

How To Become a Great Writer

by Roz Warren

My name is Tom Scarlatti and my kid brother, Billy, resents me. Of course, if you read magazines, you probably already know that.

You probably don't think much of me, either. In fact, you probably think I'm a rotten no-good clod, since my brother Billy the famous writer always describes me that way.

I can't blame you for feeling that way about me. One thing I have to say for my brother is that he knows how to write. He should -- that's all he ever did when we were growing up. Particularly when there was work to be done around the house.

"Billy," Mom would call, "it's your turn to take out the garbage."

"Can't Tom do it this time?" Bill would whine. "I'm in the middle of a sonnet!"

"Would one of you boys set the table?"

"Tom can do it -- I'm struggling with iambic pentameter."

So I ended up doing most of the work. But I also had most of the fun. Poor Bill didn't have much of a social life. He was one of those pale gangly kids with thick glasses who never knew how to talk to girls. He didn't know how to talk to boys either. All he knew how to do was write. Unlike Bill, I had a normal, uncomplicated childhood. I had a nice group of friends, my grades weren't too bad, and I made the high school football team. I even had a date for the senior prom.

But Bill never really cared about friends or grades or dates. What he did care about was the fact that our parents preferred me to him.

Mom and Dad tried their best to hide it, but they always thought Billy a little odd. They loved him, of course, but they were just ordinary folks; a genius like Bill was out of their league. They certainly didn't understand Bill's love for writing. Mom and Pop read only three things -- the Bible on Sunday, the Reader's Digest on weekdays, and Time Magazine in the john. Otherwise, they just watched television.

Bill refused to watch television. He said that screen-watching had turned America into a bunch of mindless zombies. Every evening when the folks and I settled down in front of the set, Bill would stalk upstairs to work on his stories. What Bill couldn't appreciate was that only during these hours of watching our favorite shows would our normally reticent parents "open up." As we exchanged views about the trouble the characters got themselves into, and chatted during the many commercial breaks, I bonded with mom and dad.

So the folks never felt as close to my brother as they felt to me. And Billy resented it. All he wanted was to be accepted by them the way I was. Still, was that any reason for him to want to destroy me?

I admit that my brother got on my nerves, too. The incessant click of his keyboard used to drive me crazy. When I came back to our room at night after a date, he'd be there, hunched over the damned thing, fingers flying. On the table beside him, his pet hamster Ernest would be running like a madman on his little exercise wheel, like he was trying to keep up.

Nevertheless, I had a lot of respect for Bill; I guess it was clear to everyone that he was destined to become some kind of a great writer. His English teachers always made a huge fuss over him.

Still they always told him that there was something lacking in his early stories. Although his writing was good, it failed to move people. "No heart," his teachers kept telling him. "No spirit. No guts."

Finally, one of them took him aside and gave him some advice.

"Stop trying to write a masterpiece," she said. "Stop trying to be brilliant and earth-shaking. Instead, just try to write about something you care about. Try to write honestly, from the heart."

Billy gave it some thought. What did he feel that strongly about? Me, of course!

The result of this revelation was Billy's first published story -- "Blood Brothers" -- which came out several years later when my brother was almost out of grad school and I was just starting my first job as an insurance agent. You've probably read it -- it was first published in *The New Yorker* but it's been anthologized all over the place. In the story, "Tim Scarlett," hospitalized with a rare disease, is given a crucial blood transfusion by his adoring younger brother "Bob." The story focuses on the dialog between the two brothers as the transfusion takes place. During the course of this conversation, the smug, insensitive older brother gradually reveals how he's ruined young Bob's life by turning their parents against him. By the time the transfusion is completed, Bob is devastated, and the sympathetic reader finds himself almost hoping that Tim won't survive his unnamed illness.

Billy gave me no warning before the story came out. At work the morning after it appeared on the newsstands, I found a copy of the magazine on my desk, open to Bill's story. I read a paragraph. My head began to spin. There, squeezed in between the cartoons and the advertisements for Norwegian luxury cruises, was my soul laid bare. But Bill had captured only my darker side, presenting none of

my redeeming qualities. It was terrible. It was a masterpiece. It was the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

I did everything I could about the situation -- I cancelled my New Yorker subscription.

After this success, Bill tried to move on to other subjects but the stories he wrote were all rejected. It soon became obvious that the only thing he could write about with passion was his hatred of me.

His next published story was based on a fantasy I'd told him about one night years before when we'd both had a few too many -- only Billy didn't write it up as a fantasy. In "The Beauties and the Beast," Tim, cheating on his wife, manages to impregnate an entire squad of high school cheerleaders, "The Beast," which was translated into seventeen languages, destroyed my marriage. The judge, an avid reader, almost refused to give me visiting rights to my two little boys.

I thought it couldn't get any worse -- then that story came out in Playboy, the one about me and Butch, my Doberman. People at work stopped talking to me.

After that, Bill really got down to business. Tim died in plane crashes, car collisions and train wrecks. He plunged off the roller coaster at the amusement park. He fell off buildings, jumped off bridges and was pushed under the wheels of commuter trains. In one very popular story, he was kicked to death by a deranged Pluto while on vacation at Disney World. Billy's readers never seemed to tire of seeing "me" die.

My nervous breakdown inspired my brother's first foray into nonfiction -- a series of poignant articles about mental health care which won him a Pulitzer. When I recovered, I sued Bill for some of the money he'd made from my breakdown to apply toward my

hospital bills, only to discover that he'd put the money into a trust fund for the homeless. When the public learned that "Tim Scarlet" was attempting to take money away from these poor unfortunates, controversy raged in the Op Ed page of the New York Times. For the first time, I experienced the dubious pleasure of having somebody else besides my brother viciously slamming me in print. The court battle, which I lost, provided Bill with the raw material for yet another series of brilliant articles.

