



FTHR Online Workshop – August 2006

No Rules, Just Right

Presenter: CJ Lyons

Course Description:

What are the "rules" of successful fiction writing? Should you follow them? Or should you break them?

Award-winning medical suspense author CJ Lyons will discuss the rules using examples from industry professionals. She will discuss head-hopping, genre-mixing, the toxic backstory dump, the hero and heroine's meet and greet and other "rules." CJ will give you the information you need to understand why the rules exist and when to ignore them and just write.

About the Instructor:

CJ Lyons has lived most of her life on the edge. Trained in Pediatric Emergency Medicine, she has assisted police and prosecutors with cases involving child abuse, rape, homicide and Munchausen by Proxy. She has worked in numerous trauma centers, on the Navajo reservation, as a crisis counselor, victim advocate, as well as a flight physician for Life Flight and Stat Medevac.

A Golden Heart Finalist in Romantic Suspense and winner of the Golden Gateway, CJ is a member of Romance Writers of America, Sisters in Crime and Kiss of Death. She has contributed columns to the Kiss of Death newsletter, CrimeSpree, and WebMystery Magazine. She has presented workshops to the MWA, RWA, and Nittany Valley Writers Workshop among others. Her medical thriller, BLINK OF AN EYE, will be published by Tor Books, summer 2007.

For more information go to her website at <http://www.cjlyons.net>

INTRODUCTION

This is a topic that grew out of a single lecture of my month-long Chasing the Muse workshop, but it was so popular that people wanted to spend more time discussing it.

So here we go...

There are good rules and bad ones. Rules, like punctuation and grammar that help us communicate our stories more effectively. And other rules that seem designed to make it impossible to ever fulfill our goals--like the "rule" that you can't get published without an agent but you can't get an agent until you're published...

One of the things I've learned is that following the rules can get you in just as much trouble as breaking them.

So, what's a writer to do?

Why, write, of course!

Seriously, it is my firm belief that if you write with passion and with your reader in mind (in other words you work hard to entertain your reader, not just yourself) then you'll find success.

But there are some rules that can make it harder and some that can make it easier. Understanding which work for you and which don't will make your path to publication easier and more enjoyable.

Susan Gable and Holly Jacobs asked me which rules I had broken in selling my first book, BLINK OF AN EYE. They included my answer in their recent RWA presentation, We Don't Need No Stinkin' Rules!

Here it is for you:

I think I've broken all the rules <g>

My hero is an artist (and a major crime squad detective), I use multiple POV, children die, the hero and heroine don't meet until chapter 3 (although you're in both of their POV prior to that), and it's cross-genre: medical thriller/dark suspense with a romance central and integral to the story.

Despite, or because all of this, BLINK OF AN EYE still managed to be a Golden Heart Finalist and was sold to my editor based on my first chapter because she loved my voice.

The GH was my first RWA contest, but there was another with a deadline around the same time, so I entered BLINK in that as well, in their mainstream category. Guess what? Those judges hated it! The things my editor loved about the story were the same things they deducted points for, which goes to show if I had followed the rules, I may never have sold!"

Some "rules" are just plain silly and seem to exist only in the minds of people determined to see others fail. An example would be the judge who deducted multiple points and wrote me a treatise on romance conventions, proclaiming that no New York editor would ever buy my work because....my hero wasn't tall enough.

Since her scores and comments arrived after I'd become a Golden Heart finalist and sold BLINK OF AN EYE in a hardcover, pre-empt deal to Tor Books, I laughed. But I would hate to see anyone else who received similar comments put their faith in playing by the "rules" rather than following their own heart.

My advice? Learn the rules. Learn which ones are true rules and which, in the words of Captain Jack Sparrow, are merely "guidelines". Then learn when and how to break them. And my personal motto: No rules, just write.

I've asked published authors to give us examples of the rules they've successfully broken as well as those that work for them.

And fair warning: because of copyright restrictions, I will be quoting from some of my own work. Sorry for the BSP, but I don't want any lawyers to come knocking on my door!

During our first week together we'll be discussing head-hopping, genre bending, toxic backstory dumps, and the all important hero/heroine meet and greet. During the second week, I'd like to talk about some of the rules of the publishing world including contests, multiple submissions, how to tackle revisions and working with editors.

Finally, I hope to have time to go over some examples from you guys, so if you have comments from contest judges or critique partners about a passage and want objective opinions, feel free to chime in!!

This workshop works best with group participation, so send any questions or comments at any time. If a question ties in with an upcoming lecture, I might wait to answer it until the day of that lecture, but I will get to it.

Rule" #1: STICK TO ONE POV PER SCENE:

"You changed POV in several places. You should stick to one POV per scene. Score = 2 out of 5" - contest judge on BLINK OF AN EYE

Okay, lets jump right in with the standard "rules". First up: no head-hopping.

Actually, I agree with this to some extent. I hate head-hopping when it becomes intrusive to the point of jarring me from the story. Especially if there seems to be no reason for changing POV other than the author's whim.

So what is POV and why do we need it at all? Why don't we just spew out whatever comes to mind, as long as the story is told?

POV is a tool to both focus and anchor the reader in the world you are creating. It's like weaving a spider's web--one strand broken and the whole thing collapses. So if changing POV too often jars the reader from your fictional universe, then you're not doing your job. Remember, our one and only job is to entertain our readers. Everything else is secondary.

How do we entertain our readers? By allowing them to vicariously live and feel the emotions and situations we are placing our characters in. So how do we get total strangers interested in characters and a world they know doesn't really exist?

You got it, POV. Well, it's one of the tools anyway.

My definition of point of view: the distance between the narrator (you) and the characters in the story.

In my mind, I "see" point of view as a spectrum. First person is at the extreme end of the spectrum. That's about as immediate as you can get, actually "living" inside the characters as events unfold.

