

The Five Stages of Co-Writing

By Deborah Reed and Lisa Shapiro

It began with a death.

Crowded into a hospital room, we met while hovering over a sickbed, watching Lisa's mother die. It was the year 2000, and her mom, Nicki Shapiro, was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer. Her health had deteriorated almost overnight. She was in pain. She was hoping for a miracle operation. She did *not* want to die.

Lisa, having just arrived from Florida that morning, rushed to be at her side.

About the same time, Nicki, in full business mode, summoned me, a co-worker, to the hospital. She wanted to dictate a goodbye letter to her real estate clients. She wanted to explain why she wouldn't be returning calls, or emails, or showing them any more homes. Nicki had no intention of just disappearing.

I had lost my own mother eighteen months earlier and was still slogging through the thick mists of grief. This was in the same hospital where my mother had died, and she was the same age, sixty-nine. After crying all the way there, I sat in the parking lot and tried to pull myself together. I had to be strong for Nicki, and for her unknown daughter who was about to enter the abyss of heartache.

But when Lisa and I met, things got off to a really bad start.

Jet-lagged and agitated from numerous family conflicts, Lisa glared at me the moment I entered the room. I was just one more annoyance with which she had to contend.

I was a hot mess, and despite my best intentions, I took one look at Nicki and had a complete melt-down.

Nicki, with time running out, ignored the drama and wanted to write client letters.

Deborah turned into my best friend and staunchest ally. She spent most of the next month lending emotional strength to both my mother and me as Mom moved into the final stages of dying. My family had arranged for hospice care, and Deborah rallied her colleagues to help too. She was constantly with me at my mom's bedside. She was also running Mom's business, and made sure I had food, tea, and a drink if needed. She helped me administer the morphine, which had to be crushed when my mother was too weak to swallow. Deborah was always there, and I could not have made it through the struggle of holding on and then letting go without her help.

During the last, long night, Deborah and I watched my mother's labored breathing, and then the grimace of pain finally relaxed. Two strong, quick pulses throbbed in the vein on her neck, and then stilled. On the Fourth of July at 4:30 a.m., my mother passed.

The decision to write a novel together was an unconscious part of our healing process. In the opening chapter of our novel, **The Chamber and the Cross**, Laura Bram's mother dies suddenly. Our early writing drafts had a somber tone, and Laura was an angry protagonist. She kept asking, *Why? Why had this horrible thing happened to her?* As we worked through our grief, we slowly cut out the rants and despair and started building a real story arc for Laura.

Grief moves through stages, and so does the process of co-authoring a novel. We had a lot to learn. The stages of co-writing are: Naiveté, Fury, Despair, Compromise and Completion.

Naiveté

Writing was an adventure pointing us in a new direction, and a way to indulge a mutual passion for history and travel. It all made sense – in the way that an infomercial or the Home Shopping Network seems rational in the middle of the night. We were in the dark corridor of grief and the world had taken on a narrow focus. The novel was the bright doorway; we had to keep moving toward the light. We brought different but complimentary talents to the project: Lisa, the experience of a writer and English teacher; Deborah, an Anglophile's knowledge of England (the setting of our book) and architecture (our protagonist inherits a Medieval manor house). We projected, as we boarded a plane for the first of several trips to England, that we'd hammer it out in a year or two.

We didn't know we'd have to write seven or ten or a dozen-plus drafts of the whole thing. We were weak on depicting character point of view, struggled with interior monologue and wrote corpse-stiff dialogue. We foolishly assumed we could craft each chapter and end up with a beautifully balanced composition – a perfect resolution at the end of a gripping plot. We probably wrote sixteen versions of the first chapter alone. The beginning of the story was set first in America, then in England, then America again. We started with Laura, then with her mother. We picked up the pace, then slowed it down. We wrote dozens of scenes and then threw them out, only to retrieve them months or years later. As we slogged through this stage, we had no clue which version was best.

