

# Indie Author

The Writing Life When You've Gone Rogue

By S. J. Reisner

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## Introduction

This book is a compilation of essays I wrote about the writing life and business of writing. It's all about stuff I've learned or observed over the years. These essays may have been blog posts or articles I wrote for writer's magazines, or personal journal entries.

First some background about me. Technically, I've been a professional writer since 1996. That's when I sold my first magazine article. Not a year later I landed my first column in a national magazine. Then, after selling and placing a few short stories and self-publishing a niche non-fiction book in 1999, I landed my first traditional publishing contract with a small press back in 2005. Yes – this means that from 1995-2005 I'd written hundreds of thousands of words (if not millions), made thousands of submissions, and collected crap loads of rejection letters. I don't even know how many rejections I have. It's a pretty thick notebook. So as I was saying – I landed a contract on one of my fantasy novels (Left Horse Black) with a small traditional publisher. When that went awry about eight months later, I pulled my novels (they had contracted a second one and breached that contract as well), fired my agent and went rogue out of necessity rather than want (no one wanted a reprint of a book that had already been published, let alone the rest of the series). So for my fiction I had a choice to either let the series die, publish it myself, or find another small press that would take it.

Meanwhile, I had just put my first self-published NF book back in circulation via Lulu. That book turned into two, then three, then four – you get the picture. Five years and nine non-fiction books later in a niche market, I found myself a bestselling NF small press author (technically Indie, but not). Financially speaking - striking out on my own was the best thing I ever did for my writing career. Fiction-wise, the jury is still out. In the small press you might as well be self-published because the amount of work you do is the same. I still sell quite a few copies of my novels in e-book formats. Not so much in paperback since a lot of small presses use POD and eBook formats most exclusively these days. That means expensive paperbacks but cheap eBooks.

Now I'm not going to sit here and blow smoke up your rear and tell you indie publishing or small press is right for everyone. On the contrary, it's a lot of work and it's **not** for everyone. The indie author has to learn everything from how to deal with editing, to cover art to formatting, and they have to deal with marketing. Lots of marketing. And if they're like me – really shy and socially awkward – they will do most of it on the internet.

On that same token, for people who like challenges, who have the drive and motivation, and who want to make a career out of being a writer, self-publishing (if a person is good and knows what they're doing) can be a wonderful, fulfilling career move.

Please note that I am a blunt and straight-forward person. I'm not going to lie to you. Some of the essays in this book may be offensive. Some of them may seem discouraging to the aspiring indie author. But hopefully, overall, they will give you an inside look at what it's really like to be an indie author. Some of you may even find yourself inspired (I hope).

Thanks for Reading!

## **Small Press – Indie Press: Is It Right For You?**

Those of you who know me know that I've really wrestled with the small press vs. large publisher when it comes to my books. On one hand I like the idea of lower priced paperbacks and the additional exposure of shelf space in bookstores, not to mention reviews in major industry mags (three things large publishers do that small press doesn't). On the other hand, small press is its own unique animal. With new POD printers available to small publishers, they're more likely to take a chance on new writers and books with niche appeal. They're also less likely to pass by the more controversial material.

Let's be frank, shall we? I write a lot of controversial material. I came to the realization early last May that while a large publisher was a goal I do want to shoot for at some point in my writing career, right now the books I'm writing just aren't conducive to the mainstream. I had to face the hard reality.

There probably isn't a huge mainstream audience for what I write. I am one of those authors who probably won't be well known until I'm dead a hundred years or more, if at all. Now I'm not talking about my fantasy novels. Those are pretty much mainstream fantasy. I'm talking about my NF and the new novel.

### **I write weird shit. Period.**

Yeah - others write weird shit, too, but for some reason my books seem to actually scare people. This is the biggest reason I signed with Darkerwood Publishing for this particular novel and any subsequent novels in the series (another one's already brewing - I checked). Basically - the nice Satanist necromancer and daemon worshipping heroine scared the shit out of the mainstream, large press. I actually have this in writing (from three agents and one publisher).

I already have a loyal fan base of at least 500 readers or so, possibly more than that. It's not huge - no, but then I like to think my books are one of those well kept secrets that travel word of mouth. I know I've sold on upwards of 1000 copies of my most popular Demonolatry title without really doing any real marketing. That's the power of word of mouth. And trust me - bigger publishers have given me offers on it (once they learned what a sleeper hit it is) and I've turned them down specifically because I know what I know about publishing (that's another essay for another time).

### **I am a control freak.**

When it comes to my books, I like to know where they are in the process at all times. I like being able to input on my covers and involve myself in every step of the publishing process. Not all writers are like that. I like knowing how it all works. I also enjoyed being able to make my own cover for this new novel and am looking forward to producing the next cover as well (already have an idea for that brewing as well). Both Indie and Small press give the author that opportunity. Now – some small presses don't give you as much control as I have, but then my publisher loves me and she's

become a good friend of mine over the years.

So those are two of the biggest reasons I have found myself in the small press and indie press. What I've learned ultimately, however, through the ups and downs, and the ins and outs of small press, bad publishers, and publishing in general is this -- I write because I love to write and I love crafting stories and characters to entertain my reading audience no matter how small that audience may be.

You have to make a choice based on where you want your career to go. Don't sign up for the small press or indie publishing if you don't like hard work.

## Down With the Block : Writer's Block

Writer's block is one of those things I don't talk about a lot and there's a reason for it. I very rarely - if at all - find myself with writer's block.

Now there have been times I've had writer's exhaustion. Those are the days where I really just don't want to write because I'm physically or mentally exhausted. Or I've gone and burnt myself out. Periods like this rarely last long for me. One to two weeks is the average.

I've been writing professionally since 1996. I learned quickly that professional writers don't have time to lament or dwell in writer's block because professional editors won't hire you again if you can't meet your deadline. I also learned that readers aren't very sympathetic to writer's block either. If you take forever to write a book, by the time you actually finish that novel you've been promising or the book you've been promising - they've moved on and forgotten all about you. The ultimate consequence being the book sales and readers and word of mouth recommendations stop flowing if you stop writing. That means income dries up.

There are a lot of reasons writers give as to why they find themselves blocked. Sometimes the words just don't flow. When this happens, I've found that switching from fiction to non-fiction or vice versa works well for me. Sometimes the words just won't come because you need time to really think through what you're writing about. Most of the time just working on something else will grease the wheels and let loose the ideas on another project. The ultimate goal is to always keep writing and keep producing.

Another reason for blockage can be what my online acquaintance Morgan Drake (Musings from the Pen) calls *toxic writing friends*. All those naysayers who think there's no money in being a writer so it's pointless, don't think you have any talent, or just like discouraging you in some way. I think we've all had someone like that in our life. I used to have a friend many years ago with whom I was very competitive. All the way down to the point that we both started writing novels around the same time. We both took a creative writing class, too. It was after I got an A in the class and she got a C, that she became a *toxic writing friend*. From that point forward she told me how awful my writing was and how I'd never make it because I wasn't smart enough to be a writer.

Well the joke's on her. I have over 10 books to my credit. Of course I'm also one of those people who take "Living well is the best revenge" to extremes. I actually thrive with a critic like that because I actually get a thrill from proving them wrong, pissing them off or making them jealous. Nothing like a naysayer to motivate you into being successful and rubbing their nose in it.

Now onto the people who say being a writer is pointless because they think you'll never make a living doing it. I'll be quite honest with you all - after 5 years of constant work and regular book releases, I currently make the same amount of money from my writing as I'd make from a part-time job (okay, a low paying part time job, but still...). If I could devote myself to my writing full time I'm sure I'd be making a lot more. But I do have a day job so my writing time consists of stolen moments after work. Ultimately though, how I've dealt with my *toxic writing friends* is I've either kicked them out of my life, or I've just plain proven them wrong. My father always told me to keep my day job because writers don't make a lot of money. He told me that because he loved me and didn't want to see me struggle. So I have kept my day job -- but he's never been prouder of the fact

that I've kept writing. He can now tell his friends that he has a daughter who is an author (and don't think he doesn't!).

Sure - being a writer isn't easy and it takes a while to build an income from it -- but it can be done. It helps to remember that everyone who discourages you couldn't write a book in a million years. I highly recommend the film "Heckler" to writers out there who have found themselves discouraged and blocked by critics. There's a line in that movie, something about people who criticize and heckle do it because they don't have a creative bone in their body and could never do what you do in a million years. I'm sure a great deal of criticism from non-writers may actually be jealousy. Of course criticism can be healthy as it keeps us realistic, too. It's learning to separate legitimate criticism from sour grapes that can pose a problem.

My next bit of advice is to surround yourself with supportive people and people who love what you write. Write for yourself and those people because they're really the only ones who matter. They're your target audience and chances are - the ones who are going to become your core paying readers. This will keep you motivated.

Another good practice is to keep deadlines and goals and consistently try to meet them. This is really important for those writers who either haven't sold anything, or who haven't been hired yet. You need to give yourself deadlines and goals so that when you do sell something - the deadline doesn't sneak up on you. This goes for you self-published folks, too. A writer who can't meet deadlines or keep goals isn't going to make a lot of money writing.

I suggest starting realistically with a goal of 1,200 words a day. Depending what you write I also suggest the goals of one book/novel per year (add to this as you can manage), or one article every two weeks, or whatever. Give yourself deadlines and word counts.

## Reasons People Go Indie

On a writers forum I'm on, I often frequent the Indie board since I'm simultaneously a micro-publisher and micro-press author (which evidently is considered self-published by industry standards). There's an interesting shift in the publishing world. Do it yourself services like Lulu and Create Space have made it easier than ever for anyone who's written anything to have it published and distributed. This has also given rise to micro-presses and niche publishers as well as the indie book.

What has amazed me as I'm reading these threads and talking to other indie folks is how many novelists go indie in hopes a major traditional publisher is going to discover them.

I guess everyone has their own reasons for going indie.

I went indie with the Demonolatry books and started DB Publishing after several of the large occult publishers politely declined my manuscript because it was just too controversial and subversive. Then I had several small press occult publishers approach me with contracts that demanded certain censorship and took away all my rights to the material. They also only wanted to pay me \$1 a copy sold for my work. It was at that point I discovered Lulu and said, "Screw it - I'll do it myself."

I've never regretted that decision and if a major traditional publisher came up to me right now and wanted to contract any of my magickal/spirituality books I'd tell them to stick it in their ear. No, seriously. Their traditional publishing model isn't worth it because it's always the writer who does the most work and makes the least money. At least the way I'm doing it now I may not be on every bookstore shelf in America, but my books aren't censored, readers are happier, and a reader will know that when they buy my books the author is actually being compensated for the work.

