

## **The Craze of Contests for the Unpublished Author** **by Tabitha Gibson, COFW Secretary, 2004**

Contests, contests, so many contests. But which one to enter? The popular "Laurie" or "Molly?" The long running "Ignite the Flame" or "Maggie?" The prestigious "Golden Heart?"

You've decided to enter a contest. FINALLY! Well, first and foremost... congratulations! Putting your "baby" out there for people to "pick on" is a hard thing to do. Imagine sending your child to kindergarten for the very first time. Terrifying? You bet. Entering a contest is a big step. No, wait. Scratch that. Entering a contest is a HUGE step, especially if you are unpublished.

I personally have entered a contest or two (or ten) with high hopes only to have them dashed. Of course, that was during my early days of writing. I even bought paper that matched the genre of my writing (Imagine shiny, silver paper for a paranormal entry). Thinking back on that, I can laugh now, but boy did I have a lot to learn. Hopefully, you can take something from this pro-and-con list of entering contests, things that I learned along the way that made entering contests not so scary anymore. And though it's always good to start with the positive, I think I'll end on a positive note instead.

### **Cons**

**Expense** - Let's face it, writing isn't cheap, though the potential rewards are great. Be prepared to spend money on things like the "good" paper, postage, copying costs, contest fees, and ink cartridges. Just remember to keep track of what you spend on writing. It is, after all, a business. Your business!

**Criticism** - Break out the rough loofah and start scrubbing. Toughen up that skin! You expect that judges know what they are talking about, but not all are trained or tactful. And from time to time, they aren't fond of your writing genre. You might not get the best feedback or appreciate the constructive criticism. But don't forget that's what it is: constructive. And remember, judging is subjective. If all else fails, break out the chocolate and deal with it another day.

**No Guarantees** - Placing is nice and winning is great, but that's not a guarantee that the final judge - an editor or agent - will fall all over themselves in an effort to make "the call" to you. Being a finalist in a contest is a nice feather in your cap, though. And for goodness sakes, keep writing!

### **Pros**

**Feedback** - Can I say it again? FEEDBACK! The biggest pro for entering contests is feedback. Things you might miss in your manuscript, someone else might catch. There's a good chance that your entry will be read by a published author who has "been there, done that" and can help you reach your potential. The feedback itself is worth the price of the entry. Don't forget to thank your judge with a note or card. A sneaky way to network and appreciated by the judge.

**Slush Pile Bypass** - Enter a contest that has an editor or agent that is a final judge you would like to target. This could be a short cut to an editor or agent to read. What if your entry finals? How great would it be to have taken that first scary step and have your manuscript end up on an editor's desk months or years quicker than that of an aspiring author who goes the query-letter route? Editors aren't kidding when they call it a slush "pile."

**Credentials** - Another way to catch an editor's or agent's eye is to place in a contest or two (or ten). If the contest category has more than just a handful of entries and you place, it speaks volumes for your talent. How wonderful would it be to have several contest wins as a tag line, in a query letter or as a special link on your Web site? Boastful? Maybe. Good PR? Sure! And why not? You earned it!

Hopefully this article has inspired you to polish up those first few important pages and chapters of your manuscript and you are ready to take that leap of faith. So what are you waiting for? Go for it!

(Tabitha Gibson is a proud member of Central Ohio Fiction Writers and Romance Writers of America and has been writing contemporary and paranormal for three years. Though currently unpublished, she has high hopes and great support from COFW and her husband, Arthur.)

In addition to the Write from the Heart newsletter of COFW, The Craze of Contests for the Unpublished Author was picked up by the following chapters and newsletters:

- Utah/Salt Lake chapter's e-mail loop
- Greater Vancouver Chapter's craft loop
- SpacecoastT Authors of Romance email loop
- Wisconsin RWA's online loop
- Writer's Serenade, June 2004 (Rose City Writers in Portland, OR)
- ShoreLines, June 2004 (Long Island Romance Writers)