



Inspiration

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‘**W**HERE DO YOU GET your ideas from?’ I hate this question for two reasons. Firstly, it’s the most-asked question at book events, so it’s difficult to answer in a different way from the hundred other times you’ve been asked. But, more importantly, I’m reluctant to examine too closely the sources and methods of inspiration because I’m worried it might all disappear in a puff of smoke.

Before I was a published writer, I went to see the late, great Iain Banks at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. When the time came for audience questions, he got the inevitable one. Without pausing he said there was a secret website called www.ideasforwriters.com; ‘You just go there and it generates ideas for you.’ This is, of course, a brilliant answer, and typical of Banks’s quick wit. But also, what a great idea, I would pay good money to access that website.

To answer the question more seriously, I think inspiration is everywhere. Ideas for stories are floating in the ether all around us, and it’s the writer’s job to recognize them. It’s like a writer has an invisible story antenna sticking from the top of his or her head, constantly sweeping the area for nuggets of inspiration to be turned into a narrative.

A writer friend of mine, Kevin MacNeil, once said at a book event that, to the writer, everyone else is walking around with a sign around their necks that reads: ‘What is it like to be me?’ That’s about as good an explanation of the writer’s relationship with inspiration as I can think of. We put



ourselves in other people's shoes, experience life through different eyes, and that's a story.

Another reason I don't like the question of where ideas come from, is that it's based on a presumption I don't agree with. It implies that all you need is an idea, a flash of inspiration, a visit from the muse, then the story basically writes itself. This is the biggest misconception about writing there is.

A story isn't a story until you write it. And rewrite it. Again and again. By then it's nothing like the idea you had in the first place. Iris Murdoch said that every novel is the wreck of a perfect idea. Ideas can be perfect because they're just ideas, they're meaningless until they're put on the page, shaped into something that, while admittedly a wreck, is at least *your* wreck.

Thomas Edison claimed that 'Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.' I don't know about genius, but I can say with conviction that it's the same for any creative process, including writing.

Aspiring writers always ask for advice at events and workshops, and I always give the most banal advice. 'Just get your bum on the seat and write.' It's banal but also deadly serious. That really is the secret. Inspiration is only meaningful with a whole lot of perspiration to go with it.