

How long did it take you to write your first book? Have you even finished it yet? Some people let that first one pour out of them. Lucky you, if that's what happened. Of course, I know you went back and did a lot of editing. And maybe that first draft(yes, that's what it was) needed some serious work to come up to the page count for a submission. Or you stalled out after the first chapter or two. Entered contests, honed the first chapter until it shined and never finished that book. Shame on you if that's your method. Get cracking. I probably took six months to write my first one. It didn't sell though I learned years later that my rejection from Second Chance At Love, a long defunct imprint of Bantam, was a really encouraging one.

I know people who have taken years, as many as ten, to complete their first novel. Yes, they had good excuses--divorce, demanding jobs, I could go on. Personally, I've written and turned in near deadline through the death of my husband and mother. If you want to have a career as a published author, finish the book and start another one. It took me five complete novels before I finally sold one. Each provided a learning curve I needed. I wrote short contemporaries, romantic suspense and historical Regencies. I eventually sold three of the five. Short contemporaries? Not my winning product. But they're coming back in style. Add a cell phone and microwave and even those might find new life now.

But let me get to my point. You need deadlines for your writing. Even when you are cursing them and wishing they'd go away. I wrote my last book in three and a half months. I did it to myself, promising my editor I could do it so I'd have two books out in 2013. My fans deserved it and I felt it was good for my series. But, damn, it was hard. I forgot that the holidays would fall during that time. Yes, I wrote weekends and late at night. I always have. I also wrote on New Year's Day. Good thing I wasn't hung over. I wanted to take a little trip over the holidays. Had to cancel. Because my writing career comes first. After family, of course. I did take time to entertain them and cook Christmas dinner. But I did deliver my book within days of the deadline.

Notice I keep hedging about the deadline. I admit that I rarely hit it on the nose. I'm lucky to have been working with the same editor since 2002. She knows my work is clean(English major!) and she usually won't have many revision notes. I was thrilled when the last book needed none. A rare thing. So she gives me extra time if I need it and let her know when the book will be on her desk. But I always know the deadline in my contract and aim

for it. It's important because the production arm of a publishing house is very serious about their schedule. I have friends who have been given three weeks to totally rewrite a 100,000 word book. That's a nightmare. But it's because production needs the book so early. The last thing you want to have happen is to have your book moved in the schedule. Not after you've been promoting it as coming out in a certain month. So you must deliver it on time.

Have you dreamed of having a deadline? Of course. We all did. The reality can be hell. But start practicing now. Take this seriously. Enter the Golden Heart next year. It demands a complete novel and will provide a deadline. Saying you're a Golden Heart finalist is a door opener in a query letter. I was one and eventually sold that book to the editor I have now. You never know how this business will work. If you want it badly enough, you will put your feet to the fire and your butt in the chair. Now, go. I challenge you to have a couple of chapters done before this time next month. Are you up for it?

Gerry Bartlett is the best-selling author of the Real Vampires series for Berkley Publishing. Real Vampires Know Hips Happen is a March, 2013 release.