With fiction I have to admit I still wonder what it would be like to have my books on bookstore shelves and hundreds or even thousands of dotting fans anticipating my every release. But then I also know a lot of traditionally published people. They're some of the hardest working folks I know. They travel a lot for book signings, conventions, and conferences. Their next book sale depends on the sales of their last. Some of their books are back-listed. They have to meet contractual obligations and deadlines and ultimately, their publisher has the last say as to whether the story/plot is going to fly. The publisher dictates where the stories go and what gets censored.

The publisher often also gets first dibs on the writer's next book.

In relation to that, me as a micro press author & publisher, I have all the creative freedom I want. My readers dictate which stories are expounded on. I don't have to censor and clean up my characters' language. As a result, people who want magic realism get it. Now admittedly my fantasy is very PG milk toast. It would be great for a mass audience and I bet had I had the patience to wait for the right agent and the right traditional publisher it probably could have been picked up by ROC or Del Rey or whomever. But my mystery series - nope. They would have wanted me to clean up my language, given my MC a different background, and perhaps changed the story into something more formulaic and cookie-cutter. I know this because I know a lot of traditionally published authors who had certain stipulations put on their work. Things they had to agree to change if they wanted the publisher to offer them a contract. Some folks call that selling out. I call it making concessions, or

compromising.

I don't know. I'd like to think that if a major publisher ever had a momentary lapse in judgment and wanted to contract one of my novels that I'd politely decline. At the same time, who knows? The distribution and bigger audience thing sounds lovely. ::sigh:: With that comes more work though and I'm not so sure I'd be able to do my best work under tight deadlines. I have a day job and real-life financial responsibilities and a 4K advance (which is about standard on a first novel) is not even 2 months' salary for me. I'm also not a social person so the whole traveling and book signing thing - meh. ::shrug:: I could probably take it or leave it.

Nothing personal. I love people - just from a distance. There's a reason I'm a writer and live inside my head.

Right now I am very happy where I'm at and my books are selling well. Especially on Kindle. So evidently people do like them. So I guess I'm completely the opposite. I didn't go Indie in hopes a major traditional publisher would discover me. If I wanted a traditional publisher I'd have never gone with a small micro-press.

I went Indie so I could write and share my books with my readers. I went Indie because the big publishers were afraid of what I was writing. I went Indie to get rid of the middle man and so I could directly interact with my readers and let my readers dictate what they want to read written by me. I went Indie so I could actually make a living as a writer. So far it's working out for me and I'm pretty sure I'm making more on my own than I would with traditional publishers. I'm also pretty sure that in 10-20 years' time it's very likely that I will be writing full time as my primary function in life.

## **E-Books Really Are the Future!**

So today I decided to play, “Let’s look at our e-book sales figures!” and all I have to say is WOW! I have to admit, I was, at one time, a naysayer when it came to e-books. I didn’t think e-books were real books and I was an ass and looked down at e-book authors back in the day. Now I’m one of them. Yeah, I have paperback books out, too, but guess what I’m selling more of right now? Yep! E-books! E-readers and e-book distribution services are a wonderful thing. My fantasy novels have a real audience thanks to e-books. My other fiction isn’t suffering either.

Now, you should all know I’ve gone completely over to the dark side. Not only am I putting my books out in e-book, but I bought an e-reader and now I’m one of the people reading oodles of e-books. Does this mean I’m anti-paperback? Hell no! It just means I like being able to browse for and get a new book at two a.m. when I can’t sleep and need something to read. I also read more. Why? Because I can afford more e-books (especially from indie authors) and I also don’t have to worry about having enough shelf space for more paperbacks.

No – I’m not a tree hugger. However, I won’t deny that I like the idea that e-books are “greener”. On that note – the real reason I switched over is because while space may be infinite my house isn’t. There is limited space in my life for physical books and I read so voraciously that I spend hours every year culling my stacks and passing them on to others who might love them so I can make room for more. The e-reader makes the culling easier.

Of course as an author there really is no substitute to seeing your books in physical, tangible form for you to hold and caress. There’s something wonderful about the smell of paper and ink, the sound of the pages, and the weight of a real book.

Yet the reality is I only sell one paperback for every twenty e-books. Did I mention my e-book sales have taken off like crazy since about 2009?

## **Pricing Your Books & E-Books – When to Take a Loss**

While I was shopping for some shorter fiction on Amazon I realized something disconcerting. Why is it self-published authors think they should be getting paid top dollar for their Kindle books? Especially when they're overpricing their books for their genre and compared to books of similar length? No offense, but Stephen King can get away with a \$9.99 or \$12.99 Kindle book. But when authors like Dean Koontz are selling theirs for \$7.99 each -- shouldn't you be pricing your self-published horror/thriller novel about the same? After all - you're *not* Stephen King, nor Dean Koontz. You don't have the audience Stephen King has to where his fans are willing to pay top dollar. You're not Dean Koontz either, but you can at least attempt to compete with his books by pricing them competitively. By overpricing your Kindle books at \$10 (especially when paperbacks of your book are \$15+) you're just pricing yourself out of an audience, aren't you? Small press books seem to have this same issue - but not always.

## Are You Professional or Legitimate?

A conversation between me and a friend:

**Friend:** "Steph, I just got a publishing contract with XX publishing company and I got a \$4000 advance!"

**Steph:** "Awesome! That's so cool."

**Friend:** "I have edits due by this date and covers will be out this date. It's so stressful. Lucky you don't have this sort of thing."

**Steph:** (with raised eyebrows) "How so?"

**Friend:** "Well, you're not professionally or legitimately published so you don't have things like real deadlines and all that."

**Steph:** "What do you mean?"

**Friend:** "I don't mean anything bad by it. It's just that I have a publishing contract with XX and you are independent and small press. There's a big difference."

**Steph:** "And I also make more than \$4000 a year writing."

Trust me - the conversation went downhill from there.

I think I'm finally tired of the debate as to whether or not you're a professional writer based on how or where you've been published.

Here's the deal -- if you've been paid- you're technically a professional writer.

I get so tired of the cliques in the writing community. Some don't believe you're a "real" writer unless you've published with one of the big six. Others will consider you professionally published only if you've been published with a big publisher or an \*approved\* small press.

Dictating who is "legitimately published" or not is merely another way to divide the haves from the have-nots. My question is - are you making money?

That's great - maybe you did get a publishing contract with one of the big publishers. Maybe you got a \$4000 advance. You know what an advance is, right? That's money they give you in advance. That also means that if your contract reads that you make \$1 a copy sold, you have to sell at least 4000 copies of your work before you make anything else on that book. If you're only putting out one book a year on a \$4000 advance each time, you're only making \$4000 a year writing (unless you sell more than your prerequisite 4000). Even if you sell 10,000 copies, that's only 10,000 bucks folks! So keep your day job, okay? (Oh, and by the way – most authors start out making 10% of the

cover price so if your book is selling for \$7.99 a copy, that's only .79 cents a copy, not even a dollar).

I currently make between \$6000 - \$12,000 a year from my books (both small press and indie stuff). So does that make me LESS a professional author than the author who sold a novel to a major publisher for \$4000?

So I don't sell 4000 books a year. I sell between 2000-3000 (but I get a higher royalty on my indie stuff because there's no middle man). Not to mention my sales and income have been going up year by year. Also remember that all of my books have been published in the last 5 years.

So I don't have space on a bookstore bookshelf, but my readers know where to find me and they send their friends, too. Trust me - you can write numerous books, but if they suck, no one is going to buy them no matter which publisher published them.

I have an audience and fans believe it or not. I may not have droves of them, but I do have them. I'm thankful for each and every one, too.

So how is it, exactly, that I'm not "legitimately published" or "professionally published" again? Just curious.

This kind of reminds me of the debate how so many people used to scoff at e-book authors and say, "Oh, so you don't write \*real\* books then?" and "Oh, so you're not \*really\* published?" Tell that to some of the popular e-book authors who are bringing in \$20-30K a year writing e-books.

If you write books that real readers are buying and enjoying and you're making enough money to where your tax accountant is writing off stuff to offset your writing income -- you're friggin' professional and clearly \*legitimately published\* regardless what the cliques say. And by cliques I do mean to include certain writing organizations that have strict membership requirements based on where you've been published. Hate to say it but there's an "old boys club" mentality about that. I'm not a fan.

## Coffee Shop Writers and Literary Fiction

I just read another author's blog post about writing in public. What's up with that? Since when, to be a real writer, do you have to practice your art in front of everyone? I've always viewed people who purposefully write in public as pretentious and more in love with the idea of being a writer rather than actually writing.

I do my best work alone with a pot of coffee in the comfort of my own home. I don't have time to dreamily hang out in a cafe or coffee shop just to show the world I'm actually writing. I can do without the distraction. I don't know about all of you other writers out there, but when I'm writing I tune the rest of the world out and completely retreat into the world in which I'm writing.

Probably not a good idea for a 5'2" woman to be alone in a coffee shop, lost in her own world when a thief comes along and snatches her handbag. No?

Now onto another point that I always hear when I hang out in writer's groups for too long. "*More people need to write literary fiction instead of all this genre crap!*" Seriously? Earlier today I sat and listened to a rant by a woman who bitched about genre fiction as if it was the bane of all existence and how more people should be writing "literary" fiction. (ala Oprah Book Club style)

I tried my hand at literary fiction in college. Even got it published in *The Rose Thorn* literary e-zine years later, and again in an Indian literary journal. It was a short fantasy story called *The Elements of Warfare*. I guess it got published because it was so relevant to our modern age of the war on terror. Oh - and did I mention it was fantasy? Yes, I did.

Anyway - it seems to me most literary fiction types are just snobs. They knock genre fiction because they're jealous. Probably jealous because they can't write their way out of a box. When people criticize their work they can use the excuse it's because the rest of us uneducated derelicts just "don't get it". After all - we're too busy spending millions on brain-candy vampire novels to know "*good literature*" when we see it.

Blow me.

I, and millions of readers, do know a good story when we see it. Good stories are about characters - not stroke of literary genius and metaphors up the wazoo. Some of the best literature falls in the category of genre fiction. Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and even *Beowulf* -- all fantasy. *Frankenstein* by today's standards might even fall into horror or science fiction as well. Look at Edgar Allen Poe. Do I really need to say more? Oh - and on the subject of vampires I have one word. "*Dracula*". I rest my case (or rant as it were).

## Aim High – Or Be Realistic

How about both?

