

# THE *BAG* OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



## TIME PASSAGES Six Writers Talk About Time Management

## Part II

**As I predicted when I wrote the first part of** this article back in July, I am busy. My carefully planned summer schedule went out the door when Debbie Viguie and I hit the New York Times Bestseller List with our *Wicked* series, and we took advantage of that by immediately writing a new series proposal (which we sold after long, tough negotiations) and going on an author tour together. Debbie flew over from Kauai for Comic-con and stayed an extra week. The tour was both exhilarating and exhausting, and we worked while we were on it. Then we had to hit the ground running as soon as it was over.

Looking back, I honestly don't know how I/we accomplished so much. Completed novels, revisions, teaching gigs, articles, columns, comic books—and book promotion—and we're still going. How did we do it? How are we doing it still? We employed a lot of the same strategies as my second set of three interviewees for this two-part series on time management. So I'll let them speak first, and save my own remarks as a conclusion.

### My interviewees include:

**DC:** Douglas Clegg has won the Bram Stoker Award, the International Horror Guild Award, and the Shocker Award. In 1999, he launched the internet's (and world's) first publisher-sponsored e-serial novel. Called *Naomi*, Doug later went on to sell both hardcover and paperback rights. In 2000, Doug's short novel *Purity* became one of the most-downloaded fiction ebooks on the internet — reaching more than 100,000 readers in its first year on the internet. In 2001, *Purity* became the world's-first fiction to appear on a cell phone — and was nicknamed an M-Book at the time (for Mobile).

Additionally, he's been Director of Marketing for a publisher, editor for a bookstore's website, and a marketing consultant for publishers, publicity firms, and booksellers.

**LM:** Lisa Morton is the treasurer of the Horror Writers Association and has organized two HWA Bram Stoker annual awards weekends. She has received two Bram Stoker Awards ("Tested" for Short Fiction, 2006; and *A Halloween Anthology* for Nonfiction, 2008.) She has also received two HWA Richard Laymon President's Awards for Service. Her produced screenplays include *Blood Angel*; *Blue Demon*; and *Tornado Warning*. Her non-fiction books are: *The Cinema of Tsui Hark*; *The Halloween Encyclopedia*; *The Hallowe'en Anthology*; and *Savage Detours: The Life*

and *Work of Ann Savage* (forthcoming.) A novella, *The Lucid Dreaming*, is forthcoming from Bad Moon Books; her first published novel, *The Castle of Los Angeles*, is forthcoming from Gray Friar Press. She also studies Mandarin.

**DH:** Del Howison co-owns Dark Delicacies, “the Home of Horror,” a store featuring horror-themed books, gifts and collectibles in Burbank, California. Together with Jeff Gelb, he has edited three volumes of the anthology series *Dark Delicacies*. The first volume won the Bram Stoker Award. He also edited *The Book of Lists: Horror*. The first *Dark Delicacies* comic is on the shelves now. Among his many other accomplishments, he has acted in horror films, most notably as Renfield; and his short story, “The Lost Herd” which appeared in *Hot Blood 12: Strange Bedfellows*, was scripted by Mick Garris and retitled “The Sacrifice,” and was the premiere episode for the TV anthology series, *Fear Itself*.

Although Del doesn’t make mention of his charitable activities on behalf of the Shriners, he and his wife, Sue, have produced calendars featuring horror authors, a cookbook by same, and donated their time and effort in other generous endeavors.

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

**DC:** I just write fiction, that’s it. No other job.

**LM:** Yes—I work full time managing a used bookstore.

**DH:** I own and operate a retail store with my wife.

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

**DC:** I have to admit, I don’t do much volunteer work.

**LM:** Yes, I work with an international writers service organization (the Horror Writers Association). Usually the work is 7-10 hours a week, although it can be more, depending on what special projects the organization is currently overseeing.

**DH:** Most of our charity work is done from the store although we occasionally are on-site to do things or allow people to use the facilities afterhours here. Timewise, it varies with the projects.

*What writing projects are you involved in?*

**DC:** I’ve written more than 23 novels in about 20 years of writing fiction, and perhaps about 45 or so short stories. All

have been published. My new book, hitting stores the end of September 2009 is called *Isis*.

**LM:** I just turned in my fourth nonfiction book, and am now working to fulfill some short fiction writing assignments before I start a new novel.

**DH:** Have the following working projects in some form of completion: An essay in a book about what stories inspired me as a writer. Have a zombie short story in an anthology. Working with a co-writer on *The Guide to Dating and Bedding a Vampire*. Working with a co-editor on an anthology about *Median* and Clive Barker’s monsters from *Cabal*. Finishing up a contract to write a book on *The Werewolf Survival Handbook*. I’m also a staff writer for *Fantastique* magazine.

