

THE BAG OF Holding

BY NANCY HOLDER



TIME PASSAGES Six Writers Talk About Time Management

As I write this, it's July. For me, July means my daughter is home all day. I'm on deadlines; teaching for two weeks out of state in Maine; Comic-con; and promoting my new YA dark fantasy novel (coauthored with Debbie Viguie) *Wicked: Resurrection* on tour at the end of the month.

In September, when Part I of this two-part article appears, my daughter will be going back to school. I will have turned in a novel, a revision, and I will be promoting my new YA horror series, *Possessions*. I'll also be working on a new series called *Crusade* with Debbie. In short, I will be busy.

I know many authors who do even more than I do. So I asked five of them how they manage it. Here are the responses of my first three, edited a bit for space. The next two writers will appear in the November issue, along with my own comments.

HF: Heather Fowler has taught composition, literature, and writing-related courses at UCSD, California State University at Stanislaus, and Modesto Junior College. She works predominantly in the literary, feminist, and magical realism genres. Recent and forthcoming short stories have been published in the following journals and anthologies: *Feminist Studies* (forthcoming, print); *Filling Station* (forthcoming, print, CAN); *Etchings* (forthcoming, print, AUS); *Surreal South 2009* (forthcoming, print); *PANK* (June 2009); *Night Train* (Spring 2009, 9.1); *The Abacot Journal*: an online magazine of weird fiction (Spring 2009); *Underground Voices* (November 2008); *A Cappella Zoo* (October 2008, print, Volume I); *KeyHole* (August 2008); and *Trespass* (August/September 2008, print, UK). For a full, linked-in bio, please visit her website at www.heatherfowlerwrites.com.

DLB: Deborah LeBlanc is the president of the Horror Writers Association. Her novels include: *Water Witch*, *Morbid Curios-*

ity, *A House Divided*, *Family Inheritance*, and *Grave Intent*. Her many accomplishments are included in her responses. Her LeBlanc Literacy Challenge has provided thousands of dollars in prizes, including matching funds for college. See www.theblancchallenge.com

NW: Nancy Warren is a best-selling romance author for Harlequin and Kensington publishers. Her most recent novel, *Under the Influence*, was a Romantic Times Top Pick. Other novels include *Speed Dating*; *The One I Want*; *Turn Left at Sanity*; and *French Kissing*, which won Best of the Year for Series Romance from *Romance Review Today*. She also writes for Harlequin's NASCAR promotional tie-in series. You can find Nancy on the web at <http://www.nancywarren.net>. I took Nancy's online time management class in 2007 and it was invaluable.

Please tell us about your lifeload/workload. Do you have a day job?

HF: I have three children in my home and I work full-time, as well as pursue my written work at night. Along with that, I sometimes teach. My kids are 3, 6, and 15.

DLB: I actually own two companies and have for the past 14 years. One is a fuel inventory management company that monitors underground fuel tanks around the country and Canada. The second is a management consulting firm that works with funeral homes (strategic planning, marketing analysis, etc.) around the country. I'm fortunate in that I have 30 great employees who manage the day to day minutia, which frees me up to do everything else that's plugged into my life.

NW: No. Writing is my day job. And my night job. My weekend job, my can't sleep and it's the middle of the night so I might as well write job.

Do you do volunteer work? What kind? How many hours?

DLB: Yes. I'm the president of the Horror Writers Association, the Writers Guild of Acadiana, and Mystery Writers of America's Southwest Chapter. I also volunteer for the other writing organizations I belong to, depending on the need and task required—International Thriller Writers, Novelists Inc., Sisters in Crime, and Romance Writers of America. I'm sure I'm forgetting one or two, but you get the idea—lol. I'm also the founder of Literacy Inc, a non-profit organization whose mission is to fight the growing rate of illiteracy in America's teens, and I'm the founder of Pen to Press Writers Retreat, an annual, week-long retreat for serious, unpublished writers. As for how many hours I spend doing volunteer work, that depends on what's happening at any given time. On average, it's around 15 hours a week. If there's a major project going on, however, i.e. bylaw changes, board of director issues, fund raising activities, preparing for the retreat, etc., it can easily add up to 30 or more hours a week.

