



The 10 Lessons I've Learned

written/given by

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You know since the day I first learned that there were actually writer's conferences out there, I have to admit I've been a major con 'ho.

I don't know, there's just something about being in a room full of people who share the same dreams and goals that invigorates me and makes me want to go running straight for my keyboard. It always has.

Writers' conferences are wonderful events where all of us can spend a few hours with people who actually understand our weird psychosis.

Let's face it- mom, dad, husband, wife, friend, significant other, beloved pet, even stranger on the street- they can only take so much. After the five billionth time we lament about so-and-so saying that our book wasn't right for them when it is so obviously tailor-made for their house- our family, friends and pets are a little tired of listening to us wail and explicate the latest rejection letter or career woe. There's only so many times they can hear us whine before they tell us to suck it up.

But a writer... they understand. They will go over that woe with us for years, and I do mean years. Because we go over their woes with them for years. It's totally symbiotic. We understand each other.

You know, this is an incredible business. It's full of up and downs. And even sideways, backwards, and rocket rides. You just never know what you're going to be in for until it's too late. In my case, it was definitely "fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy ride."

Personally, I think writers' groups should issue every new member a survival kit that consists of Dramamine, Prozac and Teflon Underwear. 'Cause you're going to need them all.

Some of us are just starting out on this path with no idea of where it'll take us. Some of us are old guard who have walked this way to the point we can go blindfolded. Some are climbing their way up the ladder with rose-colored glasses and some of us have become disillusioned by the journey and scarred by one wound too many.

Ironically I've been all those at some point in my career. I remember well being the doe-eyed innocent who attended her first chapter conference years ago. And being the veteran who has been to her hundred and first. You know, the weird thing about careers, they so seldom go the way you think they will.

Like most writers, I thought back when I started that I'd write a book and sell it within a few weeks of finishing it. Of course, it would be the next bestseller and I would do tons of tours and keynotes.

But it didn't happen that way.

Instead, I spent countless days that rolled into years, biting my nails in anticipation of the time when I would finally get the call from a publisher.

Most of you know exactly what I mean. Those interminable hours of sitting by the phone while you're typing and glancing over at the phone every two minutes saying out loud, "ring, damn you, ring!"

And checking every so often to make sure that it's still working. It would have been just my luck that the multi-book, multi-million dollar offer would come in and my phone would be on the fritz.

I know what it's like to finally get that wonderful phone call and do cartwheels of joy for days on end. I know the thrill of seeing my name in print for the very first time and to see something I wrote sitting in a bookstore. God knows, there's nothing like it.

And I also know the horrible sting that comes when all the doors slam shut afterward. The feel of rejection after I've made my sales and won awards and had great sell throughs, and to wonder what I did

wrong and why I can't get another contract no matter what I do.

I know the mixed joy and fear of finally getting another contract and the paranoia that lingers with that awful voice saying, in the blink of an eye it could all go away again.

I also know what it's like to get that most incredible phone call that says, "You've hit the *New York Times* print list, Sherri, congratulations." Of course, my plan was to get that call while I was busily working on my next book.

I never knew that call would come three days after I buried my mother.

Things so seldom ever go as we plan them.

There are times still when it all seems like a dream. Times when I wonder when I'll wake up and find myself once again destitute, skipping lunch so that I'll have enough money to send out my proposals. That I'll find myself back in my tiny two room apartment leaning over my word processor, waiting with breathless anticipation for that first phone call from a publisher.

If I am dreaming, then please, please don't wake me.

But through all the good times and the bad, I've learned a lot of things and these are what I'd like to share with you today because to me, these are the things writers need to keep in mind if they want to achieve and enjoy their dream.

1. The only difference between a published and an unpublished writer is a contract. That's it. One tiny... well okay, they're usually rather large, but for the purpose of this, one tiny piece of paper. That's it. And honestly if you've ever really read that fine print you might realize that you're a lot better off being unpublished. I swear I think on some of them I not only sold my firstborn, but my soul as well. Believe me there are times when being published is no walk in the park.

2. We don't take this journey alone. I know when we're in this kind of environment it's easy to forget who you've met and talked to. So many times we sit in anonymity at these things. But I want everyone to take a minute and give a good hard look at those who are with you today. For all you know, you're sitting at a

table with the next JK Rowling, Dan Brown, James Patterson, or a writer who will one day out-sell all of them combined.

That person sitting beside you may be unpublished now, but in two years, they could be where I am or even way beyond me.

