

THE PERILS OF BEING PUBLISHED—Still Learning by Gerry Bartlett

I recently listened to a tape from the Romantic Times conference where Dean Koontz spoke. It was supposed to be on Craft. Now you'd think I wouldn't be interested in a craft workshop and you'd be right if it were aimed at beginners. Still, this was Dean Koontz. And any time a best selling author of his stature speaks, I listen. This kind of author is doing something--usually a lot of things--right to get to the point where his novels hit the top ten in the New York Times best seller list. The man is brilliant. So I listened. What struck me first was his writing process. He writes one page at a time, polishing it endlessly until he is satisfied and then moves on. This means he does only two to three pages a day. Hmm.

He used to plot out his books, now he flies by the seat of his pants and lets the characters take over. I can relate to that. I usually have a vague idea where the book is going. I write faster, ten or more pages a day, and then love to edit what I've got. However, I don't write every day. Koontz writes six days a week for ten to twelve hours. Sounds grueling and too much to me. Bottom line? It works for him, wouldn't work for me. And I'm not beating myself up about it. Or trying to measure myself against him. I hope you don't do that to yourself. We all go to workshops and hear presenters tell you how it "should" be done. No, that's how *they* write. You have to find your own groove. When I try to change my method to fit another writer's guaranteed technique, I tend to freeze. That's when doubts creep in.

Koontz also shared that he thinks writer's block is nothing but self-doubt. He doubts himself all the time and believes if you never doubt that you are a good writer, then you probably aren't very good at all. You have to have enough concern that what you're putting down on paper could be better. Come on, does a voice from on high dictate your stuff to you? I wish. It's nice to get in the flow and have a story come to you. But there is usually room for improvement. That's why I'm a firm believer in having other people read your work before it goes to the publisher. Whether it's a critique group or a volunteer from your chapter who reads the kind of books you write, you need an unbiased opinion, someone who will tell you the truth. Especially in this day of "throw it up on the Internet." Please. Stop and think before you put anything out there with your name on it. Is it the best it can be? Did you proof it to DEATH? Remember that once you put it on the Internet, it's out there FOREVER. There's a lot of discussion on published author loops I belong to about self-publishing. The biggest concern is the need for professional editing. If you're not sure you need it, then you probably do.

I've been at this for over twenty years, sold my first book in 1998. Yet I learn something new every year. Koontz talked about using one specific detail to nail a description of a room. I liked that. I'm trying to use it. I'm no Koontz, but I can play with the idea. I pick up tidbits on-line, at workshops, at chapter meetings or by hitting a link a friend throws at me. I take criticism without tears (usually) and listen to my agent, editor and critique partners. I don't always agree with what they say, but I do think about their input and then rework my novel my way. I strive to make each book better than the last. I spend time promoting my work, yes. But if it's not fit to read, what's the point?

And my last thought on this is the best thing I've learned from this journey—the more you write, the more input you have, the better you get. I truly believe that. I've written lots of books, way more than the eleven that have been published. It's still a struggle, but I know more and feel like I'm a better writer today than I ever was before. That old adage "Practice makes perfect." holds true. Well, if not perfect, at least more entertaining and worth buying. I hope it comes across to the reader that I have given each book my best effort. If it doesn't, I'm out of a job. Maybe Dean Koontz needs someone to clean his toilets.

Gerry Bartlett is the best selling author of the Real Vampires series. REAL VAMPIRES DON'T WEAR SIZE SIX is an August release from Berkley. Hit gerrybartlett.com to check out all the books in her series. SIZE SIX is book number 7 with number 8 on her computer now.