The next closest pov is what I call close third person and others call "deep" pov. This is where the writer is like a documentary crew living inside the character's head. They can see more than first person but the story is told via this character's thoughts, actions, reactions and emotions. Often you'll find their thoughts wrapped in with exposition, pulling the reader inside the character's head without their realizing it.

I enjoy using this close third person or deep pov when I want the reader to really forge a strong and immediate bond with a character. So I use it for my main characters, occasionally for a secondary character if they have a vital role to play but aren't on stage very long, and sometimes for my badguys. Yes, I enjoy getting inside the badguy's head and even making them sympathetic to the audience. Deep pov is a good way to do this.

A more distant pov is regular third person pov. This is what, until recently, most fiction was written in. The narrator reveals some of the character's thoughts or reactions, but not all—and they identify it when they do by using tag lines such as "he thought". It is easy to "head hop" from one character to another using this pov because you're not firmly anchored in any one character for an extended length of time.

I mix deep pov and regular third person at times to create the illusion that a group of characters are really one character. For instance, in a wip, I have two kids who are virtually inseparable. I freely head hop from one to the other as if they were one character experiencing the world together—which they are. Then for dramatic purposes I'll use deep pov to explore more closely when they do have different reactions, thus revealing more about each individual as the story progresses.

I also use this technique in my sex scenes to reveal how the two individual characters become "one" for a short time—I think it adds impact to the relationship, especially when they're forced apart again.

I try to keep the reader anchored by making every POV change reveal a new facet of a character--something that could not be known without being in his or her mind. If this is something unexpected that gives the reader insight the other characters don't share, then a POV switch can be a powerful tool to develop reader identification and anticipation--two keys to keep those pages turning.

POV changes can also be used to increase suspense. By breaking from the heroine's POV as she's in a life and death struggle with the nemesis and joining the hero as he's sitting in his car, fiddling with his radio, wondering why she's late for their date, the reader's anticipation builds. What will happen? Can she save herself? Will he get to her in time?

Or, in my books where no one is immune to danger, what happens if he doesn't make it?

One of the masters of frequent POV changes is Nora Roberts, especially in her JD Robb books. She uses POV to create the illusion that when Eve and Roarke are together, they are in essence one character with two bodies. This synergy helps to heighten the awareness of

the reader as they experience how much in love these two very different people are. It also increases conflict and tension when they must follow separate paths.

In a few of her novels, there have been times where I've spotted her changing POV from one person to the other in the SAME sentence! I caught it and it distracted me a bit, but I doubt if any non-writers realized it. That's how slick she is.

I wouldn't recommend trying this without examining a master, like Nora, and learning how she makes it work. In her hands, pov changes are virtually seamless, woven into the fabric of the story. But, one misstep, one clunky POV change and you can totally throw your reader out of the story and they may never pick it up again.

The most distant pov is omniscient. I've seen this in literary novels and some classics, but it's rare. This is when the narrator acts as "god" able to travel forward and back in time, all knowing and commenting on things outside the character's scope of knowledge, head hopping at will and even intruding with their own comments. Things like: if Julio had only known...

So how to get your readers closer to the action your character is experiencing? First, I'd start by reading a variety of books and analyzing how the authors use pov. How does Nora Roberts get away with head hopping—sometimes in the same sentence! How does Robert Parker make a first person narrative compelling even though you only see and know what the main character does? How do Suzanne Brockmann and Tara Janzen get under the skin of their characters with their deep pov?

Play with it, have fun! Try writing a simple descriptive scene—say someone changing a flat tire—from a variety of pov.

Start with omniscient: Sally knew nothing about how to change a tire, but if she didn't learn quickly, she would never meet the future father of her children.

Then try first person: I banged my head against the steering wheel, adding to my already throbbing headache. What the hell was I going to do now? I've never changed a tire in my life.

Now, play with the in between.

Here's deep third: Sally banged her head against the steering wheel. A chorus of tympanis pounded behind her eyes, adding to her misery. Hell's bells. Should have paid attention when Dad tried to teach her how to change a tire all those years ago. Should have paid attention to a lot of things... She sighed and opened the car door, ignoring the insistent ding of the alarm. What the hell did she know about changing a tire?

And finally, plain third: Sally banged her head against the steering wheel. Hells bells, she thought. Why didn't I pay attention to Dad when he tried to teach me how to change a tire? She sighed and opened the car door, ignoring the insistent ding of the alarm. "What the hell do I know about changing a tire?" she asked the empty air before her.

These are just quick examples off the top of my head, but clumsy as they are, they reveal a different level of immediacy and intimacy with the pov character. There's nothing wrong with using any of these—whatever fits your voice and allows you to tell your story with passion and energy is the way to go.

One way to see if your POV changes work is to read the story aloud into a tape recorder (or have a friend do it for you). Wait awhile, then play it back again: do you "feel" the POV changing? Or does it effortlessly flow from one character to the next without the reader becoming confused or distracted?

Also, listen to a few books on tape where multiple POV are used in a scene. How does it make you feel as a reader? Does it work for you?

Bottom line, if by using several POV's you give an added dimension to the reader that they could not gain with a single POV, then it might be the best way for you to go. Just do it with a subtle hand, well-polished prose and use it only when you need to.

"Excellent use of POV to allow us to immediately connect with the characters and see them as others view them. Score = 5 out of 5" --same contest, different judge on BLINK OF AN EYE

Anyone with good examples of how this works and when it didn't work, feel free to chime in!

"Rule" #2: YOU NEED TO FIND A GENRE AND STICK WITH IT:

"I'm not sure which genre the author is writing in--romance or suspense? Decide what kind of book you're writing and be consistent." --NY editor on BLINK OF AN EYE

I disagree with this rule. It might have been important years ago when readers only shopped in one aisle of the bookstores, but it seems irrelevant in our current culture of eclectic, cross-over music, film, art and literature. Today's readers are used to multi-tasking and want to enjoy their fiction on several levels at once.

