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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

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## Real Work

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Panel: Real Work

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## Real Work

It is natural to find that the breadth of our experience informs the content of our writing. Our identities, our ascribed social categories of race, gender, and social class, get into our writing. Our past experiences and upbringing as children, and especially our current lifestyles, inevitably influence our creative pieces. For example, the characters and the stories created by Ernest Hemingway show a close parallel to his own life. His experience influenced the content of his fiction. The same goes for our Malay authors and poets, like Mohd Latif Muhammad, Masuri SN, Rasiah Halil and Hamed Ismail. This is in line with the notion of “write what you know,” the most common piece of advice given to young writers. It is commonly said: “Write what you know because only you can tell that story.” The slogan has become accepted wisdom. But like all received wisdom, it is true only to a point.

We cannot deny that personal experience is essential in writing. Experience is used as a structure to form a story in fiction. From our experience, we pick up details to evoke a place and the people who appear in the story. However, our writing should not only be confined to our direct personal experience. A straightforward recounting of the experience would merely confirm what reader and author already know. It could hinder creativity. Experience is not a permanent structure—it is more like scaffolding that could be torn down once the work has been completed.

My two beloved daughters used to watch the television dramas I wrote. Every time, after watching my dramas, they always had this question: “Mama, we know you didn’t go through the kind of life depicted in the drama. So how can you write all that?” I don’t have the answer. But I know I have done it. What we know isn’t always what we see around us. It is not just the material life that we know. We know a lot more than that. We know what makes us sad. We know how we feel when we are sad. We know what to do when we are sad. It is this knowledge that we draw upon to make our stories believable to others.

Elan Barnehama wrote a novel entitled *Finding Bluefield*, whose two main characters are lesbians. It puzzles people because he is not a lesbian. He is not a woman. And he is not even gay. He admitted that it was not always easy to write something you do not know. But he learned to trust his characters. He engaged with the characters. But the question is, how? Empathy is the channel through which writers can most assuredly connect with their characters. Empathy is significant. When personal experience constrains a story up to a point of dullness, then empathy will sharpen and emancipate it. When the writers empathize with the characters and trust the characters, the characters will decide what must happen. The story will develop by itself. The writer will give himself the chance to stumble upon the unexpected truth and the accidental truth. At the end of the day, the writer will tell the story truth, which is so much more interesting than memory truth.

We often hear that to write without experience is akin to walking around like a blind man without a walking stick. But experience is not eternal. Deep experience in one thing could be irrelevant tomorrow. Then where are you? The best inventions and creations that have evolved over time did not come about because of experience, but rather because of imagination. Imagination explores all the possibilities and paths. She opens up new doors and moves the world forward. With imagination, writers end up writing what they do not know.

Experience and Imagination are both essential traits and are very much intertwined.

Without Experience you are blind.

You are tapping in the dark.

Without Imagination you become a craftsman.

You are so focused on the tree that you miss the forest behind it.

Whatever it is, with or without Experience or Imagination, writers will always write with their hearts.