

Lesson 8 - You and Your Muse

Good morning everyone! Today is our final class, there will be many thank yous for me to hand out later but for now let's finish our class material.

Taking Care of You

I am not going to tell you to take up Yoga, eat clean or take more bubble baths (though none of those are poor recommendations). If you had time for that you would not be in this class. As I have went through my journey of learning how to be a productive, sane, functioning writer, I had to learn to give myself a minute occasionally. I can sit down and write for five hours straight if say the spouse takes the miniature to Chuck E Cheese or some other lord of the flies convention hall and is gone that long. I learned I had to stop doing that. I had to stretch, sleep, breathe, eat and hydrate. It may sound silly, but writing or not, keep track of yourself and be kind to your body. It is just the two of you in this together. I set my timer for every two hours if I have a large block of time (which isn't often). I stop, stand up, hop up and down a few times (yep, I look as ridiculous as you might imagine), walk over and pet the dog, drink some water, stare off into space for at least two minutes (alleviating eye strain), roll my shoulders twenty times, and then I get back at it.

Speaking of the dog, I try to walk her (and me) most days. It's only fifteen minutes but we both feel better. Some days the dog gets left alone (she is old with weak hips and doesn't like brisk days) then I make sure no one is watching and do some yoga (sort of). I am not very good yet so basically it's a simple stretching session. I try to do something to keep me at least a little bit active and not just sitting in front of a keyboard. I am one of those folks who can hyper focus and I can sit and not move for hours. Don't do that. It is unhealthy and your creative juices can get thin as you fatigue. My doctor harps on this, he says creatives in particular have issues with self-care. The problem with that sort of hyperfocusing is you may not notice your work quality diminishing as you go.

If you are thinking about writing all the time that's great, but make sure to turn it off enough to actually appreciate and spend time with the people in your life. It took me a while to really start focusing on my daughter at night during her bedtime routine. I wanted to usher her off to sleep so I could work. We would have conflict because I

wanted to rush off and meanwhile, she just wanted a hug, kiss and a snuggle. Ten minutes of my day where she was the sole focus of my attention was all it took when we finally talked about it. Not my finest moments as a mom, prior to that. Once I realized that was all she really needed I felt like a jerk. If they are there, try to pick up on your family's cues earlier instead of later. As you start assessing your situation and making changes make sure you give yourself permission to spend time with your friends occasionally and family often, and to enjoy that time.

As authors we tend to isolate ourselves and just work when we can. Fight that urge and only close yourself off for certain parts of your day. We miss enough already, don't cheat yourself out of any more happy time than you have to. Kids grow, parents age, friends have to move on in their lives or you just grow apart, we move through life without appreciating the people in it all the time. Make sure you at least make the effort, or in the end, what was the point. In a way, being a writer is about living a big life and sharing it with your readers but it's also about sharing it with the people who really love you most. Make sure you keep that well of love, laughter, and general experience full, it will make your job as a writer easier.

Finally, on taking care of yourself, **I HIGHLY recommend the book *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less* by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang.** The book talks about "active" rest and why, as humans, we must give ourselves down time for our brains to refuel and be creative. I purchased it off EBay in audio form and have listened to it a couple of times. It teaches that resting in a productive manner (yep, that is possible) is a skill you can hone like any other. This is a book that was life changing for me. It gave me permission to rest as a way of furthering my business. I hope you might find one, or one like it, to put you on the path to utilizing your "rest" time to keep yourself healthy and more productive.

Hating Your Muse Without Guilt

Most of us get to that point in writing a book where we really don't care about our characters anymore, we just want it done, published or off our screens for a while. Well, we say that, and might even believe it for a few minutes. Then we come back to it, but we aren't up to par and aren't doing our best work, even though we can likely force

something if we try. So it doesn't meet our internal quality control so it goes back in the drawer.

When we sit down to write it's not that we don't want to write, can't start writing, or don't know what needs done. Sometimes we are simply burnt out. Sometimes it is that we are burnt out on trying to rush in, sit down, clear everything, and dive headlong into our fictional world so we can get more words on the page. We are tired of trying to fight the world around us to get some time to just sit and write, uninterrupted, not in the dead of night, not with someone knocking on the door every five minutes and not with someone wanting a drink of water or bedtime snack.