NW: Yes. Most recently I was on the safe grad committee for my daughter's high school. I volunteer through my writing organizations, my local cancer agency and I participate in several fundraising runs throughout the year. I try to take on defined tasks rather than time-sucking positions. I probably spend about two hours a week on volunteer work.

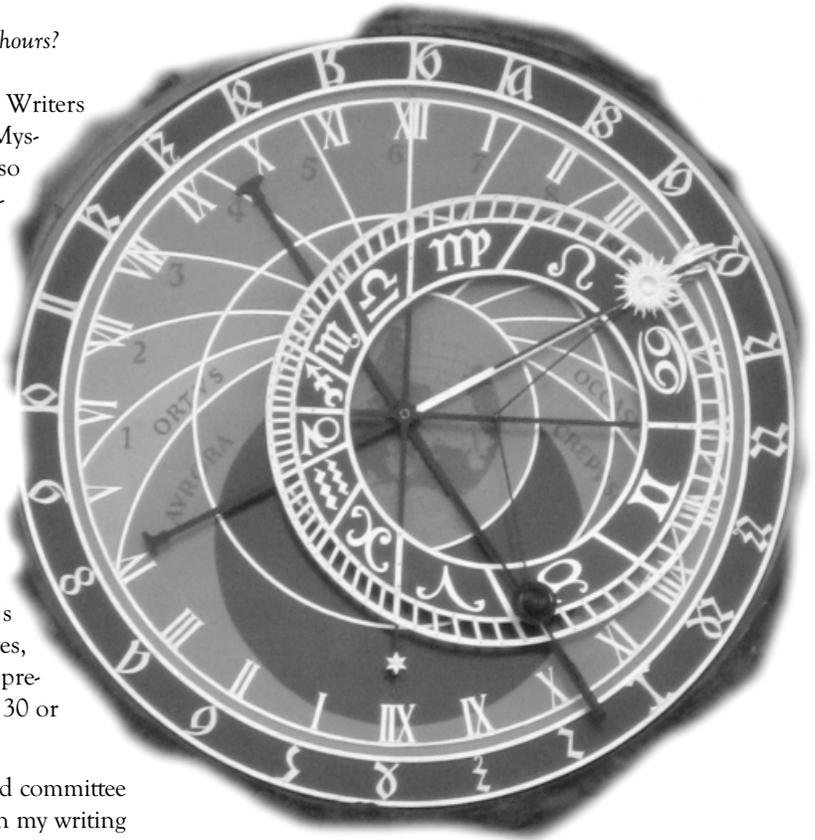
What writing projects are you involved in?

HF: Currently, I write several stories a month and usually a number of poems. Sometimes, I work collaboratively. Also, I have three novels in progress and seven to nine books of short fiction in compilation being edited. Ask me this number of books on different days, and the number shifts. Basically, I've got about 280 stories, and counting, that I keep moving from one book to another, trying to find that perfect clutch of stories that feels complete.

I run an active creative blog on my MySpace page, which is where I usually debut new work for friends or preferred blog members, and every year I do two writing marathons—Poem a Day in July and Story a Day in November. Those are hard push months.

DLB: I'm currently working on four novels simultaneously, a short story for an anthology, and the script for a comic book.

NW: I'm working on my contracted and scheduled romance novels (3 in my current contract) as well as writing proposals for spec projects and I'm co-writing a spec movie script.



Do you have other demands on your time?

HF: Bills, home maintenance, family obligations. The kids are a big demand, of course.

DLB: They aren't so much demands as they are hobbies that always keep my story-chest filled with ideas. I do paranormal investigations around the country, death scene investigations (although, due to time constraints, I'm only alerted to unusual cases), motorcycle riding, target practice at a shooting range, and I always seem to be at one writing conference or another, either doing a workshop or participating on panels.

NW: I have a family and I work from home, so there's all the juggling of tasks that involves. My daughter is getting ready to go to university in the fall so that has been a big part of this year, checking out universities, any number of grad related activities, and of course, shopping for the perfect grad dress. As a woman of a certain age I'm also keeping an eye on aging parents and a beloved aunt who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Oh, yeah, and there's also a Border collie in my house who insists on long walks every day.