Fury

The strengths that seemed so complimentary at first turned into irritating personality traits. What had begun as a friendship was on the verge of becoming a fatal attraction. Deborah is concrete. Lisa loves anything with a metaphor. Deborah likes to work from an outline. Lisa meanders off on tangents. Our voices were too different – in person and on paper. Our writing styles are as different as our physical looks, with Deborah towering over Lisa by eight inches.

One of our biggest areas of conflict was the fact that the characters also looked and sounded different in each of our drafts, and we were overwriting each other. Every time one of us finished a scene, the other would get hold of it and put a new twist in it, effectively destroying the intent of the previous draft. Following one such revision, Deborah screamed, "You've lobotomized my characters!" We didn't just fight, we had temper tantrums, followed by steaming periods of time-out.

Despair

Holidays without our mothers, their birthdays, and the anniversaries of their deaths came and went. We commiserated and offered each other moral support.

But when it came to the book, there was no end of fighting. We were plodding along and it felt like we weren't making progress. Our time frame for each draft was extended again and again. We set goals that we couldn't meet because we were bogged down, mired in the middle

section. Our friends and families were waiting patiently while we juggled jobs and writing. We grew tired of the incessant question – *When will it be done?*

Writing the book, and fighting over it became a way of life. We met each Sunday to hammer out changes, work on new scenes, and attempt to keep the process moving forward. Some weeks we fared better, and at other times we came out of the session a little the worse for wear. We had our doubts about the process, and were sometimes counseled by friends – separately and together in a kind of writers’ group intervention – to give up on the damn thing. To us, that felt like asking a parent to give up on a kid with a learning disability. No way were we going to quit. We had to work harder.

We lived with our grief because we had no choice. We lived with our difficult writing habit because creating the world of Bannock Manor brought a new richness and color and vibrancy to our lives. It counter-balanced the despair of loss.

Compromise

Each time we hit a low point, something pulled us back. Sometimes it was plain stubbornness, but other times it was our mother’s voices chiding us, *if you start something, you have to finish it.*

When we could agree on nothing else, the one point we had in common was that we both loved the story. When we admitted that we loved it too much to give it up, the story became more important than our disagreements. We decided to put the story first, our egos second, and it became bigger than either of us, better than both of us. It was no longer merely something we were working on to heal from our loss. Both our main characters, Laura and Lorraine, suffered tragedies and loss. They cried and struggled and compromised, just like we had to do.

Many times we thought our book was done. We sent it out to literary agents and knew we were on the right track. Several people were interested, but their suggestions were vague and varied, and we were blind to the flaws, the plot holes, and the structural inconsistencies. A few more years went by, we attended conferences and workshops, and each time we returned to the project armed with new techniques and new insights. We were learning and getting better, and trusting our teamwork.

We had to blend two different stories – one modern, one medieval – each with unique characters and conflicts. We went back and forth – a little of this story, a little of that technique; slowly the stories intertwined, the plot smoothed out, and our styles synced.

Healing is a matter of blending the old emotions and memories with new purpose, and a deeper understanding of life. Like our different styles, so rough around the edges at first, our scars softened and smoothed. In writing, we got better at taking critique; in life, we got better at managing those anniversaries.

Completion

Finally we signed with an agent, and although she was complimentary about the six hundred page manuscript, she wanted it cut - substantially. Another year and a half went by while we sliced and diced, and at the end of that time no one was happy with the result. After two years we parted ways with that agent, certain that cutting wasn’t the answer. We had a big story to tell.

Editing a manuscript can be like sorting through boxes after someone dies. It's hard to know what to keep or discard. By the time we wrote our final draft, we had made some very tough decisions, and some radical changes. Yes, we had done an enormous amount of cutting, but we also added back some older scenes, and we created a new character.

There was a time when finishing our book seemed like an impossible dream. But with hard work, persistence and healing, it became a reality. By the time we were done, the book had one voice. Without knowing us or seeing two names on the cover, you'd never know that two people had written this book.

We've dedicated **The Chamber and The Cross** to our mothers, Roberta Lambert and Nicki Shapiro. They both enjoyed a good book, and this is a story they would have loved.