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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!
Make it a great year!

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FROM
home
TO *home*
AND
heart TO heart
FROM ONE PLACE
TO ANOTHER
THE *warmth* AND *joy* OF
CHRISTMAS
BRINGS
US
closer
TO EACH OTHER

-EMILY MATTHEWS

Beta Readers: Why Writers Need Them

Reflections by Abigail Dane

In a stage play, the curtain ascends, the players do their best work and, if all goes well, the audience applauds wildly as the curtain descends.

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Writing is nothing like that.

How hard would it be for stage actors to perform every night for months—years—if they never got to see the audience or hear their applause until long after the play had closed?

That's what writing is like.

Writers must hone their writing and story craft, and devise appealing stories they can tell compellingly. They must maintain focused attention for months—years—as well as enough faith in themselves and their work to sustain their efforts from bud to bloom. Writing, by nature, is solitary work, so writers must accept self-imposed exile with only their imagination and words as companions. No wonder writers value their critique partners, indulgent spouses, forgiving families and beta readers as they do.

My six beta readers are the first people to whom I entrust a completed manuscript. Handing over that new first draft feels something like a parent giving a much-loved newborn to strangers—trust them to provide the love, care and discipline needed for the child to survive and thrive.

My betas check for anachronisms and OOPSes. (Plodding isn't a gait. Anyway, stallions don't plod.) They challenge my quirky plot twists and awkward story lines. (Water running uphill? Really?) They spot places where the action drags, the dialogue doesn't sound authentic, or a passage "needs more cowbell." They let me know if my characters are too adorable to be believed (puppies?) or too stupid to live ("What man would turn down an offer like that?"). They mark the scenes that made them laugh, cry, growl or wince; and the point at which the story has them hooked. In short, they tell me the truth and help me fix the mangled bits before I inflict them on the reading public.

Writer friends have asked where I found my betas. Actually, they found me. With my first book, *The Pirate and the Virgin*, I didn't even tell my husband I was writing a romance novel. In fact, I started out writing a genealogical history that somehow took on a life of its own—like those wire hangers that somehow breed in dark closets. My history turned into a novel, and I finished the first draft in only four

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MOMENTS.

At dinner a few days later, friends Donna and Bill asked: "So what have you been up to lately?"

"Oh...you know...this and that...walking the dog...writing historical romance novels..."

After I convinced them I was serious, they asked if they could read my story. Gratifying. Terrifying. Like showing off your wrinkled, ruddy-faced newborn and hoping people will say "She's so beautiful!"; not "Yup, that's a baby, all right."

Nothing I had ever done professionally came close to the excitement of writing that novel. Mostly, I simply watched the movie in my head and typed as fast as I could to capture what I saw and heard. I typed, laughed, sighed, cried, and periodically wondered about the source of so much whimsy. My characters became real to me. Their playfulness amused me; their concerns drew me in. I worried about them and wanted the best for them. I liked my story—it was a story I would enjoy reading—but I was an "n" of one and not a very objective "n" at that. I had no idea what anyone else would think of it.

Apprehensively, I waited for the verdict of my first betas, who were former editors and devoted bibliophiles who read aloud to each other, critiquing as they went. Before agreeing to take on my book, (the curmudgeonly) Bill wanted to be sure I was willing to hear the TRUTH if (as he fully expected) they didn't like the book. Gulp. Well, what point otherwise? All I could do was hope that, if they found the story cringe-worthy, they'd share the horrible truth GENTLY.

I dropped off the manuscript on a Thursday afternoon. At 6pm on Friday, they called to curse at me. They had moved that day but, instead of unpacking boxes, they sat around, drinking wine and reading my book aloud. The curses were for making them forget about unpacking. (The role the wine played in this lapse remains a mystery.)

They told Bill's sister about the book. A retired reference librarian in Pennsylvania, Judy wanted to read it, too; so I sent her a copy. I had known as much as nothing about England in 1649 or the English Civil

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what when I began writing my story, but I researched as I went along. These days I'm a more mindful writer, because I know Judy will root out the historical anachronisms, malapropisms, mental misfires, mangled syntax and the rest. Sometimes I'm right: "Nope. Since 1638, everything above the main deck of the ship has been called the superstructure." Sometimes she's right: "Uh-oh. First known use of 'copacetic' in 1919. Primarily an American, not a British, expression." And who knew pimps weren't called "pimps" until 1701? (TIP: Merriam-Webster's online dictionary is a great "first use" resource.) Judy's copious notes about her first impressions, frustrations, suspicions and revelations are also priceless.

