

# Carolyn on Writing

An interview with Carolyn Hart  
by **Kathy Moad**, *The REPORT*  
Oklahoma Writers' Federation

*Q: What is your philosophy on writing: why we do it, have to do it, love/hate to do it. Where does the need come from for you?*

**A:** This is a perceptive question which reflects a clear understanding that writers do not choose to write, they must write.

I am often asked at a writers' conference: How do you have the discipline to write? I know then that the questioner will likely never write a novel. I am not disciplined, I am compulsive. Actually, I am miserable and worried and uncertain and frantic when working on a novel. It is not fun.

I am always afraid I can't do it this time. I am never confident of success. Yet, I would be infinitely more miserable, in fact non-functional, if I did not write. Writing gives me a reason to live. It also affords comfort from the chaos of the world, the horrors that beat against us from every direction every day all the time. I address my feelings about writing in **Letter from Home**, my Oklahoma novel.

The misery and stress end, however, when I complete the first draft. That is when writing becomes fun. I love doing revisions. This is the payback for the pain of the process. I have the book. It's there. I am no longer afraid. I revise and polish and change and tweak and my mood is sunny. Oh happy day, the book is done and all I have to do is enjoy making it better.

*Q: Who or what particularly influenced your work?*

**A:** Agatha Christie. She is and will always be the greatest writer of traditional mysteries. I believe in the importance of mysteries and their contribution to goodness. The world is beset by evil and injustice but the traditional mystery will always offer a good, just and decent world to readers.

*Q: Does plot inspire character, or does character decide plot?*

**A:** Plot demands particular characters but the characters then determine how the plot plays out.

*Q: Do you outline, or let the muse take you? And what is the greatest drawback of the path you choose to create stories?*

**A:** I do not outline. This isn't to say that I start off on the first page with nothing in mind. I know these particulars:

- The protagonist. The personality and attitudes of the sleuth determine the background, style and possibilities of the book.
- The victim. The personality and identity of the victim determine the cast of characters. Those who surrounded the victim in life will be suspects after the death.
- The murderer. I know who committed the crime and why.
- I have a working title. I can't write a book unless I have a title. It may not be the title of the published book but the working title gives me a sense of the book.

That's all I know. When I start Page 1, I have no idea how I will get to Page 300. This is where the importance of character comes in. The story will unfold because of the dictates of character.

The drawback to this openended fashion of writing is the panicked feeling that there is no way to get there (the conclusion) from here (the beginning). I wish I were smart enough to plot in advance. My mind doesn't work that way (or doesn't work well enough to do it that way!). But one of the great joys of writing is coming up against a blank wall and then little squiggles of thought begin and suddenly something happens, a character appears, a door opens, a message is left and hey, we're off and running again.

*Q: What's worse: fear of failure or fear of success? How do you get past the fear?*

**A:** I taught writing for a few years and if I had one precept for students it is this: You will never succeed unless you are willing to fail.

Whether a writer will write will be determined by the force of the compulsion to write opposed to the fear of failure or success.

I think my suggestion would be to realize that there is no disgrace in failure and success is what we make of it.

*Q: What was harder: getting there, or staying there? Does the 'fun' leave with a contract?*

**A:** I don't think most writers, unless they are on the level of Mary Higgins Clark or John Grisham, ever feel they have "got there." Most of us run scared. All we can do is write the best books we can write and know that is all we can do.

A contract is simply a recognition that there are readers who want to read your books. That is an affirmation. Enjoy it.

*Q: If you could skip a part of the process, which would it be? What part of writing do you struggle with?*

**A:** I struggle with the first draft, but obviously I wouldn't skip it.

*Q: In birthing the story, do you 'hear the voices' or 'see the pictures/movie'?*

**A:** I see the pictures which is probably odd because I am not a moviegoer. But the scenes play out in a visual way.

*Q: Getting an agent can be like getting a loan: you only get one if you don't really need one. Do you think an agent is important, and what is your advice for unpublished authors who are seeking representation?*

**A:** An agent is essential in today's publishing world. The best way is to go to conferences such as OWFI. I would like to explain here that the reason I've never been able to attend the wonderful conference is because the most important mystery conference of the year for traditional mystery writers is the same weekend in Washington D.C.

Getting to know other writers is not only a joy but a necessity. Most writers are friendly and helpful and knowing them and attending conferences is the best way to get an agent.

*Q: Do you worry about being pigeon-holed in your success, and do you have other worlds/genres you hope to explore someday?*

**A:** Success is ephemeral. Like sea foam, it's here today and gone tomorrow. I will write mysteries as long as someone will publish them. My heart belongs to the mystery.

*Q: What have you learned over the course of writing that made the task easier?*

**A:** This is a mundane, nuts-and-bolts question but it took me almost 20 books to learn this. As you write the book, outline the chapters you have written. In the margin (I do this on a legal pad), mark the day and time as the action occurs and scenes shift. This makes it easy to find a particular scene when you need to revise or remember a fact. And the times are invaluable. *Q: Advice? What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?*

**A:** Care passionately about what you write. If you care, readers (and somewhere an editor) will care.