The very first writers conference I attended was in Richmond, VA in 1990. I didn't know a single soul there. I was scared and nervous. I sat in the back of the room next to a woman who turned out to be a bestselling author— she was on my right and on my left was another doe-eyed first timer. It turns out she was Cathy Maxwell. I was terrified of the bestselling author and I couldn't really hear her so I spent most of my lunch talking to Cathy.

Little did I know that this one person on my left that day would be crucial to my sanity for years to come. She was my first critique partner and I had no idea that in two years both Cathy and I would have a contract with two different publishers.

I didn't know that Cathy would sail to the top of the USA Today bestseller list in only four years or that she would hit the Times list in five. If I could have one wish, it would be for all of you to have a career like Cathy's. For all of you to have a smooth and quick rise to the top.

Nor did I know that in two years I would sell six books in one twelve month period and then sell nothing again for more than four years. I didn't know the woman on my right would lose her contract and give up publishing in less than three years.

All I knew was that I was finally having lunch with people who dreamed the same dream that I did. And all of this gets me to lesson number three.

3. You can't climb the ladder of success with one foot planted in your mouth. Again, look around your table. You don't know where any of you will be a year from now. Never mind where you'll be in two or even ten. Remember in less than ten years, Rowling sold her first book for only four thousand dollars and today she's the richest woman in England and the single most successful writer in the world. Her last book set a new first time record for it's 12 million copy print run. And ten years ago, none of us even knew her name.

You know my mother used to have a saying If you can't say anything nice about someone... then come sit over here by me.

Don't listen to my mom. In this business, that will only get you into trouble. Because you don't who the person next to you is or who they know, always be prudent with your speech.

Not to make you paranoid, but yeah really, be paranoid. I had my best friend with me at a conference. She's a reader pure and simple. God love her, she never wants to write anything more than a check to pay for one of our books.

So she was at that conference with me that day and because I was one of the speakers, they had her sit in the back with a group of authors while I was in the front of the room.

The writers at that table were rather rude to her once they found out that she wasn't one of them. Even after she told one of the writers that she was a fan, the writer actually grilled her on what she'd read and what she thought of the writer's work. My friend was flabbergasted. You better believe she doesn't buy them anymore.

But more than that. My friend lives in New Jersey, literally down the street from one of the senior editors who was there that weekend. They know each other. They go to the same stores, shop at the same mall and attend the same church. She's sat at this editor's kitchen table and has played with her children.

Those writers, both published and unpublished, were saying some less than kind things about the editor, not knowing that the little unknown person beside them was a friend of hers. Likewise I was at another conference where two writers were doing the same thing in the privacy of their own room and didn't realize that next door was an editor who could hear them plainly through the walls. Not good. Saying things in public is a really quick way to shoot your career down.

Likewise, writer loops, blogs and social media are a huge hazard. Remember, you are not in the privacy of your own home. Those are public domain and never post anything or email anything that you don't want to go straight to your worst enemy or more to the point, straight to your editor, would-be editor or agent.

Please take my advice, if you can't say anything nice, say nothing at all. Because you never know when those words may come back to haunt you.

Lesson 4. Believe in yourself. Always. This is not an industry for the meek. I want all of you here today to repeat after me. "I am the best writer in this room and I deserve my dream."

Believe it because it's true.

Don't ever put your work down to anyone, not even yourself. Be proud of what you write. Be proud of your genre. Be proud of your words. No one ever writes a perfect book. No one... and we are all very much aware of that fact.

Everyone, no matter where they fall in the pecking order, thinks that their book sucks at some point. It's a running gag between me and my friends that whenever I'm in the middle of a book, they know as soon as they hear my voice to say, "You're the best. Sher. I love it, I adore it. You don't suck and your career isn't over. Now go back and write."

It's true. So know that you're not alone in thinking you stink at times— you probably do, but then don't we all?

