



## Killing Your Darlings

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‘**T**OO MANY CEMETERIES’. It’s my favourite comment from my editor, succinct and to the point although it’s only now I can say it’s my favourite bit of feedback, as at the time I howled that cutting back on the cemeteries was impossible, unthinkable, undesirable and just *plain wrong*.

I was writing a novel where one of the characters was researching their World War I family history and as part of my research I had gone to the battlefields of the Somme region. I’d not been before; my knowledge of the ‘The Big Push’ was pretty much limited to watching *Blackadder Goes Forth* on television. I knew in theory about the numbers who had died, and that the British had decided to bury them where they had fallen, but reading about it and being there were two very different experiences.

For three days I tramped around the museums, the monuments and the cemeteries, leaving a trail of soggy handkerchiefs as I went. It was an intensely moving experience, one that I wanted to share with my readers through my characters. So she too wept her way around the museums, the monuments and the cemeteries. But there are a lot of cemeteries in the Somme. Too many both in reality, thinking of all those young men, and too many in what was meant to be a light-hearted romantic novel.

I whittled the cemeteries down to two. My editor was adamant — two was still too many. And of course she was right. My personal, highly emotional, response was blinding me to the fact that if I wanted to write about the



cemeteries of World War I, I should write a different book. What I was doing was, in effect, as self-indulgent as adding ice cream, clotted cream, double cream, custard and condensed milk to a slice of apple pie.

I've seen this with the students I teach creative writing to. They hang on to their favourite bits, refusing to get rid of them when they have no place in the wider picture. It would be kinder to take an axe to them from the start – the 'darlings' that is, not the writers – but instead they manoeuvre, adapt and tinker in desperate attempts to keep their favourite pieces of writing, like edging the plaster off rather than boldly ripping it away.

The result pleases no one: not the editor, not the reader, not the writer themselves. Worse: the tinkering affects the whole piece until it lacks conviction.

Writing is hard won and it is very hard to let go what you think are your best bits. I try to remember advice given by legendary theatrical agent Peggy Ramsay to Joe Orton: 'If you believe you have talent, be generous with it.' You should kill your darlings in the expectation that there will be more to come, that your writing capacity is not finite and that editing improves not detracts.

And I also remember that there should only be one cemetery per novel.