

CONTESTS

By Blair Bancroft

To contest or not to contest . . .

I've judged more than 300 RWA chapter contest entries over the last six or seven years, so obviously I have some definite opinions about contests and don't hesitate to give them. But I am not an expert on contests sponsored by other organizations. Anyone entering a contest with anything but a nominal fee—\$30 or less—should think long and hard before laying your work on the line. Is this a situation where you're going to get helpful feedback from the primary judges and the finalists will be judged by an editor or agent? Or is someone going to charge you \$100 to enter, then come back with some malarkey, such as, "You show potential. All your work needs is professional editing, available for only \$1000 a book?" Or maybe offer you a small press contract for a mere \$8,000? (Otherwise known as Self-publishing.)

Be careful. Know your contest before you enter. Some RWA chapters are more professionally run than others. A few chapters slip into emphasizing their contests more as fund-raisers rather than an opportunity to pass along wisdom to aspiring unpubs. But, overall, the RWA contest fees are low and the feedback worth it. Yes, every chapter member, even Newbies, are encouraged to judge, but each chapter holds training sessions for judges and makes every effort to be sure entrants get at least one experienced judge; if possible, a published author.

The following dialogue and personal comments refer only to RWA chapter contests.

"Why enter a contest? Some of the judges are unpubbed authors themselves and their comments are a joke."

Well, yes, but they're also readers. And chances are they're not new at that.

"I got marked down because the judge believed something that my research showed was absolutely false!"

It's true a few judges are absolutely clueless. Hung up on old myths, "rules" that never existed, or afflicted with plain old jealousy. It happens. But not very often. And that's why contest coordinators make sure your work has more than one judge. (Most

contests try to have three judges per submission.) Some contests drop the lowest score. In other contests, if scores vary widely, a mediating judge will be assigned. Believe me, contest coordinators want their authors to be happy. They want you to tell your friends about their contest. They want you to submit again. They want their chapter's contest to be approved by the entrants, be considered top-rate, helpful. And they're rooting for one or more of the finalists' manuscripts to be requested by the final judge (an editor or agent). So if you thought the contest coordinator was just out there ho-humming her job, you couldn't be more wrong.

The same is true of the judges. Perhaps even more so. Those of us who judge multiple chapter contests are doing so because we're trying to give back to our organization. We want to pass along our experience so others won't have to learn the hard way, as we did. And then there's that sudden burst of pleasure when we find a manuscript that's truly ready, or on the brink of being ready, for submission.

“Well, okay, but what if somebody steals my idea?”

Somebody could just as easily steal your idea in an agent's or publisher's office. Every time a writer sends off her/his precious idea or chapter pages there's a risk. It's a given in any kind of creative field, from movies to television to books and e-books. More than fifty years ago, my mother—later a well-known children's book author—heard a story she had submitted to a New York publisher performed as a radio play. And I've had some personal experience with this sort of thing myself. And yet your story is never going to earn you money if it never leaves your computer. You have to close your eyes, take a big breath, and tell yourself, “If I sit on my hands, nothing is ever going to happen.” So suck it up and take the chance. Remember, in romance the basic story is always the same. It's what you do with it that's unique. No one can take that away from you.

Note: If you're still doubtful, avoid contests that include a synopsis.

“Why are contests so nit-picking about rules?”

They're trying to prepare you for nit-picking editors and agents. And, yes, there are some. I've met a few. Contests are trying to get you to follow instructions, mostly because a submission that doesn't follow traditional manuscript format is going to scream “Amateur,” and you really don't want that. When judging, I usually mark the

deviations from standard format but do not take off points for it, though violating one-inch margins tends to set me off. There's no excuse for that. This violation probably happens more in contests than in publisher submissions because authors are trying to squeeze more into a set number of pages. Take my word for it: Don't do it. Less than one inch margins, like less than 12-point type, screams "cheat" to the judges.

Remember: Most publishers list definite submission guidelines on their web sites. Follow them exactly, and your submission is already a step ahead of those that didn't.

