

## The Perils of Being Published: Playing It Smart

By Gerry Bartlett

Believe it or not, I'm still angsting over what I'm going to write next. Yes, I have a contract for book nine in my Real Vampires series, *REAL VAMPIRES KNOW HIPS HAPPEN*, and I'm trudging ahead on that one. Note the word choice. If you are trudging on any project, it's not a good sign. But I've spent my advance (Damn Facebook! No more stock market for me.), so I **will** write that book. The thing is I really want to get a second series going. Because there's just no security in the publishing world. Have you figured that out yet? If you thought you'd write a book, sell it and happily wait for the contracts to start rolling in, wake up and smell reality, sweetheart. It just isn't that easy.

Let's take a moment to examine some of our idols who have "Made It" and are now very successful, with books hitting the New York Times list consistently. I won't name names because these people would probably like to forget the dark old days. But most suffered through them. One well-known writer was thrilled to sell her first book but instead of a big splash, it barely made a ripple. Not her fault, no one could find it because of its tiny print run and lack of push. When she was told the publisher's romance line was going to be dropped, there went her plans for a sequel. She had to basically start over as if that first sale had never happened. Instead in this business which is all about numbers it became a liability with a bad sell-through. Luckily her fresh start in a different genre landed her with a fabulous publisher who believed in her and gave her the backing and print run necessary to get her on the Times list where she regularly sits today.

Other promising authors hitched their wagons to a publishing house that never paid them what they were owed, even though their books did hit shelves and even got on best seller lists. That nefarious publisher is now out of business, thank goodness. And it's not the only publisher to disappear leaving authors holding an empty wallet. This is a cautionary tale. Don't be

desperate. Or willing to sacrifice the book that cost you so much blood, sweat and tears on the sometimes empty promise that it will get into print. You need a guarantee that you will be paid what your work is worth. Do your homework. Ask other authors about publishers before you commit. Especially if the “buy” offer comes without an advance. That’s what on-line loops are for. I’d be very leery of being the “launch” book for a new publisher. It takes less than an hour to set up a website and claim that status. Hmm. Maybe I should...

Pay attention to which publishers have books on the USA Today list (which is based on sales) making their authors money. You want to be one of THEM, a successful author. Not left hanging when your “publisher” disappears or cheats you out of your hard-earned cash. Thinking of self-publishing? I don’t have statistics but I’m pretty sure there are a very small percentage of unknown, previously unpublished authors who actually make decent money that way. Those crowing about their success and big incomes make a lot of noise. How many others out there are staying very quiet?

In my struggle to figure out what to write next I study what’s selling. I’ve written here before about the Young Adult market. It’s booming when other genres are in a slump. As a published author, I subscribe to Bookscan through RWA. I study it every Wednesday when it’s updated so I can see what’s selling. New authors are rarely breaking in. Romance contemporaries are flat and the big books about small towns are in the hands of the rich and famous (authors). It’s a rare newbie who can edge into that hot market. Romantic suspense seems to have hit a wall as does urban fantasy. I also note the publishers there. Who is getting its authors sales?

Where can you go and find a soft spot to land? Inspirational your thing? It looks like a niche is to be found in Inspirational mysteries and historicals. What about Regency romances? Still strong if they aren’t traditional. In print you need a hook, something different to catch the publisher’s and reader’s attention. Traditional Regencies are doing well on-line. I write about vampires, one of the few paranormal entities still beloved by readers. Whatever project I work on

next is going to have a vampire in it. As they say here in Texas, “You need to dance with who brung ya”. I have a fan base. I will try to drag them along with me to whatever I write next.

I’ll never forget a workshop Christina Dodd did for our chapter years ago. It was right after her first historical, *Candle in the Window*, won the Rita. I loved that book and still consider it one of the best historicals ever written. If you can find it, read it. Anyway, what she said back then has always stuck with me, and as I’ve watched her career build to the stratosphere, I know she lives this philosophy. She was all about writing smart and said: Pay attention to the market. If your book is set in Nicaragua and books in Nicaragua don’t sell, change the setting. If sports figures aren’t popular, why are you writing about them? Check out Dodd’s web site. She’s written everything from historicals to contemporaries to romantic suspense to paranormals. And these weren’t accidental experiments. When one market slumped? She was on to the next big thing. And she’s just brilliant enough to hit the New York Times list in all of those genres.

Maybe you are that gifted, maybe you’re not. But I wouldn’t advise you to write a hero who’s a shepherd in Nepal if no one wants to read about shepherders or Nepal. Or to make your heroine a Wiccan with warts if it makes her less than attractive to readers. One caveat: If you really don’t like historicals or vampires or whatever, DON’T WRITE THEM. It will come through to your reader and you won’t sell that story. You have to be enthusiastic when you write. Love your story or no one will.

Write smart. That’s the message here. You can waste a lot of time on your high horse creating a so-called “Book of Your Heart.” B.S. The Book of MY Heart is the one that gets me a contract. So I changed the contemporary paranormal YA proposal I’m fiddling with from London to New York recently because I’ve noticed that series set in America are more popular with teens. Market slut? Of course. Are you with me?

For more Perils articles, go to [gerrybartlett.com](http://gerrybartlett.com). Gerry's latest book is REAL VAMPIRES HATE SKINNY JEANS, #8 in her series about a vampire who was bloating when she was turned in 1604.