



## Killing Your Darlings

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**W**HETHER IT WAS FIRST SAID by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, or William Faulkner or Oscar Wilde, it's since been repeated by pretty much every writing tutor on the planet, referenced in every book on 'how to write'. And it's undoubtedly advice that's often met with defensiveness, rejection, even floods of tears.

The trouble is, 'Killing your darlings' is not just about ordinary editing; not just about recognising we've overwritten a bit, or gone off piste; that we can lose that paragraph for the greater good of the whole. No — the clue is in the word 'darling'; 'killing our darlings' strikes at our writerly hearts for the simple reason that it's all about love.

I think it was the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips who described being in love as 'a temporary psychosis', and scientists understand that certain parts of the brain become deactivated when we're in love, including areas linked with negative emotion, planning, critical evaluation. Love *is* blind. It's also recognised that there's something intrinsically narcissistic about falling for someone. When we gaze into the loved one's eyes, are we in fact looking into a mirror, are we Narcissus staring into the pool and falling for the reflected image of himself?

Blimey. No wonder it can be painful – impossible even – to make that particular cut; no wonder we fiercely cling to it against all advice. Those precious words are the unsuitable lover we're obsessed with, the dodgy cad who's turned our usually reasoning head, or perhaps they're a narcissistic



reflection of our self — the writer we think we are, the stylist we fancy our self to be. ‘But it’s the best bit!’ we cry; ‘it’s the truth!’ we wail, as we flounce off, ‘the essence of the whole thing! You just don’t understand me or my work...’

But then here’s a thing. Just sometimes – not often – but now and again, maybe the flouncing writer is right. Maybe it isn’t necessary to murder that particular darling — maybe the writer *is* being misunderstood and time *will* prove the worth of that questionable image or phrase or paragraph. Maybe this love will last, is built on solid ground.

No wonder editing our own work can be so bloody hard to do. If we don’t fall in love as we write, if we’re not a tad addicted, obsessive about our words, how can we possibly endure the slog of it? And how can the writing sing, breathe, have life? But if we don’t reach a point where that first flush of lust and romance turns to something calmer, more enduring, more like hard work but worth it, how can we reconnect our reasoning minds, be boundaried, a little hard-nosed with ourselves and what we write?

‘Writing is re-writing’ is another one of those sayings ascribed to who knows who; crops up all over the place. Perhaps, also, long-term loving is a kind of ‘re-loving’ — a constant edit and revisioning that can only happen over time. And sometimes, when the first flush of ‘darling, darling, darling!’ has cooled, we wake up and realise we’re in bed not with a prince but a frog. ‘You’re no darling!’ we cry. And the killing comes easy.