

MY TERRORISM PROBLEM AND YOURS

By

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Every one of us has their September 11 stories and I am sharing mine with you because I think it is, although unique to me, not uncommon to writers. Earlier this summer I was hard at work on what was to be my eighth Moses Wine detective novel, a comeback book of sorts after having become somewhat lax with the series while chasing the white rabbit of Hollywood down various movie business holes.

It had taken a while to get back into it, reeducating myself in skills that didn't require "fade in" or "dissolve to," but I was finally on my way, writing with what I thought was authority, when those maniacs decided God wanted them to incinerate the World Trade Center.

Like almost everybody else who wasn't immediately involved, I stopped what I was doing and watched CNN and the rest for days on end, trying to make sense of the senseless. But when my shrinking bank account and generalized guilt sent me back to the computer, I found something else scary had happened, something personal to me—I couldn't write. Barely a word came out and the few that did were, in my judgment, terrible. On top of that, I couldn't stand the story I had been working on or its seemingly lightweight and now dated point of view.

I groused about the house, wracked with self-pity, making a pest of myself to my family and doing everything but kicking the proverbial dog. Finally I faced the grim reality: I had to trash many months' work, the hundred or so pages I had written, delete all those kilobytes from my hard drive (okay, I left them backed up somewhere), and start

over with a new idea, one that would encompass in some way the tragedy that had occurred.

When I called my publisher, Byron Preiss of iBooks who had been reprinting my old volumes and was teaming up with Pocket Books/Simon & Schuster on this one, to tell him what I had decided, I heard a gulp on the other end. Would this new idea be funny, he wondered? (Somehow I had the reputation for being funny. Maybe it was because once upon a time I wrote a movie for Richard Pryor.) Was Afghanistan a horrible yet passing phase we would all have forgotten eighteen months from now when the book hit the stores? (Who could tell, although the plot wasn't really about Afghanistan? It takes place in Prague and LA.)

Yet still I knew I had to follow my changed instincts and Byron, to his credit, was smart enough or kind enough to know he shouldn't rein me in. And so, some six weeks ago, I started working again. And you know what? It's better. And this is what I have learned from the sometimes gruesome experience: (No, it's not "No gain without pain!" Actually it's something I relearned, maybe something we relearn every time we write, when we're doing it well.) I found the reason I wrote—the only important reason worth anything because, as we all know, there are a lot better ways to earn money—was to reach out and make my small bit of contact with the world. And if I didn't speak out on my vision of September 11, what would I ever speak out on? So I am. In doing it, you could even say I've become a happy camper, but happy, as is so often the case with writers, in a slightly depressed way. And that extra dollop of depression, of course (you can relax, Byron), makes it funny. Maybe, in the final analysis, black humor is the only manner in which you can address terrorism anyway. At least it's going to be that way for me. The results you can judge for yourself.