

You Never Know... or How a Gospel Song and A Series of Questions Turned Into a Science Fiction Tale by Rachel V. Olivier

One of the things I keep learning repeatedly lately (perhaps because I have a tendency to entropy, laziness and procrastination) is to pay attention, because you never know where something may lead you. And it's easier, in the long run, if you pay attention in the first place.

It works like this: You see, hear, notice something. It could be anything—a song, a phrase, an article or blog, a piece of broken furniture by the Dumpster. And this thing, that you might otherwise ignore, or not even see, is now pulling on your attention for some reason. There's something about it that just won't let you go. I believe that's when you sit down and start to write.

When I sat down to write my novella, "The G.O.D. Factor" (Sam's Dot Publishing, June 2011, sdpbookstore.com), I had a favorite gospel tune, "Turn Your Radio On" by Albert E. Brumley from the first half of the 20th Century, as an earworm. Juxtaposed to that was my attempt to begin a scifi story that I knew I wanted to set in a starship in space, possibly several hundred or even a thousand years in the future. Rather than fight that disparity, I decided to go with it. And then there she was, Monica, a young woman far in the future working on a spaceship, who had a love for things "old", "retro" or just not technologically advanced.

The contrast gave me the bounds of her character, and I had the setting, all I needed after that was to fill in the details. Why was she in space? What was she doing there? Where was she going? Was she alone or with others? How did they react to her quirky affection for knitting and gospel music? How would a young woman like this react to trouble? But most of all, I wanted to know why my brain was still hung up on that song. What was it about that song that my brain decided I needed to know?

So, I took a hard look at the lyrics, took it apart and tried to see how I could use it. And from that parsing I got Belukas, an engineer and Monica's ex-boyfriend (and direct opposite). Once I had Belukas and Monica in the story, I realized there needed to be more crew on that spaceship, but what kind of crew? And what kinds of conflicts would they run into? What was their story?

I had found the tune online at YouTube.com and had been listening to it repeatedly when I realized how listening to it over and over might drive some people crazy—and not just people.

And then, I had my story. After that it was just a matter of getting it down on the page and slowly chipping away at it until I had a clear picture of just what was going on on that spaceship out there in the middle of nowhere.

Many writers will tell you that they aren't really writing fiction. They're writing the truth about something that they themselves are slowly discovering as they sculpt away at a block of ideas and words to try to see what lies beneath. Another way I look at it is that it's like rescuing animals. The stories are out there for us to discover and rescue from the ether to share with the world before they disappear forever into oblivion.

In both cases, either as the artist or as the foster parent, if you don't pay attention you may miss it—miss the right chisel angle or the one story that peeks its nose up over the metaphorical gate and begs for a home. You may miss the opportunity of finding that story, making it beautiful and finding a home for it. You have to pay attention to those times when your awareness is snagged by something, because you just never know if it might lead you to your next story.

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