They expect a story that is more than "only a mystery" or "just a romance". They want stories that go deeper and reflect not only a character's relationship with the plot but also his or her relationship with other people, that reveal a character's true humanity.

Romance combined with other genres is the perfect way to accomplish this. If I had to label my own work, I would call them Thrillers with Heart. And I have excellent company in this "meta-genre" . The Odyssey, the oldest and best-known thriller in history, is at its heart a love story. What drives Odysseus? His love for Penelope. What gives him the courage and strength to succeed and persevere? You got it, love.

To me cross-genre is the way to go. If you write a compelling novel, it will speak for itself. Don't worry about the label on the cover.

What's more important is knowing why you want to write that kind of novel, discovering where your passion lies. This is often intimately tied to the theme of the novel and your own individual voice as a writer.

I believe you need to find the genre (or genres) that fits your voice.

For example, I consider all my novels as inspirational— despite the fact that they are dark, edgy with very realistic situations and consequences. There are no guaranteed happily-ever-afters in my work (hence my tag line: No one is immune to danger) but I can guarantee that in every single one the main character finds the courage to get involved and make a difference.

Now, there's no way an "inspirational" line would consider my current work because I seldom mention any religious tenets and there is explicit sex and violence.

But, if I were to decide to write an inspirational, I would first read the various publishers out there to see if it would be possible for my voice to fit with one of them. My theme (everyone can be a hero and make a difference) would remain the same, but I might move the sex to behind closed doors and send the violence off page. I wouldn't totally remove the violence and I would still have realistic consequences to it.

That's because I've lived in a world of violence, I've had it touch my life, I've helped others deal with it, and I refuse to sugar coat or deny it. I guess that's part of my theme as well—if you deny the bad stuff, you can't overcome it or appreciate the good things as much. So my inspirational would still have an edge to it. But if I chose to change my writing technique (NOTE: not my voice, just how I use it), then yes, I could do it.

Now, could I ever use my same, edged-with-danger voice to write other genres? Hmm...let's see. Would it work for SciFi/fantasy— yeah, sure, there's dark, edgy stuff in some SFF lines. Again, I'd have to do my homework, target the right one. But I wouldn't have to change my voice. Sweet romance? Probably not. Chick Lit? Might be fun to try if I had any talent for comedy—some of the funniest stuff comes out at moments of crisis, so if a publisher was looking for dark humor I could maybe do it without changing my voice. Historicals? Sure if I did my research, bad things definitely happened in the past just like now—worse sometimes, ever read a history of the Crusades?

Bottom line: it's not your voice that changes, it's how you use it. It's a tool, just like your word processing program.

Again, think Nora Roberts/JD Robb—very different writing styles, but her themes--love conquers all, the sanctity of a relationship, the existence of a soul mate, that through love you can discover what you're really capable of and fulfill your true potential--those remain the same.

Any reader who enjoys Nora's voice is likely to enjoy her novels whether they're paranormal (which she has done), sweet romances (which she has done), romantic suspense (ditto) or edgy thrillers. And she's successfully combined multiple genres in a single novel.

Now, will this drive a publisher and their marketing department batty? Sure. They want to know what niche to shelve a book in and they want it to stay there, nice and neat. But guess what? Readers and booksellers LOVE cross genre—they want don't want neat, they want different yet still rewarding. So if you can guarantee your readers a good read, it doesn't matter how many genres you cross—although, you should be prepared from the beginning to have a unique promotional plan to draw your readers to your work.

"A perfect blend of romance and suspense. My kind of book." --Sandra Brown on BLINK OF AN EYE

I know several of you write in multiple genres and cross-genre. Any comments? Speak up, we'd all love to hear your experiences!

"Rule" #3: NO BACKSTORY ALLOWED:

"Cut any and all backstory. Cut it all. I mean all of it. NO backstory in the first 40 pages." -- well known NY agent during a writing seminar and in his many books on craft of writing

Another good rule to follow. To a point.

Backstory should be treated the same way as a strong spice. A little sprinkled throughout a dish adds to the flavor, makes it more savory and you go back for more. Too much in any one area overwhelms and makes the dish unpalatable.

Ask yourself, what does the reader need to know here and now? Give only that much-- maybe even a little less if it won't totally leave them confused--and no more. Make them ask questions and anticipate the answers, draw them into the story. Yes, you'll answer those questions sooner or later--but far better to keep it later, if possible.

Here's how I think of backstory. All character motivation comes from backstory. That's why it's useful. So if you need your readers to understand why your character absolutely loathes men who wear fedoras, then we need a glimpse of the backstory that motivated that feeling.

Only a glimpse. We don't need to know that her great aunt Martha smelled like mothballs or that when she was a kid she was the best watermelon seed spitter on the block--unless they are necessary to understand her hatred of fedora sporting men.

Here is the first line of SLEIGHT OF HAND (the sequel to BLINK OF AN EYE):

The last time Dr. Cassandra Hart entered Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Medical Center she was covered in the blood of the man she had killed.

It's total backstory. But it's compelling, it sets the stage for the conflicts to come, it reveals a lot about the heroine's character and develops reader empathy immediately.

You understand immediately that this character has been to hell and back. That she's a doctor who's lived through any physician's worst nightmare: killing someone.

Yet, here she is back at the same hospital...so it sets up a question in the reader's mind. And that compels them to read on and on and on...

That's a lot of work from one sentence.

My advice? Use backstory as you would any other tool, judiciously and by design for maximum impact.

"Wow! You've got me hooked." --same NY agent upon hearing first sentence from SLEIGHT OF HAND.