I can't begin to tell you how many new authors start out with the well intentioned fantasy that they're going to be the next Stephen King, Nora Roberts, Robert Jordan or [insert well-known author name here]. While I never say stuff like that can't happen, I do say you shouldn't count on it. One should not become a writer with the idea that being the next famous author is the absolute end goal or the ultimate reward (or that it absolutely *will* happen for you) because undoubtedly you're going to find yourself disappointed. Possibly even so severely discouraged that you may put away the pen or laptop for a few years (if not completely).

I had some really high expectations of being a published author when I first started out. When I was in the early days of college I thought authors made good money and could afford nice country homes in New England. I thought that once you actually had a novel published, you were finally permanently out of the slush pile. I believed each new book would be easier to write than the one before it. I thought publishers did all the marketing and I'd just have to show up to book signings. I thought people would buy my book just because it was there. I viewed my stories as pieces of profound artwork.

Looking back I was incredibly naive. But at the tender age of nineteen I had no idea that writing was a business either. Now, nineteen years later, I am listening to some new authors (at a forum I'm on) full of hopes and dreams that I find somewhat unrealistic, and I feel sad for them. While I don't want to rain on their parade, it's hard to watch the 2 x 4 of reality speeding toward someone's head without saying anything. Most of them don't see it coming.

More than once this week I've heard newly published small press and self-published authors talking about trying to get on Oprah. I've seen new authors who are bright eyed and hopeful looking at their first sales numbers in shock and dismay. I've watch authors cry because twenty people said they'd buy the book, but only two did. I've seen them lament about their *work of art*.

I've more than once heard new authors talk about writing as if it's their ticket to financial freedom.

But writing is a business. Always has been. The reality is that most small press and self-published books (especially in fiction) will be lucky to sell two hundred copies, five hundred if the author is ambitious and markets the hell out of their work (as my friend Kim says). Well known authors with the big presses have the advantage and that advantage is in sheer numbers. Once you better understand how publishing works, you'll better understand the numbers and why small press and self-pubbed folks have to work harder for each sale.

Writing is hard work. The work doesn't stop after you've finished writing, found the publisher, and the book is out. Then it's up to the author (regardless the size of your publisher - or if you self-publish) to get out there and spread the word. Now if you have numbers a certain number of your sales will come from people browsing bookstore shelves and randomly picking up your book. For the rest of those sales, people need to know the book exists and you have to tell them why they want to read it.

This is where a marketing plan comes into play. A lot goes into marketing. Certainly the

packaging of the book (i.e. format, editing, and cover). Once the book has a package, then it becomes a product. Pricing is also a part of marketing. All of these things determine if readers are going to buy. If your book is good, readers are going to tell their friends. If your book wasn't so good - eh, not so much word of mouth advertising. Without shelf space it could be a harder sale.

These are just a few things the new author would be wise to consider before making big plans to quit their day job, meet Oprah, and put a down payment on a house in rural Massachusetts.

### **Make realistic goals.**

All of this especially applies to those who are small press or self-published.

-With a good marketing plan and by pimping books out of your trunk, don't *expect* to sell more than 100 copies the first three months your book is out. If you do - great! If not, that's NORMAL for small press and self-publishing. It doesn't mean you suck.

-Expect additional sales will trickle in. (In the meantime, write the next damn book!)

-Not everyone who says they're going to buy your book will. Or, they might have to wait until they can financially afford to buy your book. Many people will tell you they did buy it (thinking they're sparing your feelings) just so you won't keep bothering them about it.

-The likelihood of you getting on Oprah is small. However I don't discourage you from trying. By all means, go for it. But if Oprah isn't interested don't get all depressed either. It was a long shot to begin with.

-If you have a day job, keep it for now until you are making the same or more with your writing.

-Don't expect to become famous overnight. Some writers work years and years before their work is even noticed. After 13 years of work, I've only now become a bestselling small press non-fiction author. And quite frankly, the only person that probably means a whole lot to is me.

-Do expect that you will have to do your own marketing. Also expect you'll be selling your books out of your trunk (at least until you gain an audience).

-Do aim high and submit your book(s) to the publisher(s) you are interested in. In that I mean - I know it's tempting to settle for small press when you really want a large publisher, but I don't necessarily think you should settle if you expect all publishers are created equal. Small press requires more author input and work and there are a lot of shoddy and shady small presses out there. Large press is harder to get into. And if you self-publish be prepared to deal with the stigma that often comes with self-publishing. You're wearing a scarlet letter at that point. Remember that and you won't be disappointed when the A list writers look down their nose at you and treat you like a hack.

## Writing Discipline: Creature of Chaos – Creature of Habit

Or perhaps habitual chaos.

Last weekend over brunch a friend of ours told her friend, "Stephanie is a very disciplined writer. She keeps word counts and writes so many words a day."

I almost laughed because disciplined is not a word I'd ever use to describe myself. My husband will tell you I'm kind of like the Tasmanian devil. Thoroughly undomesticated, always in a hurry, and sometimes even haphazard. We don't keep schedules at our house.

Normal people, disciplined people, may do house cleaning on Sunday, or their grocery shopping on Saturday. I tend to do everything whenever I feel like it or whenever I can shove it into my schedule.

Writing is no different. When people ask me about my specific writing habits you'll notice I tend to skirt that question. Instead I'll throw a bunch of platitudes and writing advice their way. Stuff we've all heard a million times from other writers (I merely parrot it like a mantra).

Perhaps it's time I came clean because the truth is I don't follow my own advice.

First you should know that I write in chaos. I know so many folks who, for example, plan their blog posts carefully and edit the crap out of them before posting. As a result each blog post reads like a well thought out essay.

I, on the other hand, write my posts on the fly. If they're long it's because I don't know how or when to shut up. If they're clunky it's because I didn't take time to edit. If they're disjointed it's because I don't take time to really plan them out. Sure, in the very least I try to remember to run them through spell check. But that's about as far as my editing goes. I save the laborious editing for my books and even then I still miss stuff as my editors will tell you.

I also write books in chaos. Sure, I'll sit down with a goal of writing 1,500 words a night, but more often than not I'll end up writing more. Or I'll end up editing. Or I'll end up watching TV or doing whatever I'm interested in doing at that very moment. I will write paragraphs during my lunch break or during stolen moments at work, and then e-mail them to myself so I can graft them into my manuscript when I get home. I may be sitting on the couch watching TV with the laptop on my lap with two windows open. One with a NF book and the other a novel. I may watch TV, then pause and write a little on one manuscript and then a little on the other. Then I'll watch TV some more.

My writing habits have got to be the worst ones for any writer to have. It's a wonder I have actually finished anything, let alone gotten it published.

But somehow all that chaos manages to come together into a cohesive story or book and it works for me. It would be stupid for me to tell anyone to write like I do, however.

One thing I am diligent about is editing. My initial writing habits may be chaos but I tend to run my manuscripts through at least 3-4 editing passes before sending them to my editors for their final run through.

Now that's not to say I don't aspire to be more disciplined. I do. I just haven't been all that successful at it (so far). Perhaps someday I will be less haphazard and more disciplined and I won't blush and feel guilty when friends introduce me as their "disciplined" writing friend.

## On Writing and Patience

I will be the first to admit that patience is not my strong suit. I am, perhaps, one of the most impatient people I know.

So here I am, on the cusp of the publication of my third novel and I'm feeling my patience slipping away into oblivion. In 5 days, the manuscript goes to proof. What has surprised me is that I'm already on the next novel. I had no idea writing a story like this would catapult into the next and so on. My first series of books was just so planned and thought through. I'm still working on the third book in that particular series (trying to lighten it up). It goes to show you no two novels are alike and each new book presents its own challenges. Writing doesn't necessarily get easier, you just get used to your own process.

I should just relax and work on other projects.

## Writing May Not Be Your Ticket to Financial Freedom

I just read a thread at a forum I'm on where writers are asking people for ideas for their next books.

Put on the brakes and back the truck up a minute. What?

As a writer I've never been at a loss for what my next book will be about. My brain is constantly churning out ideas all on its little lonesome without needing outside help.

What this sounds like to me is the poster is someone who thinks writing is their ticket to financial freedom so they wrote a book. When that book was done they decided they better write another one for good measure and try to make their money in volume rather than good content. But the reality is they're so creatively inept that if self-publishing weren't so easy they would have never gotten past the first book.

All the writers I know (the real creative people) can't get their minds to shut up and certainly aren't posting to message boards asking for ideas for the next book.

Now mind you I'm not saying you can't share your ideas with others and toss them around for feedback, though I'd never do it on a writer's message board on the off chance it was a really good idea and someone else decided to try to beat you to the punch, but that's me.

I just really wish the people who had no creativity or talent beyond using other creative people to get their ideas would get the hell off the book-publishing playing field so the rest of us who really are creative have more room to breathe. Nowadays every jackass with an idea thinks he's a writer and can upload a book and have it published in seconds. Not only does it make it harder for real small presses to be taken seriously by readers, but there are some really good indie authors out there who try their damndest to put out high quality material only to have their efforts foiled by talentless hacks who will publish the first draft of anything they pen (usually a misshapen barrage of disjointed ideas provided by someone else).

## Who's Really Blowing Sunshine? Family & Friends or Your Printing/Distribution Service?

Time and time again I meet Indie and Small Press authors who think their publishers or printing service/distributors are trying to screw them.

Why? Because a lot of people (family, friends, strangers on the Internet) will tell you they've purchased your books. So like most authors you immediately rush to your sales numbers to take a look and for some odd reason - that sale isn't showing up. Hmm. You trust the people who tell you they bought your book, but not the publisher, printer, or distributor. So it's only natural to think the latter are doing something underhanded.

In reality, most of the time it's the people telling you they bought the book who are blowing sunshine up your ass.

Pardon my candor - but it's the truth. Even family will lie and tell you they've purchased copies of your book when they haven't. I know, right now you're saying, "Steph! You're wrong! My family and friends would NEVER lie to me like that. NEVER!"

Well, don't be so sure about that. I never thought my friends and family would either. What most readers and book buyers don't know is small publishers and indie-authors oftentimes have REAL TIME access to sales numbers. So they don't see the harm in lying. After all, they think you won't notice one sale among the hundreds of sales you must be getting. They don't realize it's not like that.

Oh yeah - that's right readers. If you tell us you bought a copy of our latest tome through our publisher, or amazon, or through the printing service - we're going to know if you're lying or not.

Here's the thing - over the years I've done experiments. When someone says they bought a book through XX sales channel I know exactly when those numbers come in. Being the obsessive author and publisher I am I check my sales numbers daily (monthly with my small press stuff) because it tells me which marketing campaigns are working and what isn't, etc... If someone tells me they bought a copy of X title through Amazon, it will show up on my sales record within 1 hour. Sales that didn't show up in 1 hour, I asked the person to give me an order number so I can check out my distributor or printing service (or publisher).

