

THE PERILS OF BEING PUBLISHED: Hooking The Reader by Gerry Bartlett

I've been trying to start a proposal for a new series, something I've been thinking about for quite a while now. I've had a close look at what happens if you write for only one publisher and it's scary. A friend is caught up in the problems when that publisher suddenly has financial issues. It ties up your backlist, which means an income stream you counted on suddenly dries up. I don't want that to happen to me.

I just finished book 7 in my Real Vampires series and have hopes there will be a contract for book 8. I just got a nice royalty check for books 1 and 2, which were released in mass market form after they did well in trade paperback. So they earned out my advance. Otherwise, it's tough to earn out advances these days, unless they're puny. And my agent won't let the publisher get away with such disrespect(that was a joke, folks!). She fights tooth and nail over each contract just to keep them from cutting that advance. Luckily the first contract hit when paranormals were hot(still are, but the economy has changed) and she squeezed a nice sum from them. Now that's her standard and she won't back off. Anyway, every time I finish a book I go through the terror that this will be it, the series will be cancelled and I will be adrift, without a contract. So I'm trying to come up with something new. My proposal must include three chapters, an overview of the series and a synopsis of book one. Is that all? Argh.

So back to the point of this article. I have to write something that will immediately hook the reader. In this case, it's an editor. Best case: more than one editor will be interested and we will have what's called an auction, with several publishing houses bidding on my new series. If this happens my agent will help me pick the best deal and I'll get a new contract. It might not be the one for the most money, sometimes other terms are more important. Things like publisher support, print run guarantees, release dates and bonus stuff that my agent explains better than I do. I may even stick with my same publisher because I love my editor and we work well together. It may be no one loves my new series and I go back to the drawing board. Oh, no, stop with the negative thinking. But, I bet you understand. We all have those doubts.

So here goes. The hooks. First, start with action. No, I don't necessarily mean a bomb dropping in the middle of the town square or a fight scene. Taking advice literally is a newbie mistake. Subtlety is cool. Action can be any life-changing event, even unexpected news. Just don't hide it in endless dialogue about the weather or backstory you think the reader **has** to know up front. Trust me, we can wait to know about Aunt Minerva's second husband or the color of the flowers in the spring garden. The main thing is that it has to be action that's critical to the story. I've seen way too many prologues or action scenes in contest entries that are just stuck on for shock value when there's no payoff. Sorry, that's cheating. Your action scene has to be the incident that gets the story moving in some way and has to have impact on the hero/heroine. I want to see that hero/heroine involved when important stuff happens(love those technical terms!) and, not only that, I have to see the emotional toll it takes. Oh, yes. That's a big factor and the single most missing element in newbie fiction. Where's the emotional reaction from the character?

While all this butt kicking is going on, how is the character taking it? Is she terrified inside but holding it together in the face of danger? Is she facing down a bully in the drawing room with tears on her face but hiding inside the determination to run away? Is she screaming obscenities at the zombie while she wishes she'd never climbed out of bed with that hot guy she'll probably never live to sleep with again? Come on, you know what I mean.

Because you have to have three dimensional characters in your story to hook your reader. And that's what will make the opening come to life too. Your hero/heroine can't be cardboard or forget to *feel* the danger/love/excitement if he/she is a fully realized character that has all the thoughts and feelings you want her to have. Plunging into a book is what I do. I'm a pantsner. But I'm also a character driven writer. So I try to have a handle on my heroine and hero as I start. And I want my reader to empathize as I have the characters fall into a mess. That's my hook. It's important that I build the character early and make him or her sympathetic or at least interesting. My alpha male had better have something that makes him worthy of loving. My heroine must have a quirk or characteristic that helps her rise above a stereotype. And that has to be on the page up front, easy for the reader to figure out.

You may think I'm digressing here, but I watched Project Runway recently. The designers trying to get to the finale had a chance to show three looks. They said they were saving something for "later", some of their best as a surprise. Hello? If they didn't make it to the finale, there would be no "later". Learn the lesson. If you don't put your best up front, there will be no "later" for you either. Don't save your most brilliant work for the end of the book. It has to be in the opening.

Even with a contract, I still spend way more time on the first three chapters of my books than I do on all the rest of it (and I usually have at least 20 chapters and over 400 manuscript pages!). The reason is simple. First, if you're like me, you pick up a book and read a page or two to decide if you'll buy or not. And, yes, I want people to buy the book. My sell-through is what gets me contracts, you know. You think an editor doesn't also do this first page pick up trick? Second, I have enough confidence now to know that if I get off to a good start, the rest of the book will flow for me. And it does. Sometimes I need a little help from my editor to get it to flow more smoothly, but it does get there.

Remember, the hook is the thing. You want an editor to fall in love at first sight with your story. And you want to feel the same way about it. You want as much passion for that prose as your characters have for each other. If you do, it will shine through in your writing. Make it happen, as Tim Gunn on Project Runway says. I bet you can do it.

Gerry Bartlett's bestselling Glory St. Clair series will continue this December with **REAL VAMPIRES HAVE MORE TO LOVE**, book 6. Book 7, **REAL VAMPIRES DON'T WEAR SIZE SIX**, will be out from Berkley in August, 2011.