

THE *BAG*

OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



I started working on this piece well

before Halloween; taking a break, I went to the store to buy some eyeball candles for my daughter's annual Spooky Sleepover. Halloween is our holiday, and I grinned at the chocolate brains and the dancing Frankenstein monsters and the mounds of candy corn. But my eyeball candles were nowhere to be found.

I made my way to the back of the store, where I collided with the first wave of Christmas/Hanukkah merchandise. My smile faded, and I could already feel the metaphorical winter chill of the long day's journey into Christmas.

"June brides and June suicides," my father the psychiatrist used to say. He told me that while depression strikes people hard during the winter holidays, they usually hold off committing suicide—or attempting to—until well after the holiday season. But the seeds of unbearable depression are often planted—and/or well-watered—during the "most wonderful time of the year." Pressured to depart from the usual routine to go on vacations and entertain friends and relatives; to spend money on charities and gifts; and above all, to be cheerful while under an amazing amount of stress—the holidays can be very rough on people.

In my life as a writer, two of my peers have committed suicide. In one case, the writer was plagued with health problems and career setbacks. In the other, things appeared to be going quite well. I do know that sometimes, it's when things are "fine" that depression hits hardest—because nothing is "wrong."

In *The Van Gogh Blues: The Creative Person's Path through Depression*, author Eric Maisel states:

"The cliché is that creativity and depression go hand-in-hand. Like many cliché's, this one is quite true....[Creators] experience depression simply because they are caught up in a struggle to make life seem meaningful to them." (3,4)

He goes on to suggest:

"Creators have trouble maintaining meaning. Creating is one of the ways they endeavor to maintain meaning. In the act of creation, they lay a veneer of meaning over meaninglessness....Not creating is depressing because she [sic] is not making meaning when she is not creating." (5)

The holidays often disrupt our writing schedules and "meaning-making" activities, and I think that's one reason a number of us get depressed around this time of year. My father would list additional reasons: nostalgia for happier times; disappointments caused by unmet expectations (boosted by commercials and trips to the mall); loneliness; and the awareness that we're not "supposed" to be depressed because, after all, it's Christmas.

With that in mind, I queried a number of writers in my usual round-robin fashion to discuss depression. I was gratified

Writers & Depression (Part 1)

by the number of respondents, and the depth of their replies. It's been a challenge to edit their comments for the sake of space. I also want to remind readers that this is an informational column only, and I am not endorsing any specific course of treatment. Please consult your own professionals (including your insurance provider) if you need help with depression.

I think a good jumping-off place is this quote from **Samantha Sommersby**, author of *Forbidden: The Revolution*:

I worked for a licensed psychotherapist for years before leaving that job in 2007 to write and work in the publishing industry full-time. I've given your last question some thought since doing so:

Detachment, introversion, and social isolation are common symptoms of depression. They are also part of the writer's experience. When working on a project, in many ways it's the situation that we must create for ourselves. We live inside our heads, creating characters or perhaps even an entire new universe. Often this happens in the seclusion of the writer's home, or office. It's not a social activity and there's little room for live, face-to-face interaction with others. I believe like with almost everything else in life, balance is the key. Staying connected with family and friends, participating in social activities, or even something simple as a change in setting can make a difference and remind us that there is a real world out there.

Here is a full list of my questions, with answers by **Seanan McGuire**. Seanan is the author of the *Toby Daye* series, the first book of which is *Rosemary and Rue*. Subsequent responses have been edited, and in many cases, my questions have been omitted.

1. *Have you struggled with depression?*

Sadly, yes. I suffered from clinical depression for several years, and put off seeking treatment for a long time because I was afraid it would destroy my ability to write.

2. *How do you define it?*

Misery; creeping malaise; unwillingness to interact with the world; unwillingness to believe that there is worth in anything. For a while, I was also heavily suicidal.

