THE BAG OF Holding

BY NANCY HOLDER

Writers & Depression (Part 2)

*(**Editor's Note:** Due to space limitations, the first part of Nancy's column ran in issue #180 of the Bulletin.)*

From Terri Osborne, dark fantasy and science fiction author:

...I probably had the neurochemical imbalance from birth, at least that's what my psychiatrist has determined.

....I was expected to be the best at everything I tried...That pressure, combined with an unmanaged anxiety disorder, caused me to fall into habits of setting ridiculously high goals for myself, which I couldn't always live up to. And when I couldn't live up to them, I'd get depressed by the failure, without realizing that I was setting myself up for it in the first place. But I couldn't break the habit of the unreasonable expectations on myself. I'm still fighting that even after about 3 years of treatment.

According to my doctor, this is a common cycle for people with both anxiety and depression.

I guess it could be said that it affected my work by just making it darker overall. All of my tie-in work deals in some way with the darker aspects of life. Death, fear, danger, pain, psychological trauma, being forced to deal with less-palatable parts of yourself that you don't want to acknowledge are there, I really have always gravitated toward these things in my writing. I believe that's a result of the depression. But my creative brain is just more comfortable working in those thematic areas.

NH: Did you do something about it? What did you do? Did it work?

Yes, but it took a long time for me to get my butt in gear.

...I've gone through medications over the years thanks to my body adjusting to them, but I'm still on an antidepressant/anti-anxiety combination that has literally changed my life.

Occasionally, I'll still have a bout of mood swings that could knock over buildings, but that's mostly either hormonal or seriously stress-induced. I'm still learning how to properly deal with stress and the anxiety disorder. Medication only goes so far. I'm also undergoing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which is helping me to dissect the "bad thoughts" that keep me in this vicious cycle and will, I hope, lead to disarming it completely.

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

The stigma associated with admitting that you may have a mental illness is one that is just killing people, IMO.

People should never be afraid to go to the doctor if something is wrong with them, and that includes if something is wrong with your brain. Your brain is a part of your body just like your heart or your lungs. If either of those were injured, or gave you problems, you'd see a doctor, right? If your brain is giving you problems like depression, see a doctor. You have nothing to be afraid of, and everything to gain.

If you need medication, you shouldn't be afraid of it. It won't change who you are. It'll remove the obstacles to being who you are. I'm still the same person I was before the diagnosis, but now I'm getting out of bed in the morning for more reasons than because I have to go to work to make sure the bills get paid.

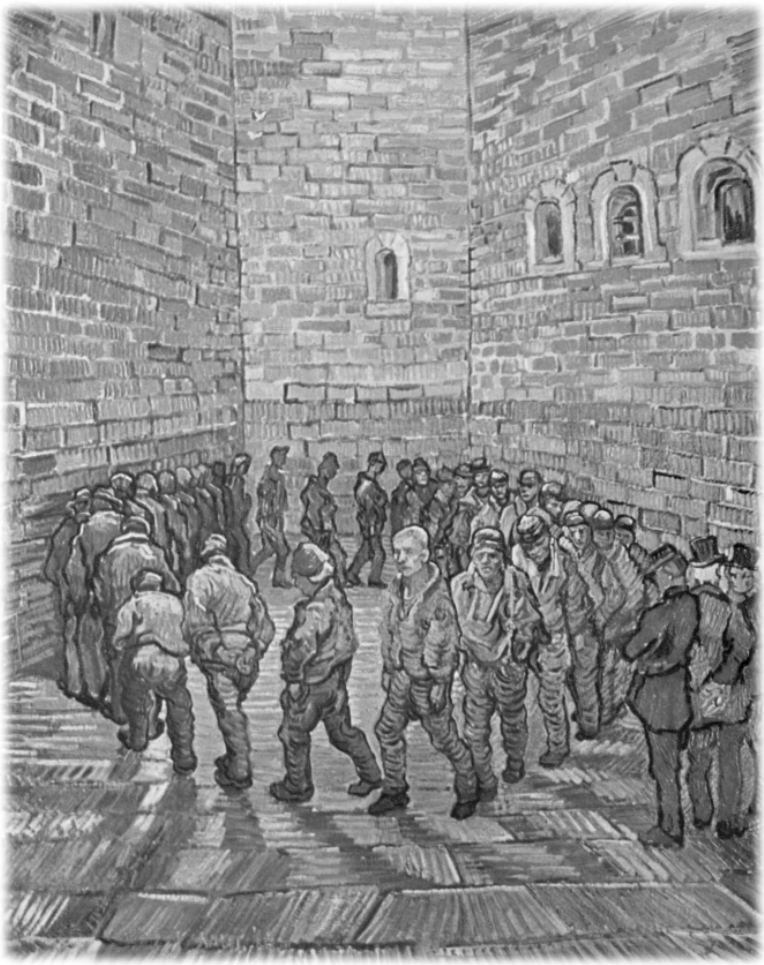
Depression is something that makes you look at the world and your place in it from a different perspective. There are so many studies that state that repressed creativity can lead to depression. For women, creativity was something to be frowned upon for so long that the repression, the "be a good little girl and be just like everyone else" thing just drags the creative mind into the doldrums. And if you're already looking at a neurochemical issue, then you're going to stay in the doldrums, and you're going to be more prone to depression.

