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The Big Idea: Randee Dawn

– Posted on March 5, 2026 Posted by Athena Scalzi Leave a
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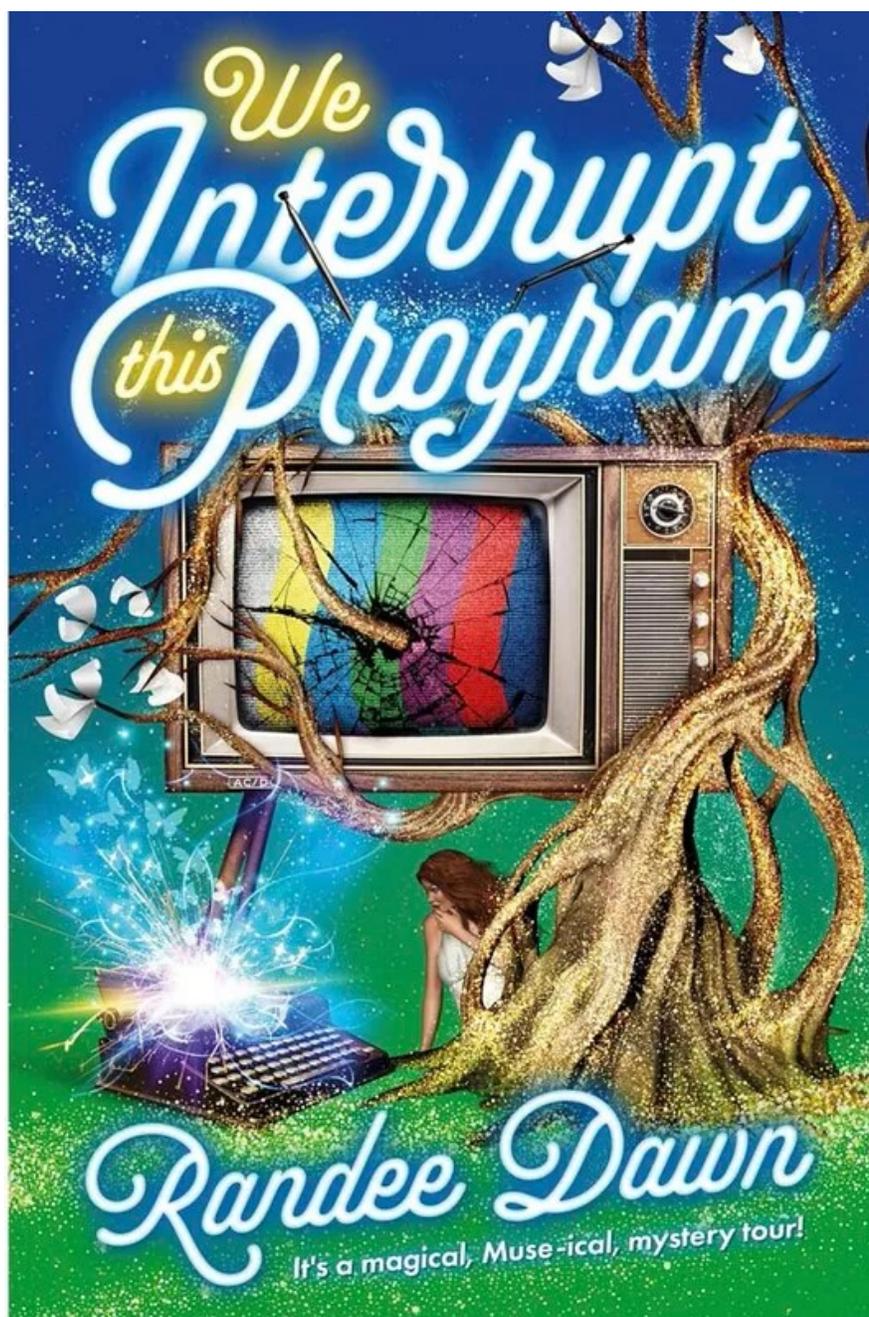
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If everyone only wrote what they knew, how many books would we be deprived of? Author **Randee Dawn** has some concerns about the age-old advice, and suggests writers should get out of their comfort zone in the Big Idea for her newest novel, *We Interrupt This Program*.