Kathleen, a retired nurse in Houston, was one of my proofreaders when I was a journal editor. When she learned I was writing my own books, she offered to read and proof them for me. She likes to email her impressions as she goes along: "That passage brought tears to my eyes." Or: "Just finished the dueling scene. Entertaining." I forewarned her the second book was spicier than the first, but had to laugh when she emailed: "Does your husband read your novels?"

My upstairs neighbor, Tamara, reads primarily for enjoyment. I count on her to let me know if the book is vanilla, chocolate or rum raisin. Readable? Entertaining? Make sense, at least?

My sixth beta is my brother, Lindell. I assumed he was teasing (as usual) when he said he wanted to read the first draft of my first book. But he actually took the manuscript along on his next fishing trip and—wait for it—read it aloud to himself. (Loud thud as I hit the floor..) He spotted a few errors others had missed, including a mixed-up biblical reference. (After 20 years of teaching Sunday School, I'll never live down the shame. He'll make sure of that.) He enjoyed the first book and insisted on re-reading it before beta reading the second, *The Baron and the Black Widow*. He'll let me know if book two works both as a stand-alone novel and a sequel.

My betas are invaluable in other ways, too. Bill, himself a fine artist, encouraged me to do my own covers. He and Donna also suggested alternative (i.e., improved) titles for both books.

The beta process for the first book was simple enough. I just sent my readers a printed copy in a three-ring binder, with a brief cover letter inviting honest feedback. Too much? Too little? Pure rationalization?

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Pure genius? Delusional? What works? What fails? With Baron, a much more complex story, I had some doubts; so I reviewed it chapter-by-chapter, composing questions as I went. Thirty-six in all, each with a brief "rationale" explaining why I wrote that element as I did. I sealed the questions in an envelope, to be opened after. This approach helped the betas to direct their feedback. Despite a few notable fails on my part, they generally agreed with my approaches.

Sad but true: My paltry payment to these devoted helpers is a free, inscribed copy of the book, dinner out when we catch up with each other, and inscribed copies at cost if they want to gift their friends with books. Not nearly enough for all they do for me. But as long as they keep asking for the next book, I'll keep taking awful advantage of their generosity and goodwill.

Who knows what discoveries the third book will bring? With luck, my beta readers will be as curious about it as I am, and will stick with me as the series progresses. (I'm already outlining books three, four and five.) As I tell my readers in the "Acknowledgments" to book two:

Writing brings me such joy that I'd keep doing it, even if no one would ever read my stories. But knowing you enjoyed the last one enough to prod me for the next one increases the joy exponentially.

That's what keeps me going for months—years—as I write, edit, agonize and exercise the full range of author fidgets. That and the hope of...someday...getting to see my audience and hear their applause.

Rosanne Vrugtman, PhD, as Abigail Dane, writes in a genre she calls "History happily ever after." A year-round SW Florida resident since 2012, she edited and published a contemporary version of Zane Grey's first novel, Betty Zane, in 2013. Since then she has written and published the first two historical romance novels in her "Whitleigh" series: The Pirate and the Virgin (2015) and The Baron and the Black Widow (2016). Visit her website at TransitionsUnlimited.biz.

The More Time We Have, The More Time We Waste

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by Ann Peare

Why is it that the more time we have, the more time we seem to waste? Then, as that nasty deadline looms, we face crunch time. We don't eat, bathe, tend to our chores, spend time with our families. All we do is sit at the keyboard until our joints ache and our ankles swell. Oh, to be sure, crunch time sees a fantastic turnout of word count and pages - some even worthy of keeping. But why not spread that production out - you know, that whole work-life balance thing?

Here are some reasons why I waste time:

1. Afraid of being second best - I've been tip-tapping away at the keyboard, working on the "great American novel" for a lot of years now, and I have not one thing to show for it. I mean out in the real world, that is, either through traditional publishing or self-publishing. I've been told countless times that I'm my own worst enemy, but really! After all this time, what if my writing is for shit? What if some people are mean to me in their reviews? So I keep on keeping on, tweaking and editing, editing and tweaking. Moving from one project to another, but never actually finishing one. That way I never have to put myself out there. I never have to worry about failing, about negative comments.
2. Time fills the space I have - If I have 30 minutes to get my blog written and posted, you can bet I'll pound away until I hit that mark (or come damn close). But what if I have all weekend? Strange how that same 30-minute blog post will actually take all weekend to complete, and it won't necessarily be better for all the extra time I had.
3. Grandbaby (the new man in my life) - He's nine months old now, but I'm still trying to figure out how not to miss one single development discovery and at the same time manage, you know, to get some actual writing done. I'll confess to not understanding this grandbaby obsession when I witnessed it in others. Two a.m. feedings, toys everywhere, and constantly being covered with spit up, snot, pee and poo. Now, seriously. What's the appeal in any of that? Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and laugh. I deserve it, because I soooooooooooooooooooooo get it now.