I wonder if all people with depressive disorders are very introspective. I was an only child of a single mother with depres-

sion. I grew up inside my own head, and basically had to be the adult in the family from a very young age. My formative years were spent learning how to entertain myself. Making up stories was one way to do that. It was my way to not be bored. Boredom led to the depression, and even as a child I knew that was a bad thing.

From Mike Jasper, author of the contemporary fantasy, A Gathering of Doorways*:*

It lasted about a year or so, and I had issues with my wife as well as a lot of unhappiness at my day job—I did only the bare minimum at work, just sliding by. I was also very jealous of my wife, who had quit her job to go back to grad school, so I was the sole bread-winner in the household. I know I couldn't have been very fun to be around during these times. I ended up quitting one job that I hated, without giving any notice, and with no job lined up. I also tended to drink alcohol more.



I still struggle with it, thought it's not as bad now ever since we had kids—I don't have time to get depressed! My biggest struggle is with the sense that I could be a better fiction writer if I didn't have to work a full-time job as a tech writer. At some point, my plan is to cut back to part-time work so I can write more novels.... At some point...!

I think writers are probably more prone to depression, simply because they are pulled in so many directions at once, and they live inside their heads so much. Also, writers have to motivate themselves to write so much, that there's no one else to blame if it doesn't get done. So there's a lot of frustration in the act of creating—whether it's lack of time, lack of energy, external forces preventing you from writing or being creative—that it's a wonder any of us writers are happy at all!

From a fantasy writer:

> Clinical depression is a verifiable medical condition. Most commonly it's caused by a low level of serotonin in the brain. That in turn can be caused by many things, overall health, drugs or other substance abuse, stress, sleeping disorder, and other less common causes. A good diagnosis can find the cause and address that while treating the depression symptoms.
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> It cost me a marriage. A fair amount of work. Serious debt, and troubles with the IRS because of my inability to stay focused on work at times and falling behind on payments. As stated above, acute for 4 years, overall eleven years. Now, the nice thing about clinical depression is that in middle age, once you get rid of it, it's gone.
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> I think there's a romance of the "tortured artists" that a lot of writers enjoy working, but if we are, it may be because we have less social contact during the work day than other people. But that's speculation. Depression can strike just about anyone, at any age.

From Judy Gill, with e-reprints of some of her older paperbacks available at www.belgravehouse.com along with a couple of electronic originals there and with awe-struckbooks.net.

...My husband and I were scheduled to go on a three-week long boating vacation. I was convinced he was going to somehow push me overboard way off shore in cold, northern waters and pretend I had fallen from the boat and he didn't notice until it was too late. There was no basis for this fear. In my heart I knew it. In my gut, I was terrified. That was when I realized I needed help and went to my doctor.