RANDEE DAWN:

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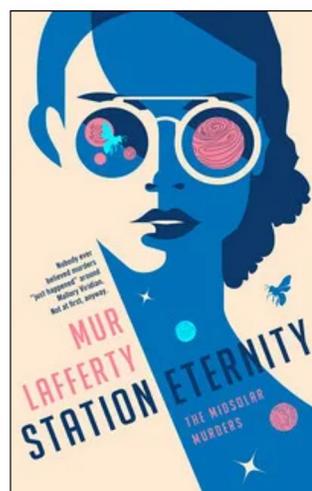
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The Big Idea



What's the Big Idea?
 Authors explaining the

There are many phrases writers long to hear: *Your book is a best-seller!* *Your book changed my life!* *Your book is getting a Netflix adaptation!* *Your book props open my screen door!*

Maybe not that last one.

But if there's one phrase writers are a little tired of hearing is this: *Write what you know.*

What does that even mean? For years, I thought it was reductionist and stupid. I write speculative fiction. Spec fic is about dragons or distant planets or zombies or dragons and zombies on distant planets. I have yet to encounter any of those things. But isn't that what imagination is for? Make stuff up!

Write what you know is a rhetorical piece of advice that sends young writers off on the wrong path, and often confuses older ones. It explains why twenty-two year olds write memoirs. They don't know anything but their own lives!

But it can have value. My first useful encounter with understanding *write what you know* came when I plumbed my entertainment journalism past – including time at a soap opera magazine – to write a goofy first novel, *Tune in Tomorrow* (helpfully given its own discussion in The Big Idea in 2022). I knew what backstage on TV and film sets looked like. I'd spoken to thousands of actors, producers, and directors. It wasn't so far a leap to imagine how things might be different if magical creatures were running things.

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Then it came time to write the *next* story in the *Tune-iverse*. I'd used up a lot of Stuff I Knew. So what could come next to keep things interesting?

That was when I discovered that the advice isn't stupid. It's just not the only advice that matters. Writing what you know can – pick your metaphor – give you a frame, a recipe, or a direction to follow.

But writing what *hurts* gives you substance. Writing what hurts gets you into the subcutaneous zone.

With *We Interrupt this Program* (the next, also standalone, novel in my *Tune-iverse*), I tried to picture what the rest of the fae entertainment universe – run by the Seelie Court Network, of course – would look like. I imagined whole villages run by fae, populated by humans full-time, whose lives fit into neat little tropey stories. What if all the Hallmark movies were shot in the cutest, sweetest, village ever? What if there was a whole burg populated with humans who'd pissed the fae off and were being punished? What if a seaside town existed where a gray-haired older lady author solved cozy mysteries?

The latter one gave me Winnie, an older woman whose cozy mysteries about her TROPE Town neighbors were turned into movies for SCN. But Seaview Haven is in trouble when we meet Winnie, and she discovers she'll have to write a *really good* story to fix matters. So she writes about a love affair with the town's Seelie Showrunner/Mayor/Director.

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Hiatus

But those who vet it say it isn't good enough. It's nice. She wrote what she knew. Then she's told to write what's *hard*.

The novel took me by surprise here. I hadn't planned to make her write two important stories. The love story should be enough. But it was only good. It wasn't great. Despite being supernatural, it felt mundane. Tropey.

In going deeper to find Winnie a hard story, I discovered I already had one based on events in my real life. I gave them to her. Sure, it's about love. But it's also about betrayal and writerly jealousy, the kind delivered with a stiletto and not a butcher knife. Frankly, I'm a little embarrassed it's in there. It's not an epic awfulness. I didn't commit a crime.

Probably.

And in giving it to Winnie, the story worked for me. When she unveils her personal, painful moment, it folds into the story as if I'd planned it. *We Interrupt* remains slapsticky, punny, and full of lunatic moments. Hopefully, though, that's why this moment – the hurtful story – hits the hardest.

Readers can sense when we've gone deep, and when we skate the surface. A writer always has to find a way to squint at their latest creation and ask if they've gone deep enough to make it hurt, no matter what the genre is. That's what – if I've done it right – it means to stick the landing.

So let's look at that old hoary advice once more. Yes, write

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what you know.

But don't stop there.

After you figure out what you know, figure out what's hard.

What hurts. Pull out the stiletto, not the butcher knife ...
and get cutting.

**We Interrupt This Program: Amazon|Barnes & Noble|
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