It's at this point the fumbling usually starts. If someone can't or doesn't produce an order number - they didn't buy your book. Accept it, don't hold it against them, and move on. Not everyone likes to read or likes to read what you write. Nope - not even friends and family. In 99% of the cases where no sales showed up I found the person who said they bought the book was lying to me.

There was only 1 instance where I actually found my printing service at fault and it was a site glitch that was rectified and our sales for fifteen days magically appeared in one day. That was with Lulu (and part of the reason DB Publishing no longer keeps all its eggs in one basket).

So before you jump to the conclusion that your printing service or publisher or anyone else is lying to you about sales numbers, make sure you have an order number and better yet receipts in

hand.

Otherwise you can darn well bet there are some readers out there blowing sunshine up your ass.

## Family & Friends: A Reading Audience?

A lot of new authors go into Indie publishing or the small press thinking their friends and family are going to support them. And most often times certain people will. They'll give you the encouragement you need to keep going, congratulate you when the book comes out, and even help you set up the book release party.

However - don't expect them all to race out the door to buy a copy. There are three members of my immediate family I can count on to actually read what I write, and one person in my extended family who has continually purchased my novels and supported my work. Very few others in the family read, or like to read what I write. So if, on the off chance, they even own copies of my books it's because they got them for free.

Now in the friend department I'm a bit luckier. Most of my friends are readers (not writers, writers have too many published writer friends to read the work of every writer they come across, which is why I never market my work to writers) and they like to read the same kind of stuff I'm writing. Many of them do get free copies because they'll beta read for me and even help with editing before a MS goes to my publisher/editor. However - they'll also RECOMMEND my books to other people if they liked them.

The people who really support you and your work will go beyond writing a thorough 4 star review on Amazon (if it's just a 5 star gush on how great you or your books are - that's not likely to attract strangers to your work) will help you market and pimp your books by recommending them to other readers who \*don't\* know you.

But for the most part I've learned that extended family and friends who don't read will very rarely buy, let alone read your work or recommend it to anyone beyond bragging that one of their family members or friends is a published writer. I've written and had published 12+ books in the time I've been with my husband and he's never read a single one of them. Nor do I expect him to, and it doesn't hurt my feelings that he doesn't. The same goes with other family members and certain friends. To be honest - I'd be more shocked if certain people \*did\* read my work and ended up liking it.

My goal for getting readers never really amounted to family and friends anyway. It's always been my goal, as an author, to gain a real audience of people I don't know who like my work. After all - that's far more flattering to me than a mere audience of family and friends who would love me and my work regardless.

So as an author I think other Indie and Small press authors should shoot a little higher. Don't go just for family and friends as your reading audience. Don't even expect other writers to be supportive beyond tagging your books on Amazon and maybe reading it and giving you a good review because beyond that - the likelihood they'll recommend it to complete strangers is still slim to none.

Don't get me wrong - I am grateful and thankful for the supportive friends and family I do have and I'll be forever grateful for the ones who truly do love what I write.

Sure, you'll always need the support of family and friends but for your work to truly be taken seriously you need real readers. People who don't know you who find your work enjoyable or

profound in some way so that they'll come back for more. I feel truly blessed to have such a reading audience (albeit small). Some of them I \*have\* gotten to know online. Knowing that my work and stories can appeal to people I don't know (and knowing I've brought ideas to people not in my immediate circle of friends and family) has been a rewarding experience and IMHO, that's really what being an author is all about. Being able to share ideas and stories with a wide audience, people who will appreciate your work and tell their friends about it.

Sometimes those folks are your family and friends, but more often than not, they aren't.

## The Day My Illusions Were Shattered

Back between 2002-2004 (or thereabouts) I was actively writing and submitting short fiction for the professional market. It was all being rejected. I just figured my stories weren't good enough. One of the particular magazines I was sending my work to was *Realms of Fantasy*. I had been laboring over my stories, putting them through rigorous critique and editing, and making them as perfect as I could. And yet I was still getting the stock form rejection letters.

When the fourth one finally came back I called my sister, ranting, "This is ridiculous. I really don't understand what these magazines want! What am I doing wrong? My critique group thought it was great!"

To which my sister replied something like, "Maybe you should write what you think *they* would like instead of what *you* like."

"Like what," I said in a snotty tone. "Fuckin' stories about unicorns? Maybe some fluffy bunnies?"

My sister laughed.

But that did it for me. I was dead set and determined to make a point. That night I sat down and penned a short story about unicorns. Yes, you heard me. Unicorns.

I wrote it in a few hours. Let my sister read it the next day. I edited it a little. Then I sent it out to *Realms of Fantasy*. Months went by. Finally, it got to a point where I'd been waiting a long time and many of my writer friends who'd also submitted stories to *Realms* had already gotten rejections back. I queried the assistant editor who confirmed that *Faith In Unicorns* had indeed been pulled out of the slush pile and sent on to the editor, Shawna McCarthy. After a few more months I received a polite note from Shawna herself telling me she loved the story, but unfortunately she'd already bought more pieces than she could use for the year so she was passing on "*Faith in Unicorns*".

This point bears repeating: The sarcastic joke story that I didn't send through critique, or labor over for more than four hours is the one that made it out of the slush pile and almost into the pages of one of the biggest pro short story magazines in the genre.

I remember thinking, *well I'll be damned, they really did want unicorns.*

The point being that to be a successful writer goes beyond being able to write well. It goes beyond being able to tell a good story. Instead -- it's really about giving the people purchasing the stories what they want. I know a lot of writers don't want to hear this, but it's true. If your inclination is to write about wizards who ride war horses and all your stories keep getting rejected, perhaps you need to write about warriors riding magical unicorns (metaphorically speaking of course).

This point was driven home for me again this month. I've been dabbling in some alternative genres lately under a pseudonym. I've had one novella published in this particular genre (another one will be published later this month). In 7 days it's sold 40 copies and I've made \$80 and the month has barely started. I think it's going to be interesting how much the book makes in one month's time. I look at the books I've literally spent months writing. Books that do not sell this well (not in small press anyway) and I am shell-shocked. It only reminds me that if you want to make a living as a writer you do have to give the buyers what they want no matter how ridiculous it may

seem.

Talented writers are a dime a dozen. Talented writers who are persistent become published. Talented writers who are published and give the buyer the product(s) (s)he wants have careers. The hard part seems to be figuring out what it is buyers want. But once you hit it, you'll know because your sales numbers will hit the roof compared to the rest of what you have out there.

## Conventions and Conferences for the Shy Person

Here are a few rules of the road if you're horribly shy, terrified of public speaking, or generally aren't a people person. I mean, let's face it. Not all writers are social people. That's why we became writers, because we live in our own heads. You can't always do that in a super social setting.

Rule #1: Make sure you have a room (at the hotel the event is being held at) you can go to, to hide. A neutral zone as it were. If you're like me, dealing with tons of people can be very draining and when you're at a conference or convention you're always "on". This can suck the life out of some of us and this is why the hidey hole is necessary.

Rule #2: Make really good notes for every panel you'll be on and bring a friend for support (have them sit in the audience). I have terrible stage fright in front of strangers. I've frozen up in front of a room full of strangers. Notes help. So does knowing you have someone in the audience who's rooting for you and who knows you. One of my friends would sit in the audience and ask questions if she saw me freezing up. It was a life-saver. So plan this all in advance.

Rule #3: Rehearse what you're going to say! The more you say it the easier it is to say. This does not necessarily mean you won't freeze up, but you may be less likely to freeze up if you know what is going on.

Rule #4: Have a backup plan! If your presentation material doesn't go as long as necessary, a backup plan is a life-saver. Otherwise you'll be left twiddling your thumbs.

Rule #5: Don't be afraid of your fans or other writers. Treat them like old friends and smile a lot. Yes, your face is going to hurt really bad tomorrow, but that's okay. People like people who look like they're having a great time.

Rule #6: Never say anything bad about anyone even if you can't stand them because it never fails it will get back to them.

Rule #7: Make sure you bring someone to pal around with (this is much easier to do at a writer's conference because most writers have writer friends). Having a partner can be a good thing in case you need to get yourself out of an awkward situation (i.e. some creepy guy comes up to you and is trying to pick you up) or if you just need someone to talk to during the slow periods at the signing table.

Overall, keep an open mind and keep telling yourself that you'll do great. Make it a point to talk to people. Don't be afraid of approaching other authors and talking to them – even if it is about the weather. Know that there will be people there who may be rude in their actions or words. Don't take it personally. Maybe they're shy, too. Or socially awkward. Or maybe they're just assholes. Regardless, their rudeness is really their problem and not yours. Just smile and move on.

## Teaching Classes and Workshops

Teaching classes and workshops are a great way to get your work out there and develop your professional writing résumé. Even if you write fiction you can still teach.

- Volunteer to speak on panels at writer's conferences and conventions.
- Put together a class curriculum and apply to teach your workshop at a local continuing education university, community center or at your local library.
- If you write NF, attend and speak at conventions relating to your book's topic.
- While you're at these events make sure you sign up for any opportunities to do a book signing or suggest a book signing if there isn't one scheduled.
- Even if you can't get a book signing, keep at least 5 copies of your book on you at all times and put it on the table in front of you so people know you have a book.
- When choosing topics to cover, make sure it's a topic you know a lot about and are comfortable with.
- If you have co-panelists, be courteous and don't hog all the speaking time.
- Make notes just in case you freeze up, lose your train of thought, or the conversation goes off topic and you need to find your place quickly.
- Leave time in your schedule to answer questions.
- Always put your books in your bio and mention them when you introduce yourself.

## When Your Books End Up in Free Torrents – Alternative Marketing Strategies

A very popular author friend once told me whenever one of his books ended up on an illegal torrent he experiences a surge of sales. Since I don't have that many books out, I don't seem to have that problem.

First off, if your book ends up on an illegal torrent, congratulations! Evidently your work is popular enough that it's listed on an illegal torrent. However, this can be an issue, especially if you've only written one book. As an author of multiple books who has found her books on illegal torrents I do have some suggestions for things you can do to turn a bad situation into something positive (because trying to get it off the torrent sites is almost impossible).

1. Try to work with it. As an experiment I released a free PDF copy of one of my out-of-print books on my website. I then created 1.99 downloads for both Kindle and Nook of the same book, telling people they could get a free PDF on my website. A strange thing happened. People, knowing they could get a free PDF, were still willing to pay \$1.99 to get a copy formatted for their e-Reader. I took this a step further and began offering the book in paperback again. Once again, people kept buying them because they wanted a hard copy.
2. If you release your own eBooks into the torrent, make sure you add a page advertising your other work! This will often result in sales for other work.
3. If this is your only book – get busy writing the next book!
4. Don't release your NF books in eBook right away. Make people who run the torrents work for it (i.e. make them have to scan the book – the longer the book the less likely they are to scan it).
5. Use your out-of-print books (provided you have your rights) to sell your in-print books by re-releasing them as e-Books on the illegal torrent and charge for copies formatted for specific e-Readers.
6. Use your torrent books to sell services, products, or collections of work (special editions, hardcovers, whatever).

