

Writing Inside the Box

By Briana Paternoster

Pretend with me for a moment that I am your painting instructor. Before you is a canvas twenty feet by thirty feet, stretched and gessoed waiting for brushstrokes to bring it to life.

I turn to you and say, "Paint!"

How would you feel? Panicked? Overwhelmed? Anxious?

What about if I give you rules? A still life with flowers, monochromatic, in green? It may cut down on your available subject matter but isn't it freeing? The big decisions are out of the way. I've narrowed the playing field for you.

Guidelines can be the very tools we need to explore creativity.

The rules of genre and fiction writing seem confining, but what if you take another perspective and use them to stretch the limits of your art?

Instead of concentrating on the boundaries you feel limiting, why not dwell on the aspects of your story that will set it apart, such as memorable characters, a strong plot and distinct voice? If you develop each one, you won't have to worry about your story sounding contrived or trite, your writing will elevate it above the contents of the slush pile.

"But my story won't stand out!" you say.

Just as we know there are no two people alike in the world-even twins-so will no two stories ever be the same. Ever. How can I say that? Have you ever lost a paragraph, or even a page and grappled to remember what you wrote? Did you ever get it exactly right? Yes? Then my memory is horrid.

There's an old saying, "Necessity is the mother of invention." The man who thought of the paperclip had a distinct problem. Every time a person would grab a stack of papers he would be gouged by the pins that held them together. Not to mention grabbing one pin out of a pile could lead to some tender fingers. The rules were that he had to find something to keep the paper together that had no sharp edges. After much thinking, Viola! A small bent wire to hold the thin sheets together. He worked within specific needs to find a solution, and a timeless one at that. The same idea works well for writing.

Write within the box, concentrate on the cornerstones and the story will be structurally sound, allowing you to make the story your own with your distinct voice. Leave coloring outside the lines to the kiddies.