

Work With Me

A Chat with Newly Published Authors Susan Lyons and P.J. Mellor

© Susan Lyons and P.J. Mellor

[This article first appeared in *Romantic Times BookReviews*, August 2006.]

After writing for years and diligently studying not only the craft but the business, you'd think there wouldn't be many surprises when you sold that first book. Is that really the case? Here's what two first-sale authors have to say.

What was the biggest surprise after making your first sale?

P.J.: That people weren't more impressed! I also had to—or felt I had to—explain exactly what it was that sold...which segued into an explanation of exactly what erotica was, and was not, that generally left them with eyes glazed over.

Susan: I just call them sexy romances, and don't bother explaining! My biggest surprise was how fast things can take off, when they finally do. Between us we've contracted for ten novels/novellas in less than a year.

When it takes off, you have to think about priorities. How do you set yours, and have they shifted since you made your first sale?

P.J.: My priorities have definitely changed. IMHO, writing for an actual—and real!—deadline is much more difficult. Suddenly everything else takes a back seat.

Susan: Writing has always been a strong priority, but I'd shove my WIP aside for a deadline on a "real" project. Now I have book contracts with very real deadlines. The other big change—and another surprise—is how much time I'm spending on promotion.

How much promotion do you do? How do you balance it against writing time?

Susan: Everyone says authors have to do promotion; they can't rely solely on their publishers. Yet we all know the best promo is to write fabulous books and get them out quickly. Wish I could clone myself, with one of me writing and the other doing promo. I've spent way more than my advances on promo, with no idea which, if any, efforts will pay off. How do I balance things? Juggle like crazy! Also, I strongly recommend, even before you're published, taking Gwen Shuster-Haynes's online course on developing a writing presence and career plan.

P.J.: This has been a real problem for me, since I tend to jump into a project with both feet and eat, sleep, live and breathe it until I move onto something else. So I tend to do that with promotion as well, which means my writing suffers. Someone told me, when I first sold, to spend just 5% of my advance on promotion—of course, I didn't listen! When my numbers come in, I'll know more about how effective it was.

When should a writer get a website?

P.J.: I always felt getting a web site before you publish is probably a waste of time and money...then I met authors who actually sold as a result of their site! An RWA friend was rejected by an editor and when she wrote her thank you, she included her web site in her signature line. The editor went to the site and read about another book the author had written and bought it! So now my opinion is, if you can afford it and have multiple projects—especially in varied genres—go for it!

Susan: As soon as (1) you can afford it (both time and money), and (2) you have something to say. It didn't reach the top of my priority list until I made the first sale. But by then I'd done a lot of research, had a very good idea of what I wanted and knew that trying to do it myself would lead to major frustration.

Do you have a blog? Why, or why not?

Susan: Not personally. Yes, I know it's promo and it works great for some authors, but for me it's way too much time away from writing. Plus, I can't imagine being witty on a daily basis. But I do participate in the Aphrodisia Authors blog and the YahooGroups loop for Aphrodisia authors and fans.

P.J.: No! They scare me! LOL. I'm a techno-tard and the few times I attempted to blog I felt like roadkill on the information superhighway. But many authors love them, so if you have the ability...why not? As long as you have your priorities and don't let it interfere with your writing.

How do you feel about privacy issues, especially seeing as you write erotic romance? Do you use a pseudonym, have a PO box and unlisted phone—or do you share lots of personal information on your website, blogs or chats?

P.J.: My agent assured me if anyone truly wanted to find me, it would be an easy thing to accomplish with the internet. I don't use a pseudonym, but I do have a post office box—mainly because it's easier to keep business and personal mail separate that way. But no, I do not share really personal information on my web site. Not because of “privacy issues” but because it's...personal.

Susan: Me too. Exactly as P.J. said.

What's been the most fun thing to happen in your writing career since you first sold?

Susan: Going to my first RWA National conference as a “published author” and getting the princess treatment. Being a Golden Heart finalist at the same time didn't hurt one bit either.

P.J.: Seeing my first book on the shelf in a book store! Followed by book signings. Some authors find signings difficult, but I've been totally enjoying them.

What's been the most scary thing about being a published author?

P.J.: Everything! Now you have pressure to actually produce something in a timely fashion that is salable.

Susan: Sending my babies into the world. I want everyone to love them, and I know that's not going to happen. (Of course, my babies do happen to be perfect, so what's not to love?)

Susan Lyons (www.susanlyons.ca) has degrees in psychology and law, so what else could she possibly do but write chick lit erotic romance?

P.J. Mellor (www.pjmellor.com) has a BS in Business Administration/Small Business Management—which is very strange, considering the way her mind works.