Be creative in how you use free books and illegal torrents to spur sales of your other work. A lot of authors are now giving away free PDF stories and even eBook novellas on their websites to encourage readers to buy their for-sale print novels and eBooks! This evidently works well because many authors are doing it.

## Dealing With Criticism

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When I first started submitting my work for critique and publication, several writer friends told me I needed to develop a thick skin. I was not sure what they meant until the critiques and rejection letters began pouring in.

It didn't help that my father thought I was completely stupid for pursuing a degree in English with a creative writing emphasis. I remember a day not long after I graduated college when he pulled me into his office. He asked me what I planned to do.

"I'm going to be a writer," I said, matter-of-fact.

"There's no money in that!" he told me, frowning.

I wondered then if he was right. After all, editors were rejecting my work left and right. My critique groups still found many mistakes in everything I sent off. Maybe I was not cut out to be a writer.

The problem was that I couldn't help it. I had to write. Stories flooded my mind, keeping me awake into the wee hours of morning, until I wrote them down. So instead of giving up I kept trying. Much to my dismay, it seemed that the critics stood as solid obstacles in my path, keeping me from where I wanted to go.

Then one day I had an epiphany. It wasn't the critics who were standing in my way; it was how I dealt with them. I took it all too personally.

### The Critic-al Issue

All writers, at one time or another, have to face criticism. It's the nature of the business. Whether the criticism comes from your critique group, an honest rejection letter, an enraged reader, or your mother-in-law, the critics are ever present and can wreak havoc on your self-esteem. Here are some thoughts on criticism that have helped me develop a thick skin over the years.

### The Brutal Critique

We've all gotten at least one, haven't we? And if you haven't, you surely will once you join a critique group. The brutal critique is when someone tells you, in a less-than-tactful way, that your latest short story or novel chapter is worthless drivel. This can be painful, especially when you feel you've done your best work. Initially, you'll be angry and will feel like telling the critic what you think about his criticism. Relax. It's not a big deal.

Look at it this way: *For every person who likes what you write, two will hate it, and three will be indifferent.* This is the non-scientific formula I use to remind myself that not everyone is going to love what I write. You can't please everyone. When you receive a critique that you find less than tactful, set it aside for a few days. Once you've had a chance to calm down, pick it up and try to read between the lines. Compare the brutal critique to others you've gotten. Does the nasty critic point out things the kinder critics also pointed out? If yes, consider that maybe your brutal critic simply has no tact, or just doesn't care for your writing style. It happens.

You will always be the ultimate decision maker when it comes down to what criticism you *choose* to listen to when revising your work. Be objective. The purpose of a critique is to help writers improve. The people giving the critiques *want* you to improve. Sometimes even brutal critics can give good advice.

On the other hand, some critics are downright mean. I once had a critic who, after reading one of my short stories, told me I had no business being a writer and should give up. Well, I didn't

give up. The critique made me so angry that I posted it above my desk. The critic's attack fueled my determination. Ironically, four years later, the same critic who told me to give up gave me high praise for another short story. I like to think that her insults challenged me to improve. So try to find something positive from everything negative. You might look back and thank your brutal critic years later.

## Rejection Letters

*"I prefer stories that do not put my readers in danger of losing their lunch."*

This is an actual line from a rejection I received five years ago. I learned early on that sometimes you have to be able to laugh *and* learn from a rejection even if it makes you feel like hurling your manuscripts -- or yourself -- from the top of a tall building. One day, after receiving what I thought was an incredibly rude rejection, I went through my reject file and pulled out what I considered the meanest, nastiest, critical comments from editors and typed them up on a sheet of paper. I hung the list over my desk. Every time I read it, I felt a fierce surge of determination wash over me. I thought to myself, "I'll prove you wrong. My next story will be better."

If you are not the type of person for whom rejection stirs determination, try doing the opposite. Find the nicest comments you've received from editors, type them up on a sheet of paper, and hang it over your desk.

Always remember that editors are people, too. Not all editors are going to like what you write, but on the flip side they also know what will sell their publications. I remind myself of this by saying: "Write what you love to write, and find an editor who loves what you write." Pay attention to any personal comments editors make, and try to figure out why your story was rejected. Use rejection as a challenge to succeed, and use personal comments from editors to improve your writing.

Sometimes it takes a while for an editor's comments to sink in. Don't worry, you'll figure them out. It took me years to finally figure out why several of my first short stories were rejected. The realization came while critiquing someone else's story and finding that her story had the same problem as mine. This is why joining a critique group is so important for any writer. By learning to catch other's mistakes, we become more apt to catch our own.

Sometimes you really won't know why your story or book was rejected. Just because your work was rejected does not mean it was terrible. It simply wasn't that editor's cup of tea. Keep sending it out.

## Readers as Critics

Once again, remember that for every person who likes what you write, two will hate it and three will be indifferent. When you do get something published, you may find that you have very public critics who appear in the form of reviewers. This is not necessarily a bad thing. A reader's point of view can help you improve your next book or story. Treat a reader's criticism like you would the criticism from a critique group. Listen to it, learn what you can from it, and disregard the rest.

I've gotten two negative reviews of previously published work. My initial reaction to both was anger. After a few days I realized that one review was the angry rant of a computer programmer who thought my article was a personal attack on him. The other was from a critic who hated my non-fiction book because he did not like my writing style. Once I realized that these critics were expressing opinions that I could do nothing to change, I calmed down, stepped back, took an

objective look at both critics, found that their comments would not help improve my writing, and ignored them entirely.

### **Other Critics: Unsupportive Family and Friends**

I'm convinced that almost every writer has encountered this problem. These people criticize your dreams of being a full time writer, or try to push you into a career with more money making potential. While I've found that most of my family and friends encourage my writing, there have been a few who have made comments meant to discourage me. "You'll never make any money doing that." "You don't write or spell very well. What makes you think you'll ever be a writer?"

When your hopes and dreams are criticized by family and friends it can be extremely painful. It's easier to disregard a stranger than it is to ignore comments from the people you love. So when your mother-in-law rolls her eyes every time you talk about your latest work-in-progress either take it as a challenge to succeed or stop discussing your work with her. Your unsupportive family and friends will rarely change their minds. They expect you to prove yourself to them, and even if you do they may not give you their support. As I see it, the only person you have to prove yourself to is *you*.

I keep a list of people in my mind whom I can go to for support when I need help pulling my self-esteem out of the toilet. Find out who your biggest supporters are and seek them out when you feel like giving up. Avoid the topic of writing with those people who make you feel bad about your writing.

### **You Have the Last Word**

Had I continued to take the critics personally I would have stopped writing years ago. Luckily I found out how to deal with them in a constructive way that works for me. Helpful criticism is not always nice or tactful. It can still hurt no matter how thick your skin is. It can still catch you off guard. Just remember this: criticism is nothing more than one individual's opinion. You have the choice to take it or leave it.

## Dealing With Rejection

I think every writer has a fear of submission and rejection no matter how many books or articles they've sold. Even nowadays, after having sold numerous non-fiction articles, one non-fiction book, a novel, and a few short stories, I still feel queasy when I slip a query or manuscript into the mail. I still get rejection letters, and form rejections at that. For those of you still grappling with fears of submitting and rejection, I'd like to share a real story that may inspire you.

It was my mother who gave me the confidence to make my first professional sale. As a child, she always told me I could do anything in this world so long as I put my mind to it. As an adult, she is always the first person to encourage me to go for my dreams. This situation was no exception.

One day, back in 1997, I was reading a national trade magazine and came across a letter to the editor suggesting they print more computer articles. A tiny thought crept into my mind. I was a writer, and computers were my forte. The thought grew, and by the end of the day, I had an idea.

I went home that night, jotted down some notes, and wrote the first draft of an article. No sooner had I finished the article I began to lose my self-confidence. Who was I to think that I had the experience and know-how to write an article? I tried to rationalize my credentials. I did deal with all the office computers which made me a computer professional of sorts, so I knew what I was talking about, didn't I? I became nervous and sat on the idea for a few days.

Finally, I went to my mother for advice. After sharing my ideas with her, I asked her what she thought.

Without hesitation she said, "You should call the editor and ask if they're interested."

I responded with a look of sheer horror. Everything I'd ever read said you should *never* call an editor to query your work. I became frantic. "That's not how it works, mom! You can't just call an editor. You have to submit a written query or the full article based on the submission guidelines!"

My mom laughed and raised an eyebrow. "I don't see why not. They're human. They don't bite. Besides, this isn't Vogue, it's a trade magazine." I met her comment with a brief moment of silence. Having received brutal rejects on paper, I could only imagine what a phone rejection would be like. I must have given her that 'yeah-right' look because she promptly added, "What's the worst thing that could happen? They could say no, but they can't kick you off the face of the earth. Can they?"

Her words were like a well-needed slap across the face. She was right. A simple *no* wasn't that painful. Even if the words, "how dare you call" were attached. If anything, I would prove to my mom that writers could not call editors out-of-the-blue.

So the following Monday I did what no writer should ever do. I called the editor not expecting to get past the receptionist. Much to my surprise, I was promptly patched through. The editor was excited that I had called, and immediately invited me to submit my article. I submitted the article, she loved it, and I made my first professional sale.

Not one month later, the editor called me for another article and another after that. I ended up writing for the magazine for six years, and received my own bi-monthly computer column as a result.

Mind you, I am not suggesting that writers should start calling editors to query their work. My situation was unique in that I worked within the trade the magazine was geared toward for nine years, I knew the audience first hand, and this particular editor was open to phone calls from industry professionals.

What I am saying is it's okay to send out that query letter, or to submit your work. Be it fiction or non-fiction - go for it. Every time I start feeling hesitant about submitting anything, or become anxious about being rejected, I simply remember my mother's words, "What's the worst

thing that could happen? They could say no, but they can't kick you off the face of the earth. Can they?"

## Turn Rejection Into A Challenge to Succeed

When I first started out, other writers always told me how brutal rejection could be. I laughed, not believing them. I waited months for my first self-addressed-stamped envelope to show up in the mail. When it finally came, I opened the envelope carefully, not wanting to tear its precious contents. Surely there was an acceptance letter enclosed, brimming with high-praise for the short story I had labored over. I was shocked, even surprised when I unfolded the letter only to find a form rejection staring back at me. I thought about it for a little while, then picked up the phone and called a member of my critique group. After crying on her shoulder for an hour, she had me convinced the editor simply did not know a good story when she saw it. So I found another market, printed another copy, and I tried again.

