

It's that time of year. When we look over our budgets, tighten our belts, or groan because that belt is too snug. You know what I mean. And then our RWA chapter dues notice appears in our inbox. One more bill to pay. I've been a member of RWA for over twenty years. Joined when I knew squat about writing except that I wanted to be rich and famous with books in Barnes & Nobles. The rich didn't happen. Famous? Not so much if you're keeping score on Facebook. But, yes, my books are in B & N, at least this month.

I am quick to admit that wouldn't have happened without RWA. I found my critique group at a chapter meeting. I learned craft and where and how to submit manuscripts at meetings and conferences. I heard about my agent at a meeting and kept abreast of the market through the RWR. Of course almost everything has changed since the nineties when I got started. The romance writing world has turned. I've heard more than one published author wonder aloud why she should bother renewing. I'd be lying if I didn't admit I had asked myself that same question. So this article will give you my answers. Hope it gives you food for thought. And without calories. Happy New Year!

First, let me explain that I belong to two local chapters plus another on-line chapter. I live in a suburb of Houston, birthplace of Romance Writers of America. So it's no wonder that there are three active chapters in this very spread out metropolis. One of the chapters is small, cozy and it's where I started as a newbie. I go there for the friendship, the company of writers, and I am happy to occasionally do workshops for the group. I have served as president in the past, newsletter editor and this year I'm on the board for special events. I don't mind. It's payback. How long will I feel I need to pay this little chapter back? I don't know. Maybe as long as I can pony up the twenty-five bucks and the energy. I get back as much as I give. I love seeing new people arrive with that enthusiasm that I've lost along the way. It can get me going again. The other chapter I belong to is big, has famous authors come speak and sponsors signings when I have a book out. I like the way they support their published authors.

Okay, how *do* the chapters support the pubs? This is a bone of contention for a lot of people who feel they have learned all they need to know, paid their dues, etc. Well, I'm lucky. I have PALS. That's the old name for unpubs who read books and post reviews of them in newsletters and on-line. In both chapters I have gals who do a

great job of getting reviews out in a timely manner, even put them up on Amazon. At the larger chapter the PAL stands up in front of the group, reads the review, then urges the crowd to buy my book at the signing after the meeting. I sell some books and the bookseller takes the rest back to her indy store. It's a win for me and it's let me establish a good rapport with the bookstore. I know this kind of arrangement is rare. Maybe your chapter doesn't do as much for its published authors. So what? Just remember how you got where you are. I never forget it. I used to just listen to the pubs talk when I first joined, soak in their experience and learn from them. It blew me away that they didn't mind passing on their knowledge so willingly. And I wanted to belong to PAN so badly that I wrote hours daily until I reached my goal. I also entered contests.

Ah, yes, contests. RWA contests can be your golden ticket to publication. I'm not just talking about national contests like the Golden Heart either. Chapter contests can get you in front of an editor or agent when the slush pile can't. My big chapter sponsors the Emily. We have wonderful editor and agent final judges. I got my own editor at Berkley to judge the paranormal category this year. I hope she finds a winner to buy among the finalists. Pubs who want to try a new genre can enter those contests too. It's a great opportunity. Just the feedback from judges can also help you perfect your manuscript before you shop it or self-pub it.

Oh, but maybe you are all into that self-pub thing now. Do you really need RWA for that? I don't know about you but stepping out on my own scares me. I'm about to do it. I'm grateful my chapters have veterans in that world who are more than willing to share stories from the trenches. Both chapters have had speakers on the subject and I'm sure there will be an interesting track at RWA National in San Antonio on the subject.

Yes, the National Conference. Have you been? It's overwhelming and a great place to fill the well. I admit to running dry lately. So I'm going. Whether I have a new contract or not. I want to rub elbows with successful people, pick their brains and come home energized. It always happens that way. I can't wait. So I'll renew. Will you?

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