



HOW DO I WRITE?

by Kelly Jones
January-February 2007

I didn't grow up dreaming of being a writer. I wanted to be an artist. When I was in grade school my mom signed me up for a painting class. It was held in an old brick building at a city park where, during the summer, high school students taught arts and crafts to kids who didn't have anything better to do. But this was winter, and serious art. Oil Painting. Early on Saturday, my mom drove me to the park, and left me off in a world where I could create my own world. I remember how cold it was inside, the furnace sputtering away. I loved the scent of the old building, the sound of the creaky wooden floor. But mostly I loved the smell of the paint, linseed oil, and turpentine, the old-fashioned kind before it became *odorless*. It's almost embarrassing to admit what a creative turn-on that turpentine was. The blank canvas awaiting me was both frightening and exciting.

It wasn't until I was in college that I recognized I wasn't really an artist. I spent my junior year in Florence, Italy, browsing in museums, studying the masterpieces of the Renaissance, and conceded that I needed to reexamine my goals. I tallied up credits, reworked my schedule and graduated with an English major, my art moved to a minor.

Years later I took a creative writing class, wrote my first fiction, and realized I'd already learned the basics of writing in that long-ago painting class. I'd learned that the

sky isn't blue, but a mixture of white and cerulean with a touch of alizarin crimson or burnt umber or maybe white with Prussian blue or lemon yellow, or so many other possibilities. I learned that a picture can take on a whole new meaning and look, depending on the perspective and point of view. And I learned that I write like a painter. Always in oils.

I try to avoid the cliché—painting pictures with words—because we writers hate the trite, and also because this makes it sound so easy. It doesn't describe the anguish, the fear of the blank canvas—now in the form of a computer screen. It gives no hint of outlines, undercoats, of cutting, and deleting, of scraping off words like paint with a palette knife. It doesn't tell how you can't get away from it, how the pictures are always popping up in your head no matter where you are, how you're scribbling on coffee shop napkins, envelope flaps, and old receipts. Artist's sketches in words. And it doesn't express the pure pleasure of that last draft, adding the final small brush strokes to make the story come to life.

I remember an old trick I learned years ago. If you mix up a big batch of paint on the palette and don't use it, stick it in the freezer, thaw it out and use it later. I do that with words too, those that seem perfect at the time, but don't quite work for the story. But I can't let them go. So I put them into the freezer. I give them a name—*the freezer file*, *leftovers*, *extra paint file*. It makes me feel better to stash them away. Maybe someday I'll thaw them out and use them. Maybe not.

I move on to another blank canvas, feeling that familiar fear and exhilaration.

How do I write? I write like a painter. Always in oils. Sometimes I can even smell the turpentine.

Kelly Jones is the author of two novels, *The Seventh Unicorn* (Berkley Books/Penguin Group, 2005) and *The Lost Madonna*, which will be released by Berkley in February 2007. She lives in Boise. Visit her website at www.kellyjonesbooks.com .