NH: How did it affect you?

I could go to sleep about the normal time at night, then wake up at around two AM with terrible thoughts in my head (about the boat trip), or wake screaming from bad dreams. Could not go back to sleep. Got up and played Solitaire on the computer and cried while doing so till around 6, then went back to sleep for a few hours. Took long walks on the beach and cried. Sat at my keyboard and stared at the screen and cried.

NH: How long did it last?

About four months before I finally went to my doctor and described the symptoms. [She went on medication and it resolved her symptoms. She also discovered that she had been only using the top one-third of her lung capacity because her chest was so tight.]

If you have symptoms similar to any of the above, get help! It's there, so take it. There is no stigma attached to clinical depression. It does not mean you are crazy (just acting and thinking crazy). It's because your brain in not using serotonin the way it should. Medication can take care of that problem....A note here about the many different kinds of antidepressants there are. If you are taking a particular kind, it is dangerous to switch to a different kind without discussing it fully with your doctor because there are two different protocols used to treat clinical depression. I was lucky and the first one prescribed did the trick for me.

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

I do think so, because I've seen it in so many writers, artists, musicians, and because the shrink says it is so. It was, I believe, the Ninc Conference in Atlanta, GA, that was dubbed "Prozac on Parade" when I realized I was not alone with this debilitating condition, that probably half the people in one particular session where the subject came up were suffering to one degree or another with depression. It was very enlightening. As to why creative people get depressed, I hope your article explores that aspect of it and you'll explain it. I've wondered if it's because we have vivid imaginations that won't shut off. I've heard other people say taking antidepressants has killed their creativity. What I take gave me my creativity back. I am grateful.

From another writer who prefers to remain anonymous:

> When I'm depressed I have to figure the story out by logic, rather than just writing it to see what happens—which is what I prefer to do. But, that's just no fun when I'm depressed; nothing's fun when I'm depressed.
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> ...I got *really good* at maintaining an "everything's good, everything's fine" facade. Part of this is the nature of the disease—you don't want people to see the blood on the water when you're vulnerable, stupid and slow....[H]ave at least one person to whom you always tell the truth, no matter how painful or foolish. That person is your guide to brighter days, and may possibly (Goddess forefend) be called upon to be your lifeline—so choose well.
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> What I think is that people who are in jobs or life situations that require them to Actually Look At Things—musicians, artists, and writers, yes, but also police officers, psychologists, social workers—are more prone to depression that people whose lives provide them with a certain level of buffering, where they can avert their eyes, and think about something not so scary.

From another author who prefers to remain anonymous:

> I think it's important to recognize there are different kinds of depression, and the kind that arises from outside events WILL pass eventually. If you're dealing with chronic depression, then you do need to look at changing fundamental things in your life, whether it's your diet or taking medication.
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> The insidious thing about depression, though, is that often you don't know you're suffering from it, so you don't do anything about it, and by the time you realize what it is you don't care whether anything changes or not. You're sitting at the bottom of the well and you don't feel that it matters whether you climb out. That's why it's important to make sure—BEFORE you hit bottom—that you have people around you who can tell you you're falling. They can help, but when it comes right down to it they can't catch you. You have to catch yourself. You have to recognize the problem, take the walk, take the pill, and at some point open an empty file and fill it up with words again.

From another writer who prefers to remain anonymous:

> I am dealing occasionally with depression stemming from the Neuroborelliosis. I qualify that because insomnia and arthritis, for example, are caused in different ways for people with Lyme. I handled it with supplements until I hit the fourth year of drugs. Then I kinda lost interest for a while. I'm keeping most of the info away from fans (AND editors!) until I finish and sell a couple of books. So people know I have my creativity back. When I was first treated, it took six months for the creative impulse to resurface.

From Sylvia Kelso, author of Amberlight*:*

....[I] hardly noticed when the heavy black phases started to lighten, but more experience later, running during writing my PhD, taught me that running, endorphins or just distraction, was also a good time for thinking out things.

I don't do so well on that now after an injury that makes running more like hard work than thinking time, but the endorphin effect remains.