Four form rejections later I found myself holding a hand written rejection signed in *real* ink. It was brief and said, “An interesting story, but not enough focus on the character. I enjoyed your writing style. Please send more.” I was excited to have gotten a personal response, but angry with myself for not having succeeded, and angry with the editor for rejecting my work. The nerve! I’d sell a great story to someone, somewhere. The feeling swelled in my chest like a bomb ready to explode. It was a new found determination to write a better, stronger, more character oriented story. I took the rejection as an opportunity to challenge myself.

I left that story behind and moved on to the next. For every rejection, the more determined I became. My stories changed, becoming more complex and character driven. I began receiving more personalized rejections with requests for more. I even submitted eight short stories (one every other month) to an editor who I’d heard used macro rejections. Not only did I want to collect them all (as if they were baseball cards), but also I wanted a personal response. Signed by a real editor in real editorial ink! It became a strange competition between the rejection letters and me. If I couldn’t get an acceptance letter, in the least I wanted a personal reject. After all, the more personal rejects you had meant the closer you were getting to an acceptance, right?

I became obsessed with my rejection collection. It became my pride and joy. A testament to my hard work, stress, and tears. When other writers would complain about their form rejects I would share some of my more brutal rejections, reveal the contents, and laugh about them. My determination would shine through. My writer friends would shake their heads. “How does this make you determined? How can you be proud of a reject like that? I would have given up if an editor said something like that to me.”

The truth is I love a dare. I love a challenge. For me, every form rejection is a challenge to get a personal reject, and each personal reject is a challenge for me to succeed in selling something. The challenge is what fuels my persistence. Giving up is certainly less fun.

I have two personal rejects I’m particularly proud of. I’d like to share an excerpt from each one:

One editor wrote, “*I do not want to put my reader’s in danger of losing their lunch.*” I laughed so hard when I read this one. It spurred me to write three new short stories, two of which would have put a weak reader in danger of losing her lunch. It was also responsible for two chapters of a non-fiction book, and the abrupt start of my third fiction novel.

Another short fiction editor told me, “*This story makes no sense. Chain mail is heavy, and don’t horses pee where they stand?*” I was very angry about this one at first because it made perfect sense to me. The anger subsided when thoughts of the horse excusing itself to go outside for a *powder break* made me laugh, and I immediately got back to work on another story.

Two years and 50+ rejections later, I received my first acceptance letter. Okay, so you would think a first acceptance letter would be like the creamy filling inside a chocolate éclair. The truth is I was more proud of myself for enduring two years of brutal rejection, which in turn fueled my persistence. The journey through the land of rejection made my arrival sweeter. While I have moved from writing short fiction to non-fiction to novels in recent years, I still find rejections in my mail, but I don’t mind. I have somehow discovered a way to turn the hurt and anger of rejection into something positive and motivating by taking each rejection as a personal challenge to succeed.

# Writer Calamities: The Art of Organization

## Spring Cleaning

It was a cool autumn day when I realized my motivation was not in her room. I hadn't worked on my book for over six months. Not a paragraph, not a sentence, not a single word. Sure, I was writing without her. Though letters to friends and grocery lists cannot really be classified as creative writing. Can they? I needed her help. No matter what, there always seemed to be something more important to do rather than spend time in my office. Neglected, motivation left. This time I left my critique group to find her. Somehow, I was sidetracked, and completely forgot what I was looking for.

After some introspection, I discovered the cause of this strange pervading drought that had taken over my home. It was embodied in the absence of organization, dysfunctional space, and inadequate time management skills. I would sit at the kitchen table night after night talking instead of doing. I allowed the thoughts of what had to be done become intimidating and overwhelming. That's when I declared my office a disaster area, and probably the point at which my motivation to write vanished.

Now, I'm not a messy person. I keep my house tidy. My office, on the other hand, was the pit from hell. I vicariously threw everything in there and left it where it fell. A messy workspace is the sign of a creative mind? Possibly. More probably, however, a messy workspace is a workspace not being used.

In pursuit of order and hoping to find my motivation, I attempted Feng Shui. But it was too complex and didn't seem to work. Putting a mirror on the wall opposite the window no more dispersed negativity than painting the door red attracted manuscript sales. I watched TV for hours hoping to find my motivation hiding on the set of a sci-fi re-run. She wasn't and I didn't.

I examined the problem further. It seemed to go deeper than mere cosmetics. Each time I straightened up, it wasn't enough. The mess returned. The mess ran deeper than I wanted to admit. My desk remained buried in paperwork. My closet was packed with plastic totes whose contents were a complete mystery. My floors were buried with the overflow of \*things\*. It was anyone's guess how I could find my keyboard let alone motivation.

It took me several months to admit I needed help. Lots of help. Out of desperation I did what many writers with no motivation do. I sat down in front of the TV and tuned in to PBS. As luck would have it the program on was about organization. Inspired by my superstitious notions of divine intervention I decided, then and there, that I needed to ask a professional about their organizational skills.

I called on a writer friend. "I've lost my motivation! Help!" I cried.

My friend had sold several books, and was writing her millionth (so it seemed) article for a

major magazine. She agreed to come over and take a look. After all, she wasn't quite sure what "My motivation is hiding" really meant.

When she entered the house she looked around, puzzled, as if she expected some disaster. "Oh no, not in here," I explained as I led her from my tidy living room, down the hall to my office. I flung open the office door and stood back, allowing her full access. "Here."

She gasped. "What happened?"

"What do you mean what happened?" I asked.

"It looks like a wild animal was let loose in here. I'm surprised you get anything done!"

"I don't get anything done. That's the problem," I explained.

She laughed. "I can see why. You can organize it all you want, but maintaining order is half the battle. There is some link between organization and success when it comes to writing. If you can't organize your space, how do you organize your mind?"

With her help I created a list of rules to help me get organized, and stay that way.

- Rule #1 - If you don't need it or use it - store it or get rid of it.
- Rule #2 - Make sure you can get to the stuff you use often.
- Rule #3 - Everything has a place.
- Rule #4 - When you are done with something, put it back in its place.
- Rule #5 - You don't need seventy-five hard copies of your most recent draft.
- Rule #6 - The floor is not "extra room" for future files, books, etc..
- Rule #8 - If it doesn't belong in your workspace, then it shouldn't be there.

After almost a year of not writing anything, it took only a few days to thoroughly examine my office and get it into order. Imagine my happiness when I finally found my motivation hiding behind my desk. She looked parched and thin, and she was a little cranky. She pulled herself out from behind the desk and brushed herself off. As I slipped the last book into its place on the bookshelf I turned to her and asked: "Where have you been?" She scowled at me and shook her head. I already knew the answer. She had been trapped by the mess, and couldn't get out. What she was doing behind the desk in the first place is anyone's guess. I decided not to ask.

## What Is Your Point? (First Printed in *Vision: A Resource for Writers*, 2005)

*"I failed to see the point of this story. You must have wanted to say something, or you wouldn't have written it."*  
Sincerely, Editor.

*"I didn't care if your characters lived or died."* Sincerely, Editor.

Let's face it, short fiction can be tough to write. I received numerous rejects like the ones above before I finally figured out what I was doing wrong. The revelation came to me as I was critiquing another writer's short story. After forcing myself to read the entire 6,000 words I put my pen to the manuscript and scribbled the first thing that came to mind, "This story has no point, and I could care less about the characters."

That is when it hit me. I was not simply having a revelation about the story in front of me. I was describing my own short fiction. Later that day I went through all my rejected short fiction manuscripts.

My short fiction had too much back-story irrelevant to the plot. The story always started before something interesting happened. I often tossed in too many characters. As a result, my characters had no depth, and no distinct voices. I was trying to shove too much into too little space. My plots often went nowhere, or were not interesting in the least. As my husband described it, "This happened, then this happened, etcetera, etcetera, he died."

I wasn't really telling a story. Instead, I was simply sharing an irrelevant and boring event in the everyday lives of a motley crew of characters. The main character (if the reader was able to find her amongst the variety of company) never changed or grew. The motivations behind my villains weren't convincing. The resolutions were too simplistic and unrealistic.

As a result of my epiphany, I came up with a seven-point check system to make sure my latest masterpiece wasn't just another bland story with apathetic characters.

1. Make sure the first paragraph throws the reader right into the middle of the action. The first sentence should be interesting enough to entice the reader to keep reading. "Janet's hand met John's face with a whip-like crack." is much more interesting than "It was a cool morning in mid-September." The reader wants to know why Janet slapped John. A weather report is irrelevant, and has nothing to do with the story.
2. Limit the number of characters based on their relevance to the plot. This gives the writer room to develop them. If Bill and Adam merely sit on the sidelines watching Janet slap John, and do nothing to further the plot, they have no purpose. Get rid of them.

3. Make sure the plot is compelling. Janet and John have a fight; they break up, the end. This is not a compelling plot. Janet and John have a fight over his drug use. Janet walks out on John and as a result he seeks help for his drug addiction. John tries to get Janet back, but slips into his old ways. At this point John realizes he has to leave Janet behind in order to overcome his addiction. This is much more interesting. Not to mention that John, the main character, grows and changes as a result of the events in the story.
4. Make sure what you choose to add is relevant to the story. The fact that John has a pet ferret has nothing to do with his drug addiction. However, feel free to mention that John grew up in the ghetto and learned quickly that selling drugs on the street was easy money. Keep every aspect of the story relevant.
5. Make sure you have a clear antagonist the reader can easily identify. The antagonist in this story is John's drug addiction. Janet is merely the catalyst who moves the story forward, making John realize he has a problem that he must overcome before it destroys him.
6. Go through your story and make sure the protagonist's solutions to the problem are realistic and not too simplistic. Make sure your protagonist struggles. Without struggle to overcome a difficulty, a story will fall flat. You want the reader to cheer your main character on, feel bad when he fails, and feel joy when he succeeds. John simply walking into rehab one day and leaving clean a week later is too easy. Make him struggle with it. Make him yearn for the drug. Maybe even slip back into the habit for a short time.
7. Make sure your antagonist has a realistic and clear motivation. Certainly John's drug addiction has no aspiration to take over the world, but it is fighting with John's body and mind and ruining his life. If your antagonist is a person, why does he want to take over the world/kidnap the girl/ or steal the Orb of Uvbah? "Just because" doesn't cut it. Give him a real motivation. Something convincing.

