



Killing Your Darlings

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FIRSTLY, I HATE the expression. Secondly, I know it is necessary to ‘kill our darlings’ as we writers understand the metaphor. Though perhaps what we’re doing is making composite characters. Doesn’t everything you write feed the work even if you omit it? Sometimes I abandon characters, but their qualities enter other parts of the narrative. Maybe writing too many characters means writing different facets of the same character? And rather than killing, shouldn’t I incorporate those layers and levels into one character or scene? Likewise, in poetry, I initially write too much. I wrote pages of a poem the other day, but all I wanted was something short and songlike. Eventually, I crystallised the poem into six short half-lines. The poem, which always has a life of its own, agreed that this was best. Somehow the thinking in the rough pages remains between the lines. Some of my favourite images and ideas had to go because they didn’t serve the poem. So evidently, I can and do cut swathes out, refigure, and edit hard, because a hint is often enough. I act on the ‘kill your darlings’ metaphor but I still hate the metaphor. Why?

Well, it sounds like an exhortation to murder. It sounds like part of a serial-killer movie where the victims are women. The term also suggests domestic violence or femicide. I don’t see writing as destructive in this way. Who coined the phrase originally? Online consensus identifies Arthur Quiller-Couch who said in a lecture, ‘Murder your darlings’. Several bloggers agree about the violence of the expression though there are many other negative terms for cutting and rewriting — well, cutting for a start. Also slash, burn and hack come to mind.



Why not metaphors of gardening and therefore of growth? Pruning, setting seed, feeding, weeding out, digging over, grafting, separating roots, thinning branches, lopping runners, cross-fertilising, pollinating, taking cuttings, hardening off, planting out? I prefer the gardening metaphor because although the plant feels some pain from pruning, the gardener wants the plant to grow, its blossoms to show and its seed to develop. The gardener wants the garden to thrive as a whole in all its constituent parts, which is surely a preferable metaphor to murdering those you love.

Much damage has been done by the term 'kill your darlings' in creative-writing classes too, where the exhortation can be used irresponsibly as an excuse for nipping an exploratory idea in the bud. 'Kill your darlings' is high on my list of unhelpful comments about writing, almost as bad as Connolly's dismissive comment about the 'pram in the hall' which implies parents (and probably especially women) can't be good writers. We need greener metaphors for creativity. Sue Stewart-Smith's book *The Well Gardened Mind* offers a more holistic look at the connection between the creative mind and the growing world. So now, I'm off to nurture my plants, to grow a novel and some poems organically.