

Hack Your Muse Episode 1: The Origin Story

Transcript

0:00 Welcome Muse Hackers.

Welcome Muse Hackers, you're listening to the Hack Your Muse podcast with Kelly McClymer. Our mission is to help you discover your muse, and write what you want, when you want, and how you want. I'm going to give you the *origin story* of Hack Your Muse.

A friend of mine does not like the total- ha, the total- the title 'Hack Your Muse' she wants me to change it to something kinder and less violent. And I said, "Oh, I don't think of it as violent. I think of hacking your muse like I think of computer hackers who get into the system and make it do things that you didn't think it could do in the first place." So, I kind of liked the concept.

1:20 My weakness for great titles.

Okay, so here is a secret about me as a writer, Kelly McClymer the writer: I really, really fall for great titles. I can't help it. I love titles. One of my favorite, favorite titles ever is the 'Salem Witch Tryouts.' Isn't that a great title? Doesn't it kinda tell you exactly what is about? You know it's gonna be YA because it's tryouts and that sounds like cheerleading, and that's what it is. And, you know it's going to be kind of funny because that title is a little twisty.

So, when I came up with the Salem Witch Tryouts that's all I came up with. I misheard somebody at a writers workshop who was talking about titles and talking about- it was actually a panel of agents and editors who were giving feedback on proposals. So they would read out the title, they would read the premise, they would read a little bit from the beginning, and then they would all say whether they would accept or ask for it. Because what agent would do would be: you send them your proposal, and then they either ask to see more or they politely, or impolitely reject you, or completely ignore you depending on their personal policies.

So I heard Salem Witch Tryouts I was like this is fantastic! I got this electrified feeling in my body and I just was standing at the back of the packed room and I just sort of leaned forward to hear what the story was going to be about. And then I realized, 'Oh, it's just the Salem witch trials.' Which I happen to find fascinating from a historical perspective, but there are lots of things called the Salem Witch Trials so it wasn't as exciting as the title the Salem witch tryouts.

So, I proceeded to stand in the back of that room and build an entire book from that one title. Which went on to be a three-book series which I hope to extend at some point when I can get the rights to my second book back from Simon & Schuster. They've given me the first and third but I don't have the second yet. One more hurdle that's what life is. I don't know any way to Hack your Muse and get over that hurdle so I haven't figured it out yet.

But back to Hack Your Muse. That concept, to me, says it all. I've been writing for 40+ years and every time I go to the blank page, it is the same feeling: I don't think I can do at this time, I don't think I have what it takes, I don't have an idea. Ugh, I just wish that I could blink like a witch. Like, I forget, it wasn't Samantha twitched her nose on Bewitch, but I wish I could just blink it there. You know, technology may get us there so Hack Your Muse may actually one day be a real hack where something is stuck in the back of our neck. I think that would be kinda cool but also very scary so, who knows.

04:44 Londridge Writer's Group So here I have this idea and it came from my years and years of teaching. So for a dozen years, I taught writing through Longridge Writers Group, which is the Adult Fiction and Nonfiction arm of the children's writers- uh, I don't, Children's Writers and Literature Institute, I can't remember, maybe Institute of Children's Literature. I never wrote for them, I never paid any attention to them. I was just always Longridge, that's how I thought of it so. I'm terrible sometimes with names even though I love titles that grab my attention.

So I spent a dozen years helping writers write under a very structured scenario, and what I noticed was that structure helps. It's not everything because mindset matters. And so I've created courses to try and help writers get that mindset going and use those hacks that I've learned over the years. And in that course creation process which is just, I tell you, it's just the same as trying to create to write a book as it is to create a course. You feel like all 'I just don't know what to say next or how to get these people to do what I do'. But I have a secret weapon.

So I didn't start formally teaching until I got my first book published in 2000. On the other hand, I have children so I've always been teaching and I was a big sister and my role was always teacher. We would actually have school. Who has school to have fun? Me and my sisters. We did, and I always had to be the teacher. So I found out when I did this through Longridge that I actually have an affinity for one-on-one teaching and for really trying to help someone get what they want out of what they're writing.

And I really enjoy that too but it is a draining process so this time around what I wanted to do was to create something that would be useful to the student that would still allow me not to be teaching 24/7. Because one of the problems I have is that I start to really, really, it's a boundary issue, but I start to really, really care more about the student's progress than the student cares sometimes. That's not a good thing. You want to care, you really want to care and you want to be able to celebrate what's good. You want to be able to say "I think maybe you're

getting in your own way and here's a way you can avoid that.' That's a useful thing, that's what I like to do.