When that happens you have to break yourself from sitting there and mentally grinding on the project. When I catch myself doing that it brings to mind the sound of grinding gears in an engine. Take just a little bit of time for you to regain your focus. Maybe that night you grab your favorite craft book or the romance that made you want to write romance and go sit someplace quiet for fifteen minutes or half an hour and just reset and read. Center yourself occasionally and make sure to give yourself permission so you don't feel guilty when you have to do that. You can't do it all the time, but sometimes it can be quite useful.

For me it takes about an hour and a half to clear my thoughts when I hit that wall. It happens maybe once a quarter or three weeks into heavy projects, like if I am doing my final draft or heavy edits. My normal go to recharge is to go sit in my husband's recliner (he is a big tall guy) and snuggle up with my kid and eat something horrible for us (normally cookies) and watch old Tom and Jerry episodes until we are both giggling or napping. Being with my daughter recharges me because she is one of the biggest reasons I stick it out, be brave and do all this. Taking my dog for a walk is one of my favorite block removers. If you are really and truly stuck you need to do something different to get unstuck. You may have to take a bit and figure out what your mental palette cleansers are. Sometimes I can go to the local library for a while if I have the chance or a local Dennys (I prefer late night French fries and a quiet empty corner to a bustling Starbucks mid-morning) and write there for a bit just to shake things up and get fresh perspective.

As you line out your plans for what you want and need to do with your book(s) make sure to build in rest (you will get more done if you aren't sleep deprived, trust me). You won't be able to avoid being tired or sleep deprivation all the time, but if you keep an eye on it in general, sometimes you can avoid it better. Don't isolate **more than you have to**, anticipate this being hard to balance, especially once you start getting your productivity up close to where you want it (which is counter intuitive but real). Give yourself a mental break and cut yourself some slack occasionally. If you are like me, you feel the need to write nearly all the time when you can make a moment to do so. Sometimes you might feel like you can't relax unless you are completely spent from the days writing session, your work, and house work. Been there, pay close attention if you feel that way and make sure to keep at least a little balance.

One of the most important things to remember through all of this adjusting, modifying, observing, and experimenting, is to hold true to your muse and yourself. I started my own company because I wanted to keep my vision for my work intact. I wanted to do this my way. I have felt good about everything I have done so far, like sleep well at night good. Later on is there a chance I will change my vision? Sure. But for now, I am learning and meeting people and doing what I love. I won't ever regret that. The only caution there is to be humble and open. Putting off new ideas because you "know it all already" won't help you either.

Approaching things the way I do and breaking them down with the concepts I have talked about gives me the chance to handle each day on my terms while being productive and keeping the balance between family and work. If I move on to other things later, like working with a small press or traditional press, nothing I am doing now will be a waste. Knowing that I am making myself a more knowledgeable professional in my industry lets me not feel guilty about learning and growing my own abilities. It may not work for everyone, but it works for me.

Nothing you do as far as learning or trying new things is a waste unless you are procrastinating or avoiding something. I have noticed many writers tend to be perfectionists. Our inability to mentally deal (in a healthy way) with the routine small failures that we have to overcome each day to become "successful" writers can grate on

us. When you are deciding whether or not to be hard on yourself, take a moment and listen to your inner dialogue. Now, pretend you overheard a good friend say that to another good friend. If your eyes just bugged out and your blood pressure rose a few notches thinking what you would say to someone who was spouting your inner dialogue at another person, or if you are appalled because it is just plain mean, consider trying to change it. Don't talk to yourself in ways you would not talk to others. Negative self-talk is never helpful. Bullying yourself isn't either.

Odds and Ends -

I reviewed the entire class last night to see if there was anything I left out that I felt was important enough to mention or mention again before I close the class. There was.

1. Contest Submission Issue

Earlier in the class, via private email, I was asked about what to do when a certain contest piece just continues to be a non-finalling, non-winning time suck but you have various excellent reviews from freelance editors and beta readers. After some conversational back and forth I wanted to put this out. Read EXACTLY what contests are asking for, not just the formatting.

