

2012

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Michelle Mangano

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Recommended Citation

Mangano, Michelle (2012) "The Writer's Bane," *The Cyborg Griffin: a Speculative Fiction Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 18.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/cyborg_griffin/vol2/iss1/18

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The Writer's Bane

Michelle Mangano

"I can't do this," Sarah snapped, slapping down the pen.

Balfour sighed, allowing his exasperation to bleed through. "Yes you can," he droned, massaging his brow with his gauntlet bound hand. "You'll have to eventually." He leaned back against the wall. The conversation had been running in circles for hours and his irritation was beginning to show.

"No, I don't," she said, aggressively shaking her head. Her dark hair, usually kept up in a ponytail while she worked, slipped out of the hair band. Rebellious curls battered her face with every shake. "I can change the plot as much as I want. I have time."

"That's a lie and you know it," he parried her excuse with ease. Before she could counter, he continued his assault, leaving her no room to respond. "If you don't finish the battlefield scene soon, you'll fall behind. If you fall behind, then the whole book will be in jeopardy. And if that happens, your publisher will pull out on you. Do you really want that?" Balfour's voice grew in strength with every hit he made, breaking the exhausted monotony of the last few hours. "Do you really want to throw away an entire year's worth of work over this?" He leaned off of the wall, towering over her. "You're acting like a coward, Sarah."

Sarah stood, shoving back her chair. It tumbled to the floor with a violent crash. "Why are you doing this to me?" she hissed through clenched teeth. Grabbing him by the collar of his worn green cloak, Sarah wrenched him down to her eye level. "After everything we've been through?" She got up right into his face, their noses nearly touching. Her bright blue eyes drilled into his, burning furiously. "Do you think that I can just write you off and then forget about you like a first draft?"

The warrior didn't pull himself out of the author's grip. When he spoke again, his voice was calm. She could see him changing tactics, trying to find the best way to convince her. It was far too easy to read him. "I never forced you to do anything. I'm only going along with the plotline that you wrote." Balfour's own green eyes narrowed. Despite the composed tone in his voice, the intensity in his eyes matched hers. "You brought this on yourself, Sarah."

She knew he was right. It was childish to shift the blame to him. But that irritating fact didn't stop her from tightening her grip. "That was before! I never had any of my characters speak to me like you do! I never thought that I would get to know you! I didn't think..."

Her voice lowered with her gaze. Limp hands let go of the collar, the fabric now crinkled from their grip. Her eyes flickered to the scuffed hardwood floor, as if she could find the words she needed scratched into the worn surface.

"I didn't think that I would care for you." Sarah lifted her face again. The rage in her eyes had been replaced by a cold, sobering sadness. "I need you. Don't you get it? Without you, this—" She waved an accusing hand at the notebook on the desk. "— is nothing."

Balfour was silent. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He bit his lower lip, unsure of how to proceed. She would have laughed at his struggle in different circumstances.

When he did speak, she could tell he was choosing his words carefully. "I do understand. I always have, Sarah." He leaned towards the desk and picked up the prostrate pen. It seemed so small, so insignificant compared to the sword he usually wielded. Yet at that moment, it seemed far deadlier than the sharpest of blades. "But I also trust you. You're the only one who knows the best way to continue the story. You started it, so you have to be the one to finish it."

Balfour took her hand in his. The pen was pressed into her petite palm. Balfour then clasped both of his great hands around hers, making sure the pen stayed there. "You can do this. I know you can."

Sarah stared at their entwined hands. Her eyes then lifted to his again. "You do understand that there's no going back from this? Are you sure—"

"More than anything," Balfour interrupted. His face cracked into a drained smile. "I'm tired of fighting, Sarah. It was fun for a while, but all good days must have their sunsets. Besides, you want peace, don't you? You know better than I do that there won't be any as long as I'm there. If I don't go, then there will always be war. It's time for me to rest. It's time for the kingdom to have the age of harmony it deserves."