I've recently discovered that if I can look at a piece of short fiction and say, "Yep, I have all of these points covered," it is less likely I will receive a rejection letter later asking, "What's your point?"

## **Why We All Need Editors, Critique Groups, and Beta Readers**

...Because quite frankly, we all suck to some degree. I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just that none of us is perfect. I don't care if you're making millions and have been writing since the dawn of time. If you're a writer, you're going to make a typo, spell something wrong, write an awkward sentence, make a consistency error, find yourself with a plot hole, or miss something important. No writer is immune to making mistakes.

This means that all of us can benefit from having critique groups/partners, beta readers, and editors. Each of these groups/people have different functions.

### **Critique Groups/Partners**

Now not all writers have a critique group per se. Some just have critique partners and that partner could even be a family member or friend (someone who's been trained to find fault, ask questions, and really make the writer think about her work). When choosing a critique group you'll want to make sure the other members are at the same level you're at (i.e. already submitting for professional publication or already published or whatever). Critique group critiques go beyond grammar and spelling errors. As a matter of fact you should always send very clean copy through your critique group so they're not sidetracked by technical issues. The critique group will help you catch plot problems, unrealistic character reactions, consistency errors, and major issues hampering story flow or whatnot. Obviously – critique groups consist of other writers. Critique partners may not be writers, but rather critical readers.

### **Beta Readers**

A beta reader is basically someone who gets to read your book first and give you their opinion. These people are often just readers and better yet – readers who are actually well-read in the genre in which you're writing. This will give them a foundation to draw upon and your work can be compared to what's already on the market. These people may catch things your critique group or partners didn't.

### **Editors**

Editors are simultaneously critics, beta readers, and proofreaders. They are the final step between you and publication. Their job is to make sure your manuscript reaches the printer in its most polished form. You'll notice most books will still have at least 1-3 errors in them even after editing. This is normal. After all, you're dealing with human beings. Even editors aren't perfect.

The point of all these folks is to make sure the work you unleash upon the public is the best work you can produce and that the final product, your book, showcases your story with minimal error.

## Practical Advice for Critiquing Others' Work

1. Read the story or chapter once over and let the story sink in. The hardest part for a writer critiquing the work of another writer is that we think like writers. What we need to do is stop for a second and read the story first as readers. Then ask yourself the following questions and answer them for the writer:
  - Could I see where I was?
  - Is the characterization strong? Could I see the people? Hear them?
  - Do I know what is happening?
  - Are there any major flaws that threw me?
  - Is there anything I don't understand?
  - What did I like the best?
  - What did I like the least?
  - Do I know who the protagonist is?
  - Do I know who the antagonist is?
  - Do I sympathize with the protagonist and dislike the antagonist?
  - Do I want to keep reading?

If you can think of any other questions add them here. Sometimes the answers to these questions may not be evident as in the case of novel chapters. When critiquing novels where you missed the first few chapters be sure never to make assumptions that the writer didn't explain something. You may have missed the chapter it was explained in. If you have the time, ask for the previous chapters.

2. Second, go through the manuscript and, if you must, you can check for grammar, sentence structure, word choice, spelling, punctuation et al. Remember while doing this that you are most likely critiquing a first, second, or third draft. I don't know any writer who can put something down on paper perfectly the first time around. Not to mention that after looking at your own work for hours on end, one comma splice or awkward sentence isn't going to stand out unless you're relatively anal. In more experienced critique groups you should be getting more polished drafts anyway.

3. Now you will want to write your critique. **Here are a few pointers to help you remain considerate and tactful when writing critiques:**

- a) **Never critique the writer** with comments like: "As a writer you should know better..." or "You have no business writing..." or "You'll never get published because..." and so on. Believe me, some people actually critique this way. Critiques like this can cause resentment and break up an otherwise great critique group.
- b) **Phrase the problems you have with the work as questions**, or ideas for improvement such as, "Was Sharon a cyber-cop or a member of the rebellion or both? I was a bit confused about this because...." or "Since Sharon is a cyber-cop and not a member of the rebellion (from what I gathered) perhaps you could clarify that she is merely posing as a member of the rebellion because she's undercover..."

c) If you can use comedy to present the things that bothered you or that weren't done very well, this works too. For those of us without the gift of tactful comedy carefully phrasing your critique works wonders.

d) **Always end the critique with the things you liked** or you felt the writer did well. That way they know you aren't completely out to get them. If you feel it's a good story, enough for publication, you may even suggest markets for them to try. If you are having a hard time finding something you liked you may want to look a little harder. Maybe there was an idea that was unique or you see a lot of room for expansion. Or perhaps the whole concept of a character was good. There is something good in everything.

## Marketing Your Book Before It Comes Out: Thirty Creative, Low Cost Ideas

Many aspiring writers I know seem to think that only self-published writers have to market their books. They work on the assumption that once they sell their novel the publisher is going to do the rest for them. Unfortunately this myth is perpetuated by writing support groups across the country. I learned this wasn't true even before I sold my novel. My first tip off was when an acquaintance of mine, who had just sold her first book to a large fantasy publisher, made her own bookmarks and began attending conventions six full months before her book's scheduled release date. Her publisher did provide her with the bookmarks. But before she got them, she used MS Word and a template, and took her "generic" bookmark down to her local Kinko's and had about fifty of them printed up.

Her reasoning, "My publisher's marketing material won't be out for a few more months, so if I didn't make my own, I would have squandered an opportunity. The publisher will be placing ads in some of the big genre magazines, helping my book get pro reviews and getting some big name writers to blurb my book. Otherwise, most of the marketing is up to me. The publishers use the bulk of their marketing budget on the big names. I was advised by others to do some foot work on my own, so I am."

Well before I even sold my first novel, I started a list, with the help of more experienced writers, of inexpensive marketing ideas to get the ball rolling and to get my name out there. Once I sold the novel I got in gear and started marketing myself. You can do most of this before your book is even out. Some of the items on this list require computer skills. Other parts require that you just get out there a little more. Don't worry if you're shy or reclusive. You won't have to become more social unless you want to. You just have to get involved, accept help from enthusiastic friends who want to help you out, and turn everyday social activities into a positive situation for you and your novel by, in the very least, talking to people. You'd be amazed at how easily "How are you today?" can turn into "When is your book coming out?" even when you're talking to the clerk at the post office.

- Start writing articles and submit them to writer's magazines, e-zines, and newsletters (like this one). That way you can mention your book in your bio and get your name out there.
- Learn HTML, or get a WYSIWYG web page creation program and build yourself a website if you already haven't.
- Buy [www.yourname.com](http://www.yourname.com) and use it. You can usually park your domain on top of your existing URL for as little as \$1 a month.
- Build banners for your book at <http://www.addesigner.com/> or other free banner site, then seek out relative banner exchange programs and join them.
- Join WebRings. (If you think this will take up too much space on your website or make it look less than professional, make a page specifically for these links)

- Trade links with other authors and your friends. Add your links to as many link lists you can find. Especially those genre related under the author section.
- List yourself in author directories like [www.writers.net](http://www.writers.net)
- Start an online blog. [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com) [www.journalspace.com](http://www.journalspace.com) [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)
- Use a site like Author's Den <http://www.authorsden.com/> to post articles, list published work, list your bio, etc... They also have an inexpensive press release service, newsletter option, and bookstore.
- Make it a point to keep writing and submitting short fiction to genre magazines. Make sure to tell them you are the author of a forthcoming novel. Many readers find new authors by reading their shorter work in online and print magazines.
- Start looking for names of reviewers in your genre and make a list. This way you won't be scrambling for reviewers when your book comes out. Also start looking for opportunities for interviews (print/radio/TV).
- Utilize any local writing group, especially if they offer support and recognition for published members. My local group, Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers, has a Published Author's Liaison that helps generate publicity, and they offer mailers members can be listed in. Plus, the member authors are often invited to participate in local events. If you don't have a group like this in your area, you might consider starting one. All it takes is a few hours a month and a few well placed ads where other writers will notice them.
- Start maintaining a list of all the bookstores within a thirty-mile radius with their phone numbers. Visit them and talk to the managers, mention that your book is coming out and when the time comes, you'd really love to do book signings. That way, when you finally approach them with your press kit, they'll already know you.
- Get actively involved in writers e-lists, online forums, and communities if you already aren't. The more people who know who you are the more potential readers for your work. Plus, never underestimate the power of networking with other writers. Opportunities for article and story publication often arise from networking.
- Start planning a publication party for your family and friends. Make invitations, and build a guest list. Hold the party 2-3 weeks after your book comes out, and send your invitations two weeks before the event. Serve crackers, cheese, sandwich wedges, soda, and juice. It doesn't have to be black tie, catered, etc... Have it on a weekend afternoon for a four hour period where people can just stop by, or stay for the whole thing. The more convenient it is for your guests, the more likely most people who were invited will show up. Tell them to bring their friends if they want. Make sure you have a small supply of books on hand, plenty of bookmarks and cards, and also make sure you tell people, on the invitation, to get a copy of your book ahead of time and bring it with them so you can sign it.
- Make generic bookmarks for your book, carry them around, and pass them out when the opportunity arises. Trade bookmarks with other authors (local or national) so you can pass out yours and theirs and they will do the same for you. This can double your exposure and cover more ground with the same amount of time invested.
- Start going to conventions that cater to your genre, and attend writer's conferences if only to get a feel for them. While you're there, hand out bookmarks and business cards when the opportunity arises, and be sure to introduce yourself to event coordinators and other authors.
- Use a service like [www.cafepress.com](http://www.cafepress.com) to have t-shirts, mugs, stickers, and other advertising stuff made up. (You'll need to know how to make your own graphics, but you can do it with

MSWord, Paint, and/or MS Publisher, which are standard on most computers nowadays.) You will get a great discount, you can link it to your website so fans of your work can buy the items after your book comes out (you make a small commission), AND it's the easy way to buy low volume advertising gear on an as needed basis. Hold contests etc... to give away this stuff. You can even start planning to host fiction writing contests at local high schools, offering a copy of your novel, a t-shirt, and a \$25 gift certificate from a local bookstore as the grand prize.

