

# KIRSTY MURRAY

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## KEEPING FAITH

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You've done a fabulous job on your new story. You've got it all down, the hero, the action paced-adventure, every perfect word of the best story you've ever written. You know it's prize-winning material. And then, suddenly, inexplicably, the screen goes black and your stomach knots. You've lost it. The whole story. If only you'd saved it! Or perhaps you did press save but some major glitch in your computer has seen fit to wipe your work. Every last word of it.

It happens to everyone at some stage or another. The loss of a good piece of writing, for what ever reason, can drive you pretty low. Professionally and personally I had the chance to find exactly how low when, in August, 2003, I lost a full year's worth of writing.

It was a wet Tuesday evening in August, cold and black outside but very cosy in our living room. The final episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was showing on television and my teenagers and I were seriously addicted. We sat up late, turned the lights down low and settled ourselves on the couch for the conclusion of the series. We were half way through watching the end of the world as we know it when I heard the first mysterious thump.

'Hey guys, did you hear that?' I asked.

The team turned and scowled. 'Mum! Why do you have to get so paranoid when we watch *Buffy*. You always reckon you hear noises when we're watching this. Vampires aren't real. RELAX.'

I watched another scene but then, in the ad break, I couldn't help myself. Something wasn't right. I went down to the back of the house and looked out into the dark and wet back garden. The rain was falling in great sheets of water, obliterating my view of the bungalow in the back of the yard where I write during the day. The garden was pitch black. The kids were right. I *must* have been imagining it. Who could possibly be crazy enough to be thumping around in our back garden on a night like this? So I went back and watched the end of *Buffy* and saw Sunnydale fall into a big hole in the ground. The next morning, at 7.00 am, I discovered just how deep a dark hole can be.

When I first walked into the office I couldn't believe it. I rubbed my eyes, and looked again. The whole of my desk was swept clean. No computer, no printer, no CD rack, no cosy pile of discs that stored all my back-up copies of countless stories, articles and works in progress. Everything was bare. I shut my eyes again and, for a split second,

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tried to pretend I was dreaming. When I opened them, nothing had changed. We had been burgled. It wasn't vampires that had visited us during the dark hours, it was thieves. All my computer equipment was gone plus all the back up discs that contained twelve months worth of serious writing. Journals, research materials and two-thirds of my new novel, *Becoming Billy Dare*, had disappeared.

Luckily, the disaster occurred just a few days before Children's Book Week, a time when most children's authors are busy talking to kids about the ups and downs of being a writer. Having to pull myself together and meet all my commitments in schools and libraries gave me some breathing time before I had to face the empty desk again. By the time I sat down to begin writing again, it had become clear about what I needed to do. Despite the assistance of the police, appeals for help through the local newspapers, searching the local area in case the thieves had thrown something aside, and enquiring at pawn shops, nothing of the stolen equipment surfaced. I had to accept that the work was irretrievably lost.

It seemed a formidable task to rewrite what had been stolen. I had been working on an entire series of novels called *Children of the Wind*. *Becoming Billy Dare*, of which I'd lost two-thirds, was to be the second book in the series but I'd also lost sections of the third and fourth novel as well. My publishers were very sympathetic. They suggested that *Bridie's Fire*, the first title in the series which was just about to be released, could be a stand alone book if I felt I couldn't face rewriting everything that was lost. For a few days, I considered it, but once a story takes hold of you, it's not that easy to let go. Paddy Delaney, the main character in *Becoming Billy Dare* was like an old friend to me. I knew his story so intimately. How could I abandon him to the nether of unwritten stories? With the insurance claim processed and a new computer in front of me, I sat down and began the difficult process of rewriting the lost novel and in the process learnt a whole lot more about writing and the power of stories.

Starting at the beginning was much harder than I anticipated. It was depressing to have to simply rewrite missing chapters. Then I discovered a neat trick. Next time your computer crashes midway in a story and you lose what you've been working on, pretend that the story isn't lost. Pretend that it's still there and that, simply for the sake of the exercise, you're going to keep on writing the whole thing. That's what made re-entering *Becoming Billy Dare* less painful. I started at the point where I had left off on that wet August day before the computer was stolen and then wrote through to the end of the novel, all the while doggedly refusing to look back. When I reached the end of the story I circled around back to the beginning and rewrote everything that had been stolen. It was amazing how fresh most of the scenes were. By diving back into the centre of the story, I didn't get bogged down in the grief of

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losing the first half of it and by the time I came to rewrite those sections, I was firmly in the swing of the work again. Each time I reworked the draft, more of the missing material came back to me.

It's easy to become precious about creative work, to feel that once it is destroyed, it is lost forever. But believing the material evidence is that important diminishes the magic involved in creating any story. When oral story telling was the only means of passing down history, people carried stories in their hearts and minds. It's important for all writers to remember that, that what is inside you is far greater than any number of words on paper and that if you keep faith with your creative instinct, it can guide you to reproduce work that is lost through mishap or disaster.

Last December, when *Becoming Billy Dare* was finally released, I had the opportunity to thank the thieves that robbed me of a slice of my life. Every bad thing teaches you a lesson, if you're willing to learn it. What I discovered through the loss of those countless thousands of words, is that a good story is more than simply black ink on a page and that the story doesn't simply live on the paper. It lives inside you.

In the first few weeks after *Becoming Billy Dare* was stolen, I had many moments where I thought I'd never be able to rewrite the novel. But it was a story that refused to go away. It was so firmly embedded in my mind that when I drew deep breath and sat down to rewrite the adventures of Paddy Delaney and his friends, the words, the action, all Paddy's hopes and dreams came alive again beneath my fingers.

Any creative venture requires a measure of faith. As writers we have to believe in our hearts that our work is more than just a string of sentences on a scrap of paper. Backing up your work and storing it in multiple locations is probably a good habit to develop and one that I've learnt the hard way. More importantly, I've learnt that keeping faith in a story and your own ability to write that story down is one of the most valuable lessons a writer can learn.