If you are entering a contest, really look at what they are asking for and make sure your work fits the guidelines beyond word count and the part of your book they want to see. For example, in my military contemporary, the entire first chapter is devoted to setting up the heroine's story and getting to know her. We go through something emotionally stunning with her. Then she meets the hero in chapter two. Without chapter one the conflict in her meet up with the hero makes no sense.

However, in chapter one she does not meet the hero because she is being set on her own path for the book. There is one year between the last sentence of chapter one and the first sentence of chapter two. Therefore, when I look at contests that are judging the spark in an opening scene I don't bother to enter. I **can't** win because no matter how good my writing is my book is a bit non-standard and the hero and heroine don't meet in the first chapter. They meet in the second.

The interaction the contest would be judging does not fall into the selection most contests ask for. My particular story requires that initial set-up exactly as it is, because it is a military romance and doesn't make sense without the situational build up. So don't throw your money away or try a round hole/square peg routine with your books. You might get a nibble here and there if you're writing it exceptional well, but more often than not you will be wasting your time and money. Make sure your story matches what each individual contest wants.

2. Quick note on keeping a detailed calendar

The biggest plus to keeping a calendar, other than the obvious value of keeping a schedule, is you can mentally let go of the details and let your brain rest occasionally. You can also see how much you really do accomplish day to day. Both of those things should not be undervalued in ANY way. They are both essential to your sanity.

In my calendar, I keep a 8.5 x 11 planner, I keep personal items on the left side of the page and all business related items on the right side of the page. This means I have detailed proof of my "business" work as far as the IRS is concerned come tax time. If I am ever audited this will be invaluable.

3. The next few paragraphs are some of the most important paragraphs in the entire class. At least it is if you are one of those people who are visual, maybe into textures and like to make things your own.

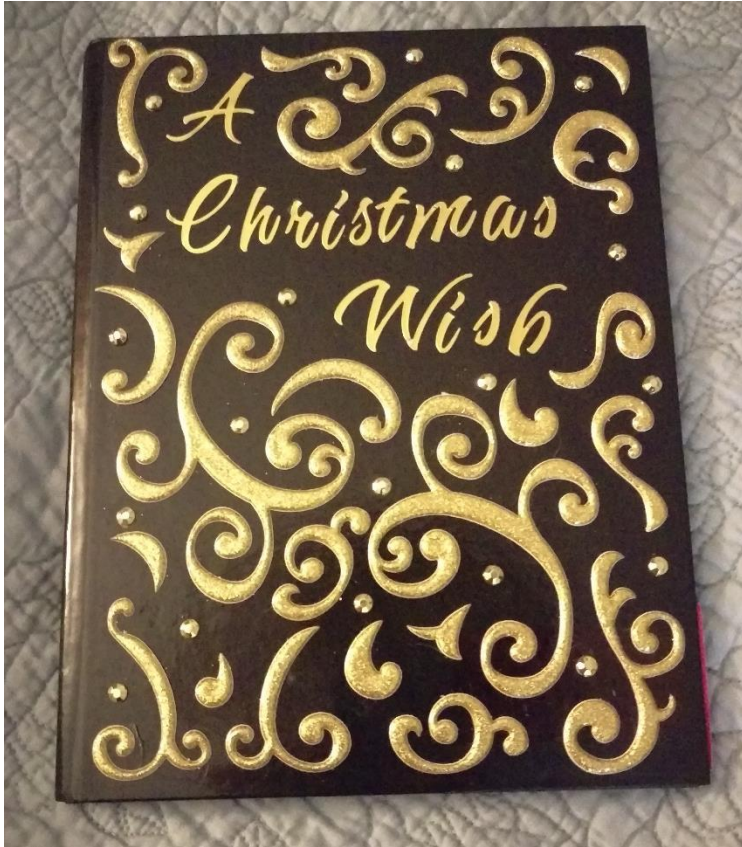
As you start to make lists, plan and do research you will need things to make those lists in and on. Make it fun. Bedazzle things, use pretty tape on your stuff, whatever small joy you can get out of your things take it. Get sticky notes that are bright and fun that match your calendar. Each year I have a set of books. An 8.5x11 calendar with a full page for each day, a small hard cover notebook for my mileage log, a regular size hard cover notebook with about eighty pages in it for my class log, etc. I go buy a few rolls of the coolest duct tape I can find and a bunch of packs of cheap sparkles or stickers or whatever catches my eye and I go to town at the end of every year when I am prepping the next years set of books.

