

Imaginary Friends: Resolving a case of copy jitters

RECENTLY, I FOUND MYSELF ASKING NYC blogger Maud Newton about the way she might approach writing a profile of several writers. I was suffering a bad case of anxiety over the piece and as I explained to Maud, the results of workshopping the article with my online writing class had led to less than spectacular results. The instructor described the work as “meandering,” “disconnected” and a “jumble of things.”

“I need professional advice,” I told Maud. “Oh, the draft is in definite need of editorial decisions,” she replied. “But first, let’s talk about what you’re trying to accomplish here.”

It’s at times like this, when we writers find solutions through conversation. We love to exchange ideas with friends and colleagues, to volley concepts, and discuss prickly problems with storylines.

This is one of the ways I work out problem pieces, too, but when I am trying to untangle a troublesome plot, or find the gist of an essay, I prefer internal dialogue.

My conversations with Maud, you see, were make-believe.

Now, before reading Nora Ephron’s *I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman*, I believed my imaginary chats were childish and were best kept to myself.

In her book of essays, Ephron writes about this personal habit as if it is completely and utterly natural. This was a great relief to me.

Nora herself regularly held imaginary conversations with gourmet Julia Child, Michael Field, and “a man named Lee Bailey,” chiefly about cooking and

decorating back when she was a mailroom clerk making \$55/week.

Julia, claims Ephron “was nicer and more forgiving,” whereas Field was “sterner and more meticulous.”

Whether she transferred this practice to her writing, she doesn’t say, though I suppose she has a scriptwriting partner in sister Delia for good reason.

While a writing partner might keep oddball behaviour under wraps, you can’t beat a good, one-sided conversation for problem-solving.

Shortly after reading Ephron’s essay *Serial Monogamy: A Memoir*, I started a blogging gig, so it only seemed natural to question her about her writing process and weblog techniques. As expected, I found her to be honest, forthcoming, and easy-going.

On any given day, as in my corporate career days, you can find me at my desk, talking to myself. As I recall, my peculiar habit annoyed many a desk mate.

Try it.

When looking for guidance or expertise, turn to a writer whose work you admire, or ask an artist, or a celebrity. Keeping in mind, of course, the potential distraction a handsome actor/beautiful actress may cause. Rousing daydreams can take a turn from conversation and then no one gets any work done.

No matter who you call upon, when tackling troublesome articles, these imaginary friends are simply a stand-in for your creative self.

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So don't be shy to ask for help in finding a spot for a misplaced paragraph. Go ahead: Debate editorial decisions. Take a position for, or against, something in your writing. Defend your word count. Fight to keep a sentence you particularly enjoy. You will soon see how valuable imaginary friends are to your creative process.

There's a plus side; if you work alone as I do, these imaginary friends are great company.

Before Nora, I would never have admitted to what has become an essential element of my writing process. Thankfully, she straightened me out. It was Maud, however, who helped me finish this piece.