*Do you have other demands on your time?*

**DC:** Life. Family. Travel. Canoeing. Bicycling. And walking the dog—can’t forget that.

**LM:** Does laundry count?

**DH:** I am hired as a guest speaker periodically, do shows with my store and run panels at events.

*How do you juggle it all?*

**DC:** Everything becomes material for fiction, so I’m either writing in my head or on paper all the time—while life goes on.

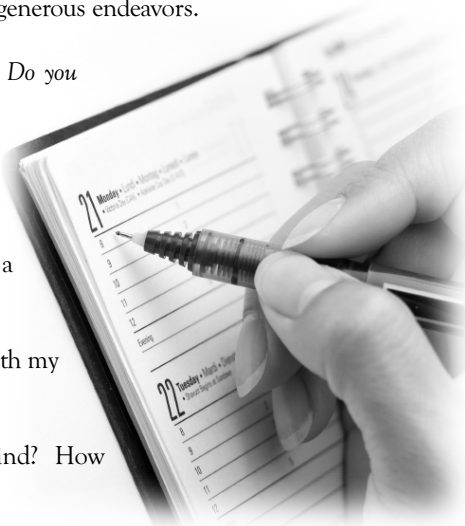
I have a husband who has managed everything from the business aspect of writing to home management since I began getting published...so I have it a little easy in the juggling

area.

We work as a team in terms of the books—I do the writing, but he proofs, listens and offers insight when going over structure and plot issues, handles various aspects of the work flow, and more. A lot goes into the writing of a book than just the writing—and he deals with it. I just write.

**LM:** I try to block certain times of day for certain tasks - for example, I work on HWA business in the mornings only, before I go to work, and I reserve my evenings for writing.

**DH:** One day and one thing at a time. Prioritizing is really important as is concentrating and focusing on just one thing instead of becoming overwhelmed.



**Everything becomes material for fiction, so I’m either writing in my head or on paper all the time—while life goes on.**

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

**DC:** I would say my ability to socialize as much as I'd like falls by the wayside. I love writing—I've been writing fiction since I was eight years old. I'm 51 now. It's how I spend my life and I'll be telling stories until the day I drop. But it's solitary work at home, and I can go months with mainly only seeing my husband and nobody else.

Still, I like months of quiet, followed by a season of social life.

**LM:** I have absolutely no idea what's current on television! Television is probably the single biggest drain on most people's time, and it's amazing how much time can be recaptured by just cutting down on television watching. I probably watch less than 6 hours of television a week, and that's mostly movies. Of course I also don't have kids—I have absolutely no idea how parents can also maintain a job and a writing career. I'm in awe of those people.

**DH:** Some family time falls by the wayside and time has to be made up for that. Sleep is lost. But you have the feeling that it isn't going to be like that forever. I could have worse problems—like no work!

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

**DC:** That time is made, not found. I make time for what I know is most important in a day—which includes writing. And sometimes, a good vacation is as important as the work itself. But I never have a perfectly managed day, time-wise. I just go with it.

**LM:** Once you create a schedule for yourself and stick to it for even a short period of time, it'll start to become natural. I actually really love my schedule right now and look forward to each of my various tasks.

**DH:** To take it in little chunks to make it manageable.

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

**DC:** I don't multitask. I just do one thing at a time, and eventually, it all gets done. But I've been fortunate—so far.

**LM:** As useful as the schedule can be, you can't be afraid to deviate from it if necessary. For example: If you have a book deadline, you might have to put the volunteer work aside for a while. And don't forget to leave yourself time to relax, too! If you overload yourself with work to the point where you finally burn out, no time management tip in the world is going to help.

**DH:** Switching between projects can actually be helpful, like working on writing and instead of burning out on it, take time to switch over to something unrelated to help clear your head. Also, since you will always come down to the wire, working on the projects a little everyday is surprisingly helpful in whittling away at the workload.

### **NH observations:**

One of the time-management strategies I learned this summer was to let go of the notion of multi-tasking and instead think of my work and my life as a set of parallel or serial tasks. Then, to prioritize that set. It has always been easy to default to doing what seems most urgent rather than to tackle what is actually most important. A low-priority task with a short deadline has felt more urgent than, say, whittling down that long-term workload that Del mentions. It takes a lot of discipline to work steadily on a long-term project rather than consistently setting it aside in favor of short-term ones. Unless I took the big project into account, I was easy to become overcommitted.