Also, ironically, I found a self-steering quiz in a woman's magazine. Answered questions about, what do you want from life? I answered happiness, found one further question on the details of that whose answer for me was: "Get on with the (historical) novel you've had hanging over you for the last 15 years." Which meant a major life change decision: going overseas for research. Whiz. Writing it was down was like getting on a conveyor belt. Without even consciously knowing it I found myself saving money and taking the trip as a given. And I did go.

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

From Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff:

....[D]epression differs from just being "down" in that it feels as if it's being imposed from outside, it results in a very physical sensation of someone having attached a lead weight to my heart, and it is recognizable by the fact that thinking about things that usually cheer me up, doesn't. Thoughts of raindrops on roses or words on paper don't make me feel better—they actually make me feel worse.

[T]he discipline of keeping to a schedule for both physical and spiritual "exercise" helps pull the mind out of the doldrums. It creates a sense of forward momentum. This was important to me because the single greatest symptom of depression for me is a sense of inertia, of being stuck in time.

I think it's important to recognize that it's not all in your head. There is a purely physical component to it that can be exacerbated by environment—not enough light, or exercise, or vitamins, for example. (I had a friend who discovered he had a mold allergy that kindled the physical symptoms of depression.)

....For me, it was also helpful to remember a piece of Baha'i scripture that says essentially that the sicknesses of the body and mind do not affect the soul or spirit. It gives the analogy of a cloud that interposes itself between the earth (the body) and the Sun (the soul). The cloud only blocks the light, it doesn't do anything to the sun. I found that mental image very helpful in reminding myself that clouds pass. And that they have silver linings. I can write about depressed and bipolar characters with some authority and I find that I do write about them a lot as I strive to understand the disease.

Having read all of Kate Redfield Jamison's books on the subject (her *Touched by Fire* is a study of this very subject) I'm still not certain which came first, the depression or the creativity. Jamison looks at the James family (Henry James and his father and brother) as an indicator that depression–bipolarism exists on a continuum. All three men were creative, but the father's creativity was sabotaged by his disorder; Henry's made pursuing his muse a challenge but afforded him moments of great brilliance, and his brother was simply very bright and very creative with none of the symptoms of depression. Dr. Jamison conjectures that perhaps the same forces that make someone creative make them prone to depression or manic depression as well.

It's also possible that the very fact that one is inclined to the sort of introspection and observation necessary to a writer also inclines one to be more sensitive to the emotional dynamics of life. And writers (and other artists) are particularly vulnerable. After all we open ourselves up to critique and censure. We meet frequent rejection for what to many of us is the fruit of our deepest internal processes and beliefs. More than people who are not artists, we invite folks to reject us or accept us every day. Imagine a secretary whose boss rejected fifty percent of her output in emotional terms or simply said, "This isn't for me" or "It's not original enough" or "It's too weird" or the sorts of words we hear all the time. Perhaps secretaries would also seem prone to depression as a group if that were their lot in life and if they felt the fruits of their labor were reflective of their inner being.

From author Amy Sterling Casil:

I have a seasonal problem, where I am basically not as happy or productive for the winter season, every year, and it was growing progressively worse until I got treated for PTSD! Last winter, it did not happen...[and] may not happen this year, because I am taking a low dosage of Wellbutrin due to the PTSD.

I tried to exercise more diligently, and I tried to get out in the sun as much as possible, and those things did help. Over the holidays, when these things get worse for everyone, if I was able to do those things, I felt much better and more active.

People must go for help. If they feel a medication isn't working or is even making them worse, they must insist that their physicians change it. Regular physicians can even help, though psychiatrists usually know much more about medications and how they should work....All medications do not work for all people, but those with depression should keep trying to find the right combination and medication for them. Living with depression is not worth it.

My mother, who designed Mr. Magoo, was an incredibly creative and talented artist, and from talking to those who knew her, it is obvious that she and I share similar depressive tendencies. Depression runs in my family, as does rheumatoid arthritis. I think that creative traits are often inherited, and with them can come things like a tendency toward depression.