Anyone worried about too much backstory in their first page or two, feel free to post examples and we can all work on it with you.

"Rule" #4: THE HERO AND HEROINE MUST MEET IN THE FIRST CHAPTER

"You need to get the hero and heroine together sooner."--NY agent on BLINK OF AN EYE.

In some category romance you have no choice but to follow this rule, the length restrictions are just too confining. In BLINK OF AN EYE, my hero and heroine don't come face to face until chapter 3, page 28. But it's a 100,000 word novel and I have room to work.

Besides, overall isn't it more satisfying to get to know both characters in their own environments, to understand them, begin to identify with their conflicts, before they're thrown into a new relationship?

I think so. That way the reader anticipates potential conflicts and barriers to the relationship without the author needing to explicitly state them. This subtext is very important as it's the invisible glue that binds your reader to your story.

Anytime you have the reader that engaged in a story, thinking about it, wondering how the hero and heroine are going to conquer everything that stands in their way, then you have an evocative, memorable story sure to land on the "keeper" pile.

I think this area of timing the H/H meet has to be one of the most common things I've heard people dinged for in contests. I know BLINK OF AN EYE was in the non-Golden Heart contest I entered it in (the lowest score it received in the GH was a 8.6, so obviously this wasn't a hang up for those judges).

Part of this may be your target audience. A target audience of RWA members is very, very different from a target audience of women readers or romance readers. And editors and agents fall into that same pitfall. Because they often may only acquire one particular genre or sub-genre, they may not see the forest for the trees.

Here's another reason why the H/H not meeting earlier is unsatisfying to readers: if you have no other conflict. No conflict=boring, so of course they want something to happen right away! And since they're reading romance, they expect that something to be sparks flying between the H/H.

So, if people are telling you that your H/H are getting together too late, take a good, long hard look at those opening pages. What IS happening? There needs to be conflict on every, single page.

Let me repeat that. Conflict. On. Every. Page.

Why? Because just as your character's motivation grows from their backstory and their goals from their future, conflict is their present. Their here and now.

No conflict means nothing happening IN that character. Oh plenty may be happening around them, but they're not undergoing any significant change. And that's why readers read, to immerse themselves in other's conflicts and travel with that character on their path to a new life.

In romance, that life usually is represented by the H/H getting together, which is why people expect them to meet as soon as possible.

If that meeting isn't happening until page 100 of a 200 page book, then I would suggest the romance is not the main plot but a subplot. Or you've started the book waaay too soon.

Search out the conflict that propels the main character towards her goal and you'll find the right place to start. With or without the hero <g>

"I am immediately drawn in by what it is that connects this cop and this doctor. I love it." -- another NY editor.

No Rules, or Know the Rules?

True confession time. When I first submitted my work, I had no idea what the heck I was doing. So before we get started with looking at some sample queries, here's your chance to learn from all of my mistakes. Feel free to laugh if you like—I sure do!

Here's what happened:

When I was 17, during my freshman year of college, I finished a young-adult fantasy novel of about 80,000 words. This is where I made a serious career mistake #1.

I knew I had something with this book (although the only other person alive who had read it was my cousin!) and I wanted to try my best to actually sell it. I knew my story was great, the characters had come alive! I was determined not to appear "amateurish" --and of course, proceeded to make every mistake in the book! My market research consisted of pouring through a two-year old Writer's Market with a highlighter until I found the perfect publisher and editor for my baby. I then packaged it in a three ring binder (to be easier for my editor to carry with her everywhere she went) and sent it off.

And waited. Two months later--a ridiculously short time, but I had no idea--I received a hand-written letter from the editor praising my work in detail but also stating that particular publisher was streamlining and would no longer be accepting either fantasy or young adult submissions. This was in the eighties when individual presses were dropping like flies or being scooped up into conglomerations. She urged me to submit it elsewhere.

Did I? No. She was my dream editor, who else could do as good of a job with my baby? Besides, I had recently been accepted into a graduate level fiction workshop and was working on literary short stories, so if the young adult fantasy market was closing, why bother?

If I had only known the rules enough to "translate" what that rejection letter really meant. To know what market fluctuations meant. To know how to research the market properly.

So, do you think I learned anything after that?

Nope, not for a loooong time! Now I look back and think, I could have been a contender, right there, right from the beginning if I had only looked beyond the exhilaration of writing and taught myself more about the work of writing. Hey, I was seventeen then, mistakes are inevitable, but the problem was I continued to make similar mistakes.

In medical school I finished a 100,000 word SF novel and this time actually bought a current Writers Market (major commitment for a starving medical student living on ramen noodles) for my research. This time I had prepared myself a little better--I had taken several classes in fiction, had joined a wonderfully supportive writers group and even attended my first writers' workshop where my work was praised by published authors.

I had learned that finding an agent first was much more likely to lead to success than over-the-transom submissions to editors. My work was formatted properly, I wrote a killer query letter, researched agents who represented authors with careers I wanted to emulate (not easy in those days before the Internet!) and again sent my baby on its way.

This time, instead of a letter, I received a call from a New York agent. Yes, a real live phone call! She loved my work, etc. BUT felt this novel would do better as a second novel, that I

really needed something more unique, more cutting edge as a breakout debut. Did I have anything like that?

Well, uh, no. Not yet, I stammered, barely able to speak coherently after being up two days straight taking call in the burn unit. But I had an idea....and that was my first time pitching. The idea must have spoken for itself because despite my addled mind she did ask that I send it to her when I finished.

So here's big time mistake number two: I never finished it. Oh yeah, I had plenty of excuses. I was working three jobs, full time medical student on clinical rotations that had me sleeping in the hospital every other night, etc, etc. But I knew I wanted to write professionally and I had a professional interested in my work and I failed to deliver. If I had...