Meanwhile, I was still dying in Billy's stories. To the reading public, the circumstances of "my" demise appeared to be getting increasingly bizarre, but I was able to recognize a pattern. After I installed a new hot tub in my bathroom, Tim, sitting in his hot tub, was crushed to death when a skydiver whose parachute had failed to open fell through the skylight. After I purchased a new sports car, Tim was killed while driving down the freeway when a crate of mangos fell from the back of a passing truck and slammed through his windshield. After I began jogging along an isolated road near my home each morning, Tim was carried off by a flying saucer while jogging along an isolated road near his home.

Soon I did nothing in my spare time but sit in my house and stare at the walls. If I discovered a pastime I enjoyed, the news would just get back to my brother, who would figure out a way to kill me at it that would give me nightmares for months. I tried to get out and meet people but it was impossible for me to make friends. Everyone I met had read Billy's prose. I was an outcast.

Meanwhile, Billy's stories had turned killing me into a new game for the reading public, who began writing my brother email (which he always forwarded on to me), suggesting new and better ways to do me in. One accommodating thug who'd stolen one of Bill's books from the library at Walpole state prison even offered to do the job himself for \$400 as soon as he got out on parole.

Finally I went to my brother. "I have no friends left," I said. "My marriage is shot. My children have both read your children's book, "Timmy the Monster," and refuse to speak to me. Everyone I meet hates me already. You've got your revenge -- stop ruining my life!"

"But I'm not trying to ruin your life," Billy said. "I'm just trying to be a great writer. We great writers write about what we have to write about. Did Mt. Kilimanjaro come sniveling to Ernest Hemingway and say "Please don't write about me!" Of course not! Every great writer has something he has to write about. What I have to write about happens to be you. The fact that I am ruining your life in the process is merely an unfortunate side effect."

"My ruined life -- an unfortunate side effect?" I croaked.

My brother smiled. "History will bear me out, of course."

I saw that I had no choice; I would have to become a great writer myself. Telling my side of the story was the only chance I had.

I quit my job and joined a writing class. I had no aptitude, but I had plenty of motivation.

"You have no talent," said my teacher after reading my first story. "This is the worst thing I've ever read."

"I can't give you back your manuscript," she said after reading my next story, "because when I finished it I drove over to the dump and threw it in with the rest of the garbage."

In the middle of reading my third story she committed suicide.

Undaunted, I submitted my work to The New Yorker. It was returned two days later.

"This is the most awful thing that's happened to us in all our years of publishing," somebody had written at the bottom of the form rejection slip. "We returned it as quickly as possible for fear that it would contaminate the other manuscripts. If you ever resubmit, we'll kill you."

I sent my work to other magazines with varied results. Sometimes I received form rejections, other times death threats. One editor traveled all the way from North Dakota to the Connecticut farmhouse where I lived, stormed into my study, doused my laptop with kerosene and set it on fire.

Finally, after about a year, The New Yorker let my story sit around with the rest of the stories in the "slush pile" for three months before returning it with a personal word of encouragement on the bottom of my form rejection slip. "This isn't quite as horrible as the others," it said. Breakthrough!

I knew then that it was only a matter of time. Two hundred rejection slips later, "Revenge is Sweet!" was accepted for publication by a national magazine. Almost immediately, another magazine took "Up Yours, Brother Bill!" and a third magazine took "How Many Kid Brothers Does It Take to Screw In A Light Bulb?" Other acceptances followed.

Bill had ignored my initial publications, but after "Ha Ha, Sure Fooled You, You Miserable Putz!" was published, he dropped out of sight. Rumors circulated that he had retired to a remote cabin near Buffalo where he was writing stories too awesome to be published during his lifetime. I had almost concluded that I could safely hang up my keyboard and go back to selling insurance when The New Yorker ran "That's What You Think, Asshole, I'll Have The Last Laugh Yet!"

After that the prose came fast and furious as we inspired each other to new heights of malicious inventiveness. I couldn't wait to read each new story of Bill's to see if I could top it.

Then one day I was on my way to a writing conference in the Himalayas with a group of other writers when our plane developed engine trouble and crashed in a snowstorm. Everyone aboard was killed except me. I built myself a crude shelter by lashing flotation cushions together with oxygen masks, and survived by eating little bags of pretzels, and poets, until I was finally rescued months later.

The first thing I did when I got back to civilization was find the nearest newsstand. Sure enough, there was my brother's latest story, in one of the magazines.

"Brotherly Love, By William Scarlatti," it said on the cover. I opened the magazine and began to read. The story was a tribute to me! Bill had focused only on my good side, omitting all of my nasty qualities.

I phoned him immediately.

"You're alive!" He shouted happily.

"I shouldn't be," I said. "I almost had a coronary reading that story. It's the most maudlin piece of sentimental poop I've ever read. For this I struggled to survive? For this I ate a hundred bags of pretzels and four poets? To come back and read this tripe? Where's that fine cutting edge, that passionately articulate rage, the abrasive eloquence that was the hallmark of your style? I'm ashamed of you."

"When your plane was lost I realized how much I loved you," said Bill, his voice trembling. "Without you to resent my life had no meaning. Don't you even care that I love you?"

"I'm a great writer," I said. "What I care about is great writing. I could handle hatred and resentment. I could handle arctic cold and loneliness and months of an unbalanced diet. What I can't handle is reading gush like this."

"You miserable ingrate!" Bill screamed. "I'm sorry you didn't die! I'm glad you had to eat pretzels and poets. And if you think that hurt, just wait till you read the next story I write about you."

"That's the spirit," I said fondly, hanging up on him. Not that I would have minded sitting around swapping insults with my brother, but I had work to do.

