



Killing Your Darlings

Caroline Smailes

I KEEP KILLING OFF my darlings. Worse still, I keep killing them just when readers hope a happily ever after is on the horizon.

Readers don't like that. They expect better, more, different. When they've rooted for a character to succeed, when they've invested time and emotion into 80,000 words, killing off their darlings is never going to be celebrated. And that's why I understand that some readers have ripped up my books, thrown them in the bin, emailed their complaints, posted horrendous comments about me online and even suggested I kill myself instead.

Do I sound flippant? Like it's a game? Like I enjoy the kill? I'm not, it isn't, I don't. But *if* I want to write realistic, believable characters then I need to throw them into challenging and often dark situations. And, when doing this truthfully, tangible consequences and outcomes need to be included too. I can't end my stories any other way.

I've been upfront about it. The back-cover blurb of one of my novels even told the reader that the main character had taken a cocktail of tablets and would die by the end of the story. Sold as an urban fairy tale, told the finale, yet still some read it hoping for a different outcome.

Once upon a time, fairy tales were soaked in hidden meaning, the teller would adapt the story to offer their own warning or message to their audience. It's what once made those spoken tales unique and significant. My hope was that the reader would focus on why my characters had



been driven to see death as an escape. That they'd consider the deeper warnings about the aftermath of trauma. Yet, still, some would have preferred my darlings to suddenly live an unrealistic happily ever after; I guess rather than confronting and acknowledging the devastating consequences of suffering.

Look at *Cinderella*, look at *Snow White* and then look at the way Walt Disney made their endings different from the original telling. Disney has happy ever after down to a fine art. As if all the horrible events and the inevitable PTSD from the actions, before and during the story, could be forgotten or distracted away with a joyful finale and a wave of a magic wand.

The important thing about writing, for me anyway, is to speak from the heart and to be truthful. Integrity's important. I'm not writing Disney stories, I'm trying to tell tales that are sincere, honest and, I hope, that matter to my readers. I want to stimulate emotion, I want to make people think. But to achieve this, I need my readers to empathise with my characters and, most importantly, to believe in them. And although Disney may be the king of happy endings, *Cinderella* is telling us nothing truthful about human nature. Instead, I'm trying to offer a moral and urban warning, just like the early tellers of those original tales. My stories aim to recapture those layers in meaning that were so significant in the traditional art.

Yet still, readers don't always like me killing off my characters, but, sometimes, those darlings really must die.