

JUGGLING BOOKS AND PUBLISHERS

by
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No, the purpose of this article isn't to tell you how to heft three books, start them spinning in the air, and keep them going in circles without crashing to the earth. At least, not literally. But there are some definite similarities between circus juggling and an author juggling deadlines for multiple books and/or multiple publishers. And whether you're in the circus or in the publishing industry, the best piece of advice I can give you is the same -- keep your eye on the ball.

This is a topic that has recently become near and dear to my heart. I knew I wanted to write for two houses (I write category and single title, so that was something of a given), but since I am a full-time lawyer, the question of how many irons to have in the fire at the same time was something I seriously considered. I'm assuming everyone wants to have more than one book and contract after contract. Rather than that, this article deals with determining how much overlap you want on those projects and how to best organize your writing life so that you don't lose your mind under all those impending deadlines! Ultimately, of course, every author has to decide what is right for her at every point in her career.

Should you or shouldn't you? Ah, the joy of having multiple books and/or multiple publishers/lines. Of having a sig line that trails down the page. But there are some things you should consider right off the bat. First, you need a very clear picture of what your personal goal is. Are you hoping to make a solid career writing category romance? Do you only want to write single-title romance? Do you hope to use romance as a stepping stone to mainstream? Are you dying to quit your day job? In doing this self-analysis, keep in mind the following factors:

- **Why do you want more than one publisher?** There are a lot of reasons why you may want to write for multiple lines or publishers. For example, you may write both category and single title, you may want to make more money, you may be extremely prolific, or you may want to write in multiple genres.
- **How fast do you write and what is your writing process?** For a lot of authors, that first book is the baby you slaved over, spent months or even years polishing. Now it's sold, and suddenly you can go to contract with the next book on proposal. Oh. Jeez-Louise. Unless you've been paying real attention to your writing habits -- how long you need to have an idea gel; how many pages you can produce daily; if you simply must do multiple drafts of a book, or if you edit as you go; and if you can "get back into" a story after being lost in another for days -- then you're going to have a difficult time when the publisher comes back and wants two or three books from you, and then asks you for input on spacing your deadlines.
- **Can you, as a writer, satisfy the publisher's requests as to timing of the**

books? (Or, if you don't think that you can, are you comfortable telling (or having your agent tell) your publisher that you need a longer deadline? Can you handle having books for different publishers with very near deadlines? Obviously, this is related to the above. The publisher might have a slot in mind for one or all of the offered books. You need to know yourself well enough to know if you can meet those deadlines. And don't forget about rejuvenation time! If the deadlines aren't realistic, you need to not be terrified to say so. Your editor will understand. What your publisher will *not* be happy about is your phone call two weeks before the due date to say the manuscript will be late. That is known as a *bad thing*. Don't do it. And if life is such that you have no choice -- medical emergencies or whatever -- make sure your editor knows as far in advance as possible.

Business Considerations!

- The option clause. An option is in fact a contract -- essentially, you are contracting with your publisher to give them the right of first refusal on your next work that falls within certain parameters. If you're not careful, an option clause can hurt your ability to have multiple books in play. Planning is key. When you get that very first contract (and all subsequent contracts), make sure that your option clause is *narrow*. This is one area where it's very helpful to have an agent. You don't want the option clause in your category romance contract covering your "next romance." Keep it as limited as possible (your next Duets, your next 100,000 word romantic suspense, your next time-travel) so that you keep the doors open for multiple projects. Also, try to keep the amount of time the option is alive as short as possible.
- Your name. Again, an agent can be a boon to you here, and planning is key. Depending on why you are writing for different publishers, you may or may not want a different name. Do you want the same name in order to build reader recognition? If so, make sure a publisher doesn't own your pseudonym. Do you want a different name because you are writing in two different tones/genres? (aka Jayne Ann Krentz v. Amanda Quick, Nora Roberts v. J.D. Robb).
- Promotion. A sad fact (for authors) of the current publishing industry is that most authors must do their own promotion if they do any at all. But promotion takes time -- time you may not have if you are under heavy deadlines.
- Keeping those deals coming!! One of the big problems with having multiple books in the work is that -- at some point -- you've written all the books and then you're suddenly out of contract again. This is where the juggling analogy really comes into play. Every author I talked to agreed -- while you are writing the contracted books, you need to also be planning for the next set of books. It's all a cycle, and unless you can keep books on the shelves and royalties rolling in, it's going to be

difficult to earn a living wage writing romance. For a lot of folks, that's a major goal.

- ▶ When determining deadlines on a current contract, always factor in time for you to work on a new proposal. For example, building in lag time before the final book is due can give you the opportunity to write a proposal and forward it to your editor so that it can be "in play" before your final book is accepted and your out of contract. Similarly, you can work on the proposal for the next project while waiting for approval. Harlequin author Jamie Denton explained, "Once I turn in the proposal for a synopsis sale, I then start putting together a couple of proposals in the hope of getting that next contract before I'm out of current contract." Considering the wait times inherent in this business, for both published and unpublished authors, this is really the best approach possible. As Temptation author Julie Elizabeth Leto said, "You have very little control over this if you turn in a proposal and it sits for 6 months. The trick for new people is that once they get a nibble of interest from an editor, they need to start working on another book for that line as if they are going to sell. They need to have it ready to go."

Keeping Sane and Organizing Your Life! OK. So now you've been offered a multi-book deal for a series in category, and the deadlines are back-to-back. Or you've got a book due to Harlequin or Silhouette right about the same time as your single title deadline. How can you get the books done, ensure the quality of your work, not get fired from your day job, not ignore your spouse and/or kids, and still sleep every once in a while?

