

For Beginners Only

Leaving the Safety of Your Home: Going Beyond Your Writing Comfort Zone

By Margo Pierce

Wandering through a bookstore with a friend, I saw a copy of *Prodigal Summer*. I turned to her and said, "If I could write like anyone, it'd be her."

She looked at the book at the end of my finger, written by Barbara Kingsolver, and she said, "Don't you mean you want to write like you?"

I rolled my eyes and insisted, "No, I want to write like *her!*"

"Why?" she asked.

"Because her stories are engaging! She doesn't avoid messy stuff or anything controversial, she just lays it all out there. Her characters are real and they draw you into their lives. Everything she writes is just so interesting!"

The next day it hit me—my writing was safe and therefore, lifeless. I stayed in my house, in my boring, everyday reality and never ventured out into the controversial or unconventional. I would secretly read the racy stuff, hiding it from everyone's view. I relished every word but never dared write the wild things in my head. The moment an unsafe thought emerged, clichés followed:

- That's disgusting!
- Who would read that trash!
- Would you want your mother knowing you wrote that?
- That is so "out there" no publisher in her right mind would touch it and nobody would buy it!
- You are never going to get published writing weird stuff like that; stick to what is popular!

But when I remembered the incredulous look on my friend's face, it drove home the realization that I was living a cliché every writing book warns against: envy. Wanting to be like another writer to the detriment of my own voice. I was more focused on admiring someone else's courage,

someone else's not-safe-stories, than developing my own. I decided right then I was NOT going to remain holed up in that stale and gloomy place.

I grabbed my journal and headed for an outdoor table at the coffee shop next to my apartment building. I was determined to sit in a public place and write down every bizarre, twisted, unbelievable thought I could remember. I had to be someplace open and unprotected.

The remembered thoughts led to new ideas and those I forced into different directions. It was difficult to write about all the taboos stuffed into boxes and locked in my mental basement—sex, drugs, death, money, hatred, violence, vulnerability—but the more I wrote, the more exhilarating it became. I didn't have any delusions about coming up with the next Booker Prize winner, I just wanted to stretch the boundaries of my thoughts. I wanted to see what would happen if I could write beyond familiarity. I left the safety of my own home, literally and figuratively, with that first exercise. I try to go further afield with each subsequent trip.

Do I still want to write like Barbara Kingsolver? Yes. Do I still worry about what people think? Yes. Do I let either one stop me from writing? No.

The next time you feel the need to stuff your ideas into a box and shove them into darkness before someone sees them, get your journal, a take-out menu, or pile of cocktail napkins and write them down. The thought police will not break down your door and arrest you! But you might just come up with an interesting idea or two.

Margo Pierce writes from Seattle, WA. ✍