## Each time something was done, I felt a boost of energy and confidence that I took into the long-term project.

My mantra used to be “Say yes now and figure out how later.” I think one of the most crazy-making things about living the life of a freelance writer is that most of us are afraid to ever say no to work. We accept the job, grit my teeth, lose sleep, defer/ignore, take sick days, hide, and make it happen. Most of us have to, for a long time. Those of us who manage to do it over the long haul are probably the most driven. I remember complaining to another writer about how hard it was to write when my daughter was an infant. He pointed out that Shirley Jackson wrote with three kids underfoot. I got back to work.

Because of our drive, we become the masters of contingencies and backup plans—of seizing opportunities and making our deadlines; working unbelievable hours and staying on course through it all. We live like we’re in college, deferring relationships, life-stuff, and stability as we pursue our dreams. But at some point, sheer drive and energy aren’t enough, and we need to strategize. Or at least, I did.

So I have to build in time for the long-term projects and stick to a schedule that accounts for it. And to protect that schedule, one of the things I have had to learn to do is to say no. No to social events, no to friends, no to new work if I don’t have the *extra* time in my schedule to do a good job.

My civilian friends became so accustomed to my saying, “I can’t. I have a deadline” that they stopped believing me. “You *always* have a deadline” really meant “You can do it (go to the movies/chair the committee/watch my kid) anyway.” The same with taking on new work—sure, I had a deadline of November 15<sup>th</sup>. But this was September 6<sup>th</sup>. I had time to do a book review/read a friend’s manuscript/write a short story. Right?

By reassigning my long-term deadline as a part of my routine, I could now say, “I have something due at two p.m. today” and be taken seriously, both by others and myself. (Two p.m. is a significant time in my day because here in California, I’m three hours behind New York time. Five p.m. is officially end of working hours, although I’ve found my editors at their desks past eight p.m. and even later.) Then, if I have short-term deadlines, I can do the same serial-tasking with them—giving certain hours over to them, like Lisa does. But also like Lisa, I recognize that there are times when I have to shift my schedule to accommodate the situation—as, for example, when Debbie and I dropped everything to write our new proposal and go on our tour.

One of the biggest problems I had during the Summer of Insanity was stress. Fear really is the mind killer. I was so keyed up that I couldn’t sleep. Because I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t concentrate. Because I couldn’t concentrate, I started falling behind. The cycle perpetuated itself and I began to get seriously concerned as I looked at the workload and contemplated failure. A number of things helped:

I talked to someone who would understand—in this case, my co-author, Debbie, who was in the same boat. We would offer each other sympathy, empathy, prayers, and suggestions—to work

for another hour and take a break, for example, or to switch gears and work on a different project or a different part of the project. Having a peer to talk to allowed me to build in some accountability and objectivity. If the chapter wasn’t happening, maybe my mind really was trying to tell me the book was going in the wrong direction. The flashback, I decided, would confuse our readers.

Maybe I was making things too hard. For example, I wanted a list of the names of all the bookstore managers who had hosted us on our tour, and sat down with a stack of business cards to create one—but it turned out that our media escorts already had one. A call solved that.

By scheduling my projects serially, I would finish the short ones even while the long-term one was still before me. As a result, I had a sense of *finishing* things. I was not on an endless treadmill of work. I was fulfilling goals of varying complexity and intensity. Each time something was done, I felt a boost of energy and confidence that I took into the long-term project.

Even though I still had work to do, I took real breaks. Accent on *real*. As Del wisely points out, sometimes you need to switch to something else to avoid burnout. I was in serious danger of burnout. So, instead of aimlessly net surfing with my unfinished chapter in front of me, I watched a movie. I traveled with my daughter. I let myself really rest and recreate. It felt very wrong at first, but I began to see that if I could honestly disengage for a while, I would go back to the work at hand refreshed. And I could sleep.

And I asked for help. I asked my daughter to make dinner. I hired two brothers (my “minions”) and they did yard work, took crap to the dump, and pulled up my old carpet. I explained my situation to my editors and asked for extensions. They were thrilled that I was on the NYT, and accommodated me as best they could.

Most important, though, I stayed focused on the task *at hand* and gave it my attention until I withdrew focus. Somehow, I got some control over the summer instead of it controlling me. In short, I managed it.

I’d love to hear your thoughts on time/project management. Please feel free to join me on facebook/myspace/tweet me at nancy holder/ or e me at buffnan@aol.com.

*Nancy Holder, the New York Times bestselling co-author of the Wicked series. She is also author of the Possessions series from Razorbill. Saving Grace: Cry Me a River will debut in October.*