"Any other reasons to submit a contest entry?"

Yes. Several.

1) Submitting to a contest is excellent practice for submitting to an editor or agent. You learn the steps: edit, edit, edit. Proofread, proofread, proofread (NOT the same thing). Make certain you have provided all the information required. Make sure everything is clear, neat, professionally laid out. Do not squeeze your page by violating margins or using smaller type; i.e., make it easy for the judge/editor/agent to read.

2) Winning or finaling in a contest looks good in a query letter, which is the same as saying, "It looks good on your resumé."

3) Submitting to a contest helps you learn to take criticism, roll with the punches. If just one judge makes what you consider an unwarranted remark, feel free to shrug it off. But if more than one mentions a particular flaw, take the criticism seriously. Learn to be open-minded, willing to consider suggestions. Think. If you agree with the judge, revise. If, after careful consideration, you don't agree, then stick with your guns. The important thing is not to close yourself off, bulling ahead, heedless to criticism. None of us is perfect.

4) Submitting to a contest forces you to meet a deadline, something all authors have to do as they move past published Book Number One.

"I'm almost convinced, but contests cost money, postage has gone up, and is it really worth it?"

Most RWA contests are well worth it. When people in other industries are paying a thousand dollars or more to go to a Conference or Seminar in their professional field, I can't see that paying an entry fee of \$25, plus the cost of mailing a partial manuscript is prohibitive. In fact, it's a real bargain. If your budget is truly severely limited, then

choose contests that emphasize overall critiques instead of a long series of sometimes irrelevant questions. The Georgia Romance Writer's Maggie contest is an outstanding example of this type of contest. You can save postage by entering contests that allow electronic submission. You will, however, miss out on a lot of details that judges customarily write in the margins. I personally will not judge electronic entries for that reason.

So what's an irrelevant question? A question that is aimed at one sub-genre of romance and not applicable to others. For example: "Do the hero and heroine meet in the first chapter?" (A question that applies to Category romance only.)

And as for theft of ideas: If you're going to be a professional author . . . if you're going to submit manuscripts to New York publishers, small press publishers, e-publishers, Hollywood . . . wherever, you've got to ignore the eight hundred pound gorilla and just go ahead and do it. Persistence is an author's best friend. Paranoia is not.

"What is a Contest Slut?"

I had trouble believing such people existed, but a long-time contest coordinator assured me they really do. A Contest Slut is a so-called author who keeps submitting the same first chapters to contests over and over again. She keeps polishing and polishing until she not only finals, but wins and wins again. **And never writes anything else.** This is the scary part. A contest slut just wants to win contests, but never finishes the book. An ego trip? Maybe, but I just can't see the point. So please, please don't be a Contest Slut. Polish, polish, and polish that entry, but FINISH THE DANG BOOK! Submit the dang book. Roll with your rejections and keep right on going to Book Two. Polish that one. Submit. That's what all published authors had to do. It's not an easy road. But contests can help you travel it with more confidence and greater professional polish. So get that book in the mail!

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If you keep in mind that the most important thing about contests is the *learning process*, then by all means enter. *Feedback* is the primary goal, not winning. Don't just glance at your score and toss your manuscript aside. (And, yes, I recall being guilty of exactly that once upon a time.) Read all those comments the judges went to the trouble

of passing along. To use an old expression, learn to winnow the wheat from the chaff. Learn from the advice of experienced judges and learn to ignore the remarks of judges who are still honing their judging skills, just as you're still honing your writing skills. Grow a tougher skin. Be prepared for the rigors of submitting to publishers and agents. Believe me, contests are great practice for the rough and tumble of big-time publishing.

To Contest Sluts on an ego trip, my advice is *Stand Down, make room for the authors who are serious about their careers, the ones who finish the dang book*. To everyone else, YES, go the contest route. Put your work out there and get other authors' reactions. Select the best of the advice, act on it, and try again, until your manuscript is polished enough to submit to an editor or agent. And Good Luck!