

# THE *BAG*

# OF Holding

BY NANCY HOLDER

## GREAT Expectations



### It's award season in genre publishing: May

(now, as I write this) was the Nebulas. June will have been the Stokers and the Golden Spurs. In July, the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers will award the Scribes, and the Romance Writers of America will hand out the Ritas. August is the Hugos. October will bring us the World Fantasy Awards, where my story begins.

A long time ago, at my very first World Fantasy Convention, I was walking alone into the ballroom for the awards banquet, having one of those “lunch room moments” because I didn't know very many people. Scanning the tables, I nearly collided with a prominent author, whose identity shall remain forever protected by the press. She was standing stock-still and glaring straight ahead at a table brimming with people in tuxes and after-five dresses. The table was situated very close to the podium where the MC would conduct the awards ceremony. Once the table caught sight of her, there was quite a stir, much “oopsing” and grimacing, and one person pushed out his chair and half-rose, gesturing for her to take his place.

The author huffed and started marching to her left, which was the same direction I was headed, and we wound up sitting next to each other. She was in the mood to vent. I was agog. It turned out that she was up for a World Fantasy Award that very night, and her publishing house had forgotten to save her a seat at their VIP table.

They sent over a bottle of wine, which made her even madder. I said something like, “Well, it was nice of them to do that” and I got an eye roll. *Please*, it was cheap banquet wine; and she was up for a World Fantasy Award, which would make all of them look good, too, because she was their author; and so on and so forth.

Imagine my sense of déjà vue some time later at a different conference, when I thanked my editor's assistant for the beautiful flowers that had been sent to my hotel room that morning.



“Oh, God, we were so sorry that we forgot to invite you to the dinner last night!” she exclaimed.

Eric Maisel, the creativity coach, has discussed the need to assign meaning as a core component of the creative personality. Writers and other artists, he argues, need to feel that life is meaningful, and if they don’t perceive something as intrinsically having meaning, they assign meaning to it. Anais Nin says much the same thing, in a different way:

*“There is not one big cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.”*

So what does it really mean when your publisher forgets you? Or you have the worst signing of your life, or your agent sounds terse in the voicemail message he left? Or you get bounced from the anthology because your story didn’t “fit”? If it means whatever you think it means, no wonder it’s so crazy-making for some of us (at the very least Nicolas Cage in *Adaptation*, and me?)

I sat down today and chatted with my *Wicked* coauthor, Debbie Viguie, about all this, the assigning of meaning to, or interpreting the reality of, the writing life. Debbie is the author of over a dozen books, including mysteries, retold fairy tales, and the YA dark fantasies she writes with me. We started by talking about the externalities of the writing life: signings, book sales, interactions with readers, editors and agents.

We talked about her best and her worst signings. The best had been her very first, with me, for our first book together. The audience was rather small, but it was made up of Debbie’s friends and family, who had driven from Orange County to cheer her on. Juliette, her best friend, found out that there was only one copy left in the store, so she bought it, and gave Debbie the book and the receipt. She said, “Now you will always remember that your first book signing was sold out.”

The worst was a signing she had been asked to do, on behalf of National Literacy Day. Writers from all over the country were assigned to a Target store, where they would read aloud. Debbie was on deadline and didn’t want to participate, but since she’d been asked, she felt she should. Compounding her frustration was the fact that she assigned to a Target store far away from her house—chewing up yet more valuable time.

But the true size of the debacle was yet to come—when she walked into the store with her special ID and printed out instructions, and no one in the store had a clue who she was or what to do with her. So they sat her down on a rocking chair in the baby furniture department. And while sitting there, she noticed a large sign for Dean Koontz in another section of the store, with chairs. He scheduled to read three hours later.

In short, even though she’d been asked to do the signing, she felt “like dirt.”

We burned up some more time sharing war stories—one of my personal favorites was sitting next to Jack Williamson at World Con in Orlando; he was incredibly kind to me as his signing line went out the concourse door and mine was, um, a little shorter.

But what did all this mean to our identities as writers? How did (and do) we interpret these events in the context of our careers, for example?

Debbie said, “The problem I struggle with is that in my heart of hearts, I’m an optimist, but I’ve been in this business long enough to know that things are rarely as rosy as they seem. I’ve been burned enough times that even though I am an optimist, I interpret events in my career through the filter of interpreting the “real” situation in the worst way possible.”

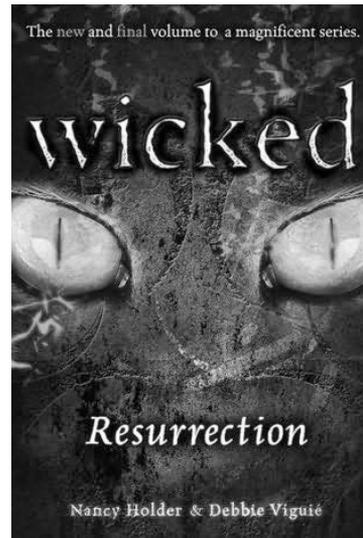
She went on to say, “But I also know it’s rarely as bad as I imagine, so I filter everything twice—first through my pessimism filter, and then through my optimism filter. So things are really never as bad or as good as I think they are. Reality is somewhere in between.”