One, it is fun. Two all my important stuff that I need to put together with my tax paperwork is easily identifiable at the end of the year because it matches. Also, since it is pretty and I “made” it, I like using all of it. I like things to match, compulsively so, and will waste HOURS online trying to find matching organizational sets. This was a fix for me wasting time looking for something I wanted to use. I get whatever functional stuff I need then make them look like a set. I had to adjust for my own quirks. My daughter helps me make them sometimes so it is fun for both of us and it get her interested in asking questions about the company. Win on all sides.

Below is my current set.



I also get colored pens, glitter pens, specialty scented pens like chocolate cherry and banana split. I buy bubble gum scented pencils and holiday pencils from the dollar store to use throughout the year. Dollar tree carries a scented pen three pack every school season that has strawberry, blueberry and grape (pink, neon blue and purple ink) for a buck and I stock up every fall :) I have a really nice expensive pen I use when I am working on things like business plans and serious marketing proposals. There is no rule that you can't have fun with things.



The book above is a book bible I for a project I have been working on. I carry it in my backpack on days I am waiting on the kiddo to finish with this or that camp or class and will brain storm and write down ideas while I wait. It is sparkly and gold and pretty so I like to carry it and get it out and use it, even if no one sees it (which they normally don't).

WalMart sells hardcover plain notebooks for \$1.97 (or Walmart.com if your local box store doesn't carry them). I get them and decorate them for any new project I have on tap. The more the project means to me the prettier the stuff I use to build it tends to be. If you love how something looks and feels you are more likely to carry it with you and not lose it or forget it. It takes me less than half an hour to customize things when I feel the need, but in the long run, it saves me a ton of time and it makes me happy.

An aside on how that can end up being fun in real life and useful to your authorial pursuits...I collect unique pencils, I talk about it sometimes on social media. Anytime I go somewhere to teach, part of my honorarium inevitably includes some neat and

different pencil, pens or cool notebooks. My favorite was a notebook a chapter gave me with black paper and glitter metallic pens. It looked like I was writing my notes in gold and silver and it shined off the matte black paper. I loved it and the chapter loved that there was something cool they could afford to give me. This list making, note taking, research tracking and planning doesn't all have to be drab drudgery.

My notebooks are also a great conversation starter at conferences. I haven't done it this year but last year I bought a cheap clipboard when I taught at a local conference and jazzed it up (matching tape with gems adhered to the clip) to match my stuff and carried my class outline. It came back with far more people signed up for my newsletter than my normal sign-up sheet handout alone did. It was a random bit of really useful marketing.



Here is one of my style manuals. I also cover my favorite craft books (the ones I keep on my desk, with scrap book paper and sparkles or whatever I like). It takes about half an hour each and I do it when I am blocked and can't seem to do anything else. I almost always come up with whatever idea is eluding me when I let my mind drift while I am working on these sorts of things. Everything on my desk is pretty and even garish at

times, which is fine because I am the only one who sees it and again...it makes me HAPPY.

I have white Christmas lights over my desk instead of a harsh desk lamp or overhead. I have candles that I sit on mug warmers so my office always smells good. I have talked to other authors and lots of us have our quirks about our space and our tools. I know one gal who put her desk in a walk in closet and the desk is glass and she has a high speed white leather office chair and her pencil cup is faceted glass and she has a spot light type light above it. When she sits down it glistens all over. It is like a futuristic space ship.