My big mistake? I didn't know myself, didn't understand the demands of my life at that time well enough to realize that for a short time, writing was going to take a back seat to the real world. I tried to do both and ended up letting the writing slide. I should have never submitted if I couldn't commit to it fully.

Any author takes their writing seriously. One of the rules that I didn't know about is that you also have to take your writing career just as seriously.

The first and most important "rule" of successful publishing--and of course, since I seem to be living my career backwards, the last thing I did--is know your audience. Whether it's an audience of one: a particular agent or editor or publisher's line, or the broader audience that you want to someday become your readership.

As I continued to write, I wrote mysteries. Joined MWA, continued to research agents and editors and submit, got lots of nice, personalized rejection letters to show for my efforts, but always seemed to just miss the mark. Finally a critique partner suggested that although my books were filled with crimes and violence and gritty, dark realism that they weren't truly mysteries. All of my work centered around a relationship evolving between the hero and heroine and this relationship drove the plot more than the actual whodunit. Maybe I should consider that I was actually writing romance and join RWA?

They were right. My audience wasn't those hard-boiled mystery fans who like solving a puzzle. My novels are dark and gritty and yes, often have a mystery as part of them. But they're really about the relationships, about the power of love, and center around the idea that all courage comes from love.

So I joined RWA and Kiss of Death, entered the Golden Heart and three months later got the call that I was a finalist! In the meantime I met lots of people who gave me expert guidance, advice, feedback and encouragement and began shopping that book, BLINK OF AN EYE.

Finally, I found my target audience. An editor who bought BLINK based on the first 30 pages because she loved my voice and also wanted to buy the sequel based solely on our phone conversation.

Sometimes, you need to know the rules! So here are three rules that I've learned that can work for you and help to create a successful writing career.

1. Know yourself: why do you write, why do you need to tell this story, where's your passion?
2. Know your work: is the story idea so compelling that you want to commit to it for however long it takes to finish? What genre are you writing?
3. Know your audience: research, research, research. Brand yourself, look at your recurrent themes, look at who you are trying to sell your product to.

Next up, tales from the pros: multi-published authors divulge their own stories! And we'll start our joint project of polishing fellow classmates' queries.

Tales from the pros:

The following stories come from multi-published authors who asked to remain anonymous. I'd like to thank them, though, for sharing their trials and tribulations with editors.

Story #1: Editor rejected a book where the heroine was suffering from amnesia because editor didn't believe that people could get amnesia. Around that time, there was an article in the NY Times Sunday magazine about a young woman from Texas who'd come to NY to try to discover her identity. She had no idea who she was, and the only thing she remembered was certain things about NY, although she didn't remember ever being in NY. Plus, I'm an amnesia victim myself. Something traumatic must have happened to me when I was 10 years old. I remember "coming to" in class, 5th grade, my social studies book open in front of me. I was terrified that the teacher would call on me because I had no idea how I'd gotten there, what we were studying, and no memory of the prior week, which was Easter break. I've never been able to find out what happened.

Story #2: Editors keep saying they wanted "different" in the way of chick lit, not to give them the same old stories about shoe-obsessed 20-somethings in fashion or publishing who kept dating losers. I write 2 books that are really different, and both are continually rejected for being too different. The publishers keep publishing the same storylines over and over again--which is why chick lit is dying. Or dead, depending on whom you listen to.

Story #3: One editor, very high up in the pecking order of one major publishing house, repeatedly emails my agent, telling her how much she's loving reading one of my chick lit books. We thought we had a sale. Then the rejection letter comes, stating marketing didn't know how to position the book. A few months later this same editor is interviewed (I think it was in RWR) and is asked if marketing ever plays a role in the decision making process as to what books get bought and which ones don't. The editor says it's purely an editorial decision and marketing plays no part. I have a rejection letter from her to my agent, stating that my book was rejected because of marketing not knowing how to sell it.

Story #4: I'm at nationals one year. Another very senior editor tells me to my face that one of my books has made it through committee and is on its way to acquisitions. Her rejection letter is dated the day after nationals.

Story #5: Editor (who shall remain nameless) said she loved the book, bought it, then proceeded to slash every sentence in the book and make it grammatically correct. Said if she were the reader she'd throw the book against the wall. I was flabbergasted. I tried to explain that people don't talk in grammatically correct sentences or think that way. I use phrases when in deep POV.

She came back with "You seriously want your book riddled with errors?" Again, I was floored. This is the same woman who raved over the book when she first read it. So I asked her why she bought the book. At this point I was ready to pull my hair out by the roots. She replied that it was standard house procedure to have grammatically correct sentences. Okay, then, why didn't she say so in the first place instead of insulting me? Inferring I'm ignorant of correct sentence structure. I was given to another editor to finish out the book, obviously we weren't a good fit. The other editor got my second book--loved it. Same style. Hardly any changes to sentences. Go figure.

Any of these happen to you? Go ahead and vent, we've all been there!

More tales from the pros: editorial tidbits

Again, more stories from multi-pubbed authors, sharing their experiences with breaking the rules.

Story #1: I remember when I wrote my first book (Woman of the Mists--then writing as Lynn Armistead McKee. I've changed names and genres) and I was so careful with grammar, even in dialogue. I had manipulated (mutilated really) a sentence to avoid ending it in a preposition because I wasn't going to break the rules. The editor came back and told me that by doing so, I had stopped the reader cold with the sheer awkward structure of the sentence. Better to go ahead and end the sentence in a preposition. --Lynn Sholes THE GRAIL CONSPIRACY ** ForeWord Magazine's Book-Of-The-Year <http://www.grailconspiracy.com/> Coming Sept. 2006 THE LAST SECRET <http://www.thelastsecret.net/> Coming Sept. 2007 INDIGO RUBY

Story #2: One of the rules is "don't use dialect." Even though I'm from the South, I have trouble reading the original version of Uncle Remus and even Parts of "Huckleberry Finn." But in my first mystery (SOUTHERN FRIED, winner Of St. Martin's Malice Domestic Award for Best Traditional Mystery), I broke the rule. On the very first page, I have a character asking, "Well, if it idn't Miz Avery Andrews, attorney at law." I had a reader (from up North) tell me she stumbled in the first chapter because she had trouble getting the dialect in her ear. But many other people emailed or told me they liked the authentic sound of the characters.