3. *How did it affect you? How long did it last? Do you still struggle?*

It made me very frantic for approval, and also very unwilling to trust what approval I received from the people around me. My depression lasted for years, and it got worse all the time. I was the toad in the slowly heating water; every year, 'good' got a little harder to handle. I'm on medication for depression now, and it's doing a lot to make life easier.

4. *How did it affect your work?*

At the time, I would have said it didn't affect my work at all. Now? It left me with long stretches of writer's block, it shattered my focus, and it made my plots much more depress-

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4. **How did it affect your work?**

5. **Did you do something about it? What did you do? Did it work?**

6. **Do you have anything else you would like to share about depression?**

7. **Do you think writers and other creative people are more prone to depression? If so, why?**

ing in unnecessary ways. There's a line between 'justified misery' and 'suffering for the sake of suffering,' and the depression meant I couldn't see that I was crossing it.

5. *Did you do something about it? What did you do? Did it work?*

I started on Wellbutrin, and got my life back.

6. *Do you have anything else you would like to share about depression?*

There's this incredible urge to justify it to yourself. 'Oh, I'm sad because this happened,' or 'oh, I'm just feeling this way because I'm a genuinely bad person.' This urge is lying to you.

7. *Do you think writers and other creative people are more prone to depression? If so, why?*

I think that people with depression are likely to become writers, if only because in cases like mine, depression starts early but shallow, leaving you a little withdrawn and a little confused about life. So you write to figure out what's going on. Then you blink, and it's ten years later, and you're a writer.

From Jackie Kessler, author of *The Icarus Project* by Jackie Kessler and Caitlin Kittredge:

...I'm able to write, even when I'm depressed...but only when I can keep a concrete goal in mind. 1,000 words by the end of the day. Hard deadline of a certain date. That sort of thing. Creatively, there's a lot to tap into. (But I don't recommend being depressed as a precondition to writing!)

... had been vehemently opposed to taking any sort of medication, feeling that it was an easy out, even a cop out, that I would be medicating the symptoms without working on the problems. But my therapist asked me, "If you found out you had Alzheimer's, would you think it would be okay to take medication?" And I replied absolutely, because that was something physically wrong with the brain. And she told me that depression does have a physical impact on the brain. That got me to start considering the possibility of taking medication, and I also started talking to other people about it. Turns out, many people

I know either are (or have been) on anti-depressants or anti-anxiety meds or know others who are. That helped me make my decision to give it a shot.

I'm still in therapy. And I hope that one day, I'll be able to really take pride in all of my accomplishments instead of holding them for a fleeting moment and then raising the bar obscenely high and fretting about how to reach the new goal.

Depression is insidious, because when it grabs hold of you, you may not want to get help, because you might believe that either you can't be helped or there's no point in getting help. There is. You're not alone. Your feelings are valid, and you deserve to be heard.

.... I would say that yes, creative people — or really any person who finds validation not only from creating something but then gets approval for that creation, either through sales or reviews — are probably likely to experience depression at one point. Rejection is part of the game when you're a writer, and sometimes, the rejections add up and boom, suddenly, you don't feel like you're worthy of, well, anything. People say you need a tough skin if you're a writer. On that, I absolutely would agree.

From Deidre Martin, NYT Bestselling Author, *Power Play*:

... I've been struggling with it since I've been a teenager. Depression can be genetic; my dad suffers from it, too, and I guess he passed it on to me and my siblings. But obviously, outside circumstances can trigger an episode, too.

I define it as seeing the world through mud colored glasses. Rationally, you might have a good life: a good career, a loving family, a circle of friends. But depression robs you of your rationality. You simply can't SEE any of those things because you're in a deep dark hole.

How long it lasts varies. And yes, I still struggle. It's cyclic for me, usually seasonally based. Fall and winter I seem to fall into the dark abyss. Then spring comes and I'm okay. Though, as I said, outside circumstances, no matter what time of year, can trigger a depression: family problems, work problems, illness, you name it.

NH: *How did it affect your work?*

Oddly enough, it didn't. Every time I've been depressed, I've MADE myself work, even if that was the only thing I could

manage that day before crawling back into bed and pulling the covers over my head.

