

THE PERILS OF BEING PUBLISHED—COMMITMENT by Gerry Bartlett

I've talked a lot about the power of sticking with your writing if you want to get published. That's one kind of commitment. When you've tried and failed to get an agent, tried and failed to sell that first manuscript, it may seem like that is the toughest one to keep. It is the strength of your determination that makes the difference between success and failure.

But there's another kind of commitment. It's the one where you agree to do something and then either follow through or don't. In any business, it is what marks a person as a professional. Who doesn't want to hire a committed worker who will stick with a project until it is completed to everyone's satisfaction? A publisher is looking for that kind of author. Are you focused? Do you know what kind of story you want to tell or are you still sending out six different queries for everything from young adult horror to medieval fantasy to see what sticks? Have you figured out your strengths? Are you better at developing compelling characters or is a unique plot with a twist your thing? Have you committed to completing a novel that plays to those strengths? If you answered "no" to either of those questions, you aren't ready to query anyone. Do some soul searching, get some more education, and work hard. Then commit to finishing something.

Let's say you do get the book done and snag one of those dream contracts. No, better than a dream—a multi-book deal that, when the advance per book is added together, makes your eyes widen and your hubby mutter that maybe you could quit your day job. You sign it, of course. Without an agent. Then the first book is released with great push from the publisher because they saw something they believed in and that's why they nailed you down (cheaply in their eyes) for the next five years and six books. You hit a best seller list. Suddenly you're hooked into loops on-line that let you know you are practically an indentured servant to this publisher. You want out. Stop. Get an agent. Which was what you should have done first. But we're writing fantasy here, right? You want to renegotiate. Won't happen. You must write those books. I can tell you, holding out won't work. You must write those books. You will eventually get royalties. And your next contract will jump to the stratosphere. But don't make the mistake of thinking you are now all that. You will refuse to write. The publisher will come begging. Oh no. They will lawyer up. Cheap for them. They have one on a retainer. Not cheap for you. All that money you got for the advance? Not looking so big now. You spent most of what you already got, didn't you? Paying a few bills, fixing up that home office for when you quit your day job. And your new agent is shaking her head at the ironclad contract you signed. In the tight economy multi-book deals are rare and perhaps beautiful things but always to be approached cautiously with an expert at hand. Bottom line: A contract is a commitment. Honor it and move on.

Besides committing to the writing, what about when you've said you would do something then, sigh, can't seem to get to it? That due date the publisher gave you. Oh, please. Everyone knows they have way more lead time than they need. And, you said you'd judge that contest but then you got snowed under. Surely they have back-up judges who can pick up the ball you dropped. Now you realize you never should have volunteered to chair that committee. Booring. You feel a case of the commitment flu coming on. That's why they have co-chairs. And new chapter members are so enthusiastic.

Do I have to tell you this? You should never, I repeat, NEVER, commit to a project, job or even a lunch date unless you intend to follow through. You don't want to develop a reputation as a slacker or irresponsible twit. Trust me, editors talk and move. Let down Suzie Editor at House Y and not only will she not buy you there again, but when she becomes Senior Editor at House Z, she'll blackball you there. And her former assistant Amy who is now an Editor at House X remembers you too. Oops. Let down your RWA chapter and your rep will sink faster than BPs stock price. Good luck getting chapter support at a book signing or fellow pubs to blurb your book or ask you to blog at their sites.

The message here is clear and an old one you've heard before. Getting and staying published is like any job worth having. Commit to what you want, be clear about exactly what that is and have the integrity to stay the course. And if you find that life gets in the way and you simply can't make a deadline, fulfill an obligation, or keep a promise? You know what to do. Right? Come clean as soon as possible. Be up front and communicate. That's what adults do and you've always known this isn't a game for kids or sissies. Gerry Bartlett made her deadline for book 6, *REAL VAMPIRES HAVE MORE TO LOVE*, coming from Berkley Publishing in December and is working on book 7 in the Glory St. Clair series.