

I confess, I watch American Idol. Yes, I'm a little older than their target demographic. Sue me. I like watching young talent struggle to become the best, a star. It reminds me of my own struggle to get published back in the day. Yes, there were always the naysayers, the preachers of doom and gloom who would remind us at chapter meetings that the percentage of aspiring writers who actually "made it" as published authors was tiny. That most writers either gave up before selling a manuscript, or just never got "the call." Well, I was one of the lucky ones. Blessed. So watching Idol takes me back to the days when I was hungry for recognition and would do anything, anything to get that first contract.

Now, sitting back on my couch and watching from the safety of my den, it's easy to see why some contestants have star power and some don't. The judges warn them not to sound like they're singing karaoke. You know what they mean. Each singer needs to put his or her own twist on the song, make it unique, personal. If you just take the song and put it out there exactly like the original artist sang it, well, that's karaoke. Nothing new, nothing original.

I remember early rejections, some from agents, some from editors. If they gave me the courtesy of something besides a form letter, the comments went something like this: "I just couldn't get enthusiastic enough about this project to represent/buy it." Words to chill any newbie. No suggestions on how to fix the thing, just that. Okay. Now, looking back, I know what was wrong with that manuscript. I'd been writing karaoke. I'd read I don't how many books in the genre that I was targeting, always a good idea. But then I wrote a book just like those. I mean, *just* like them. Of course I had my own voice, I thought. And my characters were different. My secretary was blond, not brunette and had spunk, but probably not enough to make her stand out from the herd of other secretaries with a crush on a millionaire boss books. And the boss? He was your typical alpha male, very typical. I cringe now just thinking about it.

Now here's the thing. Yes, Harlequin is still buying those kinds of books. And cowboy books, secret babies and marriages of convenience. If that's your target, go ahead, aim for it. But

make sure you aren't sending them karaoke. How is your book going to stand out? What's the special spin, the twist? How are your characters different from every other character they've read before? You know they get thousands of submissions a month, don't you? I wish I were exaggerating. Of course your cowboy looks good in a pair of tight jeans. But maybe your Billy Bob is afraid of horses and has to hide that fact. Run from stereotypes as fast as Billy Bob runs from a bucking bronco. Maybe the first time your hero and heroine have sex is a disaster. Okay, that will get an editor's attention, if she reads that far.

Next month I'll talk about the first page. It had better be dynamite or you know you won't get a chance to show how *not* karaoke your stuff is. Let your query letter be the first salvo in your war on mediocrity. Show that your plot isn't same old, same old. Boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl to vampire, boy turns vamp to get girl back. Hmm. Whatever you decide to write, show the editor that you'll have some surprises in store. Maybe it's emotion, maybe it's your funny voice or depth of character. Experts will tell you to discard your first dozen or so ideas and stretch your imagination. I know, it's painful. Predictable is *easy*. And won't sell.

I'm reading young adult books these days almost exclusively. Why? Because that's where I'm finding the most innovation. It started with *Hunger Games* and hasn't let up. No, they're not all dystopian. I've enjoyed high fantasy (David Baldacci's *The Finisher*) and YA mysteries. I got a kick out of *The Thirteen Little Blue Envelopes* that sends a seventeen year old girl alone to Europe. No, there aren't steamy sex scenes and I'm okay with that. I know where to go if I need to read those. Teens seem to be more accepting of the new and different and YA editors get that. Not sure how far romance editors are willing to go now. So be careful when you are aiming at the traditional New York romance publishers. Don't send them karaoke, but read what's out there now and decide just how far you can push the envelope.

Of course everyone can be an Idol now. If New York won't publish it, do it yourself and see what happens. Dare ya!

Gerry Bartlett is the nationally best-selling author of the Real Vampires series. Real Vampires Take a Bite Out of Christmas(RV 10.5), an e-novella, is available now. You can sign up for her newsletter at gerrybartlett.com or follow her reviews on Goodreads.com.