

WHAT I WISH SOMEONE HAD TOLD ME

They say you can only learn by experience. Fine. But what “they” didn’t say—the experience doesn’t have to be your own! And therein lies a class. At the end of the MWA-University day, when students heads are full of Jess Lourey’s “one sentence” method of plot development and Hallie Ephron’s “out of whack moment” in the three-act structure, and they know what Reed Farrel Coleman means by “writitor” and they’ve heard Dan Stashower read from Raymond Chandler -- it’s my turn. And my class, “What I wish someone had told me” is there to give the students/authors/ writers one last burst of energy (and maybe even inspiration) before they head back to their computers.

When you had your brilliant idea for a mystery novel, did you have any idea what you were in for? Looking back now, do you have notebooks full of character sketches that did you no good? (Or do you wish you had written character sketches?) Did you start as an outliner -- and then realize it didn’t matter? You’ve certainly learned to expect a bad writing day from time to time. Did you learn to handle it?

Just as a great character must grow and change during the course of a novel (third class of the day) we as writers must also grow and change. And, we hope, for the better. I wish someone had told me, I tell the class, that what seems like a brick wall in the morning--often disappears if I stop worrying about it. That the ridiculous derivative clichéd words I write at one moment--can be edited into potentially not bad. And that a week later, I won’t be able to tell the difference between what I wrote on an “in-the-zone” day and what I wrote on a “whose idea what this, anyway” day. I wish someone had told me how deeply distressing the self-doubt can be. And how reassuring one good line can become.

Another thing that’s especially reassuring: In talking to other writers, I’ve discovered that in this necessarily solitary writing life, there is a community that’s always there. That those other writers are having exactly the same experiences. And those are the experiences we can learn from.

Here’s what Tess Gerritsen told me: “With every new project, I wonder if I’ve “lost the touch, or whether this next book will disappoint readers and everyone will finally realize that I’m a talentless know-nothing.” Okay, if successful wonderful brilliant Tess Gerritsen has felt that way? We know it’s okay that we do, too.

Stefanie Pintoff also admits to bad days. And she’s learned how to battle them. “How do I handle a bad writing day? I read a good book by one of my favorite authors. All of us were readers, first, before we became writers. And it’s reading that keeps my love of stories alive ... that reminds me why I write ... that inspires me to keep working.”

Dana Cameron began to understand the steps of her personal journey: “It took me a long while to realize every project, no matter the size or the genre, has a similar progression. I eventually started keeping a work journal, just so I could go back and realize, yes, on every other book a.) I didn’t believe I had a whole book in me, b.) there would be a horrible place in the middle (lasting a few days) where I was tired and had no idea where to take the story next, and c.) my daily

writing output would double or triple as I neared the end. Made it easier to realize I'd been through this before.”

Julie Smith’s ‘what I wish’ is also about process—“I wish I'd known what a first chapter's for-- which is to make you love my character and to get her in the middle of something exciting. What it's not for is to give you her entire back story, complete with favorite foods and playlists and a few interesting insights into the weather patterns of Northern California. Here's what I tell my students about that: no exposition, no flashbacks, no digressions.”

And Reed Farrel Coleman—after 13 novels—understands the big picture. “That getting published is only the start line and not the finish line. I think a lot of first time authors are shocked at the complexities of the business when their manuscripts are accepted. I wish someone had let me know that it’s a marathon and not a sprint.”

I wish someone had told me this stuff when I started. And now I know there’s a whole lot more. Give back. Be grateful. Celebrate. There’s always more to learn.

The next MWA-U is in New Orleans, October 1! There’s still time to sign up...the faculty will include David Morrell and Julie Smith! Hope to see you there.

HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN is the investigative reporter for Boston's NBC affiliate, and has won 27 Emmys for her work. Author of four mystery novels, Ryan has won the Agatha, Anthony and Macavity awards. She's on the national board of directors of Mystery Writers of America. Her newest suspense thriller, **THE OTHER WOMAN**, is the first in a new series beginning in 2012 from Forge Books. Her website is <http://www.HankPhillippiRyan.com>