As my piano teacher stressed years ago, it's important to know the Rules before you start breaking them. Do be careful with dialect. Sprinkle It in. But don't abandon it completely. A dusting helps authenticate and preserve a manner of speaking and sets the tone. (After all, that's why Mark Twain was called the first true American novelist--because he had the courage to write in a voice different from the prevailing English/European voice.) Once you set the tone, you can back off. The rhythms of your words will remind the reader of the dialect.

Grammar rules are there to help smoothly translate what's in the writer's head into the reader's head, with as little interference or mistake as possible. Know those rules, but then tell your story. -- Cathy Pickens www.cathypickens.com

Story #3: Odd, I know, that mystery readers are okay with killing people but not animals. Sharyn McCrumb, in "If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O," killed a dog. Powerful book, first in her highly acclaimed ballad series. I hated that she killed the dog, but it fit with the story and I remember it years later. However, too many mystery readers are cat lovers, passionately so. Absolutely kill no cats. Those who've made the mistake of killing a cat have lived to regret it, deeply.

Story #4: One author told me of the Wonderful response her query letter and first three chapters got from a powerful agent. A dream agent. However, the dream agent was livid when she had to tell him she hadn't written the rest of the book yet. He didn't wait around to find out if she could write it. He was furious and broke off all contact. Moral: write the book first. -- Cathy Pickens www.cathypickens.com SOUTHERN FRIED: "a cozy with sharp edges" Publishers Weekly DONE GONE WRONG: "The courtroom scenes are exciting." Midwest Book Review

Okay, I have to admit this last one punches my buttons! I have seen so many would-be writers spend weeks-months-years to perfect their pitches, query letters, synopsis and first chapters—but not bother to finish the book! These days even multi-pubbed authors aren't selling on a proposal alone, so why waste an agent or editor's time if you don't have material for them to publish?

People tell me, "I don't want to waste time on a book that might not sell", but to me that translates as: I'm not really passionate about this book. Because if they were, they'd be as compelled to write and finish a book as they hope their readers will be.

And if it doesn't sell? Who cares—you still learned from the writing: you polished your voice, worked to hone your craft, practiced new techniques. I did a quick and dirty calculation among a group of multi-pubbed authors (okay we were out drinking at the time, but I think the math holds up <g>) They averaged half a million words of serious writing before they ever sold.

Half a million words!

Guess that old saw, practice makes perfect is true.

And one more thing—if you're not writing with passion, guess what? Your reader (whether it's a contest judge, agent or editor) will know. No matter how polished your query or synopsis or first chapter, lack of passion about your own work will translate to lack of interest by others.

Okay, jumping off the soapbox now!

How to make unpublished sound professional

Here's my take on it: don't mention any negatives. So I wouldn't even include the word unpublished. Instead, focus on your strengths: any (even small) publishing credits you do have, membership in RWA, PRO status if you've achieved this, finals in contests, membership in other writing organizations, workshops you've taken.

The fact that you are working to learn the craft and take your writing seriously is much more positive than pointing out the fact that you're still unpublished.

Remember, chapter newsletters are a great way to get a writing credit--I would word it as: my work has appeared in Kiss of Death (or if there's a name of the newsletter use that--no need to point out that it's a nonpaying newsletter, the point is there's an objective editor who has chosen your work to publish). Also writing reviews can count.

It's all in the semantics--in fact, I just read an article that publishers who place "best seller" on books don't base that on what lists that author makes at all. As soon as one newspaper

mentions your book publicly or one bookstore (not chain, but one store) says that you are "selling well", then you qualify.

Makes you wonder who to believe, right? So if the big boys in NYC can play the word game, so can you!

Tidbits on contests and magazine submissions

Here are some words of advice from published authors and a magazine editor on submissions to contests and magazines. Hope they're useful! CJ

First, check out Contest Diva Lois Winston's website for several great articles on contest do's and don'ts. www.loiswinston.com

From a multi-pubbed author who also coordinates contests:
I've run contests, I've judged contests and I've entered contests, so I can see them from all sides. However, I'd like to comment from a contest coordinator's POV:

READ the submission rules!!!! I can't stress this enough. Most coordinators will even give you a checklist. I was surprised at how many professional writers did not follow it. Don't forget, the coordinator sees the names of the entrants. The judges do not. Some coordinators are more forgiving than others. I ran a "first ever" contest last year and the number of submissions was small. I could afford to be lenient. However, if a greater number of entries came in, you can bet I would have returned those who slipped up. Main reasons: No SASE, name appearing on story, wrong font or type size, story exceeded word count, didn't include completed contest form and payment, or the entry arrived late. I'm not saying that all of these things happened, but all of these guidelines were clearly spelled out. Another pet peeve of mine: contestants who print off the required number of copies (let's say 3 for argument sake), but don't go through them page by page to make sure all pages are there and in the proper order! PROOF everything. The coordinator has enough to worry about without having to do your work for you. Remember, it is much easier to toss your entry than it is to track you down. And not every contest coordinator (or contest judge, agent or editor) is going to overlook your mistakes. Many contests also give points for proper ms format (including type and font), so why would you want to lose points?