Depression is not the blues. It's an illness, and it can be all encompassing and overwhelming. Even though friends sometimes think they're being helpful when they say, "Oh, it's just the blues, you'll snap out of it," I think that's probably one of the worst things you can say to a depressed person. If we could just snap out of it, don't you think we would?

I think it's important to be honest with friends and family about it. I used to hide it. Friends would invite me out, and I'd come up with a white lie to avoid turning down the invitation. Now I tell the truth, and ask them to please give me space. I of course always tell them that I appreciate their concern (because I do), but pressuring someone who's depressed to come out and play can make it worse.

I also think it's nothing to be ashamed of. A lot of people suffer from it, and there's help out there. There's no reason to suffer.

From Virginia Baker, author of *Jack Knife*:

It's a family thing—we have all been hit with it at one time or another. But for me, it was fairly easy to snap out of. A good movie, a good book, a good friend, a fascinating project—all of these things could divert my attention enough to counteract intermittent bouts of depression.

Then, about 15 years ago, I contracted a devastating case of mono, which eventually turned into Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). From that point on, certain stressors have seemed to make a bee-line for the depression button, and there is no getting away from those stressors and live in the real world at the same time. It would be extraordinarily tempting to simply withdraw from that world altogether, to protect myself, but I know that can't be any kind of answer.

... I don't think most insurance providers or even doctors realize how connected the mind/spirit is to the body, and that when the latter becomes ill or weak, the former is going to suffer because of that. The mind and spirit do not exist independent of the body. The body is the vehicle for both...

NH: *How do you define depression?*

Smothering, paralyzing, crippling miasmic cloud. You can't see it, taste it, touch it or smell it, but it affects everything YOU



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see, taste, touch, smell and, most important, how you perceive *everything* about yourself. It warps the soul and clouds the mind. I call it my “body snatcher” moments, because it just seems to take over. I always feel guilty for not being able to control it, as if some further application of good character could erase it, triumph over it.

NH: *How did it affect your work?*

My non-fiction work that I do for my clients, it barely affects at all. I can go on auto-pilot and do that kind of work. In some ways, it’s almost a placebo in and of itself, knowing that I can do that work well enough to be wanted by my clients on a consistent basis. It gives me a solid point of self esteem that I can grasp even in the darkest of times.

Fiction is another story. The energy necessary to write fiction is a completely different thing, a different chord on the instrument entirely. And depression seems to block that chord much more forcefully than it does when I write marketing tools or training courses.

I found that becoming a “professional” in the fiction industry was the oddest experience, because prior to entering into that role, I loved “getting away from it all” by writing stories. You would think that the marriage of the almost magical act of writing fiction and the professionalism I’m used to with my non-fiction career would create an ideal situation in which to write stories and books. But I admit to being surprised and even overwhelmed by the industry’s demands, which I did not consciously expect. With the pressure to perform, with the vagaries of the industry, writing fiction has become one of those stressors that hits the depression button. Talk about distressing! It’s something I’m struggling to resolve.

Again, the feeling that I should be able to overcome this with a strong application of backbone nags at me, constantly nattering about my weak-willed cowardly behavior. I’ve realized, though, that this creates yet another one of those button-pushing stressors, so I’m backing off on that emotional dictator and I’m starting to write for myself again, for my own reasons, as I used to. I can remember, thankfully, what that felt like and I am clinging to it as the means to re-opening the door to that intensely private place that fiction comes from.

I sometimes wonder that, when writers do suffer from depression, how much the violation of that private space—by agents, editors and everyone else who seems to feel the need to dictate what we write and how we write it, the pressure to bring them the next *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*—doesn’t worsen the condition to a crippling point, which is counterproductive for us all.

