybe deep, deep down, my universal sensibility is what everyone else also experiences. So maybe I do write what I know, whether it's a car chase or an intimate moment, whether it takes place in outer or inner space.

As my mother used to say, go know.

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