

A Cat in a Box

A Thought Experiment for Reader Advocacy

by Jolie Hobbs

Ever notice opinions and advice travel in packs? The number of steps writers must take before success will greet them reliably depends on the often unreliable source de jour. Advice greets us like a pack of slavering Chihuahuas with separation anxiety as we scroll through our feeds on social media. Countless “experts” offer guaranteed methods to ensure our book will be a superhit, fly off shelves, and nest in the homes where our enthralled fans will discuss us over breakfast. The bottomless stream of “try this, buy this” appeals to the heart of our soul’s wistful dreamer by proclamation that we can become iconic, like Steinbeck, Christie, Atwood, King, Austen, Twain, and Cher.

The message that we might achieve overnight success consumes every ounce of space around us, but when we mine for the promised gold, it’s usually a fool’s game. Practical and sometimes painful truths are elusive. We have to seek truth, and that can be scary. It’s easier to believe that because we like what we have written, everyone else will, too. From our bird’s eye view, break-out novelists become literary celebrities overnight. The most dangerous propaganda of campaigns targeting writers is that people want to read what we have written, and success is just a matter of buying the right product. Some advise that writing is like any other skill—repetition yields expertise. Like most things, there is a kernel of truth in there. Unfortunately, if we write garbage, it stands to reason that the prolific production of that garbage is, at best, a disservice to humanity.

Great writers are prolific readers. I am a tenacious nut in support of this advice. However, this well-intentioned logic requires a disclaimer. It's not enough to read prolifically if we are only reading one kind of thing. Ensconcing ourselves in our favorite genre might help us improve the formula for writing in that genre. However, a lack of variety inhibits our dimensional growth. This is especially true for young writers who have made fewer rotations around the sun than older writers and don't have the abundance of life experiences to offset singular reading preferences.

Schrödinger's hypothetical cat was sealed in a box with a gas that decays and becomes poisonous over time, thereby killing the cat *if* it were to remain in the box. The observer cannot see inside the box and has no way of knowing whether the cat is alive or dead. To the observer, the cat is in a state of superposition and is both alive and dead until someone opens the box to observe the reality. Though quantum mechanics was the driver behind this experiment, it holds value for us as writers because it revealed that the nature of reality is shaped through the eyes of the observer. Our *success* as writers *is shaped through the eyes and minds of our readers*.

It would be disappointing if any of my favorite authors advised writers to disregard the discipline, patience, grit, and determination it took for their books to gain notoriety. Those "simple" five-step solutions are tempting enough that we sometimes try to replace good sense with nonsense. Among the noise and clutter of advice, there is one truth I know I must rely on. My readers determine my success, so I must be my readers' best advocate.