Research and Pinterest - For someone who really doesn't like research, when I want to know something, I will spend a considerable amount of time surfing the Internet. And my newest Internet time suck? Pinterest. It's for my story, mind you. Mostly, I'm hunting for pictures of my characters. To be fair, I have found that my descriptions are much tighter and effective when I work from a picture, but two hours at one sitting? A bit much, IMO.

Anything I've ever read about time management stresses the idea of working smarter, not harder. Part of that, I've discovered, is setting aside specific blocks of time for certain

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things that you know are on the horizon. For example, with the [YROC](#) deadline looming, I've told my family that I'm busy all next week. Each night when I get home from work (except for RWA meeting night - on Tuesday) I will hit the keyboard and plug away until I have my chapters, my outline and my pre-writing notes completed. Spreading out my goals means that this weekend, I can play with my grandson without guilt.

And when the unexpected pops up? Well, we muddle through the best we can, adjusting our goals as needed. In the business world, that's called managing expectations. Even though our endeavors are creative in nature, we can learn a lot from business.

Off now to get me some baby sugars!

Ann Peake wrote her first ditty when she was ten on an English seashore while visiting her British grandmother. From then on, her family members either acted in, or were treated to, plays, skits or commercial spoofs. In school, she wrote poetry, fables and short stories. Years later, she tossed down a particularly bad novel and thought, "I could do at least that well." She's been pursuing the elusive published novel ever since. Ann loves a good romance – all the more if it is wrapped in a great fantasy setting.

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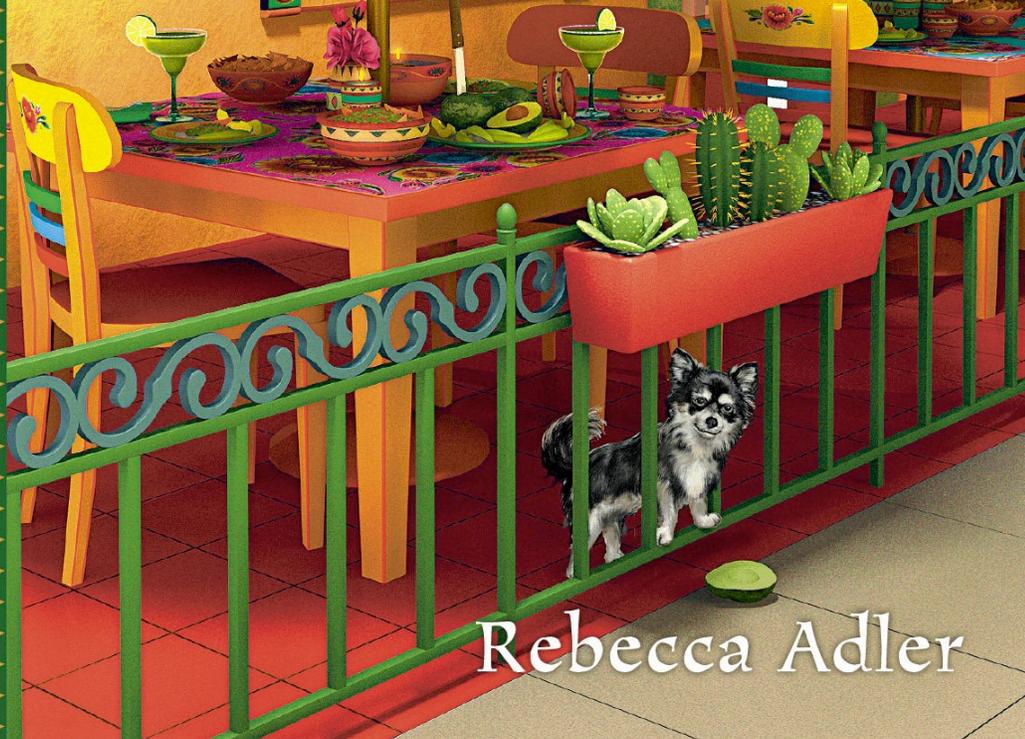
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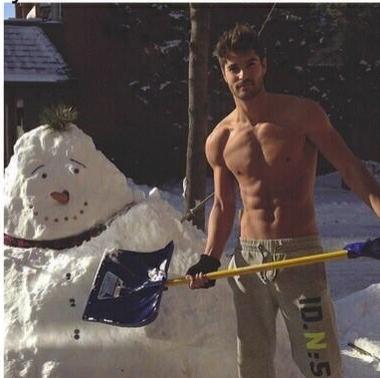
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Do you wanna build a snowman? 😊



Me! Me! Me!

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