

Melanie's Writing Newsletter - November 2008

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Dear Friends,

The holidays are upon us! Does that make you happy or filled with dread? Every year at this time I review an article I wrote in 2004 called, "Taking Back the Holidays." Here's an excerpt:

This past Christmas I finally took responsibility for my stress level and happiness during the holidays. For years I have become wound up with tension before, during, and after the holiday season. I compared how I decorated, wrapped presents, and prepared meals to others who have higher standards than I do in these areas. My goals instead, I decided this year, were to have a relaxing holiday and to enjoy spending time with the people I love. I had to say, "We're not doing Christmas this year the way we've done it in the past. We're going to focus on just being together and enjoying each other's company."

For the first time in my adult life I (gasp!) didn't send out holiday cards. I hired a cleaning person to come the day before family arrived and we went out for Chinese food on Christmas eve. I let family members help when they offered, rather than jumping in and doing it myself like I would have done in the past.

I made sure that I didn't drink too much and that I got plenty of sleep. When others dressed up for Christmas dinner I wore what I wanted: jeans, slippers, and a soft sweater I had received as a gift. I stayed in my pajamas later, took time to go off and read by myself, and let the days unfold naturally rather than planning activities in advance. I woke up to the fact that I've been my own worse enemy all these years by striving to put on a perfect holiday. I think it was the best Christmas we've had in a long time.

How can you relax your standards this holiday season and focus on joy instead of perfection?

Tips from a Professional Literary Agent

On October 28th I was lucky enough to host Matt Wagner, Literary Agent for [Fresh Books, Inc.](#), as a guest speaker at my UCD Extension writing course. Here are the highlights of his talk:

1) The biggest mistakes book writers make are: not having an appropriate query letter to pitch their book, bragging about their book (i.e. "everybody will buy this book"), having unrealistic expectations about how the book publishing world works, and querying agents when they don't have a book proposal ready yet.

2) Authors need to have a platform. What is a platform? Knowing where you will launch

2) Authors need to have a platform. What is a platform? Knowing where you will launch your book such as through your own TV show, column, radio show, web site, blog, or through speaking engagements.

3) The main reasons agents reject an author's book idea are because there is too much competition for that type of book in the publishing market, or because the author does not have enough of a platform.

4) The big publishing houses are hard to break into right now because of the economy. Focus on small- to medium-sized houses if you are a first-time book author.

5) Matt recommends the following books and web sites:

[Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Agents](#)

[2009 Guide to Literary Agents by Chuck Sambuchino](#)

[AgentQuery.com](#)

[PublishersMarketplace.com](#)

A big thank you to Matt for taking so much time with my class. Also, the topic of dogs kept coming up. Dog books are big right now according to Matt. If you have an idea for a dog book, pitch it now!

Charging Hourly vs. Flat Rates

There is a great article in the December issue of [Writer's Digest](#) by [Art Spikol](#) titled, "Off The Clock." Spikol, an editorial consultant, writer, and designer, argues that writers should forget charging by the hour.

"Whatever your hourly rate might be, it will sound like a lot to some people and peanuts to others," Spikol says. "Hourly rates cause anxiety, but with a flat fee, that worry is eliminated. If you estimate that a job will take 10 hours at \$100 per hour, that's \$1,000--unless it takes you longer. To many clients, that sounds more risky than, say, a guaranteed \$1,300 flat fee. It's like the difference between an adjustable and a fixed-rate mortgage.

Whenever I'm asked what my hourly rate is, I answer, 'I don't have an hourly rate. But I'll give you something better, an exact price.' I don't worry about losing out to a lower bidder. There are lots of ways to lose a job, but self-confidence isn't one of them."

I wholeheartedly agree with Spikol. I always prefer quoting a flat fee rather than an hourly one, and have found most clients have the same preference.

Writing Updates

* My article, "A Giving Spirit: Ideas for Raising Compassionate Kids," appeared in the November issue of *Parents' Monthly*. Click [here](#) to view the article.

* I've currently got an idea brewing for a new book. Now that I'm back working in a public school, I'm reminded daily how much needs to be done to improve schools in the U.S. Have you heard about the second-year school superintendent in Washington, D.C., [Michelle Rhee](#)? She's working hard to make radical changes in a school system riddled with problems. Along the way she's gained a lot of fans, but also many critics.

Rhee feels schools should be run more like businesses. For example, bad teachers should be let go and good teachers should be rewarded with higher pay. I've been thinking about a book on how to run a school more like a business. I'd interview experts in both education and business on how to implement changes that would benefit teachers, students, and the school's bottom line. I'd also include information on what business practices wouldn't transfer well to a school setting.

I'd love your feedback about this book idea. Thank you!

Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family. I think we need more Thanksgiving songs. Maybe that way we wouldn't start hearing Christmas ones in mid-November or earlier! The only Thanksgiving song I know of is by Adam Sandler. Are there others?

Gobble-gobble gee,

Melanie Bowden

Author of *Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me? True Stories of New Motherhood* and *Get Your Articles Published!*

<http://www.melaniebowden.com>

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