

## Chapter 7

### Surround Sound

Writing a book is like buying one of those speaker systems that envelop you in sound. No matter where you are, *you are surrounded*. When you set out to write a book, you spend a significant amount of energy making sure you are wholly involved with the book. Just as surround sound stereo makes you feel you are swimming in music, the book must wrap itself around you and permeate every single part of your life. You set up your book writing life so that you are never too far away from the project. It's always running, in the background, even when you aren't actively listening (literally putting words on paper in your studio).

Non-book writers (and certain super-organized people who are clever compartmentalizers) believe that book writing can be tucked in around the edges of a life, an add-on, a hobby. Something you whip out, on the side, while remaining a normal productive member of society. I suppose there are people out there who write quietly and neatly and books appear, no big drama. They can "turn it off" and do other things. But most people, especially for the first book, can't risk "turning it off" because of a terrible insidious mental weed called Creep. If you don't surround yourself with the sound of the book, you risk it creeping away from you. Creep is bad, it's common as the common cold.

The book writers I know all live, eat, breathe, and sleep *the book*. Or ... they're trying to get back to the place where they live, eat, breathe, and sleep *the book*. This complete absorption in the project is desirable, to be courted. Because there is not a Great

Amount of Time Ahead, a nirvana in this life and on this planet where you will have *time* to sink into the project, you will have to figure out how to play the stereo—work on the book—*while doing your life as it is right now*.

At the outset, being into a book is *very* like falling in love and the ensuing relationship—at first, it's easy. The book thinks about you, you obsess on each other, you can't not think about the book, you rush to your writing sessions. You are crazy about each other and always willing to drop everything to see each other.

But, some time after you make a real, public commitment to each other: Agh. Doubt sets in. Annoyance. It gets hard! You maybe feel *shackled*. You feel like you chose *the wrong book*. The book has flaws. The flaws annoy the heck out of you. The book gets gassy! It's terrible—there are parts of the book *that stink*. You get sick of the book. The book is needy. Sometimes, though you would never say it out loud, you think, *Screw the book*. And you are wracked with shame. *Other books wouldn't be so demanding*, you think. *Wasn't I happier when I wasn't in this relationship?*

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This is the secret to writing a book: find a way to keep your desire alive and pure.

And desire is stoked and invigorated by constant and prolonged *exposure*.

My friend Connie has an MFA in writing. She's a teacher and an avid reader. She has published a few short stories. She wants to write a novel. She has started *lots* of novels; six that she can think of off the top of her head—two coming-of-age novels, two she's got opening chapters for, and two middle-age-people-having-affairs novels. She's

had some dalliances, too. The novel in poems she was going to write. The blockbuster romance. Those fizzled pretty fast.

But Connie decided last summer was her summer to *really* write the book. She set up a schedule—mornings 8–12—and she posted it on her family’s fridge. She did great the first three mornings in June. She was having the total Surround Sound thing. She thought about the characters in the grocery store, picking out onions. She overheard dialogue at the oil change place that *had* to go in the book—it was perfect! She dreamed about the book, woke up thinking about the book, and everything was good. For three days in a row, she was writing, and for three nights in a row dinner was on the table, and the kids were normal (the real life kids).

Then, on day four she had to take her daughter to the dentist.

Dr. Oppenheimer.

Who really does seem to hate her daughter.

So there was a lot of anxiety that morning. And Connie didn’t think about the book. Or the characters. She thought about Dr. Oppenheimer. Why were they doing braces, really? Why was orthodontia marketed so aggressively to kids? She thought a lot about writing a letter to the editor on this topic. Or an article. A whole book.

Then a whole bunch of other real life stuff happened involving aging parents, a hurt, the neighbor’s, tree-trimming, a bad headache, and a vacuum cleaner that exploded.

And Connie missed three days of writing.

And Surround Sound turned off.

The book was in her writing room, on her desk. Still alive.

Just barely. Humming so softly, you would at this point need special equipment in order to hear the heartbeat, pick up the tune. Very very faintly, Connie's tender new book was still there.