Hopefully, you've heeded the advice earlier in this article, and you have analyzed your own personal skills and didn't agree to a deadline you just can't handle. (Of course, there are some reasons why you might accept a less than ideal deadline. Perhaps you've been invited to fill a slot opened by someone who missed her deadline. Perhaps a line is launching and you've been asked to write a launch book, an opportunity you don't want to turn down. Perhaps your editor simply asked and you want to be a team player. These are all legitimate reasons, and time management becomes even more important.)

In pulling together material for this article, I talked to a number of writers. I was initially surprised at how similar the methods were, but, in retrospect that only makes sense. Organization is organization. And that really is the bottom line.

- **Setting a goal.** You've been monitoring your writing, so you know what is realistic for you, page-wise, on a daily basis. Now you have a contractually imposed *final* deadline. Work backwards from that deadline to figure out your daily/weekly goals, leaving yourself enough time at the end to let our critique partners/agent read the manuscript, to let it sit and "gel", or simply to allow for emergencies. **This is very key.** Without weekly goals, you can very easily fall

into a rut, thereby bumping you up near your deadline. Suddenly, you have to write fifty thousand words, edit galleys, and turn in a proposal, all within three weeks. Best to avoid this scenario. Plus, by setting goals you will be more likely to stay motivated. As Harlequin/Kensington author Karen Drogan aka Carly Phillips said, "set a daily/weekly goal that you can make work for yourself and stick to it." Love Spell, Silhouette (and Kensington as Linda Devlin) author Linda Winstead Jones agreed. "The most important thing is to remember to be reasonable when setting deadlines for yourself. Don't promise an editor something on March 1 if you know you'll have to push yourself to the limit to get it done on time. Promise the book when you know you can have it done and turn it in on time." If you have a day job, this cushion is even more important, especially if your day job frequently places unexpected demands on your shoulders. Harlequin author Charlotte MacLay put it simply: "I don't do deadline dementia. It's just not my style. <G>."

- **Tracking Those Goals.** Harlequin authors Janelle Denison and Jamie Denton described wonderful goal sheets at their workshop at the 1999 RWA National Conference, and a number of authors swear by these goal sheets. You can see one at pages 20 and 21 of the conference handouts. Essentially, you define goals for six months to a year, then set out those goals on weekly sheets which let you know exactly what you need to be doing. Track the information on the goal sheets by describing what you did/need-to-do each day, and then set out exactly how many pages you actually wrote on your manuscript. It's truly a joy to watch those pages add up! In addition to pure manuscript tracking, you can also use a goal sheet as a "journal" as well -- so you can keep track of things like editor calls, etc. and have all that info in one handy place.
- **More Tracking.** In addition to your project goal sheets, you need to be able to relate each of your projects to the other ones. The idea is to keep this information at your fingertips, to keep you working "smarter," so you want as much information in one place as possible. I use a color-coded calendar so that I can easily see my contract deadlines, personal deadlines (I like to get things in early!), deadlines for art/marketing information, when I need to send out arcs, when I'm obligated to speak or to sign books, when I'm attending a conference, and when I have day-job obligations. This is kept on a big calendar in my home office. I keep a quick list in my purse calendar so that I can see these dates at a glance. (And, to be on the safe side, I keep all my calendar information on my computer and sync it up with my palmtop. What can I say? I like technology.)
- **Project Organization.** Often, months will have passed before you hear back about a proposal. Authors use a variety of methods for getting "back into the groove." For example, in addition to keeping a file, Julie Elizabeth Leto has "cheat sheets" — index cards with character names and physical descriptions. Other

writers keep three-ring binders filled with everything they know about the project. If that's not your style, a big envelope can work just as well. Also popular are character outlines (which can range from lean -- hair color, eye color, profession, major goal -- to very, very detailed). Vicki Lewis Thompson reports that she tacks pictures up -- people and places and other relevant information -- as soon as she starts a book. Other authors, myself included, simply work from a detailed synopsis. The goal is to have the information where *you* can find it when *you* need it and in a form that *you* can use.

- **Life/Career Tracking.** To-do lists are the greatest. Carry a pad and make notes of everything you need to do, then tick it off. Set up a time when you do little things in chunks (answer fan mail, send thank-you's to book-sellers or reviewers, angst about your bookmarks). Invest in and use a dry-erase board. Set out the information you need in a useable format and *then use it!* Another trick is to start a database (even if you're not published yet) and keep it updated. Mine currently has booksellers, distributors, friends, promotional notes, reviewers, editors, websites. Included anything you can think of that you might need to access quickly. Actually, Access is a great tool. You can use the Wizard feature, or hire a college student to design a database for you. Try to organize your life so that you don't have to constantly reinvent the wheel. For example, keep a copy of your first on-line interview, and refer back to it for the next on. Keep a running document with your backlist, complete with ISBN numbers, so that the information is right there when you need it.

Lacking the organization gene? Never Fear! The simple fact is, a lot of multi-published authors just don't deal well with calendars, lists, charts and spreadsheets. But they still manage to stay organized and stay on deadline (and stay darned entertaining, too!): When I asked a group of Temptation authors to share their tips, Carrie Alexander, who also writes for Duets, had this to say: "Daily goal sheets? Character charts? Three-ring binders? Calendars? Aye-yi-yi! My new goal is to be like you guys! (Hold that cursor while I quickly write that down on a scrap of paper...)." Heather MacAllister also offered a few useful tips for staying on top of deadlines — give *all* your characters brown hair and brown eyes; shop online; give each child his own personal microwave; and leave the Christmas tree up until February!

The bottom line? Strive for organization, but remember, ultimately you have to figure out what works for you. The absolutes? *Be professional. Don't miss deadlines.* But how you get there is up to you, and as your career grows, surely your work habits will grow and change, too. And your editor never needs to know that your Christmas decorations stayed up until July....

This article was written in 2000.

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