



## My Bottom Drawer

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RECENTLY, BECAUSE WE ARE moving house, I have been clearing out old filing cabinets and boxes. I found the first few chapters of a novel. I wondered if it was an old work of my mother's or grandmother's and I started to read. About a page in I had a sudden queasy moment of recognition: it was *my work*. *I had written it!* Quickly, as if disposing of a dead animal, I threw it out.

Later, when I thought about this, I was surprised that I could have completely forgotten writing something. That was shocking. Surely I should remember a text which I slaved over so hard? And also my revulsion was interesting. Why didn't I want to read it over? Why did I bin it so quickly?

One reason is that I already have a very, very full bottom drawer. I have the beginning of a far too crazy children's novel about a family of lizard-like creatures who lived in a zeppelin above the old cooling towers of Didcot power station. Then there is a completed novel which my agent didn't like about a boy in care who loved animals. And a sci-fi/historical mash-up Young Adult novel which my agent *loved*, which everybody *loved*, but somehow no one fancied publishing. And finally there is the dystopian crime thriller which I've just finished and is probably set to nestle down with my other unpublished manuscripts.

There are two maxims which are often repeated to writers when things are going badly and their books aren't being published. The first is the old



adage that ‘nothing you ever write is ever wasted.’ What’s that supposed to mean? That you will be able to reuse the words? Upcycle them into something else like a patchwork quilt or a genteelly distressed sideboard? Or is the idea that the process of writing teaches you something? Well, that is possible. There *are* writers who just seem to get better and better. But there are also many authors who don’t improve over time. I can think of several outstanding writers whose first novels are by far their best work.

The other adage, the other crumb of hope given to us, is that when you do finally produce a truly excellent book somebody somewhere will love it and publish it. Eventually, so they say, real quality will out. That’s the idea. But is it true? If agents and publishers really were such good judges of literary merit why then are there so many terrible books being published?

But back to my bottom drawer. All those manuscripts are piled in there. One day they may get published, but probably they won’t. For the most part, I know what’s wrong with them. None are perfect. And often it’s the recurring fault of simply putting too much in — why the cooling towers *and* the zeppelins for example? But, as I tuck my new crime novel in on the top, I think it’ll be better not to linger. Keep the drawer closed, and move on. Don’t look back. Grit your teeth and get going on the next book. Forgetting is the cure.