



In My Bottom Drawer

Sarah Hilary

A WRITER'S BOTTOM DRAWER is a strange place, part treasure chest, part pit-of-shame. It is where we hide our early attempts at writing, assuming we haven't thrown them out. Notebooks festooned in Post-it notes, manuscripts returned with form rejections, abandoned ideas which once consumed us.

Writers can be a superstitious lot, reluctant to throw anything away. Perhaps it comes from our need to believe in luck — that magic ingredient which might tip us from aspiring writer to published author.

Only we know how deeply we felt those words, how hard we clung to the belief that they would one day find a shelf in a library or bookshop. And our characters! We cannot turn them out of the house. In any case, no word is ever wasted, or so we're told. One day the bottom drawer might yield exactly what we need to start afresh; a character who will complete the story we're slaving over, a phrase that fits precisely into the space on the page.

I'm prevaricating, of course. Because it's a brave writer who can reach straight in and expose their bottom drawer to a stranger's gaze. Those treasures are secret. This shame is private. But there is a little wriggle of pride, too. All these words I've written! How long I've been a writer!

And there's the hope, always, that these words – hidden, rejected, forgotten – might yet chime with a stranger. We write to forge connections, to move



our readers, to make them think, ‘Yes! I do that too. I think and feel and act that way’.

Or perhaps these words were never meant to be seen.

The American writer David Eddings said ‘The first million words are practice’. He also said, once written, you should throw them away. I’ve often wondered what’s in his bottom drawer.

Enough prevarication. Time for the big reveal.

Let’s start with a book I’ll call *Cold Reading* although it had other names over the years. *Cold Reading* was my first attempt at a crime novel, a genre I’d avoided attempting for a long time, principally in the belief I couldn’t plot.

I could, of course, because all writers can. Story is plot, and character emphatically is. But in the throes of my self-doubt, I wrote a crime novel which was...almost entirely plot.

It opened with a car chase that led to a medical mystery which slid into a ritualistic serial killing involving an art heist, all against the backdrop of the main character’s retrograde amnesia.

The agent to whom I sent this particular treasure described it – quite kindly, all things considered – as ‘a little overcooked’. Into the bottom drawer it went, barricaded by notebooks filled with what a biographer might generously term ‘my juvenilia’. Short stories, some not too shabby. Flash fiction, rather better. An overly-mannered novella entitled *Pale-Blue Murder* about an impeccably dressed, angelically polite murderer called Julius Pyre.

(If you’ll permit me a tangent – there are other early works absent from my bottom drawer because in the ferocity of my youth – and to my later



horror – I destroyed them. Spy stories written to amuse my little sister when we were pre-teens. Sherlock Holmes fan-fiction of the same era. Very vividly I can see myself at eighteen, tossing these gems into a black binbag destined for the tip, before I left home for university. My eighteen-year-old self was undoubtedly my harshest critic but how I wish she'd been a little kinder, if only so that I had the evidence to hand of how hard I practised to become a writer.)

Some time after I attempted my first crime novel, *Cold Reading* was joined in the bottom drawer by *Falling Dark*, the manuscript which won over the agent of my dreams. It took another full-length manuscript before my debut novel *Someone Else's Skin* was sold by my agent at auction and published worldwide.

But *Falling Dark* holds a special place in my heart, and not simply because it was my big breakthrough. It was a story of an ordinary man, Sam, who witnesses an extraordinary death with which he becomes obsessed. *Falling Dark* opens with an inciting incident that changed Sam's life.

This same inciting incident appears in my sixth published novel, *Never Be Broken*.

Because sometimes the bottom drawer really does hold the secret to completing a book that comes to us much later. Because no word is ever wasted.