- Start planning a mailing campaign to send postcards and e-mail to people you know, announcing your books release. Once you start attending book signings, leave a pen and the list on the table where people can sign up for your mailing or e-list. Free e-list services can be found at Authors Den [www.authorsden.com](http://www.authorsden.com) , <http://lists.topica.com> , and [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) and can easily be added to your web page so fans can sign up.
- Make yourself business cards, on your home computer, to hand out.
- Utilize websites like Facebook, MySpace, [www.classmates.com](http://www.classmates.com) to herald your accomplishments as a writer. I have gotten hundreds of hits on my website from my listing on these places. Chances are some of my old classmates will buy my book when it comes out. (Don't worry if you weren't popular when you were in high school. I wasn't.)
- When you have your family holiday photos done, ask the photographer if (s)he will take several pictures of you by yourself. This way you save on sitting fees and time, and end up with a professional photo of yourself for use on your websites, listings, bookmarks etc... You may also get lucky and find a photographer looking to build his portfolio in which case you can get free pictures in exchange for letting the photographer use your picture. (S)he may also link to your site since (s)he has photographed someone "famous" if you return the link in kind.
- Utilize your signature files in newsgroup settings, forums, and e-mail to announce your forthcoming book. That way every time you send an e-mail or post you are advertising yourself.
- If possible, contact your college writing professors or your high school English teacher and tell them about your book. Mention that you would be willing to come talk to their classes or attend a career day event. Don't forget to thank them for the inspiration and encouragement they provided you. If they are no longer there, you can still contact teachers and tell them that you went to that high school or college and would like to offer to speak. High schools are usually thrilled when one of their students turns out successful because it's a positive mark for them. For colleges, utilize your alumni association's publication to announce your book's release. They may even want to interview you for a feature article.
- Give out a few generic bookmarks and business cards to your more "social" friends and family members, and ask them to pass out the materials if the opportunity arises. I have a friend who is very social and travels in circles where the majority of the people read fantasy. She agreed to help me spread the word by passing out cards and bookmarks, and even agreed to help cater my publication party. So if you have an enthusiastic friend who offers to help, gladly accept!
- Start looking into the costs of buying small ad spaces on genre related websites and/or magazines, especially those ran by fans of the genre. They're usually VERY inexpensive.
- Get involved with your community by teaching a writing class to seniors or volunteering to help at local festivals. The more you get yourself out there, the more people you meet, the

more people who know about your book, the more people who will want to read it. Plus, you may be invited to other events as a result.

- Support local literacy programs and get to know the librarians at your local library.
- Mentor other aspiring writers in your local/online writing groups and pay forward. Aspiring writers know many other aspiring writers. Word of your kindness will spread and you'll build a reputation. More people will recognize your name when they see it.
- Always take the opportunity to attend parties, and events hosted by groups of people who read in your genre. For example, many fantasy fans tend toward clubs like the SCA (a medieval re-creationist group), ren fairs, and certain types of music. You can hand out bookmarks, cards, and just talk to people while you're there having a good time. Also, for my genre specifically, a vast majority of readers are into alternative religions. I often frequent stores catering to the metaphysical, not only because I share the same interests my readers do, but because it gives me a chance to meet with my potential readers. What are your readers interested in?
- Once your book is out, get over to Amazon's Author Central and set up your Amazon page and jump on Goodreads and claim your author page there.
- Once your book is out buy at least 10-20 copies of your book and slate them for contests and giveaways. Readers like free books and authors should love giving them. Big publishers give hundreds of free copies away. While you may be small press or Indie, it's worth it for you to give books away.

Always keep your eyes open for opportunities to herald your forthcoming novel, but don't push it on anyone. Let the opportunity present itself (and it will!). Once your book is finally out, you'll be busy with book signings, conventions, and interviews before you know it, but only if you start finding and listing possible sources for all of this now. Be creative and have fun. None of this stuff takes as much time as you would think it does. It's not that hard, especially when you use the internet for research. Even five hours a week can get results, and anything is better than nothing. You **can** be the key to your book's success regardless the size of your publisher or the size of your marketing budget.

# The Myths and Reality of being a Fiction Writer

A humorous look at some of the myths all writers wish were true.

My writing group and I sat down not too long ago and came up with a list of myths the average person, and even some struggling writers have about the writing life. The following list (meant to be honest, sarcastic and funny) compiles my responses to these myths.

## **Anyone can be a writer because writing is easy:**

Wrong. Writing takes a lot of dedication, patience, persistence, time, and a thick skin. There is a lot more to writing than sitting down, throwing some words on paper and calling it good. Successful writers will spend countless hours on a book, or months on a short story before they will even consider sending it out into the world. They will also spend countless hours a year researching markets, preparing cover letters, synopses, and queries in order to try and sell their work. Most writers work steadily for years before selling anything. In 2004 I spent over 3000 hours writing wrote over 300K of material (if not more) and made a whopping \$8 out of 30-40 submissions. I either love writing a lot, or I'm crazy. This year was considerably better. Enough to buy a month's worth of groceries at least.

## **My college professors say I'm a great writer, therefore I am, and I will get published with ease:**

Many of us are above average writers and heard the same thing when we were in college. So congratulations! People who believe this should consider themselves a drop in the ocean of above average writers. There are millions of us out here, of which hundreds of us are writing in the same genre. For our genre, there are only a hundred or fewer publication slots open for our work in any given year. The chances of being unknown and getting one of those slots is about 1 in 1,000 (I might be being a little too liberal in this guesstimate).

## **All writers hang at the coffee shop:**

I guess that depends if the person is more interested in talking about being a writer or actually writing. Speaking for myself, I need a calm, quiet atmosphere to write in. The only writers I've met who fit the stereotype of hanging out at the local Starbucks are college students in love with calling themselves writers, or writers who really love coffee house coffee. I've been there and done that, but discovered I prefer my own home brew.

## **All writers wear turtlenecks and quote famous writers:**

Well, some writers do prefer turtlenecks I suppose. Anyone for turtlenecks? But for the rest of us, we dress like everyone else. Do we quote other famous writers? Sometimes. My favorite quote is "*You can't wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club.*" Jack London.

### **The step from college publication to real world publication is a breeze:**

Ha! More often than not, the step from college publication to the real world of publishing will send the infamous 2x4 of reality hurling toward your head. I'm speaking from personal experience here. If the writer is realistic (s)he may be able to duck, missing being knocked on her ass. If not, I hope she doesn't have a bony ass. It can take months, even years for those bruises to heal. (Once again, I know this from experience)

### **A writer will be set once he finishes that first novel:**

Finishing is only half the battle. Then there's the rewrite (lather, rinse, repeat), the polish, and trying to sell the damn thing. And if the writer is lucky to sell it, agents and editors will probably ask for additional editing and rewriting after that! At any given time, there are several thousand writers, many of them already known, trying to sell their latest novel, which leaves even fewer slots for unknown authors at the major publishing houses. Thank God for small press. All writers are at the mercy of the subjective judgment of agents and editors just like everyone else. All we can do is write the best novels we can, without expectations of selling them. Expecting a sell is like setting yourself up for disappointment. Not only that, but once the writing is done, the book is sold, and the book is published, the marketing begins. Writers have to actively help market their work regardless the size of their publisher. If a writer hates marketing, writing may not be the best career choice for them. Unless they have lots of money and can hire a PR firm. I'm not one of those.

### **Any writer can get a book published easily:**

Of course. Many vanity and subsidiary publishers would be happy to publish the new writer's latest novel for a fee. Plus there are services like Lulu and CreateSpace that you can use to publish whatever you want. So I guess this could be a valid statement. And not all self-published books suck (I'm living proof of that, best-selling NF indie author that I am). But if a writer thinks this is the easy way to get their book out there, they're in for a reality check. Self-published writers have to work even harder.

On the other hand, the reality with traditional publishers is they have to think the work is good enough to warrant their investment, and it could take several years, if not more, to find a traditional publisher who believes in a novel as much as the writer does.

The other possibility is that the book won't sell at all. Writing really is a labor of love because there is no guarantee a writer will be able to sell his novel, or the novel after that, or the novel after that. And self-publishing does not guarantee a writer an audience or a writing career either.

### **Once a writer sells their first book, they have it made:**

Ugh! When I sold my novel, I had co-worker after co-worker approach me asking if I got a six figure deal! It was annoying rather than funny at the time, but in retrospect, I have to laugh. Not all novelists are destined to become wealthy or famous from their books. The Stephen King's and JK Rowling's of the world are the exception rather than the rule. However, the average mid-list

novelist can make 30-50K a year writing books once they become known and develop a fan base. The average advance on a first novel placed with a large publisher (in fantasy anyway) is about \$4K. Even less or no advance at all, with independent small publishers. The better known a writer becomes, and if their sales numbers warrant it, the more money a writer can make on future novel advances. Yep, writing really is a business. In the meantime, this information lends credentials to the saying, "Keep your day job."

**I want to have a career as a writer because it will give me more free time:**

Hehehe. Novelists still have to work an eight hour day (oftentimes more) to make their writing a viable source of income. I put in a minimum of 20 hours of writing a week after working 50-60 hours a week at my day job. While the full-time writer's hours may be more convenient, I suspect they don't have as much free time as they'd like. Chances are they're working that same 50-80 hours (includes writing time) a week I'm working. The difference is they're spending all that time on writing stuff, whereas I'm splitting my time.

**I am going to write the next great American novel!**

Yeah –and so is every other person in the U.S. I've learned. A family acquaintance actually told me about his idea for the great American novel a few years back and I wanted to smack him for being so trite. If I had a dime for every time I've heard this, I'd be a wealthy woman. So, if there is anyone out there reading this who really thinks they're going to write the next great American novel, send me a dime! Just attach it to a piece of paper with some tape, throw it in an envelope, and mail it to XXXXXXXXXXXX. Thanks. Oh, and if you do write the next great American novel your dime is fully refundable. (It could happen)

So, I hope everyone got a good laugh from this article. I know that I enjoyed responding to these myths because I've heard each and every one of them far too many times in the past twenty years. Happy writing!

### **Books by S. J. Reisner (Fantasy & Writing Life):**

Left Horse Black (Sorcerers' Twilight Book One)

Warrior's Blood Red (Sorcerers' Twilight Book Two)

Eagle's Talon Gray (Sorcerers' Twilight Book Three) – Coming in 2011

The Unicorns War Softly (short story collection)

Indie Author: The Writing Life When You've Gone Rogue (essay collection)

### **Books by S. J. Reisner writing as Audrey Brice (Paranormal Mystery)**

Outer Darkness (OTS Mystery)

Into Darkness (OTS Mystery) – Coming in 2011

### **Books by S. J. Reisner writing as S. Connolly (Spirituality/Magick)**

Modern Demonolatry

The Complete Book of Demonolatry

The Daemonolater's Guide to Daemonic Magick

Daemonolatry Goetia

The Art of Creative Magick

Kasdeya Rite of Ba'al: Blood Rite of the Fifth Satan

Demonolatry Rites

The Coven: A Group Leader's Guide (2011)

Honoring Death: Daemonolatry Necromancy (2011)

The Daemonolater's Guide to Grimoiric Magick (2012)