

Who, Me, A Self-Help Author?

A writer who needs help finds herself writing self-help

by Felicia Pride

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I've got issues. For the most part, my emotional baggage is pretty general stuff, like leftover childhood angst and present-day adulthood anxieties. I've sought the expertise of a couple of psychologists and found uncomfortable pleasure in pouring out the depths of my soul. And while these issues sometimes pop up during the most inconvenient times—in a romantic relationship, in the midst of a family crisis—I never thought they'd become known to the world. Only my friends, family members and the occasional boyfriend would have to know the good, bad and ugly side of my business. So imagine the mini anxiety attack I experienced when I realized that my forthcoming book, *The Message: 100 Life Lessons from Hip-Hop's Greatest Songs*, will be shelved in the self-help section of the bookstore and is categorized as personal growth/psychology. Is freak-out a psychiatric term?

Let me start at the beginning. I originally devised the concept of *The Message* to show the various life mantras that can be found in hip-hop songs. On more occasions than I can count, I've quoted and embraced rap lyrics and themes to explain life. It was my way of shining a light on the positive side of the music and its role in my and countless others' lives. I thought I was providing a service by collecting these themes into one place, in written form, beyond my iPod playlist.

But when I was asked to review the jacket copy for *The Message* and saw that I would be assuming the role of self-help authority, I tried to think of other possible categories where the book would be more appropriate. I thought about convincing my editor that it really is a music book and that pop-culture titles have widespread appeal. Quite frankly, I was, as psychologists say, "in denial."

How could I possibly write self-help when I *need* help? This was the question that loomed after I saw the jacket copy, midway through my writing process. (The copy was written before I finished writing the book.) I didn't want to sound preachy, judgmental or better-than-thou. And what about credentials? I don't have a degree in psychology and have found myself watching Dr. Phil for the free advice. Let's face it: when you're searching for a psychologist, you don't want someone like me, who has an undergraduate degree in marketing and who spent her days in grad school studying literature and publishing. I feared I would be instantly dismissed as an unqualified sham.

But the book contract was signed, a reality I couldn't avoid. So I took the only approach I could: I was honest. Honest about my baggage. Honest about my issues—the effects of an absentee father, my failed romantic relationships—the fact that—gasp!—I'm not perfect, have made some stupid mistakes and am still finding my way as I navigate adulthood. Yes, I told my business not to a professional, but to the world. And I can say it has been an incomparable form of therapy that no money or health insurance co-pay could ever buy.

Then the marketer in me thought about all the noncredentialed folks who release self-help books, and the scores of celebrities who write motivational tomes that impart great advice and hit the bestseller list. I think about my favorite comedian-turned-writer-turned-self-improvement-author-turned-talk-show host, Greg Behrendt, and his co-author, writer Liz Tuccillo, who turned one simple but groundbreaking credo ("he's just not that into you") into a smash success—one that I must say has changed my life. And it's no secret that television producer Rhonda Byrne also turned a concept that she found meaningful in her life into the publishing phenomenon known as *The Secret*. Inspiration and motivation can be found in the most unlikely places, including an episode of *Sex and the City*, hip-hop songs and my life experiences and observations.

I guess you could say I experienced a breakthrough. I realized that I had worthy advice and insight to impart about love, relationships, spirituality and careers.

Now the only challenge is taking my own advice.