

After the Call

by TJ Bennett

Have you ever wondered what happens after the call? We've all got an image in our heads of popping champagne corks and dancing jubilantly around our desks. However, I'm referring to "AFTER" after the call, when it is three o'clock in the morning, the champagne buzz has worn off, and you are lying awake in bed realizing you have no idea what to do next.

I haven't yet been faced with this dilemma, but I experienced it vicariously when one of my critique partners, Lynne Marshall, sold her first book (*Her Baby's Secret Father*, Harlequin Mills and Boon Medical Romance, release date TBA). Lynne, now writing as Lynne Marshall (which, by the way, was the first decision she had to make, as her editor wanted her to select a pen name), is the first of our critique group to sell. After surveying several other writing colleagues who sold their first books in 2005, I found many of their experiences illuminating.

A common theme is the apprehension that comes with being a newly contracted author. After Gemma Halliday (*Spying in High Heels*, Dorchester, Au-



gust 2006) sold her book as part of an agented two-book deal from a pitch at the RWA national conference in Reno, she immediately developed second book syndrome. "I had a long moment of 'now what?!' panic. I somehow had the idea that once I sold I would magically turn into this writer who knew exactly what she was doing. I'm still waiting for that moment," she jokes.

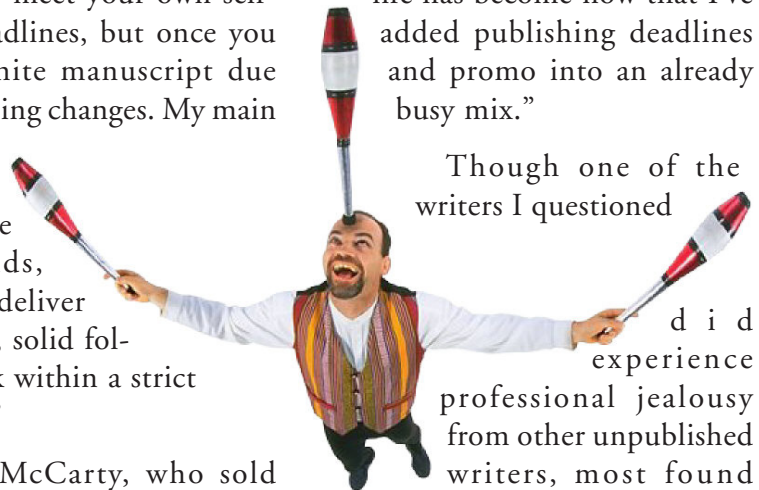
Kathleen Bacus, a finalist in Dorchester's American Title Contest, (*Calamity Jayne, Calamity Jayne Rides Again*, Dorchester Love Spell, January and July 2006) found the pressure of delivering under deadline more difficult than writing for herself: "Before you are published you only have to meet your own self-imposed deadlines, but once you have a definite manuscript due date, everything changes. My main concerns related to how to balance work, kids, home, and deliver with a good, solid follow-up book within a strict time frame."

Monica McCarty, who sold her three Scottish historical romances on an agented deal to Ballantine in December (titles and release dates TBA, but tentatively scheduled for summer 2007), says, "Actually, anxiety was almost immediate. Because it is a three-book deal, I feel quite a bit of pressure to make these

books really strong. This is a great opportunity for me to make a name for myself and I want to capitalize on it."

Figuring out how to self-promote is another dilemma new authors face. Gail Barrett (*Where He Belongs*, Silhouette Special Edition, November 2005 and *Facing the Fire*, Silhouette Intimate Moments, April 2006), who acquired an agent after she sold, says: "Doing a website, deciding if and where to advertise, whether to get bookmarks, etc...is so incredibly time-consuming." Gail suggests being as prepared as possible for this challenge ahead of time, and offers some practical tips on how to do just that (see sidebar). Susan Lyons, whose book *Champagne Rules* (Kensington Aphrodisia, February 2006) was an unagented sale, agrees: "...what a juggling act life has become now that I've added publishing deadlines and promo into an already busy mix."

Though one of the writers I questioned did experience professional jealousy from other unpublished writers, most found support from fellow chapter mates and loop buddies who shared their own newbie experiences. Lynne, whose sale was also unagented, explains, "The [Harlequin] contract was boilerplate, but there was some wiggle room that



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the ladies on the Harlequin newbie-[published] loop helped me address. I was clueless otherwise.”

Surprisingly, what I thought would be the most difficult aspect of being a new author, editorial requests for revision, seemed to be smooth sailing for most of them. Terry McLaughlin, who sold her book through RWA’s Golden Heart contest without an agent, (*Learning Curve*, Harlequin Superromance, May 2006), raves, “The process has been incredibly smooth so far, and I can credit my editor, Laura Shin, and her assistant, Lara Hyde, who are terrific to work with.” Kathleen notes that although she had to make relatively few revisions for *Calamity Jayne*, “I have to admit to obsessing over my galleys when they arrived. I wanted that puppy as close to perfect as I could get it.” Since Susan sold on a pitch for a work-in-progress (her interracial chick-lit erotica), she had the added challenge of finishing the book: “There’s a different kind of pressure when you’re submitting on a contract versus sending a contest entry or even submitting a requested full [manuscript].”

Still, it’s a safe bet that none of these talented ladies would give up the sometimes challenging experience of learning to be a new author for anything. Their advice to writers on the verge of making that first sale? As Terry says, and the others echo, “Keep focused on your

writing. All the rest of it—snazzy promotions, publishing politics, industry ups and downs—can sap energy and steal time from your work. Your writing is the reason for everything else, the only thing you can control, and the only thing that really matters.”

Good advice indeed.



LARA member and PRO writer T.J. Bennett was a finalist in the 2005 Golden Heart Paranormal category and the third place winner of the 2005 Daphne du Maurier Paranormal Romantic Mystery Suspense category. She hopes to someday be faced with the dilemma of what to do “after the call.”

Gail Barrett’s Advice to the Newly Published Author

Prepare as much as possible for the promotional aspects before you are published. For example:

- (1) **Start looking at other people’s websites;** take notes on what you like or don’t like (colors, fonts, content, etc.), and decide on a designer if you aren’t doing it yourself. Register your domain name so no one can get it before you do.
- (2) **Write promotional blurbs about your book** to use in press releases and advertisements. Be sure to have a variety of lengths prepared: one sentence, one paragraph, two paragraphs, etc. That way when someone requests something (like a newspaper reporter or your editor), you won’t panic.
- (3) **Learn how to make ARCs** (Advance Reader Copies) or find out who can make them for you. If no one is helping you, also make a list of reviewers you’ll send the ARCs to. (*ARCs are uncorrected proofs sent out for promotional purposes.--TJB*)
- (4) **Check out companies that make promotional materials:** bookmarks, postcards, pens, etcetera. Compare prices and decide whether you can design the items yourself or will need them to do it for you.
- (5) **Decide on what name you will write under,** plus an alternative. I wanted to use my maiden name but the editors nixed the idea because someone else had a similar name. I couldn’t think of any other name to use (and they couldn’t complete the contract until I decided!) so I ended up going with my married name by default.

You can check out Gail’s website at www.gailbarrett.com.