How do you juggle it all?

HF: I think it's a matter of deciding what you value and trying to do all you can to keep that alive. For example, I work a decent day job that is not challenging and does not require

What writing projects are you involved in?

Do you have other demands on your time?

overtime. I do that because I know that if I worked a harder job, as I've done in the past, I'd be too exhausted for my art. As it is, I don't have time to write, edit, and submit, so I have an arrangement with a wonderful friend who is a stay at home mom and sends out my stories for me in her spare time. This has made a huge difference. If you can find someone who loves your work and will help you with the business end of your art goal, this can be a wonderful thing. Juggling also involves constantly seeking ways I can minimize the parts of activities that I don't enjoy and free up other windows of time. For example, for my submissions coordinator and myself, I designed a database that auto-generates cover letters and tracks submissions. This makes her work faster and lets me see what's out and how past submissions have gone at a glance.

DLB: You know, people ask me that question all the time, and the honest answer is I really don't know. It probably has something to do with the fact that multi-tasking and prioritizing have always come naturally to me, and I don't spend a lot of time doing things that 'normal' folks do. Things like watching hours of television, going to parties, or chatting on the phone for hours about nothing in particular.

NW: Some facts you need to know about me:

1. I'm disorganized. Horribly so.
2. I've managed to have close to 40 novels and novellas published in the last nine years.
3. I never miss deadlines (it's my newspaper background, I can't help myself).

Half the time I feel like I'm producing in spite of myself. The truth is I don't juggle it all. I juggle the important things and the less important balls can fall on the floor and roll under the furniture. When their turn comes, I will dig around and find them. I really wish I were organized and had lists and schedules in colored blocks, but I'm not going to change, so I've had to learn to play to my strengths. They are: a pretty good work ethic, being lucky enough to get paid to do what I love, and an immediate family who are all healthy and reasonably well-adjusted. I delegate. We have an organic foods delivery service in my area...all I need to do is a bulk shop for bread and staples. I hired a cleaning service. The other members of my family are required to help around the house.

...I've always had a hard time saying no. This is how I ended up on the lice committee at school, for instance. I've had to train extended family, friends and neighbors that just because I'm at home doesn't mean I'm available to have coffee, lunch, babysit your kids, or hang out. Mostly, I've had to train myself that it's okay to say no. Call display is my friend.

Does anything fall by the wayside? If so, what are the benefits and the consequences?

HF: Oh, sure. What falls by the wayside with a busy lifestyle that necessitates multi-tasking is most often is a good night's sleep. A fully immaculate house. A lot of delicious home-cooked food. I try to keep up what I can, but this is the way of having a passion and a full-life—the essential things must be defined. Also, the routines need to be as clear as possible...

...If I don't do what makes me feel creative, the resultant unhappiness is worse for those around me. It's about balance and really knowing what generates your joy and making sure the drudgery doesn't overwhelm the parts of life that make the rest worthwhile.

DLB: A few things can fall by the wayside if you're not careful. Maintaining any kind of meaningful relationship is a big one. If you're not partnered with someone who not only understands this blow-n-go lifestyle but is eager to participate in it with you, you'll wind up alone before you know it. Another thing is your physical and spiritual wellbeing. Physically, I know I already have crappy eating habits and that sitting behind a computer all day does nothing for my behind. That and the fact that gravity has a way of taking over after you reach a certain age, are my motivators for hitting the gym from time to time. As for spiritual matters, I'm not talking about the churchy kind, but that inner quiet we all need occasionally just to stay in tune with our core, especially our creative core. For me, when writing, or any major task for that matter, starts feeling too much like a job, it's usually because I haven't taken time to quiet my brain and just...be.

NW: For a while, when I was writing more books in a year than I do now, I let exercise go. I simply couldn't fit it all in.

