



My Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

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LEONARD COHEN SINGS about cracks. I know a little about cracks. In creativity. Relationships. Health. In 2011, when I was forty-two, I had a hysterectomy. I'd never had surgery, and this was major. My gynaecologist said it would take a year to recover which turned out to be basically true though, even now, there are still ripples from the loss of my womb.

Before this point, I'd been poorly for months, looking after three school-aged children, working from home part-time, and writing. Working on a novel. Actually, two novels. (With two already in the bottom drawer). I lay awake at night, until daylight crept through the windows, worrying about my daughter's friendships, my son's ADHD, my other son's risk-taking. I worried about my body. Why I felt so weak. I worried that, despite bagging an agent, I'd never see a novel published.

I'd won the Yeovil Literary Prize with the opening chapters of *The Generation Game* in 2006. Oh, the joy when I heard I'd won £500! And then an agent on the back of it. Once the manuscript was ready, he sent it out to multiple publishers. This was it. I dreamt of auctions and plaudits and bookshop displays. But...no takers. He tried the smaller publishers and independent presses. His enthusiasm waned. I showed him *This Holey Life*, my second novel. He didn't like it. A crack appeared in our relationship. I had a choice: write another novel that he might or might not like. Or, seeing that I still believed in both of these novels, go it alone.



I went for the second option and an amicable divorce.

I rewrote *The Generation Game* and, while Googling publishers who'd accept unsolicited manuscripts, stumbled across the Luke Bitmead Bursary run by Legend Press. What appealed to me was the story behind this prize, set up in honour of Legend's first novelist who tragically died young. His mother wanted Luke to leave a legacy to help other writers on their journey to publication. As well as a generous bursary, there was the amazing gift of publication. I entered.

Months passed. I'd check the website every week. Then one day I received an invitation to the award ceremony the following month. I was on the shortlist of ten! Two weeks after my hysterectomy, a trip to London. Piccadilly. Waterstones. A crowd of short-listers and previous winners, nervously drinking wine with family and friends. My Uncle John on the Bloody Marys. My mother-in-law, the brandy. A crackle of anticipation, small talk, nervous laughter. Then a bit of hush. Tension ramped up. Names read out in reverse order. *Ten, nine, eight*. With each name, another swig of Bloody Mary. *Seven, six, five*. The crunch of celery in my ear. *Four, three*. Where was my name? *Two*. No? My name was last. I'd won! And then a rush of emotion. Relief, euphoria, pride, joy all wrapped up in a huge leg-wobbling *Thank You* speech and one of those big cheques you see on the telly.

It seems that all those cracks really do let the light in.