

**Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 6: Honesty Through Tragedy**  
**By Cathe Jones, ([cathejones.com](http://cathejones.com))**

Natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and multinational wars all make up our daily lives, but as freelancers, how can we approach these horrific and emotionally charged topics honestly? As essayists, how do we focus our audiences on the facts, rather than the myths? As authors, how do we include or exclude events that are not only changing history, but the way we live our lives? This lesson has less to do with specific methods of reporting, and more to do with the real world entering our literary worlds.

I had a long email conversation yesterday with a girl I had as a student when I was teaching in New Mexico. She is a reporter in Monroe, Louisiana. She was trying to figure out how to tell the story of an entire school system of children, and their lack of educational needs being met. Originally, the story was about lack of funding, and Louisiana's track record of failing its public school students. Instead, she was requested to rewrite the story and possibly be ready to air it live, from New Orleans, atop a decimated grade school. She became violently ill over not only writing the story, but also flying over what were obviously long dead bodies on the helicopter ride down.

"How can they expect me to tell this story, when there are so many other stories there, and I'm risking my life for their ratings?"

Her job in the media is to present facts, as objectively as possible, to the public. I told her, keep a blank journal with her, and write what she feels, thinks, and the sensual reactions. But, for her report, keep to the facts she was asked to present, and say nothing else. Her emotional

response to the horror of what was once her hometown was an entirely different story, and should be told on its own.

Recently, three journalists from Europe were killed whilst reporting the events of the Middle East. In the past, photojournalists, essayists, reporters, investigators, researchers, and fact-finders have all succumb to natural disasters, man-made tortures, and serendipitous events, such as plane crashes. Telling the truth puts the writer in danger. As human beings, our reactions become blinders to the issues. For clarity of information, we are expected to detach from any emotional responses, and are looked to for the question of "What is going on there?"

Is it better to put those gut-wrenching words into stories? Sometimes it is the only way to make the point matter to an audience. Wolf Blitzen of CNN carried himself as a professor, during the live broadcasts of the devastation of Katarina in the South. His reports came across as perfunctory, with diagrams showing locations of events, and photographs, video, and email used to punctuate his points. His job, done well, was to state circumstances.

However, on the website, and in several reports from Larry King, Paula Zahn, and Aaron Brown, the story is being told through the eyes of victims, and through the photographs and video of the crews on site. All government officials available are tapped into for reaction and rebuttal. Less time was spent showing broken lines, and far more attention was spent in pulling an audience in through despondency, grief, and personal tragedies. When the audience seems to drift onto other stations, the news stories shift to the tales of rampant looting and violence.

Many mystery writers and noire enthusiasts have used the backdrop of the Big Easy as the prime location for characters and events. The allure

of a city sitting on silt, framed by the Gulf of Mexico, serving as a gateway to the Mississippi, and of course, the culture of the Cajuns and Creoles all evoke a certain feel that no other location does. If you are writing a story of a jazz musician, and have already sold the book, does Katarina need inclusion? Your mystery novel revolves around the Absynthe Bar. Does a flood affect your exposition so much so that the events are now moot?

After the events of 9/11, a writer who uses the Pentagon as a backdrop often in his novels did select to include the rebuilding of the abstruse structure in working a recent novel. Although, his first pitch of this book never mentioned it, he felt the inclusion was mandated by the events at hand. In fact, he claims it only added mystery to the spy tales he's spun for years. [Author requested to not have name included. - CJ]

The 1988 Earthquake in Oakland, California appears in hundreds of essays and novels. The disintegration of the Berlin Wall, and the creation of Euro Dollars has changed the path of hundreds of books. But should you always include the facts of great tragedy? Not necessarily.

If you are working on a historical novel, or an essay about a region, the expectation is that facts are included. Whenever archival information is required, by all means include. Not all stories insist upon historical facts. Fiction stands as fiction. Invention of events has been a methodology for writers for as long as words endured.

Significant compositions exist without the inclusion of universal misfortunes. Personal adversity, accomplishment, recognition, and acknowledgement happen to us all, without the bias of natural, or man made disaster. Subjectively, not all circumstances will affect the writer or the work. Integrity is supported. The fundamental answer to the question

is to remain writing as you would prior to the events, and you will not lose respect from peers.

{Next week, back to the regular lesson plan: Writers' Block}

Here are several links to writers who have changed their writing since Natural, Personal, or Man-Made disasters happened in their lives:

The Indonesian Tsunami

<http://ewcupdates.eastwestcenter.org/tsunamirelief/gallery/gallery.htm>

Hijacking Catastrophe

<http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0913-02.htm>

The Journalists Guide for Ethical Reporting of Victims

<http://www.journalism.org/resources/tools/ethics/victims/interviewing.asp?from=print>