



Inspiration

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‘IF POETRY COMES NOT as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all’, advised Keats — a young man in a hurry, who wrote more than most people at the time wanted to read. I take his point, though. We all know people who talk about the novel they are going to write one day, who underline passages of ‘inferior’ prose in whatever prizewinner they are analysing, and subscribe to magazines to find out what the market wants. Their real objective is adding ‘author’ to their list of credits. Some succeed; others can only be disappointed because, once they start, everything they write falls short of their expectations. I would amend Keats’s advice: *Write when you have something to say!* Maybe that’s what it is to be inspired.

I have ignored my own wise counsel, of course, with embarrassing results. I once wrote a whole novel just to overcome the agony of trying to write without cigarettes. My editor, to his credit, made no comment, simply sent the readers’ reports.

As regards prose, I work mostly to order. There’s nothing like a deadline to focus the mind. I might not find the topic immediately stimulating, but if I research thoroughly and think hard enough (clearly I hadn’t done either in the above case), something generally happens. It’s like preparing for a role. You’re playing Eva Braun: you don’t have to admire her, but you have to find a way into her head. That’s when you fall in love with the job. And there’s a pay cheque at the end. Perspiration, inspiration, remuneration.



My poems don't need incentives because they don't (usually) take years to write, and the audience gives an immediate response. Something tickles me, and I can't rest until it's resolved itself into a shape — not always the one intended. 'Oh, darling Doctor Frankenstein/ be gentle with this heart of mine' twanged in my head in a Country and Western voice, but developed into a dramatic monologue. 'I married Doctor Jekyll, but I yearn for Mister Hyde' was a last line that came first; it took months to concoct the three pages leading up to it. A comic squib about domestic angst, which began 'There's a nasty niff in the downstairs loo', developed its own agenda and finally clinched itself in a line, 'For they are in the world, and you are not', which had been hanging around for ages. Here was the tribute to my late partner which I had struggled for two years to write. It had written itself. Or had it?

Maybe all inspired ideas are there all the time, waiting their moment. To return to Keats, that moment may even be the moment to stop. For years, I was tormented by a brilliant idea for a novel that never got started. One day I realized I could tell the whole story in a succinct little poem of sixteen lines. The relief was overwhelming.

Now *that's* what I call inspiration.