From author Kathe Koja:

...[W]e [writers and other creative people] think too much. We analyze, we overanalyze, we delve, we examine. Which is great for fiction, but in real life, where the control factor is so very much lower, it can be problematic, to say the least.

On the other hand, the examined life *is* the only one worth living. No matter what may come next in the great Tilt-a-Whirl of existence, while we live it, this is *the* only life. Eyes open, you'll see more sad stuff, bad stuff, stuff that hurts. But eyes closed is blind, and then you die.

Just another cheerful perspective from another cheerfully depressed writer.

From Dave Wolverton AKA David Farland, author of Wyrmling Horde*:*

In my worst episode I was unable to work for nearly two years. I first got it at the age of thirteen, and was manic depressive until I was about 23. That went away, and I became severely depressed again about eight years ago. That lasted for a couple of years. I was deeply suicidal for a time. Now I'm recovering, but it still comes and goes.

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It turns out that men don't usually need more serotonin when they're depressed, they need dopamine. I stayed on [Wellbutrin] for about a year.

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

Yes, my son went on Prozac and became deeply suicidal as a teen, and he also became increasingly violent and dangerous to others. I had to put him in a mental hospital for several weeks. I spoke to his psychiatrist about this "side effect." The drug companies list it as a "possible side effect," so I asked how often it occurs in teens. The answer was 100% of the time.

I'd like to warn others that this isn't just a possible side effect, it's a very dangerous and scary situation.

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

Statistically the answer is obviously yes. Studies show a strong correlation. I believe that the answer has to do with why we write. People write from a desire to communicate powerfully, more powerfully than words alone can convey. And people who are depressed, people who are suffering, have a stronger need to get their emotions on the table. So they write, or paint, or sing. Hence, it isn't the art that leads us to depression, it's the depression that leads to our art.

From another author:

Somehow, I stumbled upon the information that vitamin B helped with depression. I started taking it and the worst of my symptoms vanished and have never come back. A few years after that I started exercising regularly and that caused another dramatic improvement. Then I found out that there was such a thing as SAD and now I use a light box in the wintertime (I'm sitting in front of it as I type this) and that has kept me mostly sane even in January. :) Three years ago I began practicing Zen meditation and that is also very helpful. I should add that I have seen a therapist off and on for many years. Though not as obvious in its effect, that kind of support was also instrumental in that it gave me tools for coping and communicating that I had lacked.

There's situational depression and depression that is the result of biochemistry. But situational depression (for instance, you just lost your job) can lead to a prolonged state of depression that perpetuates itself even when the external factors are alleviated. The times in my life when I have been most depressed were not, by far, the times during which I had the most external troubles. By the time most of my family passed on within a five year time span, I had trained my body to produce more of the brain chemicals that combat depression, so even though that was one of the most emotionally painful times in my life, I did not become depressed.

From an LA author:

Sometimes it stops me from working because of the self-doubt. Sometimes it causes me to work because I'm so angry that the only thing I can do is write....Sometimes the depression prevents me from writing altogether because everything that occurs to be seems to be a terrible idea. Sometimes I'm so upset that it doesn't matter if it's a terrible idea, and I can be creative.

I think writers are more prone to being *aware* that they are depressed. I think writers are more prone to self-examination, so they more readily identify their depression. I'm not sure we're more depressed as a group, but we're more conscious as a group of being depressed.

From Elizabeth Massie, author of Sineater, Homeplace, Shadow Dreams:

Sometimes it has made work agonizing, slow, and joyless. It makes me think I'll never get where I hoped to be as a writer. It makes me look at other writers' successes not with jealous exactly but with a sense of defeat.

One depression I experienced was during a time I was struggling as a new full time writer, trying to make enough money to survive living alone. It was then my sister died from cancer. I was prescribed Zoloft and it helped clear away the cocoon I felt I was trapped inside. Now when depression occurs I am lucky enough to have a freelance significant other who totally understands and is supportive and encouraging. I go outside and take walks in the country or mountains and pray a lot.