Sarah stared at him. Her eyes darted up and down his form, drinking in every detail. Balfour had aged so much since he had appeared out of her first draft. The once pristine jerkin and trousers that he wore were now patched and threadbare—physical signs of the years of conflict and roughing it out in the wilderness. His armor (what was left of it) was badly damaged, almost to the point of being useless. His figure was still broad and defined, but there seemed to be an invisible burden on his shoulders, weighing him down. Had she done this? Had all of the hardships, the so-called "adventures," made him this way? Her writing had thrown him into an endless cycle of war and bloodshed, where he had to become a monster in order to survive. And now, at the very end, she was going to reward him in the cruelest way possible. Yes, it would give him the peace that he wanted so badly. But to think that she pushed him so far as to make him want that fate...

She felt a lump grow in her throat. Sarah swallowed it down, tasting the bitterness of defeat. It would be unkind to extend his pain any longer than she had to. Looking straight into his eyes, she nodded.

Balfour's smile grew wider. "There you go." There was a glimmer in his eyes that she could only describe as joy. It made her feel even sicker. Letting go of her hands, he reached down and righted her chair. "Your writing desk awaits, my ladyship." Balfour presented the seat grandly, as if it was a throne.

She sat in the chair, perching off of the edge like a bird about to take flight. She looked down at the ominous notebook. The blank lined page glared up at her, chiding her for what she was about to do. Regardless, she tightened her grip on the pen and began to write.

Balfour hacked another soldier's arm off. His torn and gore stained cloak flapped out furiously behind him as he turned, addressing the battlefield like an actor on a stage. "Is that all you can muster, gentlemen? Or—" He raised his chin, issuing a challenge. "—are you ready for more?" Charging towards several men, his sword, the Green Darling, danced. With every flash, she left another man in a pile of moaning tatters, begging for her to finish them.

As the battle continued to rage, an angelic smile adorned Balfour's lips. He laughed at the hellish scene with childish glee. A powerful energy rushed through him, strengthening with every cut and slash he made. He felt invincible. There was nothing that could stand in his way! Neither man nor beast nor even God himself could stop him, Balfour, from his bountiful feast!

The pen paused, anticipating what would come. Sarah could feel her resolve falter. But then she felt his hand rest on her shoulder, urging her on. They said nothing. They didn't have to. Her hand resumed writing, beginning the scene that she so dreaded.

However, his pleasure was short lived. There was the sudden sickening thud of steel plowing through flesh. Balfour had heard the sound many times in his life, but this one was different. It was accompanied by a thunder-shock of pain that surged through his breast. A snarl ripped out of his throat as the searing agony spread to his limbs. He looked down towards the source of the torment.

A slick crimson blade protruded from his chest.

At that moment, the music of the battlefield began to fade away. The Green Darling, his only reliable ally, fell from his now slackened grip. It sank into the churned and gore stained dirt silently, the emerald in the hilt glowering at him like a jilted lover.

Sarah heard a startled rattle of breath behind her, eerily similar to the one she just described. Even so, his hand remained on her shoulder. She did not turn to look at him. Instead, she continued.

Balfour's body slid off of the sword. His knees hit the dirt, resting next to his beloved. Everything had faded away by now, except for the God-awful pain. He remained upright, trying to catch a glimpse of his killer's face. He hoped that the fatal blow had been dealt from Prince Eric, pompous as he was, or even one of his competent underlings. Alas, even that wish was snatched from him. It was a fresh faced foot soldier, looking more shocked than pleased to find the bandit at his mercy. He was mere cannon fodder –the kind that Balfour usually hacked through without a second thought.

Balfour's lips curved into a final, disappointed smile. So, this was the end. He was to be slain by a pathetic boy who hadn't learned how to shave yet. Life had been a cruel mistress, but Death was by far the most vengeful bitch he had ever come across.

A word dripped from his lips like blood, almost unheard by the rest in the din of combat: "Pathetic." The sneer was still on his face as his body finally pitched forward

The fingers slid from her shoulder as she stopped writing. She didn't have to turn around to know that he was gone. Sarah stared at the words, checking her work. Her handwriting had remained steady until the final sentence. There, the words quivered ever so slightly, making them difficult to read. There wasn't a period that ended the sentence either. But the lack of it hadn't stopped Balfour from dying.

When she finished rereading, Sarah broke. Her hands tightened into fists, making her knuckles turn white. The pen, the murder weapon, cracked in half underneath the tension. Black ink dripped down her hand like Balfour's blood.

The tears that she had been holding back burst through. Little droplets hit individual words, making them drip down the page. Yet the words themselves would not fade. No matter how much the ink ran, it would not erase what she had done.