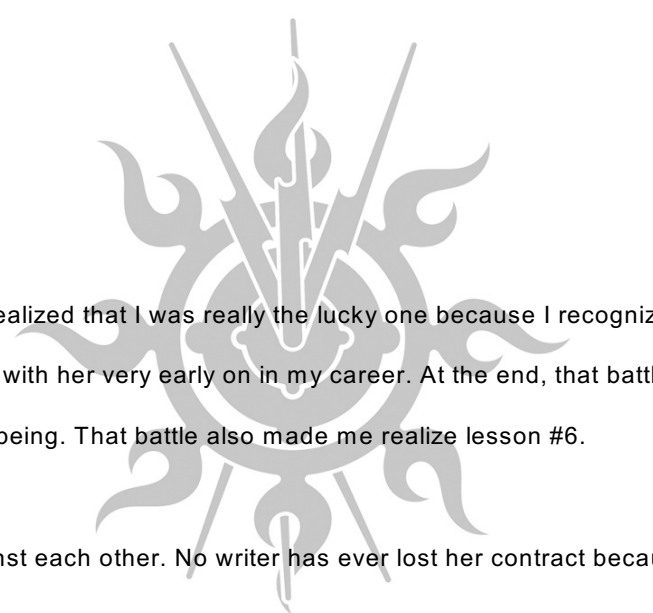
Just know that at the end of the day. You are the best writer in this room and you deserve your dream.

5. It's okay to have a pity party. Just by being a writer and surviving this industry for more than about three and a half seconds you've earned the right to it. When bad news strikes, take a few hours to cope or even a day if you need it. All of us have bad things in our lives both professionally and personally.

All of us.

There ain't no such thing as a free ride. But don't dwell on the negative. It will infect if you do.

You know, I admit openly that it was hard to watch as some of my best friends rode that skyrocket to success and I couldn't get the time of day from my publishers. Honestly, I didn't begrudge them—I love them. But it hurt and I couldn't understand why they were so lucky and I was so cursed.



But in the end I realized that I was really the lucky one because I recognized the monster within and I faced her and dealt with her very early on in my career. At the end, that battle made me stronger as a writer and as a human being. That battle also made me realize lesson #6.

6. This is not a race against each other. No writer has ever lost her contract because another writer came onto the scene.

No reader stopped reading an author because a new writer was published. Think about it. You only stopping reading a writer because that writer disappointed you. As long as she keeps you entertained, you buy her. Always.

Likewise with publishers, they have never said, Sherri you're not selling as many books as Betty Bestseller so adios. Betty's success has nothing to do with mine. My publishers only look at my numbers and my performance. That's it.

We're all in a one horse race against ourselves. It doesn't pay to look at the competition because they're not competition. They're just other writers and I promise you that their success has no bearing on your own. Except to say this. A rising tide floats all boats. One writer's success usually brings success to all— I can't tell you how many letters I get from readers who say that they don't normally read paranormals, science fiction, vampires, historicals or romance, but since they enjoyed mine, they want to know who else to try.

But we are human. And that green-eyed monster is lurking to drag us down. Don't let it win. Confront it and lop it's head off.

Early on in my career, I have to admit that it really bugged me to hear that so-and-so had had no desire to be a writer, but just woke up one day and said, I can do it— heck she didn't even read the genre. Then the next thing you know, she's got a multibook deal and is on all the bestseller lists.

I'm not one of those people. I came out of the womb wanting to be published. Literally. And because I wanted to be a writer so badly, it did make me sad to hear that. But I realized something as time moved on. And that is lesson number 7

7. Whoever envies another confesses that person's superiority. Yeah, that one snapped me right out of my jealousy every time. Because I'm the best writer in this room and I deserve *my* success!

Seriously though, the longer I stayed in this business what I saw time and again was that the very people I spent way too much time envying had to pay their own dues eventually. Many of those ones I was so fixated on for being so lucky, are no longer even published and to my eternal regret, many aren't even trying anymore and that really saddens me. I never want to see a writer give up their dream. Because *you* are the best writer in this room and *you* deserve *your* dream, too.

What we have is a gift. Each of us has inside ourselves our own set of stories and our own people who live within us. Only you can tell those stories of those people. And if you quit, no one will hear them. They will all die, unknown and unheard. Please, please don't give up. If not for yourself, then do it for all those people who share your heart and your mind.

Which leads me to 8.

8. Don't let the turkeys get you down. There are a lot of people who get caught up in the envy-game. They can't let it go. You know these people. You might even be sitting next to one right now. They're the ones who, when you have really great news, have to bring you back down to reality. "I won a contest," you say and they come back with, "Well I heard they didn't have that many entries in that contest this year and it's not one of the really important ones."

You don't need that. If you're like me, you have your own inner voice that says those things to you already. The last thing you need is an external voice validating it.

Surround yourself with true friends. Those who don't want to keep you grounded. Those who want to see you soar through the cloudless skies to the ultimate high. Believe me, we all have our own doom-and-gloom internal voice. We don't need another one.

