

The Enemy Within

By Tricia Sparks

When plans were underway to improve the site and add to its content I took it upon myself to contribute an article once a month. It was decided early on that the article would be pertaining to some element in writing. When I volunteered for this task five months ago I didn't realize how much of a stretching process this would be.

I took a journalism class in high-school and was on the school paper staff so I laughed and said how rough could this be. I reasoned naively that it would be easy since I was the one selecting the topics. But as this process has been worked I've found as a writer that it can be very difficult to follow rule one in my journalism class all those years ago: not to let my personal biases or opinions color my work.

I ran into my first issue with maintaining objectivity with the September article which compared Final Fantasy VII to Final Fantasy XII. I have a very strong dislike for the story in Final Fantasy XII and I struggled with the article because I didn't want that bias against the game coloring the article. I fought with the idea for the piece for several days. As deadline drew near I began to worry that I'd have to scrap the subject all together. With time running out I stepped back from the story and examined why it didn't work for me and it was at that point I noticed the point of view difference. Once I'd set my bias aside and looked at the subject objectively as I was taught I was able to put together a balance piece.

My next collision with this issue came with the planned article for this month. I was looking to write a piece on the trend of "Food in Fiction" and my editor Doris Ross was helpful with the article by providing a couple mystery novels which I will not identify, that she had in her library with these elements. I opened both novels and started reading but both books were frustrating for me to read. One I was four chapters into and I'd just encountered the first murder. It was too slow in getting started and I was already bored with it. The second was very jarring. The plot was fast paced and interesting but it was interrupted regularly by vivid detailed descriptions on brewing various types of coffee and even a misplaced flash back. I'd read for a while and completely lose track of the story. At my wits end I called Doris and told her I couldn't write the article originally discussed because of my extreme dislike of the material I had in hand. I knew that anything I wrote would be strongly colored by my bias formed by the two examples used.

Worse case scenario what I wrote had the potential to not reflect accurately the true strength or scope of the effect the trend that food in fiction writing is having. Doris gave the go ahead to change the article and I considered other ideas to write on but this difficulty with my own bias got me thinking about writing in general.

As writers we have to walk a fine line. Bits of ourselves go into our work because whether we see it or not we do write what we know. However we have to guard our work against letting our personal biases sneak into our work to the point it makes it read false.

With this in mind I asked myself, where can this bias creep into original work? One place is the dialogue or actions of characters.

For example if I were to create a character whose personality was polite and a peacemaker and in reading back through a scene found them to be swearing, cutting other

peoples dialogue short and starting fights odds are that my own words, opinions and behavior are invading the work and I should reconsider the work I've done. So with that said how can this problem be prevented? The easiest way is to ask ourselves upon finishing a scene; does the word choice in the dialogue fit the character as I've pictured them in my head? Is this how the character would handle the situation? The key to avoiding this problem is in knowing our characters well. If we don't they may all end up acting and sounding alike.

Another way bias can be observed in work is when a writer translates writing from one media form to another. For example when the X-Men comics were translated to the big screen the way certain characters were portrayed reflects a bias bleeding into the production. The portrayal of Rogue for instance was far from true to the comic book version she was drawn from. As she was presented her story was a weird mix of events in her own plot line and that of Jubilee. Storm as well was misrepresented There are numerous characters that should have been in play that never even made an appearance. Gambit for example was one of the first X-Men. He was a well followed character whose story was tied up in that of Rogue's. However, Wolverine, Jean Gray and Cyclops portrayals were far more accurate. Even the plot lines followed in the films reflect a personal preference toward this trio, as the main plot line of the films focuses on their love triangle. If someone familiar with the X-Men were to look at the films they would tell you that someone involved with the production was a fan of this particular storyline.

So if this bias can be found in mainstream work what as writers can we do to guard against it? First we must be mindful of the truth that our choices as writers can reflect our bias. Before we label a final draft as complete we should ask ourselves a few simple questions: 1. Do the words and actions of our characters fit with the image we envisioned from the start and 2. Does the work written stand true to what it represents? If the answer we come to is no then we may want rework the problem areas, because as writers if we don't we may find we've done our work a great disservice or worse if we're adapting a piece from one form to another we may find we've misrepresented the original work we love.