But when I start to care more than the student that's when I need to learn to back away. So one of the things that an online course allows for is for the student to work at their own pace. And this is actually what Longridge had discovered is that students could take as long as they needed to get through the course. The nominal course schedule was six weeks because it went through the mail. So the students would have a binder and they would have their lessons and Londridge did a really excellent job laying out the expectations, the how to do it, and then the students would type that up and send it to me and I would have a week to give them my feedback and send it back. And then once we went online it got a little bit faster but what we discovered is that some students didn't like to do it in six weeks, and sometimes it was because they were very busy, sometimes again, it was because they were afraid of the blank page.

09:10 Writing is hard work. So part of my job was really saying, "Okay, what's going on? Why is it taking you a long time? How can you do this a little bit more quickly and with less stress?" because writing is hard work. Mainly because you're trying to say something that is profound, you know, and you're trying to make that profound statement simple and entertaining. You know so it's kind of similar to instead of dancing like no one is watching you, your dancing like everyone is watching you and your dance differently when you do that. So what I always tried to get my students to do is basically dance like no one is watching. I said, "Yes, I'm going to get this and I'm going to be very gentle" because I know from long experience that writing can be fixed. I have seen writers go through my program, go through the Longridge program, that you know I wondered which "does this person have the skill to really write something that could get published?" That was one of the Longridge promises was that you would have two pieces suitable for publication and that's one of the directives we instructors had to make sure that that happened. And I took that directive very seriously, and I always encouraged my students to go ahead and submit the work once I felt that it was ready for submission.

The one problem that you can never control is whether someone will actually buy your work. You may write this great article and it turns out someone else read something just as great a month before you, and too bad the editors not going to buy it even though if you had submitted a month earlier they would have. That's not something you can control, but you can know it was a good article and you can of course impress the editor with it. Or the short story, because that is one thing you learn when you pitch the short story market is you basically trying to create a relationship with the editor before you get to that stage where you're selling, the editor can trust "oh, this person knows what they're doing."

You would think the story would stand on its own but through the years I discovered it doesn't always and editors have entirely different, especially editors of short magazines, have entirely different ideas of what makes a good short story that have to do with issues and

readers and themes and you know they're perfectly capable of turning down a good story because it doesn't fit into their parameters. So all of those things are what make writers even, working writers who publish and make money like I do, feel unsure when we face the blank page.

12:13 My concept of the muse. So as I was creating these courses and I came up with the Hack Your Muse brand and I was so pleased with it. It's not the Salem Witch Tryouts, but it's close to me because to me it says everything about were trying what were trying to do, which is keep ourselves writing, keep ourselves sane. So I started to think about my concept of muse. And I don't know whether you experience that or not, I'm thinking you're not going to be listening to this podcast if you haven't, but when you're a writer or a creator of any kind and the muse is with you, it almost feels like your muse is running your body and helping the creation, the writing or whatever, just come right through you. Your body feels like a conduit, kind of like those séance movies. Where, you know, you will in the muse fuge, which some people call flow, you will just create and it will feel effortless until you're out of it, at which point you'll feel energized and yet exhausted and you look at the time frame and think, "oh my goodness I have no idea time so much time passed."

And everybody wants to write in the muse state all the time which I've never found a way to do that. I can get myself into muse states by various hacks, I can't always be in the muse state. And I have also learned that I can, I can write when I'm not in the muse state. It's harder but sometimes it's more or less like bubbling around, trying to find your way and it's a necessary step. I think that's where a lot of people, a lot of people who want to write, will get frustrated because they feel like it should be easier to actually do the writing part of it like "I have the story in my head." But one of the things to think about -um, I really liked to really twist and strain and torture metaphors just for warning, their warning I guess, because I'll do it a lot if you listen to me you'll get used to it. If you want to tell your favorite twisted metaphors that I use I'm happy to hear them because I love them, almost as much as I love titles.

So, what you're trying to do sometimes you have the toothpaste tube full of ideas. You need to get that toothpaste tube contents onto your blank page. What you really want to do with your whole urges is to take a knife, cut open that tube, just blip out all the contents. But that isn't the way it works, you need to squeeze. To get all the contents you need to be like that really neat freak who like folds down the bottom. The bottom squeezes the contents to that, all the way into you have it totally, you can't get a single more ounce, spec of toothpaste out of the tube, out of the writing. That's what you're going for and that's what the process is like and that's why it's torture. Because you have so much but you can only put it onto the page at a certain rate and when you are in your muse flow you can really at that rate.

