

Writing Green

Forget Ed Begley, Jr. -- writers are the greenest of the green.

You want to talk recycling? We recycle everything. Good, bad, imaginary - it doesn't matter. Nothing gets thrown away.

A few years back I was preparing to leave on a trip. I had a few things that needed to go out in the mail. So I stopped at the corner mailbox on the way to the airport. Pulled back the lid and tossed the envelopes in.

As the items slid into the maw of the U.S. Postal Service, I saw that they included the blue one that held my plane ticket.

I grabbed. Actually touched one of the envelopes. Not the blue one. It dropped like a rock. I heard it hit bottom.

Before the lid slapped closed, however, the thought rose up: *I can use this in a book someday.*

I haven't. Yet. (But the incident's still mine, you hear that all you writers - mine! Keep your recycling paws off it!)

Which raises another point. Writers are such ardent recyclers that we will on occasion, ahem, borrow other people's childhoods, names, pets, histories, virtues and awful blind dates.

A friend was telling me about her worst-ever blind date. I'm not giving away the details, but I'll share that the date involved a tiny water craft and the unexpected arrival of an unwelcome visitor.

As any friend would, I expressed my dismay for her. I hardly had out my second "how awful" when to my astonishment, she grabbed my arm and got in my face. "I know that look. Get that look off your face," she said.

"What look?"

"That glassy-eyed I-can-use-this-in-a-book-someday look. Don't you dare. Do you hear me? Don't you dare!"

I swear, I truly wasn't planning to use it. Then. But once she brought it up . . . Ever since, it's sat there among my recyclables, enticing me. And surely there's a statute of limitations on a writer not using even the worst-blind-date-ever, right?

(Just remember, the incident's still mine, you hear that all you writers - mine! Keep your recycling paws off it!)

An elderly man said to me in a pub in County Donegal, "Ireland's greatest export has always been its youth," and the images and thoughts that stirred became A NEW WORLD. A sign in a Wyoming museum gave only a first initial for one of the pioneer ranchers, and that went into the "What if" recycling bin and became WIDOW WOMAN. A song lyric came in through my ears, sat around a while, then came out as the backstory for AT THE HEART'S COMMAND.

No question, the best recyclers ever.

And, we add another layer of green, so to speak. Because, not only do we recycle, we compost.

Christmas letter had produced some good results, even beyond the above-mentioned Everything and anything that doesn't get recycled as a recognizable scene, event, character trait, piece of dialogue, theme, or other tidbit gets added into the compost pile most of us have been keeping (knowingly or not) since birth.

My sister-in-law has known me since I was in first grade. After she read my second book, which was set in my dad's home town of Gloucester, Mass., a place where we'd all attended several family reunions, she said, "Now, I understand all those details you always paid such attention to. You were storing them up to describe this setting. But you moved things around, too."

Exactly. Because this wasn't a straight recycling job. The details - many gathered long before I thought to write that story -- had gone through the writer's composting process.

Start with a hodgepodge of shredded green details, mix them together in a bin, add some shredded paper to provide the necessary browns, keep moist with regular applications of water (or Tab or wine, in my case) and let nature work its magic.

From my first visit to Gloucester as a child through the various family reunions, I picked up the sensory details, the feel and rhythms of the place. Those mixed in with that gentleman in the Irish pub and, as the composters say, then I let it cook. The result was a fertile soil to plant that particular story, which became A New World.

The compost for my Winter Olympics-set THE GAMES no doubt started with childhood watching of Olympic drama, including Jean-Claude Killy's neck-or-nothing downhill and Peggy Fleming's ice skating gold. Add in years of covering athletes, seeing what was required of those who became Olympic-bound. More years of editing vast numbers of stories on the Winter Olympics and their sports. All cooking away together over time before a final infusion of rich interviews with a score of Olympians.

But it wasn't just Olympic compost that became the soil for THE GAMES. It was a voice heard here, an exchange of looks seen there, an attitude observed from afar.

Because the great thing about compost is it all tumbles together, producing a rich, organic mix.

The key is to keep tossing in a wide variety of material. Because each story requires different - and often unexpected -- nutrients.

So you can count on writers remaining ever green - recycling and composting as we go.