

Mad Hatter: The Many Roles of Today's Writers

By Lauren Grimley

When I decided almost two years ago that I wanted to really take a shot at being a writer, I knew the reality of what I was getting into. Or I thought I knew. Sure, I dreamed of hitting the Harry Potter or Hunger Games lottery and being able to walk away from my teaching job without any fear of literally becoming a starving artist, but I knew that was unlikely. I figured that like the majority of writers, I'd have to keep my day job and squeeze in writing on nights, weekends, and school vacations. Two jobs, no problem.

Two years wiser (and not a penny richer, unfortunately) I am wishing I had been closer to the mark. In addition to trying to be a writer and teacher, I'm now also attempting to be a blogger, contract negotiator, publicist, website administrator, press-release writer, and social networker extraordinaire. Attempting being the key word.

It seems the days of writing a book, finding a publisher, and sitting back watching it sell are over - if they ever existed at all. Now even writers at the bigger publishing companies need to wear many hats to be successful. Those of us at the smaller ones practically need to clone ourselves or learn to live without sleep. I have friends with babies now, so I'm trying to take lessons from them, but most are too incoherent to be helpful. Not a good sign.

On my pessimistic days, the expression "Jack of all trades" dances through my swarming brain. It doesn't make sense that in order to be a writer I'm spending less time on my writing and more time on other jobs. On my optimistic days, though, I look for the benefits of these added duties. Blogging, which is suggested to beginning writers because it is a free and relatively easy way to build a platform and publish our writing for the world to read, has forced me to write in a completely different manner than my fiction writing. Though I haven't attempted one yet, I know writing a press release will also stretch my skills; I haven't written a news-style piece since high school journalism. However, in my opinion, the more genres a writer works in the better. Variety creates growth, which is a good thing. Since both of these tasks are writing oriented the time spent on them seems worthwhile.

Of course having a blog and building a platform requires at least a minimal knowledge of technology. Learning to maintain a website and utilize social media is a must for writers. In addition to keeping us up to date on the tools which have become second nature to most readers, especially young readers (who are our future market base), it allows us to connect with our potential audience in a way authors a generation ago could never imagine. Reading books is no longer a solitary experience. Sure readers read in the privacy of their homes imagining our characters in the worlds of their imaginations, but most are in doing this in reach of portable devices that provide the opportunity for them to interact. If they have a question about us, our characters or settings, our other works, they can find an answer almost instantaneously - if we've put it out there for them to find. The stereotype of writers as recluses lost in their heads may have some merit for a few past and present authors, but for the most part, if we're going to be able to capture the essence of people in our writing, we've got to be able to interact with a variety of them in our daily lives. In this way, the time spent online can also help us to be better writers. Hopefully, I'll even learn to interpret what the heck my students mean when they start talking in tweets. I'm not open to accepting essays in 140 characters or less quite yet, but we'll see; they would be quicker to correct.

Finally, having to deal with the business end of things, as well as having to help promote my work and myself, has certainly pushed me out of my comfort zone, which I also view as a positive experience. I'm not saying I appreciated the panic attacks of signing my first contract

or that I love the constant blushing whenever I have to pitch my book to someone new, but I'm looking forward to the day when I have enough experience that these side-effects subside. Though these tasks may not have as direct an impact on my writing as the others mentioned, they help me grow as a person, which is good in any career.

There aren't too many people who don't have to do some serious multi-tasking these days. Back to those moms and dads I mentioned earlier, they are the kings and queens of this, and I am in awe. They can juggle parenting, jobs, hobbies and everything else life throws at them with sleep in their eyes and spit-up on their shirt, and at the end of most days are happy they had the opportunity. This is the same skill and outlook writers need. The more things we experience, the more accurately we can write about life. The more we have to work to be writers, the more we'll appreciate the time we get with our own "babies," our books. So I'm going to embrace my new tasks and don my many hats with an open mind - I'm taking copious notes in case my next book is about a person with a multiple-personality disorder. Tea, anyone?

Lauren Grimley is a middle school English teacher, writer, and author of the urban fantasy novel Unforeseen. Though she writes mostly fantasy, she likes to share her thoughts on writing, teaching, and life through her website: <http://www.laurengrimley.com/>

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