So that's why I created Hack Your Muse to get more writers into the muse flow. Our mission statement is to help you write what you want when you want, and how you want and I don't say that lightly. I have guided many students, some of whom wanted to write sermons, better sermons because they were already writing sermons, and some of whom wanted to

write bestsellers. Those are two different goals for your writing but approaching the writing and hacking your muse to make that writing flow better is actually the same process and we're gonna talk about that a lot. I will be having guests, I'm excited to say I already have some of them and I don't want to say who because I haven't decided the order yet. This is my origin podcast, just kinda let me let you know exactly what I'm planning but I don't like to plan too much. I like to have a plan and then I like to change it is something really great comes along and the plan will benefit from the change. That's the way I approach my stories, the way I approach my life, it's the way I approach this podcast.

17:56 Muse management.

You don't have to be the same as me. The great thing about hack your muse is that you take what works for you, you ignore the rest and you can laugh along and empathize with people who had different experiences. So we'll listen in this podcast to other people's experiences of hacking the muse in writing and being in the flow. You get to find probably somebody is very similar to you, and it might be one piece from this writer and one piece from that writer. And I'm really excited about sharing this whole concept of hacking muse, most of all I'm really excited about sharing some insights I have about the muse itself that all of my work in all of my writing as really led to. And that is that your muse is actually real and it's your subconscious in a really stubborn, opinionated, goal-oriented way your muse wants something from you and when you give it to your muse you can get into the flow state easier.

The other side of that is sometimes your muse wants things from you that are unrealistic. Like writing a perfect page where you never have to change a word, that's really unrealistic. And the other side of the muse equation is muse management, and to manage your muse you need to know what your muse wants and you need to say, "that is totally unrealistic, my dear, get on the same page as me and we're going to create amazing things together. Put too much pressure on me I am gonna crack and not do anything you want." And I know it sounds airy-fairy but the subconscious is not airy-fairy, right now it's it's actually kind of a movement, the mind management, the mind focus, mindfulness. It's all the same thing, it's all recognizing that we have thoughts that we don't realize we're thinking that stop us from doing what we want to do, or sometimes cause us to do things that are not good for us.

So two examples of that in writing is where we sit down and we force ourselves to write a best-selling blue printed book that doesn't touch us in the heart at all. I'm not saying you shouldn't do it, I'm saying when you do it your muse is probably not gonna show up as much because that's not what your muse really wants. For some people that might be what you muse wants, your muse might be happy seeing the bank account numbers. For most writers I know, and I've talked to many, many, many, many writers, that is not what they want, they want a combination. And for many people money is recognition and so and it's readers and so that's what you want, you want readers to really engage with what you're writing. It fuels the writing, it makes the muse happy, it makes the writing sessions better.

Part of muse management is knowing that that conversation happens on the page and one of the best ways to keep the muse happy is to talk to one reader, your true reader, the reader who sometimes they call your alpha reader, for Stephen King's it's Tabitha King. That's the person that you know is gonna get what you're trying to say and if they don't get what you're trying to say, then you probably need to change what you're saying so that they can get it. That's only one person, and you can make a mistake when you're a new writer of trying to listen to 10 people and that's not a good thing. We'll talk about that in an upcoming podcast about how to get the writing support and feedback you need without it making you crazy.

22:40 Muse Mindset.

But right now we're just talking about that muse mindset. So subconsciously, you have all of these thoughts and beliefs about what makes your writing important, what you should be doing as a person. So hm, that if you're an American you probably believe in hard work, not having fun at work- it's a very silly belief, it's really a silly belief. There's nothing wrong with doing hard work where some of it is unenjoyable and some of it is really enjoyable. But somehow we conflate the two and if you're having fun, it's no longer work. Which is silly and we'll talk about that in the future too. But your belief, that's your mindset. So every time you're facing the blank page, you're thinking to yourself out loud in the front of your brain, "I want to write my book now." and the back of your brain, that you're not even aware of, is thinking "You're not ready to write your book, you have to do dishes. You don't deserve to write that book, you have to do dishes. You're not ready to write that book you haven't done enough research. You're not as smart as the writer that you really, really love and you want to write like. Nobody's gonna buy your book."

All of these thoughts are wiggling around in the back of your brain and you don't even know them, and those are the thoughts that are controlling your muse. So what you have to do is bring some of those thoughts up to the front of your brain and zap them with better thoughts. And that's what hacks are. So a good hack for "I'm not good enough" is: "There is absolutely no way to know if I'm good enough until I've written the book. I get to have fun with my book before I even know if it's good enough."