And that is the rub. Like most of publishing, the truth isn’t really out there. It’s all kind of made up. Like a story. Most of us have anecdotal evidence of writers who never earn out, yet continue to receive increasingly enormous advances. Or writers who hit the bestseller lists, and yet their advances stay low. An agent said of a friend of mine, “I don’t understand why she doesn’t have a career. Her books are good. She’s got so much talent.” Then there are books most would agree are badly written that turn their authors into millionaires.

Books like Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* and Chris Anderson’s *The Long Tail* aside, there’s very little about publishing that’s predictable. So writers try to look for indicators of how well they’re doing—while at the same time knowing, deep down, that they’re looking at them through filters.

Once a writer’s been around for a while, it gets a little easier (although it’s never pleasant) to shrug off a bad signing or a diss by John Q. Reading Public. (I was once asked to sign my most recent book during a library used book sale. A man came up to me, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, “Just tell me why I should spend five books on *your* book when I can go over there and get one for ten cents.”) I used to query people I knew to see if they recognized the names of authors—there were many four or five household names, and then the “Uhhh” factor kicked in. So it didn’t hurt me any more when the guy in Barnes & Noble wandered over and confessed he’d never heard of me.

As Debbie pointed out, “We’re typically not like Hollywood actors. We ourselves don’t mean anything. Fans might love our books but that doesn’t mean that we’re important.



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The writer is the person sitting in the dark, creating them. Same with screenplay writers.”

That sense of insignificance is harder to take when it seems to be coming from insiders—industry professionals—people who should remember to invite you to dinner, for example. Or fellow writers. Some years ago, I was a member of a writer’s organization that was putting together an anthology. Seated in the con hotel dining room, I overheard the editor of the anthology talking to a friend of mine. “Okay, I’ve done all my asking,” he said. “Now to release the other slots to the great unwashed.”

At lunch with an editor assigned to me after I’d been orphaned with the loss of my acquiring editor, I asked her why I hadn’t gotten the opportunity to pitch for a project the house was putting together. She started laughing.

The thing is, as one moves along in a writing career, and (hopefully) starts achieving some success, slights such as these seem to occur less often...or is it simply that they bother us less? I learned a lot from walking the floor of Comic-con with a friend of mine. We stopped at a booth and an editor came over. My friend said, “So, X, what did you think of the ideas I sent you?” X shook his head.

“Nothing grabbed me,” he replied. “But keep pitching. Maybe I’ll catch one.”

Handshakes all around, and off we went to the next booth. “Didn’t that bother you?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “My time is better spent doing as he asked,” he replied.

As Debbie says:

“You have to learn that the business will give you plenty of reason to stay humble. We have to learn to be able to bolster our own egos and not look to other people to do it. Brutal rejection is so integral that we need to be able to find self-confidence or it’ll crush you.”

How does she do that, I asked her?

“I focus on those moments that are positive *and meaningful*, [emphasis mine.] For example, a woman came up to me at a signing and told me that she had done her dissertation on fairytales, and one of my retold fairytales, *Midnight Pearls* (Simon and Schuster), was one of her seminal works. Another time, a girl at a library signing threw her arms around me, sat next to me, and kept touching me until the librarian asked her to ‘back away from the author.’”

We reminisced about our first signing together, when her friends and family were so excited and supportive of her. Plus it sold out! Dwelling on that, we found ourselves moving onto

other positive publishing experiences—fan mail; good, courteous editors; savvy agents; generous writers who had steered work our way.

That reminded me of an article I’d read, which dovetails with Maisel’s assertion that creative people need to create their one meaning at an intrinsic level, and that the dilemma they often face is their awareness that they’re the ones creating it. The entirety of the article is here: [http://www.richardwiseman.com/resources/The\\_Luck\\_Factor.pdf](http://www.richardwiseman.com/resources/The_Luck_Factor.pdf)

Here’s the jist: “The Luck Factor,” an article published in *The Skeptical Inquirer* in May/June 2003, discusses “The Luck Experiment,” which was conducted by Richard Wiseman, a psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire. He went on to

write a book about his findings (*The Luck Factor: The Four Essential Principles*, published by Miramax.) What Dr. Wiseman posits is that people who self-identify as lucky have a set of strategies they employ (usually unconsciously) that generate what these people see as “good luck”—positive outcomes. They tend to interpret their circumstances in a happy or positive light. In Debbie’s terms, their “meaning filter” is “luckiness.” By see-



ing the world through luck-colored glasses, they *perceive* themselves as lucky people stumbling into lucky situations.

