



## Killing Your Darlings

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**K**ILL YOUR DARLINGS — or, if you want to be even more brutal, kill your babies. If there's one piece of writerly advice that has permeated popular culture, it's this. You'll find variations and equivalents in the writing advice of Aldous Huxley and William Faulkner, Oscar Wilde and Stephen King. 'Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart', said King in *On Writing*. I'm not about to argue the opposite, but I do feel that the advice, though well-intentioned, can easily be misunderstood.

It does not mean that you should always and in every circumstance cut your best material. A fair chunk of writing that is served up on Creative Writing degrees – an awful lot of published writing, let's be honest – is pretty dull stuff, and personally I don't mind if occasionally a young writer plays to the gallery. Better to show off than be *boring*, as I'm sure Oscar Wilde would agree.

But all things in moderation. I'm sure I've written, and maybe even had published, stuff that reads like self-indulgence. As my friend Paul Ebbs puts it, your darlings are anything that *feel like writing*, and these elements must be curtailed. But it doesn't mean that you are always striving for stripped-back Hemingwayesque prose or scripts entirely lacking in everyday poetry.

Another angle on this: imagine you're writing a short poem, or a scene in a script, or a paragraph of a short story. There's something wrong. Your



inner critical voice knows it, but you can't put your finger on the problem. It can't be that phrase or sentence that you love, can it? That part that you have polished to perfection, that might even have been the first words you wrote, or the key that unlocked the whole piece.

You take a deep breath. It's not necessarily that the line or sentence is a bad one, but you realise it doesn't *belong* any more. For some reason it's pulling everything else in the wrong direction. As the poet Nicola Heaney reminded me recently, killing your darlings can be a question of *balance*.

How do you recognise your darlings? Sometimes you need external eyes to see them — I worked on something for almost a decade before an agent told me to remove a 'darling' that was so fundamental to the project, it was baked in as part of the original concept. But I just couldn't see that it was unbalancing everything else.

Other times, you have to rely on your own editorial or critical voice. My rule of thumb is, if I'm reading back my work, and I keep stumbling over the same passage or sentence again and again, something's wrong. Don't assume no one else will notice. And be alert if you ever find yourself thinking, *My, that's some mighty fine writing*.

Once identified, you must kill your darlings by either removing them or rewriting so thoroughly that they no longer sound like toddlers screaming for attention. It's a cliché because it's true: writing is editing.