And that, I tell you, most of the people I know who didn't waste time worrying about being good enough just wrote that first book whether it was horrendous and they had to throw it away and start over, or whether it was perfect because sometimes that happens, if you know if you got all this other training from writing, you write in school, you write for work, you're just a natural storyteller, sometimes that happens, it's rare but never discount it.

Those people, they don't waste a second thinking that no one's gonna buy the book. They just have fun writing, they think about the fun it's gonna be involved. And I am that way, that's how I wrote my first novel it was like, I had the story, I wanted to tell it, I knew the odds of getting published back in the day and I still decided I was going to have fun writing the book. And, you know, of course I didn't have fun every second, I didn't have fun every time I faced the

blank page but the fun and the knowledge that I give myself permission to just write the book and see what happens that was really powerful and that is the one thing that you can do to get yourself writing today and never stop writing until you finish the book just give yourself permission to have fun and not be afraid if it's terrible.

And that's the mind management because what's really happening is your muse is embodied in it and embodiment of all of these hopes and dreams and fears, she's got them all and she's got them on steroids, so at every point she's gonna be afraid unless you have a muse who's never afraid and like I said, there are people like that. There aren't many.

27:42 Not all Muses created Equal.

So what we're gonna be doing for the next who knows how many podcasts is exploring how other people got past that basic fear and managed their mind, and we're gonna be talking about how to get to know your muse because your muse is not the same as someone else's. And I tell this story a lot and you'll hear it over and over probably on this podcast because it's a seminal story for me, it taught me a lot. When I was looking for this, you know, just a group of writers, sitting around talking about motivation and keeping yourself on task, you know there's always the traditional deadline and sometimes deadlines just aren't doing it because there's so much else in the way real life, like your children or other things. And one writer said she propped her mortgage up and that made her, motivated her to write so I thought "Oh, that was a great idea!" So oh, I didn't pay the mortgage, my husband paid the mortgage but I propped up a bill that I needed to pay. And I instantly got frozen, and couldn't write a single word and I thought "Whoa, that was dramatic!" At the time I didn't realize that it was my muse. In her fears, there were still subconscious thoughts I hadn't acknowledged. Well, all I knew was that one thing, that one hack, not only it didn't work for me but it was counterproductive.

So it's a warning, I'll give you a warning. Some hacks may be counterproductive. If they are, toss them out. It could be 10 years down the line that hack will work for you, but it's if it's counterproductive you'll feel it. You're talking about the difference between that full-body 'the muse writing with you' and that full-body 'the muse absolutely going on full strike and protest'. There's a difference. And what turned out to be for me, which is funny, is that I have through my upbringing I basically believed that making money was not, well, to be more specific, making money through my writing was kind of frivolous, and not really hard work. And almost I should give it away for free. So I had to combat, once I realized I was having these feelings, I had to combat them in the subconscious thoughts. But until then I had to find other hacks to get the writing done because I had deadlines, so I found many many other hacks and in interviewing some of my first guests, they've brought hacks I never heard of before. So I'm really excited to share this with you because different things work for different people, and all you need to do is keep trying something that will work, that when you look at that blank page you're like, "Yeah, I get to have fun, even if you're only having fun for 15 minutes.

All right, I promised myself to keep these to 30 minutes unless my guess gets super interesting, so it's time for me to go. The things we're going to discuss with our upcoming guest is what they think about the writing muse. I'm gonna get them all to tell me about the first time they sat down to write a story because there's something special about that really first time when you just overcome every objection and fear and do it. And I'm gonna ask them for their number one go-to hack to get the writing done. And you get to come along and listen to what they have to say, that's kinda cool, I think so. Okay, that's all for this episode Muse Hackers. Stay tuned for more muse hacking wisdom next week.

30:49 Meet Your Muse

Okay, muse hackers, it's commercial time. If you love this podcast and want to support it with real dollars and cents, I have the perfect course for you on teachable. Meet Your Muse is a minicourse that will show you how to unleash the power of your muse while at the same time reining in some of her most creativity crushing bad habits. If you spend more time thinking about writing than actually writing, Meet Your Muse can help you turn that around. Once you've met your muse, you will have the keys to creating the most productive writing sessions ever, even if you only have 10 minutes a day to write.

Remember one page a day, 250 words, equals 364 pages to 90,000 words. That could be too short books, or one good-sized book, or five or six, or more short stories article, or blog post. Isn't that worth \$20 in two hours or less of your time? Best perk, you will be supporting this podcast to continue seeking out the best muse hacking writers around and sharing that wisdom with you for free.

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