This results in a positive feedback loop, wherein these self-identified lucky people notice positive circumstances in their environment, then act on them. For example, in Dr. Wiseman’s research, he conducted an experiment where he asked two groups—one that was self-identified as lucky, and the other who thought of themselves as unlucky—to count the number of photographs in a newspaper. The unlucky group tended to look through the entire newspaper. The lucky group tended to notice a message he had imbedded, which read, “Stop counting. There are 43 photographs in this newspaper.”

What is surprising is that the unlucky group didn’t notice the message, which “took up half the page and was written in type that was over two inches high.” And to add injury to insult, he imbedded another message. It said, “Stop counting, tell the experimenter you have seen this and win \$250.” The unlucky people tended to miss this notice as well, because they were too busy looking for the photographs.

At the Luck Factor website ([www.theluckfactor.com](http://www.theluckfactor.com)), Wiseman goes on to talk about the fact that people who feel lucky employ strategies to increase their luck, while those who identify as not lucky don’t see that there’s any way to change their bad luck. This recursion also keeps lucky people in the

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game—like the friend with whom I walked the Comic-con floor. As Thomas Jefferson once said, “I’m a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.”

There’s a lot more to the Wiseman conversation, including research that suggests that Olympic bronze medalists are happier with their outcome than silver medalists. Silver medalists tend to think that they just missed the mark and almost got the gold, while bronze medalists tend to think that with just a little bad luck, they wouldn’t have medaled at all. So another tenet of feeling lucky is the perception that things could have been worse. I suppose the counterargument might be that such thinking will lead to settling for less than one is due; complacency, or a way excuse bad behavior. Here’s a slightly risqué joke:

A screenwriter was having a horrible case of writer’s block. Nothing he did to get back to work did any good, until he finally jumped in his car and drove all over Los Angeles, mulling his story. After hours of driving, the light bulb went on, and he zoomed home to get back to work...where he discovered his wife in bed...and it was obvious she had not been alone.

“Who was it?” he yelled at her. “I deserve to know!”

Sobbing, she confessed, “Your agent.”

A beat. His eyes widened.

“My agent came to my house?”

It’s easy to be dismissive of looking on the bright side as naïveté and Pollyanna thinking. But going back to Debbie’s dilemma, it’s difficult to discern between kneejerk pessimism and dogged optimism, especially, when there’s no clear-cut proof that “the truth” lies anywhere in between. I knew a Methodist minister who dealt with this by employing “the rule of three” when he was confronted with a confusing situation or a difficult decision: he had three trusted friends and advisors he went to. They had served as his confidants for decades, meaning that they knew him and his world very well. So when called upon, they would see his big picture, as opposed to “a” big picture. When three of the four of them (including the minister himself) saw things a certain way, he tended to believe that that was the real deal.

One of the challenges writers (and other artists) face is when to decide if enough is enough. If the last three book signings have gone badly, should one continue to do them? If a book gets rejected six times, should the writer do a rewrite? A quote variously attributed to both Goethe and Calvin Collidge, taken this time from the website blog at StevePavilina.com, promoting “Personal Development for Smart People:”

*“Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan ‘Press On’ has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.”*

Pavlina goes on to define persistence: “Persistence is the ability to maintain action regardless of your feelings. You press on even when you feel like quitting.” <http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2005/06/self-discipline-persistence/>

And bestselling marketing expert Seth Godin adds: “Persistence isn’t using the same tactics over and over. That’s just annoying. Persistence is having the same goal over and over.” [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2008/03/persistence.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2008/03/persistence.html)

The question, of course, is how to decide if one’s goal is realistic. Since there’s no guarantee in publishing, we may fall into the habit of examining anecdotal evidence for clues: If we were seated at the right table; if we won the award.

Which leads me back to awards season, and opportunities for humility: Some years ago, I was up for two Bram Stoker awards from the Horror Writers Association, and I won them both. My then-agent (emphasis on the past nature of our relationship) and I met for a meal the next day, and I proudly put my two little haunted houses on the table. After admiring them, Agent X turned to me and said, “You know, there’s a point in your career where you win awards. And then...” And he trailed off. At the time, I was both flummoxed that he would say something like that to me in my hour of triumph, and scared that he was right. Maybe this was as good as it was going to get, award-wise. Maybe it was all downhill now.

Back then, it bothered me but we remained agent and client for some time after that. Now, it would get him an eye roll and a request for a nice bottle of wine with our dinner.

And then I’d fire him, because he couldn’t be one of my trusted three.

Maybe, over time, we do cultivate a sense of reality, and the meanings that we make do make a sort of sense. Or at the very least, we can take some comfort in our expectations that they do.

*Wicked: Resurrection, co-authored with Debbie Viguie, is available now. Nancy and Debbie will kick off their promotion of Resurrection at Comic-con, in San Diego. Nancy is also hard at work on the Possession series for Penguin Razorbill.*