The irony is that I was driving kids to activities, but I'd write on my Alphasmart while they were taking swimming lessons, climbing, doing gymnastics, soccer or whatever. And then I got pinched nerves in my neck from too much writing and too little exercise. After a lot of physical therapy, I went back to yoga, started running, hiking and of course there's the Border collie. I bitterly regret letting physical activity go for those years because some of the damage I did to myself can't be reversed. I have realized how much I need exercise, not just for the obvious physical benefits, but the mental ones too. I can solve plot problems when I'm hiking and the yoga does something that boosts endorphins.



My sense is that you can actually waste a lot of time managing your time. Beware using charts and systems as a procrastination tool. The goal is productivity.

What's the most important thing you've learned about time management?

HF: I feel it is important to write every day if you are a writer. I firmly believe the writing is a muscle and that practice breeds output. If you set your mind on writing just one page a day, for example, for three hundred days, you could have a complete draft of a book. Whereas if you wait endlessly for the window in which you'll have three totally clear weeks to begin a project, you will never begin that project. Also, self-forgiveness is key if delays are inevitable. If the routine falters, begin it anew.

DLB: Over time, I've learned two critical lessons when it comes to time management.

1. Make sure to carry-over.
2. Don't panic.

If you don't accomplish something on today's to-do list, simply carry it over to the top of tomorrows. Unless what you're carrying over is something critical, like missing a brain surgery appointment, there really is no need to have a panic attack. The task *will* get done if you remember to carry it over and keep it prioritized.

NW: I can't do it all. No one can. Trying to be a stay at home parent and a working writer is hard... I've learned to work to my strengths. Hiring a house cleaner was really hard for me... [But] If I put those same hours into writing, I'm much farther ahead both financially and mentally.

One interesting thing I've learned is that my disorganization can actually be an advantage. I have no problem leaving a big mess around and focusing on my writing. Not everyone can do this. I've read any number of time management and organization books, if I could find any of them I'd list them, but for me the only secret is from a Nike slogan. Just do it. If you've got a book to write, write the damn thing. No excuses. We all have the same number of hours. We're all busy. Those who get things done find ways that work for them. If I spend all the time I might have spent on schedules and lists actually writing my books, I'll still get my work done.

I love the Internet for all the resources and communication it opens up, but it's also the greatest time wasting invention ever. I really try to stay off lists and out of discussion groups. With my neck issues, I have to limit my hours at the keyboard, so I try very hard to spend them on the work I'm being paid for. This is difficult, though. I love my writing friends and keeping up on what's going on in the publishing industry is important. It's tough to find balance and I admit that this is still my greatest challenge.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about time management and multi-tasking?

HF: Slow and steady work on designated projects wins the race. Decide on what can fit, do the best you can, and keep going.

DLB: Yes. In the midst of the madness...don't forget to breathe!

NW: My sense is that you can actually waste a lot of time managing your time. Beware using charts and systems as a procrastination tool. The goal is productivity. There are two ways of tracking your progress. You can follow the Stephen King program as outlined in his excellent book *On Writing*. Write ten pages every day, do them first, don't quit until they are done. (You pick your own number of pages, obviously.) Or there's the schedule by the hour method which works better for those with outside jobs and other commitments. This is where you might get up an hour earlier and write every day before work, or every Saturday morning. You commit the time and have to follow through. Blog posts don't count, impassioned arguments on the blasphemy of sticking zombies in Jane Austen's novels don't count. Only time spent writing or researching your story counts.

I give myself a pages per week goal. I report in every Tuesday to two fellow writers. We each set goals for the week and follow up. I find being accountable is a great motivator. I tend to write in manic bursts. Some days I'm unstoppable. Others I'm barely coherent. It's not perfect, but it works for me.

I know when my books are due and I finish them with plenty of time to edit and revise or deal with the inevitable emergencies that arise in a life. Time management is like money management and weight management. There are no secrets. Entire volumes on personal finance come down to this: Spend less than you earn and invest the difference. How many Oprah episodes and how many shelves in the bookstore devoted to weight loss are churning out one simple message? Burn more calories than you take in and choose healthy foods. Time management is really pretty simple. Focus on the important tasks first. Don't waste your precious time. Now go write a page of your wip. Right now. Go on...

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.