I'm not saying cull out a friend who is having a moment or two of jealousy. We all say thoughtless things from time to time and God knows, I've had my share of hoof-in-mouth-itis. I'm talking about the

perpetual poo-poo artist. And you know who she is. She's the last person you want to call with good news and you need to cull the herd and let her go graze on her own.

If you make an enemy by letting such a person go, then that's a shame, but it's not your fault. You can't soar if you have an anchor around your neck and that's what these people are.

Whether you are published or not, someone is going to fixate on you and think that you have it better or easier than they do and they will do or say mean things to you and about you.

But that's okay. Enemies are an unfortunate part of life. Personally, I love my enemies. Without them to goad me onward, I wouldn't be where I am today.

If I had two wishes, one would be for you to all have an easy career and the second would be to have no enemies at all.

My mom used to have a favorite joke she'd tell. A preacher was at church giving a sermon and he asked the congregation who among them had no enemies. Most of the hands went up. He looked at them a bit suspiciously, and asked again. "Are you sure you have no enemies? None at all? That there's not a single person in this world who wishes you ill?" They thought about it for a second and all the hands but one went down.

Amazed the preacher stared at the oldest member of their congregation, a little ninety-eight year old woman and asked, "Ms. Mable, please share with us how it is that you have lived so long and you have no enemies, no one who wishes you harm."

The little only lady put her hand down and said, "Simple, preacher. I outlived those bitches."

That is my mantra. I plan to be here long after they're gone. It is knowing that I have them out there waiting to laugh at me that keeps me up late at night working like a dog. I will not prove them right and fail. I will succeed and that is why I thank God for my enemies every night. They keep me honest and they keep me reaching for ever higher standards as a writer. I would not be the woman I am today if I had no enemies. I truly love those enemies.

Which leads me to the next lesson.

9. There will be pork in the trees by morning. I just love this saying. It's from A Lion in Winter and comes from the scene where Henry and Eleanor are arguing. I can never remember the argument other than Henry tells her something won't happen until pigs fly and Eleanor shoots back with, "Well, there will be pork in the trees by morning!"

This is one of my major mantras in writing and life. I've never been the kind of person who walked the well worn path of others. I'd much rather grab the machete and find my own way through the jungle. But there are many times in my career when I did glance to the other path and think... you know it sure looks brighter over there.

However Samuel Adams has a saying: No man ever yet became great by imitation. Therefore, I refuse to follow the paths of others. If you're one of those authors who is lucky enough to be drawn to the marketable... I'm so envious.

Okay, not really. I'm truly happy for you and I hope your success continues forever. But if you're like me and you can't seem to stay on that course no matter how hard you try, don't fret.

It's what makes us unique and sooner or later our path will be smooth and clean, and we will get to our destination. We'll probably be a little bruised and bloody, and we might even have a rattlesnake bite or two, but we will make it. And as my mother used to say, "success is just that much sweeter when you've had to fight for it."

Now I know it's easy for me to stand up here and give out advice. I'm published and I've been extremely lucky enough to make it onto lists.

But as I've said it wasn't easy for me to get here and the only reason I'm here today is because of lesson number 10.

10. Success is when persistence meets preparation. Let me repeat that. Success is when persistence meets preparation. All the talent in the world will not get you that contract if you give up one day too soon. The only guarantee you will ever have in this business is that if you don't submit your book, an editor can't buy it.

That's it.

You have to keep going. No matter what. And if it makes you feel better, I moved into a new house last year and happened upon an old box of file folders that contained my rejections from 1990-1998. So I pulled out a folder to bring with me today. I chose it because this is the one *after* I had sold six books and had hit the bestseller lists and won many awards for those books.

Ain't she pretty. There are over one hundred and fifty rejections in here and it's only one folder from one year. I really could wallpaper my bedroom with slips.

Success is when persistence meets preparation. You have to keep going even when the thought of one more rejection makes you sick.

I will never forget that last year of my dry spell right before I sold again. It was one of the lowest points of my life. My mother had been diagnosed with cancer, my father had just died of cancer. Because of my own medical bills and the fact that my son had been born seven weeks prematurely, my husband and I had nothing, absolutely nothing. We were completely destitute.

We'd lost our house and were living out of our car in the parking lot of a rundown hotel. I had pretty much lost all hope. And I can remember the rejections coming in over and over again until I couldn't take it anymore. You know I've always been the kind of person who believed in making my own way in the world.

