

Your Words, Their Story: Collaborative Writing with Celebrities, Experts and Just Plain Folk

From the November 2008 Write Brain

Presenters: Pam Novotny, Suzanne Proulx, Pam McCutcheon, Cicily Janus

By Fleur Bradley

It was an impressive panel of authors at the November Write Brain on collaborative writing. We had Pam Novotny, with her background in journalism and a line-up of nonfiction books under her own name as well a ghostwritten project; Suzanne Proulx, an accomplished mystery writer with a background in ghostwriting both fiction and nonfiction; Pam McCutcheon, a fiction and nonfiction writer with extensive knowledge regarding editing projects and contracts; and as a last-minute addition, local author Cicily Janus, who has written novels as well as nonfiction project *The New Face of Jazz*.

The panel discussions were casual. All authors were forthcoming in sharing their experiences—both good and bad. Suzanne Proulx recalled a project she worked on with a celebrity: after she'd spent a great deal of time and frustration trying to gather information, the author backed out of the project. "My rule in working with celebrities: get the money up front, and get a lot of it," she said with a smile. Ms. Proulx has since worked on a fiction project that did work out. She received an outline, chapter by chapter, which made the project easy. "That was a great experience."

Pam Novotny shared her experience writing a nonfiction project with Jane Seymour. When asked what Jane Seymour was like to work with, she said, "You really work with the editor rather than the author." Fortunately, she added, "I had a wonderful editor."

All four authors agreed on the importance of fostering relationships with editors and agents. Cicily Janus pitched the idea for a nonfiction project on jazz musicians to an editor at Pikes Peak Writers Conference and got a warm response, convincing her to push ahead. "Get your foot in the door with the gatekeepers," she said. "Sell them on the idea." She added that you should be professional in your queries, to avoid coming across as a fan.

For beginning authors interested in breaking into collaborative writing, Pam Novotny suggested starting with an article on the subject of your project. "It gives you information on whether this is going to work." She cautioned writers not to get in over their heads, considering the time investment that often lasts a year or longer. "Maybe you just want to write an article."

Pam McCutcheon added, "Ask yourself: Is this something you really want to do?" She suggested beginning writers look for ghostwriting projects on online bidding sites like elance.com and guru.com.

Panelists shared stories of the work at hand after doing interviews and gathering information. Pam Novotny explained the difference between your topic, the person you're writing about, and the idea of your project—what it's really about. "What makes this a story?" she said when explaining how to turn a biography into an interesting book. "What is the format of that story that's going to make it compelling?"

Pam McCutcheon added, "It's all about understanding how to structure a book."

All four panelists stressed the importance of getting conditions put into the

contract so there are no surprises while you're working. To limit your investment in an unsold project, Pam Novotny suggested starting with a paid contract for a proposal. "That makes it a defined task, and that's all you need to commit to." The panel agreed: make sure you define everyone's role in the project, and get it in writing.

For all the panelists, their projects came from contacts with agents and editors. Like Suzanne Proulx said: "They're all networking type things."

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