[Depression] doesn't have to be life-threatening even though it might feel like it. Being able to reach out for help is critical - whether help from a doctor, a friend, a group, a loved one, or the Divine. And if we're too lethargic to reach out, to at least ask someone to reach out on our behalf.

[Depression] is WAY more prevalent than most people are aware of. Ever since being diagnosed, I've discussed this with others and have discovered so many people suffering from it. If you think you're depressed, talk to a doctor.

NH: Do you think writers and other creative people are more prone to depression?

Could be. Creative people tend to be driven, optimistic, or both. In this world where everything changes so fast that what people want alters from minute to minute, the person in the creative arts...writing, visual arts, music...finds that what they were born to do and what they fashion to offer the world can be dismissed with the flick of a corporate hand or at the whim of a critic or "the market." We are highly vulnerable. We put ourselves out there, and we put our "children" out there. We put our love and hopes and dreams into our creations and often it comes to naught. Yet we keep on, because that is who we are. Occasional depression seems inevitable.

From Maria Lima, author of the Blood Lines series:

[Depression] is WAY more prevalent than most people are aware of. Ever since being diagnosed, I've discussed this with others and have discovered so many people suffering from it. If you think you're depressed, talk to a doctor.

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

The thought has crossed my mind, especially after discovering so many of my writer friends suffer, too. I don't know if we're more prone to it, but I think that the symptoms of depression can be more devastating for creative folks. We tend to be more in tune with the world, with ourselves in many ways, which is why we can create, but that can be a two-edged sword, since depression exacerbates the negative. Those of us with a detail eye on the world can see too much and, thus, I believe, be affected more. (of course, this is totally my theory.)

From Donna Andrews, NYT Bestselling author of Six Geese a-Slaying*:*

One fall in the mid-90s (I could figure out the year if I really tried; probably around '94 or '95) I was Spike sitting—babysitting the mostly chihuahua dog who eventually inspired the dog in my series with St. Martins. I had a long talk on the phone with my brother, then working on his masters in psychology, and happened to mention that I thought Spike was depressed because he missed his owners. He read me the eleven signs of clinical depression, and with much laughter we diagnosed Spike as suffering from at least eight of them and agreed that I should keep him away from sharp objects.

Flash forward a few months and one day depression hit me. Very suddenly; at least the realization—it had probably been building for a while. Luckily I remembered the eleven signs and got myself to a therapist. What I came to realize, with her help, was that I had been gradually becoming more and more unhappy about the direction my life was taking. I still self-defined as a writer, but I wasn't published and I wasn't even writing much. I realized that I either needed to come to terms with not writing or make some changes in my life to give writing a priority. I chose the second option, and it literally changed my life. In 1997 I submitted the completed draft of *Murder with Peacocks* to the Malice Domestic/St. Martins Press contest, in spring 1998 I found out I'd won, and in January 1999 the first book came out. I'm working on #15 now.

The episode of depression was absolutely the most painful thing I have ever experienced in my life, and I hope I never go through anything quite like it, but I'm glad I went through it because what I gained was so important. I'm now working full time at what I always wanted to do.

I asked my brother once if working with people who were depressed or had other serious psychological problems wasn't itself depressing. He said no, because by the time people came to him for therapy, they'd already made the decision that they wanted to get well, and it was a very positive thing, helping them do that.

Returning to Maisel, who discusses *The Price of Greatness*, by psychiatrist Arnold Ludwig. Ludwig studied "a thousand eminent 20th century figures" (Maisel, 4) and found that one hundred percent of creative people will experience a depressive episode. However, four of my writer respondents told me that they had never been depressed in their lives, and never expected to be. One told me that she had observed a number of disorders in her two writing groups, ranging from bipolar to autism. Another was occasionally "very frustrated" by the publishing industry, and wondered if some people described their frustration as depression. My third respondent owns a bookstore, and my fourth works in a bookstore. I'm not sure what Ludwig and Maisel would make of that, but I envy them. And I wish them, and you, peace and serenity during the holidays.

End of Part 2

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.*