Here are some other contest stories, courtesy of Cathy Pickens:

Some online discussion group was talking about the St. Martin's and Other contests, saying (as I was told third-hand) that they weren't anything But glorified slush piles. What a slush pile. As the winner of a contest, I can attest that the top contests are well-recognized and quite an incredible "bump" for a new writer. The St. Martin's/Malice Domestic contest brings a nice contract, an iconic editor, review attention, and the wonderful company of other winners to mentor you.

A friend of mine (and member of my long-time critique group) was a finalist in the St. Martin's contest and won a Malice Domestic grant. Awards that are known by editors and agents in the genre look great on A resume; those helped her get a good agent. Her first book comes out in January from Five Star (Terry Hoover, DOUBLE DEAD).

The moral for contest submissions? Write the best book you can. And submit! Resubmit as needed. It's only one way to publication, but it's a nice way.

Everyone has his or her own path to publication. The real secret? Persistence.

-- Cathy Pickens

And some sage advice on submitting short fiction to magazines from Sandra Ruttan, editor of Spinetingler:

I'll tell you a story about multiple submissions. We initially allowed simultaneous submissions. Our philosophy was, we didn't pay much and it takes a while to hear.

But we require people to include a release, and if they don't withdraw the submission and we accept it, they've already given us the first publication rights. This was all explained in our submission guidelines - in other words, simultaneous submissions, yes, but if you've sold it elsewhere remove it or we might publish it.

We had someone who sold us first-time rights and someone else. The other magazine had a fit over the issue, and we ended up dealing with some email over it. The thing was, we accepted the story, the writer professed enthusiasm, and never told us they'd sold it elsewhere. It was published first in Spinetingler, with full backing of the writer. It was the other publication that got burned by the writer. Now, by the time this came up, we'd accepted something else by the author. And we changed our policies - no simultaneous submissions - as a result. They did the same thing.

The chances of me taking a story by this person again in the future? Almost nil. Simply not worth the headache, and editors talk. I know other editors at other magazines. Names get known.

And, no matter what, emailing someone back arguing with their reasons for rejecting your story is another way to end up on someone's blacklist. Not sure if this applies, but I also must say that if you receive a rejection from a magazine, do not send them a new submission the same day. I always include suggestions to address why a story didn't work, and having someone turn around a few hours later and send me something new is a sure sign that I've wasted my time. It's happened to us often, and in every case the readers have returned with the exact same assessment of the person's work, although they don't know about the turn-around in the submission, because I usually wait a week or so after getting editorial assessments before I send the rejections, and depending on where we are with edits another month before I give them new submissions to review.

I've tracked these submissions silently, and checked the responses - I've had enough to automatically suspect the quality of anything received with such a short turn-around. Just my 2 cents. -- Sandra Ruttan www.spinetinglermag.com <http://sandrablabbler.blogspot.com>

Prologues

The "rules" say no prologue--but sometimes (like the DaVinci Code) one is needed. Note though, that Dan Brown's prologue does have a hook. It serves to entice the reader to keep turning pages.

If your prologue is essential for the reader to understand the first chapter, they'd be absolutely lost and confused without it, then yes, you might need it.

If the prologue only serves to explain back story, then you can probably find a more interesting way to intrigue the reader by sprinkling it into the story. You would use the "promise" of explaining the backstory to the reader as part of the hook, answering

questions like: how did they meet? why aren't they together? what happened in the meantime, etc.

Again, the two essentials are: never bore the reader and never confuse them. So if you have a way to make it work, go for it!

Q&A

Q: What if you're looking at combining three genres in one book? How many genres is too many?

A: Great question!

Let's see, I'm looking at my "keeper" bookshelf right now. There's Diana Galbadon--her books are historical, time-traveling, suspense, romances. Sandra Hill: time-traveling, viking/Navy SEAL, comedy romances. JD Robb: futuristic, police procedural, thriller, romances. Janet Evanovich: comedy, mystery, romantic suspense.

Hmm...guess what? I don't think it matters, as long as you can make it work. That means not only writing one heck of a book, but going into your publisher with some creative ideas on how to market it to all segments of your audience.

The trick will be in your NOT labeling it as "cross-genre" in your query--you'll want your brilliant voice to grab the eye of an agent or editor, to make them so fall in love with the book that they won't care about trying to pigeonhole it. Maybe pick your main hooks: comedic thriller or romantic comedy? Right now, with thrillers selling like hotcakes and chicklit (which is what people think of when they think romantic comedy even though it's not true) on the downturn, I'd go with comedic thriller.

Bottom line, if you write a book that rises above the rest and grabs a reader's attention, it won't matter where it's shelved or what's written on the spines, people will find it.

So, I say, go for it!!

Q: It seems that there are types of books that can ignore the no backstory rule completely and types that can't. Can you comment?

A: You're right. Some writers can get away with backstory in their opening pages. Key there: get away with it. And how do they do that?

They make the backstory so interesting, so filled with some kind of emotional or personal conflict, that the reader stays involved. Both Susan Wiggs and Luanne Rice are masters at this--but I notice, even they usually set up the main plot conflict first, then add in the backstory later on AFTER the reader is already hooked and emotionally invested in the main characters.

I think that's the key to most writing problems: do what it takes to get your reader excited and involved in your story and characters. As soon as you bore the reader, you lose them.

But you don't want them wandering around confused either, wondering what past events influenced critical decision making going on between characters here and now. So when it gets to the point where all those little crumbs of enticing information aren't enough and the

reader MUST know what really happened twenty years ago at the high school prom, THEN you give them some backstory.

It's like letting the kids lick the icing from the spoon but forcing them to finish their veggies before they can have the whole cake <g>

Alot of people try to cheat by throwing in a prologue that tells the backstory right away. Only problem: often it backfires because it reveals character motivation without first achieving reader interest in the character and their here and now conflicts. Remember, you have to care about someone and what they're going through before you start to ask "why are they like that?".