You have to allow the book to be with you, to stay with you. All the time. Everywhere you go. Your mind needs to be turning it over (back burner is good!), chewing it, stirring it, working it. All the time.

This is the dreaded *Creep*. It's always out there, slowly trying to steal your book from you.

You know how your house is sinking into the earth? Except you don't really? Because it is happening so slowly? That's how it is to get away from your book. Creep is so subtle. You don't notice it sometimes until *years have gone by!* This is very common even though it sounds so drastic. You didn't notice you had quit working on your novel until YEARS LATER?

Very common.

Creep is common and nasty and invisible, like radon or a gas leak, like mold or plate tectonics or anything that moves slowly but deadly.

The only antidote: Surround Sound. Never turn the stereo off.

One visit to Dr. Oppenheimer and *whoosh* your stereo implodes, you are taken over by aliens, you don't get back to your novel that day, or the next day, or the next, and you don't even know what happened, or that anything at all happened!

And that's what happened to Connie last summer.

Because she missed Thursday (she and her daughter went to the mall after the dentist), it was hard to start on Friday—she'd lost her thread. Something was nagging at

her, but it wasn't her characters. Surround Sound had been turned off. She didn't even notice! She felt the *I should write* voice, that nagging pull. But it wasn't the book talking. It was a "should."

Then, her Saturday was filled with family stuff. "Write from 9–12" was on her calendar but *she wrote over it in pen* "Northgate for dryers, soccer shoes, vacuum, card for Steketees. Oppenheimer." Connie was busy with her teen daughter, college application essays, her husband, cleaning up the house, and some yard work, and the lists written over the sacred writing hours like so much graffiti, Connie didn't think much about her novel, and she didn't think much about not thinking about it.

In fact, it didn't occur to her to make up the missed work, the absent hours. By Sunday, Connie wasn't thinking about her book at all.

The puppy had pretty much run off the ranch. If you do not take the book with you everywhere you go, keeping it alive and thriving in your mind's eye, if you don't nurture it and anticipate its needs, the book will leave you. It has to be always on. If you abandon the book, *even for a few hours*, it may not answer you when you call it back.

So, on a Monday, a full ten days later, when Connie got up and went to her desk at 8 a.m. to write—back on her program, no problem—she still thought of herself as a novel writer, and that was good, but she felt overwhelmed and defeated, and she didn't even know why, exactly. It just seemed so *hard*, to write a novel. She got mad at herself, of all people, and thought, *Why do I think I can write a book?*

A soul-killing anti-book thought that can cause you to lose an entire year.

Connie bagged writing that day, and decided to use her sacred time to read during her writing session, and then, feeling like a failure, she napped, and then she got an early

lunch (she was starving), and then she felt like a fat failure. It was a terrible day! This whole write-every-day thing. It was a crock.

You can't take your eyes off the book. Not for very long anyway. Not any longer than you would leave a baby alone. And, you can only leave it alone if you have it safely corralled in a certified crate of some kind. Approved. The book needs to be either occupied (the stuff you chew on) or resting (you are at a good stopping place with a plan for what to do when it wakes up). You know exactly what you will do if it wakes up early. You have notecards with you in your pocket.

When you are writing a book, you are "on."

There's no off.

You are surrounded. Happily. Court Surround Sound, and write you book from within that shimmering envelop.

Fight creep with intention. Tether yourself to the book every day. When you notice creep creeping in, turn up the volume on your writing life. All the way to ten.

### **Exercise**

Make a list of twenty little assignments—questions that trigger you to think about some aspect of your book. Then place each assignment, each Creep Emergency Antidote, on its own card and stick the cards in your glove box, planner, desk drawer, nightstand, lunchbox, mirror.

As your work on the book continues to deepen, your little assignments will become more specific.

For example, today I “programmed” my surround sound system to play tunes that would help me think of people I know who have written books. Just a kind of general way of working on this project. But intentional. So that during the day, authors would pop up, people I could interview. Tomorrow, I’ll have a different intention. And different little assignments.