**If at First, You don’t Succeed …**

One of the reactions I get to the story of my first sale, especially from people outside the writing world, is one of surprise that I stuck with it for so long (nine years, eight full manuscripts, four partial-plus-synopsis proposals, three Golden Heart finals, numerous other contest wins and placements and about a billion rejections, revisions, rejections with revision requests …!). Those were the same people who were also surprised during those nine long years that I still hadn’t sold a book or made my first million, like JK Rowling. How did I keep going, they’d ask. Why did I keep going?

It’s easy to be flippant about it now and say that having my book published was my dream, so I kept at it until I achieved my goal. But between us writers, that answer isn’t enough - you all know it wasn’t that simple! In fact, anyone in any creative field, or sporting field, will understand that success is rarely possible without a lot of blood, sweat and tears. The majority of people simply don’t have the courage even to start, let alone have the stomach to persist through the highs and lows until they prevail. (I don’t have the commitment to run three times a week, let alone do what’s needed to become an Olympic athlete!).

The truth we face is that the journey isn’t easy, nor is it quick. It’s the exception, rather than the rule, for a writer to sell their first manuscript at the first attempt. Some of the most successful authors on the planet could paper a room with rejections and carpet a house with all their failed writing attempts. But, it also true that the only people who cannot achieve success are the ones who give up.

Okay - enough of how hard writing is!

Romance writers are blessed to belong to one of the most supportive communities I’ve ever come across. The fact that you’re here, reading this article, shows that you know you’re not alone. You also know where to go to get help, cheers, cuddles and, if necessary, a kick up the backside! Belonging to this community is an enormous step in the battle of perseverance - because the community won’t let you give up, even when you feel like you’ve hit rock bottom … again.

When you say you can’t write another word, revise another chapter or face another rejection, they don’t tell you not to be silly. They’ll offer chocolate or wine or both, suggestions for how to grieve, take a break or refill the well and they’ll give you a couple of days to wallow. Then, they’ll tell you to get your bottom in that chair and your fingers on that keyboard and get back to work! Because they know that you have to keep going, keep trying and most important of all, you have to keep writing.

So what tips can I offer to help you persevere?

The simplest one is that writers have to write. No matter how low we get, how bad our situation or even how long we stop writing, our brains won’t let us stop completely. So, know that you can and will find your way back. In the meantime, the best thing you can do is to refill your creative well and read, watch movies or TV shows, listen to music or make or decorate something. This is a good time to hone your writing craft - listen to workshop CDs from conferences, read ‘how to’ books or do online workshops. Something will inspire you to write again.

Next - also simple - write and keep writing. Keep moving forward. To paraphrase Nora Roberts, it’s far easier to revise crap than a blank screen. Push through the difficult muse days, the tiredness, the feelings of ‘meh’. Write out of sequence, write something different, write something bizarre that doesn’t fit. Just write. Writing is like a river - in some parts it flows fast and furious, while in others it meanders slowly. In some parts it’s sluggish and laden with silt, while in yet others it’s bubbling and clear. Yet, if you keep going you’ll get to the end.

Try to write to a regular schedule. Get your mind and body (and those around you) to understand that this is what you want to do. Treat it like any other job where you have to turn up at a certain time for so many days a week, regardless of whether you’re tired or sick or have a plumber on the doorstep.

Don’t wait around for decisions. Whether it’s contest results, editor or agent submissions or your critique partner’s view, keep moving forward. Start a new story, revise an old story, create a short story or plan a novella that pairs with your manuscript.

Perseverance doesn’t just apply to the writing itself, but to your strategy for getting published. In “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers, the advice given by the old gambler is “You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em. Know when to walk away, know when to run.” The same is true for your writing career. You have to know when to keep bashing away at a manuscript that simply isn’t working and when to put it aside. Equally, you have to know when a change is as good as a rest and when the siren call of a shiny, exciting new story should be ignored. You have to know which advice or revision suggestions to apply and which to reject. When to take the plunge and submit, when to use contests to refine your work, when to take a step back and if necessary change direction.

The most important tip of all is to find a way to gain back a positive mental attitude towards your writing. To reignite the excitement you first had for writing and for the story.

Finally, identify what is blocking your success, talk to fellow writers and plan a way around, over or through that block. Having a plan of how to move forward will help you to actually keep moving forward.

So, let’s talk about some of the issues you face in your writing career and how you find ways to keep persevering.