

Writer's insomnia – or the 3:30 a.m. muse wake-up call

3:30 a.m.: I'm awake, wide awake. The beginning of the next scene is coming to me. Actually it's already here, fully formed. I can see it like a movie in my head complete with dialogue. Just like in real conversation, my characters don't repeat themselves, and the I know from past experience that the film won't run for long, so it's up to me to catch it all while it happens. If I don't, it's gone. Dang it.

Not because I've got a fully formed scene (that's great), but because it's 3:30 in the a.m. and I know I won't be able to go back to sleep after I write that scene down. Once my writing brain is firing on all cylinders, it doesn't care what time it is. Though I really can't complain when it happens. *If* it's productive. Anything that gets me closer to the end of a book with a scene I just couldn't quite reach during the daylight hours is good.

But sometimes it's not productive. If I wake up at 3:30 with my heart beating faster than normal and my first coherent thoughts are: "The book sucks. My career is over." *That's* when it's not productive. For me and a lot of writers I know, if my work in progress is giving me trouble during the day, then it's highly unlikely that I'll wake up at 3:30 thinking warm and fuzzy book thoughts.

I have yet to come up with a solution to a book problem at 3:30, but that doesn't keep my muse's evil twin, the Anti-Muse, from waking me up and trying to make me do it. For me, book problems are solved in the calm, rational light of day—3:30 in the morning is neither calm nor rational.

When I'm finishing a book, it's normal for me to get both types of wake-up calls. It's usually at its worst when I only have a few chapters left. The Anti-Muse kicks me awake and wants me to start revising the previous twenty chapters, to wrap my head around the whole book, find the weaknesses, faulty spots—basically the good, the bad, and the ugly. And once I think that one book-related thought, she's won and I'm awake for the rest of the night.

Yes, there may be (okay, probably are) some problems with the book, but they're not nearly as bad as the Anti-Muse makes them out to be; in fact, they're probably pretty minor. But at 3:30, my defenses aren't up, and the Anti-Muse gets in.

But those mornings when my characters come knocking makes up for all of it. Dialogue comes fast and furious. I have no idea where it fits in the book. I just go with it. So I grope around for the mini-flashlight, notepad and pen I keep in my bedside table and start eavesdropping and taking dictation. For a writer, this is when the magic happens. And it's this kind of wake-up call that assures me that the book doesn't suck, my career is not over.

And sleep is way overrated.