It gets back to the Samuel Adams saying: No man ever yet became great by imitation. I don't want to become successful because I modeled myself after another writer. I want to be successful because I am unique and I write the books of my heart.

But after four years of rejection and living in the roach-infested dive, I couldn't take it anymore and I caved. I sat down and I wrote that so-called marketable book. It was a light, fluffy Regency-set historical just like a hundred others that had been bought and published. This was in the hayday of their popularity when historicals were outselling everything else hand over fist.

It had all the elements that had made numerous other authors famous and my critique partners at the time were NYT bestselling authors of... you guessed it, Regency set historicals. I couldn't go wrong.

My critique partners loved it, my agent loved it. I thought it was pretty darn good.

So we sent it out and one by one I was rejected again. In fact that book got me the WORST rejection of my career and if anyone in this room ever gets a worse one, dinner's on me.

And what was that horrible rejection? "No one at this publishing house will ever be interested in developing this author. Do not submit her work to us again."

Yeah, that one stung and yes I did have to scrape myself up off the floor. I pretty much decided then that I was a never-was. I'd had my shot at publishing and for whatever reason, being an author wasn't in my cards.

So after I stopped crying, I went to my computer and instead of burning it like I really wanted to, I sat there and said, screw it.

I'm not published, so what? My son, thank you, God, is alive. I've lost my Dad, but my mom is still here and while I might be tossed out on my butt next month when we don't have rent, at this moment I have a roof- roach-infested though it is and I have electricity to run my dilapidated DOS based computer.

And for the first time in two years, I wrote a book not because I wanted to get published. I wrote it because I wanted to. I knew I'd never sell it. It was a book about a pirate. My critique group thought I was nuts. "Sherri!" they castigated. "What is wrong with you? No one has bought a pirate book in years! No one has EVER bought a book set in 1791! Do you never want to sell another book again?"

Even worse, when I sent it to my agent, she read it and then called and said, 'You know Sherri, I've tried for the last three years to sell your books and at least those were marketable. You know there's nothing I can do with this one. I'm sorry, but I think we need to part company.'

I don't blame her. She was a great agent and it wasn't meant to be. So after I pulled myself up off the floor again, I knew it was really over this time.

Because I had no money, I'd decided to just write for me. With my baby on my hip, I walked out to the mailbox and I will never forget that afternoon. My RWR had come and in it was the market update.

I saw a familiar name who had just been added to the HarperCollins staff. Laura Cifelli. Back in the days when I had been selling, she'd been my agent.

I hadn't talked to Laura in years, but as I read that she was looking for writers, my heart started pounding. You know the rhythm. *This could be my break...This could be my break...This could be my break...*

But years of rejection were there and more to the point, I didn't even have enough money for a proposal. I kid you not. But I did have a stamp— granted it was one I stole out of my husband's wallet, but it was a stamp and with it I could pitch one last time. So I sat down and wrote her a query letter. That day, I proposed what would later become the first book of the Dark-Hunters and that darn pirate book. The paranormal/vampire market was dead so she passed on the first, but Laura was interested in the pirate that both my agent and critique group had agreed would never sell.

I knew better than to be excited, but I couldn't let this opportunity pass. Ever hopeful, I borrowed the money from my neighbor to send the proposal off.

Three days later, Laura offered me a three book deal. I can't tell you the joy that went through me. It makes a mockery of the day I got my first call.

And you know what... years later, that unmarketable book is still in print, and it is still selling remarkably well.

Believe me I know for a fact that success is when persistence meets preparation.

If you give up one day too soon, for all you know that is the one day when you should have gone to that mailbox and pulled out your own market report.

If you don't submit it, they can't buy it. So please, submit those books.

No matter how many rejections you get, hold your dream close to your heart and fight for it. If I could have three wishes, my first would be for you to all have an easy career. My second would be for you to have no enemies and my third would be to see each and every one of you sitting at number one on every major list in this country.

Well maybe #2. I personally like being at #1. But I am willing to share. I only need one week a year. You guys can divi up the other 51 weeks.

But seriously, you can do it. I know you can. And on those days when that little voice says, "yeah,

right, when pigs fly." I want all of you to say, "Well, there will be Pork in the trees by morning."

Never give up. Never surrender. Believe in yourself because *you* are the best writer in this room and you deserve your dreams. And I truly hope from the bottom of my heart that they come true for each and every one of you.

God bless and thank you all for coming.