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Theme Essay by Steve Adams

When Your Fantasy Book Has Feet of Clay



Dear Writing Coach: I finally have the chance to write the novel I’ve been waiting to write my whole life. My spouse has offered to support me so I can fulfill my dream, but now I don’t even know where to begin. When I sit down to write, my stomach ties itself in knots. Worse, I’m using any excuse to avoid my novel. The thing is, I know what I want to write about, but I hate the few words I’ve managed to put down. If I hadn’t talked about my novel idea for so many years, I would’ve probably already given up. I’m afraid after all my talking I’m going to fail. Can you help me?

This is not a real letter to me from a desperate writer. But as a writing coach, I’ve been approached by a number of clients over the years with variations of it. “Someday I’ll have time to write” is a common scenario, as is the frustration experienced when time is either made or found but the dream fizzles.

What I’ve discovered, as a coach and mentor, is that there aren’t “one size fits all” formulas to teach. In many ways,

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the work is about helping a writer learn to live with uncertainty and stay the course. With that in mind, here’s my reply to those struggling to make all they imagine real on the page.

Dear Writer: First of all, take a deep breath.

Let me assure you, what you’re experiencing is not uncommon. The good news is the dream you’ve been carrying all these years has brought you to a place where you can finally fulfill it. The bad news is this dream is so radiant in your mind that the necessary false tries and imperfections, the rough clay you must put down in order to explore and realize this work, have come up short in comparison.

It’s tremendously exciting to think about creative projects as well as talk about them. Writers experience all their possibilities when they do, feeling the rush of their energy. But as you’ve discovered, once you sit down at the desk to bring your vision to the page, there “Falls the Shadow” (to quote T.S. Eliot from “The Hollow Men”).

I’d like you to consider that the vision you’ve been carrying is very real, essential even. It’s much like a teenager’s vision of a perfect soul mate, someone who is attractive and kind and funny and...well, perfect. It gives the teen an image to move toward, to follow, one that’s critical for helping navigate relationships with real boys or girls in the real world. Dreaming of a soul mate is a guide for managing what’s acceptable, desirable, dangerous, or a waste of time. It brings the dreamer to a place where he or she can let go of the fantasy and learn to deal with and relate to a real person.

Real people, as I’m sure you’re aware, are neither perfect ideals nor fantasies. They’re messy, awkward, frustrating, confused—yet sometimes they’re thrilling and astounding, too. When you find someone whose specific, earth-bound qualities push you toward giving up your soul-mate vision, this is where a relationship gets most exciting and challenging. It’s where the union is made real, warts and all, and it will surprise you in the shape it’s taken, as well as where it’s taken you.

In this way, it’s now time for you, the writer, to let go of your fantasy of your novel. Instead of judging the work you’ve begun by the star you’ve followed, discover what it can be on paper. That is an entirely different thing. You’ll be building it from scratch, out of your own imagination, and at some point, it may seem to be driving you. When it seems to be taking *you* somewhere, leading *you*, pay attention and allow it freedom of movement.

But until that starts happening, you have to give yourself permission to begin at the beginning, to play, to struggle, to stumble, to let go of your original idea no matter how beautiful it was and commit to what can actually exist on paper. And to find out what can exist, you have to start with the most basic elements. Don’t worry about the expectations you imagine others have; play with the mud you’ve found, like a child. From here on, this game is no one’s business but your own.

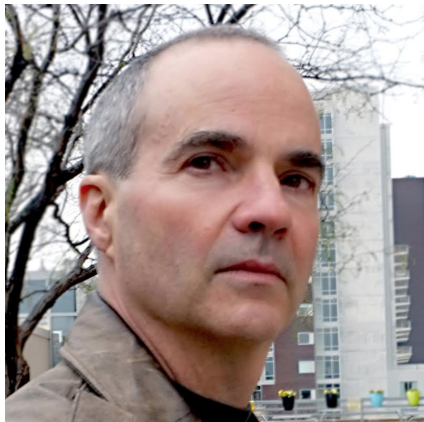
By keeping your focus on the small, necessary gestures—on the moment on the page—your novel will begin to carry you as much as you carry it. Instead of that fantasy relationship, that perfect soul mate, you’ll have a relationship with something that’s complicated, dynamic, frustrating, and—at times—thrilling. Best of all, it will be real.

Your spouse and the people in your life may not immediately understand what you’ve taken on, but they don’t need to. If you stay with it, they’ll become used to the necessity of your work, the practice you’ve begun, which, among many things, is also a spiritual practice. You may disappear from their sphere more often than they’re used to, but they’ll see you come back to them more enlivened from good work, more yourself.

And the novel? Once it’s done and you’ve travelled with it all those miles? It will look intimately familiar, but not as you expected. And it shouldn’t. It came through you, it came with you, but it is neither you nor that original perfect vision. Like a child who’s flown the nest, it will surprise you in who, or what, it’s become.

Art Information

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Steve Adams’s creative nonfiction was included in the *2014 Pushcart Prize XXXVIII* anthology and has been published in *Notre Dame Magazine*, the *Pinch*, *Talking Writing* (“[Money Is Random](#)” [4] and “[Wish I Could Quit You](#)” [5]), and elsewhere. His fiction has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, anthologized, and published in *Glimmer Train*, the *Missouri Review*, and elsewhere.

He’s won Glimmer Train’s Short Story Award for New Writers and been a guest artist at the University of Texas, a scholar at the Norman Mailer Writers’ Colony, and an artist-in-residence at Jentel. His plays have been produced in New York City and across the country.

He’s a writing coach in Texas. For more information, visit [Steve Adams’s website](#) [6].

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