

Want An Endorsement?

By Linda Rohrbough

A writer who has worked for me was preparing to attend a small luncheon featuring Nicholas Sparks. She asked me if she should give him copies of her three self-published novels. He'll probably dump her books in the nearest trash, she added, "but you never know."

You never know what? Will Nicholas Sparks insist on calling his agent and publisher to tell them about her? Or just give her his card and tell her to contact him for an endorsement?

My writer friend had the right idea in a couple of respects. One, it would help her books to have an endorsement from a successful author in the same genre. And two, it's smart to hang out with people ahead of you in the game. What I don't understand is the sense of entitlement toward established authors. Do established authors want to help other writers? Sure they do. Do they want to help someone who feels entitled to their help? Probably not.

Since I travel with bestselling authors, let's put ourselves in Mr. Sparks' shoes for a moment. He's worked more than 20 years to get where he is now. He's been jostled all morning by fans and hopes to get through this event, then back to a quiet spot to work on the project he's currently under contract for. (He's probably feeling deadline pressure from being behind schedule because he's accepted too many lunch dates already.) A writer in the long autograph line tells him how much she enjoys his work. She hands him three of her own books, saying they are similar to his. He's lost track of how many times this has happened. The writer looks at him expectantly. The other people waiting start to shuffle their feet, watching him. What would you do?

From my experience, he certainly remembers what it was like to be so desperate and loves books too much to trash these. He either says no thank you and hands the books back, or says thank you and places them in a box under the table designated for that purpose. If he has time later, he may read the first page of a few novels to see if he can learn anything. But either way, what he will eventually do is hand the box to an assistant with instructions to donate them to a good cause, like a prison or a recycling center. So, how do you get an endorsement? In my experience, authors who get endorsements build relationships that give them connections by giving of themselves. And they master their craft.

Building relationships means that smart new authors do something for established authors. They give favorable reviews, or ask them to speak at a conference where the new author has some influence. Our own Beth Groundwater gets endorsements, and you can read how in her recent blog entry. My only caveat with Beth's blog is that six weeks is a tight lead time for an endorsement. Three to six months is better, considering most selling authors try to sandwich reading into their tight writing schedules.

Another wrinkle is that writers want to endorse someone who will deliver the goods. Since it can take eight to 16 hours to read a novel, most authors say no to newbies unless they know something about the work. Who wants to spend that much time, only to face the awkwardness of turning the new author down?

What newbies don't know is that bestselling authors read a lot, and they follow new book announcements because it's smart to see what someone else did to break in. If they like a book they've read, they often make a point to tell the author, usually at a conference. Most new authors don't understand this is an endorsement until their agent or editor tells them it is and coaches them to go back and ask for it in writing. I've heard this story over and over.

I've also heard horror stories where newbies tried to trick a bestselling author into an endorsement. One *New York Times* listed friend told me about a glowing letter received from a new author. She wanted to help. Until she asked around. Turns out the newbie sent the identical letter to several other big names. Guess who they all decided to avoid? My advice to the writer who asked me what to say to Nicholas Sparks was to go to the luncheon with the goal of learning from Mr. Sparks. Listen to how he talks about his novels, because when he does that, he is pitching—he's using the same words he used to sell the idea to his agent and his publisher. Listen for how he works. If the opportunity presents itself, give him a sincere compliment, like mentioning something gleaned from his talk. Writers never tire of hearing that.

But, I told her, don't go with the idea of using the author. Rather, accept with gratitude what is freely given. The good news is that she took my advice, and she came away from the luncheon energized. That's the real value in going to hear someone who has made it.

Linda Rohrbough has been writing professionally since 1989, and has more than 5,000 articles, seven books, and numerous awards for her fiction and nonfiction. Linda's latest book is Weight Loss Surgery with the Adjustable Gastric Band (Da Capo Lifelong Books, March 2008). Visit Linda's Web site: www.LindaRohrbough.com.

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume IX, Issue 4, July 2010.