

Article 1. The Embryo

In the coming weeks we will be looking at the journey a novel takes from the first germ of an idea to the finished product. For purposes of clarity, I have decided to make this a series of personal experiences, that went into the making of my novel 'The Cloths of Heaven'.

So often we hear aspiring writers complain that they simply don't have an interesting enough life to be inspired to write a novel, theirs is a humdrum, middle of the road, perhaps even boring existence, they groan. Often they criticise their own talents, suggesting that their language usage is childish or at least lacking any multi-syllabic words, and that their sentences are short, simplistic, and unimaginative.

I too, went through this stage of self-castigation, and often started on a story, only to trash it very quickly, sinking into despair that this deep-seated desire to write was a pipe dream. Did I suffer from delusions of grandeur? Was I perhaps living in a fantasy world, where my will to write would by magic give me the words, sentences and ideas to match my grand notions?

I picked up a Maeve Binchy novel, then one by Anne Rice. I was fascinated by the difference in their approach. Maeve Binchy's novel was firmly rooted in reality, in the mundane. Her work dealt with the everyday happenings in the lives of everyday people. Anne Rice on the other hand, describes the fantastic, the supernatural, and uses long, intricate sentences, and a flowery, romantic vocabulary to do so. Yet both are writers of merit, both are respected, and more than that, both earn a good living with their writing.

Why were both so successful, yet at the same time, so divergent? The answer was simple. They were true to their own personalities, and the source of their inspiration. I cannot imagine Maeve Binchy apologising for the subject matter, nor the style she chooses to give it form, and Anne Rice has us eating out of her hand, and believing completely in the existence of Lestat, her infamous vampire. She has us fall in love with him, desiring him as though he were a film star.

In short, no idea, no spark of inspiration is too trite to be used, as long as we use it well and stay true to our own personalities and our own styles. Had Maeve Binchy taken her idea and attempted to give it to us using Anne Rice's style, then it would have jarred, and lost its power. By the same token, Anne Rice's ideas would be lost if poured into Maeve Binchy's mould.

So, using my discovery, I decided to take myself seriously, believe in myself, and have faith in the ideas that would come to me, however mundane they might seem initially.

And then the germ that was to grow and ferment into what became 'The Cloths of Heaven' came to me through the channels of my normal, middle of the road life, and through the experiences of those close to me. And when it came to me, I took it, and let it settle into the comfort of my mind, like an embryo bedding into the wall of the womb.

The process of division and multiplication had begun: the single idea separated and doubled and became two, then four then eight related ideas, and more, until the story unfolded and became the novel.

In the next article I will tell you about that first idea, and about the gathering of ideas that became the story, the backbone of 'The Cloths of Heaven'