

Rookie Mistakes

by Gerry Bartlett

I see these mistakes being made by new authors all the time. Some of them are slowing down potential success. Some of them may be sabotaging a career altogether. So I compiled a little list. You can take it or leave it. If you see something here that is useful, grab it and go. Maybe you have achieved some success despite falling into some of these traps. I know I made a few of these mistakes and it cost me years that I could have been selling books instead of whining to my writing friends. Enough explaining. Here's my list, based on my more than twenty years writing and almost a dozen published novels.

- 1) If you pitch a project to an editor or agent and they say "Send it to me.", FOLLOW THROUGH. I spoke to an agent recently who bemoaned the fact that she had heard so many excellent pitches about books she really wanted to read and possibly represent but never received after a conference. These authors missed the boat. Two lessons here: Don't pitch if you don't have a finished project and let the editor/agent know if you aren't going to send it in as requested and why. A thank you note is a good idea. Example: Dear Editor, My manuscript, Flaming Dust, is now represented by an agent. I will let her know of your interest in seeing it and hope that she will forward it to you soon. Thank you so much for your time at the RWA conference. Sincerely, Babbling Author. (That would have been me, back in the day. Maybe you were calm.) Are you spending too much time polishing your manuscript? Forget it. Send it in and let the editor or agent decide if it's worth the time.
- 2) Start out as a professional and stay that way. Is your email address something to be proud of? I get emails daily from people with the improbable names of missfluffypants@gmail.com or demondeathwish@hotmail.com. Come on. Is this the way you want to be presented to the world as an author? Use your name. If it's taken? Add the word author. Example: susiegreenauthor@comcast.net.

- 3) Speaking of names, there has been a lot of doom and gloom on one of my loops about stalkers, etc. And hiding behind pseudonyms. I wrote under another name for my first three books. I hated it. I had to go to signings and conferences and answer to a name I wasn't comfortable with. This was a decade ago and before the Internet was big so I didn't have a website issue but I would have now. So I write under my real name and, no, I don't have stalkers. Maybe I'm lucky, but I would always recommend writing under your real name if possible. It's easier. And one name is preferable economically. One website to keep up, one email account to deal with. But you decide. Promise you won't make that decision lightly. Flowery romance author sounding names are so last century. This is a business. Make your name sound like you take this seriously. Enough said.
- 4) Develop an Internet presence now, don't wait for THE CALL. That means start blogging, tweet, join Facebook. And buy your domain name. I recommended this to a friend, Kay Hudson. She jumped on it and now blogs frequently. As she submits her manuscript, you can believe editors and agents Google her name. Guess what? They find her and can read writing samples at her eloquent blog. And she writes about interesting things relevant to her writing world, not about her kitty's fur balls though writing about them with humor would certainly show her writing style.
- 5) Treat published authors with respect. Yes, you know some in your RWA chapter. They are nice to you, real people. But do you critique with them? Have you been around so long that you have paid the dues they have in blood, sweat and tears? Maybe you have and feel comfortable approaching one for advice. Fine. But they are busy and do NOT have the time to read your stuff and critique it. Or to give you a cover quote. Trust me, if they are under contract and deadlines, they do not need the pressure of a newby asking for those kinds of favors. If they judge a contest and read your entry, maybe they will approach you. It's a dream you can have. But please don't ask a person whose work you may not have even read

to help you. It's rude. If you are truly friends outside of chapter activities, that's different. Use your common sense. If you have a day job, think about how you feel if people ask you for free advice on your time off. Writers don't really have time off. We are thinking about our books constantly. Give us a break.

Hmm. Have I made you think? I hope so. Are you ready to publish? Maybe so. And here's one last bit of advice if you are a rookie. Don't be in such a big hurry to put your stuff out there. Yes, you can self-publish now way too easily. Are you sure you want the first book you've written to be on the 'Net FOREVER? Most published authors have books under the bed. They are there for a reason. They were our learning books. We discovered how to structure novels. How to create compelling characters and how to be sure we had enough conflict to hold the story together. My first book almost got bought in the eighties. I got a really good rejection letter for it. Rookie mistake. I didn't know it was a good letter and quit writing for a year to mourn the rejection. Now I'm glad it didn't sell. If I wrote it today, I'd make it much better. So think hard before you throw up something on Amazon or Smashwords (and, yes, I put it that way intentionally). Happy writing and here's hoping you won't make the same mistakes I did.

Gerry Bartlett's Perils of Being Published articles also offer insights into publishing and are available on her website at gerrybartlett.com. Her latest Glory St. Clair novel, REAL VAMPIRES HATE SKINNY JEANS, was an April release from Berkley Publishing.