She doesn't put papers on the desk. She only writes on her pc (which you can't see) which she has connected to a 20in monitor. You see the monitor, the pristine glass and a backlit keyboard in soft white LEDs. It is so pretty and clean and she plays CDs of white noise. She has essentially created her own tiny sensory control chamber to shut out the world. I am not saying you need to do this, but writers go to all sorts of crazy lengths sometimes to get their creativity on, don't be embarrassed or shy if you need to blur the lines a bit to find your productive happy place.

4. Time spent is time saved

Don't ever undervalue the time you spend researching courses of action and the time you take to come up with a good plan and simply THINK about the best way to do something. There are four studies that I have read that indicate solid research and a good plan can save you up to seven times the time you would put into a task otherwise. I don't know if that is true in all cases but for four academic studies to settle on a number like that is pretty unusual, so I figured I would pass it on.

5. Do It Anyway

Let yourself be scared, nervous, edgy, anxious, etc. when something big comes up. It is perfectly normal. Let that fear run a little bit then settle down and do what you need to do anyway. It is hard and you will fail sometimes. However, the rest of the time you won't. The longer you do whatever "it" is that frightens you or makes you anxious, the easier it will become.

6. Don't feel guilty when you start to succeed but your peers haven't yet. You will always be a little less successful than some and more successful than others.

Don't be jealous or envy the people who are more successful than you. It will only stress you out. You don't know their story, you may actually be finding success far more quickly than they did. For those you are outdistancing, be kind, help if the situation is such that you can, but don't hold yourself back and don't spend a bunch of your time trying to carry them along with you because they aren't making the same progress you are. It will eventually drag you down and create resentment on both sides instead of just one.

I used to have a really bad habit of not putting myself out there because my circle of friends thought I was too much sometimes. My ideas were too big. I was always screwing up everyone else's plans because I would bring up some detail that made their plan a less than stellar one. I should have exited that circle the moment I started getting those vibes. Good professional friends and colleagues WANT you to outdistance them so they can follow the trail you blazed, then bump head now and then and bring you along, not make you feel bad for having good ideas they didn't think of.

There is a meme I keep tacked up to my bulletin board. It says "The lion does not concern himself with the opinions of the sheep". That sounds harsh, but as a writer you have to be a bit of a trail blazer and you will always have critics. I have to reincorporate that into my mental tool box at least once a day. It is not natural for me to blow people off, or to let it go and ignore it, if people are mean to me. I want to help, soothe, etc. If you are going to be a writer you have to learn early you will have critics, your inner critic, readers, family, and other writers that may not be onboard with your ideas. Learn to ignore those people as best you can now, not five years from now.

Watch and listen for the people who truly have your best interests at heart, are honest, and support you as a person (not necessarily your business decisions) no matter what you do. They don't come along often so don't worry if it takes you a while to find them. They *are* out there. You have to have confidence and just a bit of ego to stay sane in this job. However, on the flipside of that, don't be that jerk running someone else down

because you are having a bad day. Having a strong circle of supportive writer's as friends can be an immense comfort. Take your time and be on the lookout and you will find them eventually (probably not all at once).

Closing comments for the class

As you all move forward and do what you can with what you have and start to make that progress you have been seeking so fervently, remember to take it easy on yourself and those around you sometimes. I have given you some tools and approaches to make things a little easier, and given you some ideas on how to move slowly at first and solve problems long term. Be patient, be smart and use those brilliant minds of yours to get what you want.

Let's finish up with a little housecleaning and thanks. As you are reading through lessons later (if you weren't able to follow along as we went) and have questions, you are welcome to email them to me or go through my website to request an answer (www.meriangrey.com). I will take questions here for the next few days, or at meriangrey at Yahoo dot com (proper format, no spaces) in the future. It is an open ended offer. However, just a quick reminder, the material for this class is copyrighted so please don't share. Thanks!

I want to thank the Tucson Romance Writers board for inviting me to teach. Finally and most importantly, I want to thank all of you who have taken time out of your busy schedules to follow along and make the effort not only to take this class, but to take all the other classes, and read all the other materials along with mine so that you can to produce high quality amazing work. Most of you make every possible effort to do justice to your vision as authors. Well done and thank you.

Warm regards and best of luck in all your endeavors.

Warm Regards,

Merien Grey