I'm not blasting every prologue. Actually that's another rule I've heard of and disagree with: Cut all prologues! Some prologues are necessary.

For instance, setting up a dramatic crime before starting the actual novel in the "mundane" ordinary world of the ordinary person soon to be thrust into the action is a common reason to use a prologue in suspense novels. You want the reader to understand that they can trust you as an author, that yes, even though the first chapter is about Sophie going to the grocery store, this really is an adrenalin-packed read. So you start the book with a prologue in the pov of the killer waiting for his next victim in the frozen food aisle of the grocery store.

Backstory, whether in the form of flashbacks, prologues, dreams or whatever is just another tool at your disposal. Use it in an effective way and you have a masterpiece with no "toolmarks" to be seen--the reader plunges in and is so entranced by your story-telling that they don't feel your hands manipulating them at all.

Use it crudely and you'll plop the reader right out of your world, or worse bore them enough to put the book down and never pick it back up again.

Maybe that's really the only rule that counts? Jeffrey Deaver put it best: the reader is God.

To me that translates as: Everything you write should be with your readers' pleasure and satisfaction in mind. Boredom is a carnal sin.

Q: CJ, what do you do when you start a new story? Do you have the basic story in mind already? Do you make a GMC chart for each character?

A: LOL! No charts--just start with an idea and one or two characters. Usually that includes understanding some of their conflicts and goals, the motivation I often figure out as the story goes on.

For instance, the wip I began last week, SHATTER, is about a missing girl and the FBI agent who is searching for her. The theme is denial--every scene will have someone denying something causing more conflict and problems.

All I knew when I started (I'm 90 pages into it) was that the FBI agent would be married with a child near to the age of the victim and that she would have a wonderful, caring husband, great kid, and normal family--I'm sick of all these dysfunctional characters with all this baggage <g> Think soccer mom with a loaded forty caliber Glock.

What would my "normal" main character's conflict be and how would it tie in with the theme of denial? I needed to know that early on because that's how my plot develops (did I mention I'm a seats of the pants writer? I have no idea where I'm going until I get there!). So here's her conflict: she subconsciously believes that if she can catch the badguys and save the victims that she can keep her family safe.

It's what they call "magical" thinking in psychology and even the most logical people do it at times--so she's actually in denial, believing she can somehow protect her loved ones if she's good enough at her job when of course she can't, bad things still happen to good people, even the people you love.

By having that one character and her conflict clear as well as knowing the theme I immediately knew the direction of the plot--one of the main character's loved ones will need to be placed in jeopardy. And somehow her job must prevent her from helping--or maybe even cause it! Ohlala, the possibilities!

Anyway, it's what works for me. The main thing, no matter what kind of writer you are (plotter, pantsier or inbetween) is the ABC method: Apply Butt to Chair and get the job done!

Q: Why in a romance can't the hero or heroine have a weak moment and slip? It happens in real life, why are books any different?

Oh boy, oh boy, talk about opening up a can of worms <g>

Remember, I don't write traditional romances--there' s no guaranteed happily ever afters in my books. But, even the slightest hint of one of my heroes considering infidelity has my critique partners up in arms! Why?

I think first of all, it is too close to the real world. The thought of a loved one violating a trust that way may make it too difficult to make it "entertaining" . Especially if the person in question is meant to be "heroic" and has captured the reader's sympathy. Readers read to be entertained, to escape--especially romance readers.

The second reason? I think in romances we strive to have our readers fall in love with our heroes just as our heroines do. So it's not only too close to home in that infidelity brings in "real" world issues--but it feels like a personal betrayal by someone we "love".

To tell the truth, if this second reason is why something isn't working for you, then that's a good sign because you've created a character who jumps off the page!

I think if you're writing single-title you might be able to get away with it, if you handled it carefully. Hasn't Jennifer Cruisic in one of her books? Can't remember which, so I might be wrong.

In category, I doubt it--H/S knows what their readers want and it's definitely the fantasy, not reality.

Should that stop you from writing a book surrounding infidelity? Heck no, not if it's what you're passionate about--just know your target market before you start trying to sell it. H/S won't be on top of your list but a mainstream pub might be. And know your editors--it won't be the person who just bought three sweet romances but it might be the person who works with Susan Wiggs or Luanne Rice.

Q: What is meant by Brand yourself?

A brand is simply the underlying theme of your writing voice (not each book--but more of your own "universal" theme for all your writing). Once you know this, you use it for marketing, to target your audience, to develop a tag line, etc.

For instance, my theme is all about everyday heroes finding the courage to get involved. It runs through all my work (even the stuff from way back when I was a kid). So that's my brand.

How did I use it? I developed a tag line: No one is immune to danger. I could have used something like: Unsung heroes or the like, but since I'm a doctor I liked using a medical term and since my stories are thrillers with strong romantic elements but no guaranteed happily ever afters, I wanted people to know they weren't picking up traditional romances.

Hence...No one is immune to danger.

I try to use it everywhere so people associate it with my name, I developed a logo that incorporates it (in crime scene tape yellow) along with my name, a stethoscope and a fountain pen, etc. You can see it on my website: <http://www.cjlyons.net>

So what's your brand: second chances. There's many tag lines you could develop, the most obvious of course: Everyone deserves a second chance.

But you can brainstorm better ones--a good way to discover this is to ask friends who have read your work tell you 1-2 words that describe it, sometimes that will help.

Good work in discovering your theme and your brand!

CJ Lyons

No one is immune to danger...

BLINK OF AN EYE "is a perfect blend of romance and suspense." --Sandra Brown

<http://www.cjlyons.net>

<http://killeryear.com>