I understand the need to be a professional, to produce. But I am beginning to also understand the need for this to balance with what *I* want as well, and to balance this with approaching the job AS a job—one that feels like a hobby while I’m doing it, but that I organize and track and address as a vendor selling a product once each piece is produced. And, also, the need for a strong sense of humor—to know which projects I should approach with more “this is mine” and to protect voraciously, and which to approach as simply an exceptionally interesting project. That seems to help turn the urgency to produce

from a stressor to a fun, non-threatening challenge. And that seems to be counteracting the trigger for depression when it comes to approaching my fiction.

NH: *Do you have anything else you would like to share about depression?*

Be patient with yourself in all the right ways. The loving kindness, the compassion and understanding that you would bestow to others you should also gift to yourself. At the same time, to the very best of your ability, train yourself against allowing any slides into negatives. That’s the most difficult thing,

Additional Resources about Depression:

<http://www.elizabethmoon.com/writer-depression.htm> (Writer Elizabeth Moon discusses depression)

http://www.healthyplace.com/COMMUNITIES/depression/major_depression.asp

<http://depression.about.com/cs/amidepressed/a/sadness.htm> (Addresses the difference between depression and sadness)

<http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/lookforthesigns/clinicaldepression.shtml>

<http://bipolarwellness.blogspot.com/> (Blog of Susan Bernard who has survived 120 bipolar depressions)

<http://everything2.com/e2node/Suicide%2520is%2520a%2520permanent%2520solution%2520to%2520a%2520permanent%2520problem.>) (by Gary Braunbeck, in which he addresses suicide in general and the suicide of Bill Relling, Jr., in particular.)

Print Resources:

Otto Rank: *Art and Artist: Creative Urge and Personality Development*

Eric Maisel: *The Van Gogh Blues: The Creative Person’s Path through Depression*

Sarah Susanka: *The Not So Big Life: Making Room for What Really Matters*

Courtesy of Tim Waggoner, www.timwaggoner.com: Eric Maisel is a therapist/creativity expert who specializes in working with creative people. His book *Living the Writing Life* (which I highly recommend) deals with the mental and emotional challenges writers face. His website is www.ericmaisel.com. Janet Piirto is another psychologist who specializes in creativity theory. Her book *My Teeming Brain: Understanding Creative Writers* is another reference I highly recommend. The book contains an interesting chart that lists poets and writers who suffered from depression or manic-depression.

but, if you can manage it, the most helpful counter to depression. Refuse the cloud entry. Use any tool you can to do this: humor, bustle, activity, people, outrage, nerve, whatever. Cultivate a f**king huge ego, even if it's a character in and of itself that you have to create. Even if you create a monster, that monster is better and more manageable than depression once it sinks its teeth deep.

NH: *Do you think writers and other creative people are more prone to depression? If so, why?*

The only thing I can think of that would leave creative people more open to depression is this: creative people produce something that is so utterly connected with ourselves that we often can't separate the connection between that thing's success and our own worth. We must then send that precious piece of ourselves that we've created out to be judged, one way or the other—by critics who judge the work directly, and buyers who judge indirectly by choosing or not choosing our work to purchase. Then there are agents, editors, distributors, all of whom judge the work as well—whether it's "good enough" to represent, to buy, to invest in. Separating that work from our egos is very difficult, and not being able to separate it at all leaves us vulnerable.

Success in the creative arts is so rarely based on actual quality that this is a dangerous connection to cling to—our own worth as it is connected to the "worth" of our work once it is sent out to the field of judgment. For emotional reasons alone it would be a dangerous connection to continue to make. But for professional reasons, the practicality of that connection is questionable. We all know that becoming a bestseller can be the result of doing quality work on a continuing basis. But it can just as easily be luck: being in the right place with exactly the right thing for precisely the right audience to have a particular piece resonate wildly for a large number of people. If there was any rational basis for this at all, publishers would have found its trigger long ago. We shouldn't expect it of ourselves. And if anyone finds a way to actually DO that, please let me know... :-) I'm trying, but finding it deucedly difficult to do...

End of Part I

Nancy Holder writes a monthly book review column for the American edition of Fantastique Magazine. Please have your publishers send your ARCs to her. www.nancyholder.com; nancyholder@san.rr.com.

