

## **CONTEST CIRCUIT** By Patti O'Shea

Confession time. I was an unpublished contest slut.

I entered **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** in probably a dozen contests before I got the call. I know, of course, that there are writers who've entered many more than that, but I sold RF fast. From first contest (with the revised version of my story) to sale was slightly over four months.

I've also judged contests, although I didn't do it until after I was published. It was very interesting seeing it from this side of the fence. So what did I learn? Lots. And I'm going to share some of it here.

First and most important. SEND THANK YOU NOTES.

I don't care if you disagree with everything the judge said. SEND THANK YOU NOTES. If you can't honestly thank them for their comments--and sometimes it's hard--thank them for the time they took to read your entry.

I've heard writers complain that they don't have enough time to write notes. Really? You can't take 5 minutes to thank a judge who probably spent at least two hours reading and rereading your entry? I suggest you find the time.

There are published authors judging contests. What happens if you sell and need a quote? What happens if you contact an author you really admire and ask her to give you a quote for your first book, Jane Doe's Big Romantic Adventure? What happens if this author read your entry in a contest and didn't get a thank you? And if you think published authors don't care about receiving a thank you note, think again. This topic has come up several times, and every author who I've heard voice an opinion said it definitely made a difference to them.

Five minutes for a thank you note can generate a lot of good will for you later. Trust me on this one. And yes, I sent a thank you note to every judge who read **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** on the unpublished contest circuit. There were a couple of instances where I was two months late, but I still wrote the note, and apologized for my tardiness. The judges deserved the courtesy.

Another person to thank is the contest coordinator. When I sent the judges' thank you notes to be passed along, I always included a note for her and thanked her for all her time and hard work. From all accounts, that job is a big one, and I would guess a lot of writers overlook the coordinator even if they do thank the judges. A kind word or two goes a long way.

Tip Two. Get someone to proof your entry for you. Get several someones.

Yes, errors are going to slip through--it's inevitable. I'm still finding typos in the galleys for my October book, **THROUGH A CRIMSON VEIL**, and I went over them three times. A few mistakes aren't that big a deal, but I've seen entries that have been riddled with errors--missing words, extra words, misspelled words, the incorrect word, etc. I tend not to mark down for this unless it's really bad, but going by what I saw on **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** when it came back, I'm a lenient judge. Why give anyone a reason to take points away? And this is something that is easy to fix.

Tip Three. Don't assume the judge a) knows more than you do or b) is a complete idiot who wouldn't know talent if it bit her in the butt.

I made changes that I never liked to **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** based on comments from judges, but I assumed they knew more than I did. After all, they were a contest judge. I thought they must have all kinds of experience that I didn't have. I was wrong. (This was before the time when calls went out on loop after loop for any warm body to judge a contest.)

The flip side of this coin is don't assume that the judges know nothing. Even if you get some screwball comments in the mix, take a few days, then reread them again--and be honest. Does the judge have a point? Maybe their comment is wrong, but could there be a problem that the judge can't put her finger on? Editors don't always know what isn't working either, and it's up to the author to figure out how to fix the problem even if the editor is wrong about what's causing it.

The key here is balance, and being honest with yourself. If the judge's suggestion doesn't work for you, don't take it, but at the same time, don't assume there isn't room for improvement in your story. No one has written the perfect book yet, and no one ever will. Try to be objective when you read comments.

Tip Four. This is another two part tip. a) Don't assume you're not a good writer if you don't final in a contest and b) don't assume you're ready to be published if you are a finalist.

I entered the first draft of **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** in two contests. I didn't final in the first contest. In fact, I ended up in the middle of the pack. I was sure I was terrible. No, I was far worse than terrible--I was *mediocre*.

Then I finaled in the second contest! I even won the second contest. Was **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** publishable as it was at that point in time? Not a chance, but I had judges who liked my voice, my storytelling, and my characters. And the editor who judged the final round liked my entry the best of the three finalists, but she didn't ask to see more. RF wasn't ready. Yet.

I judged an entry in one contest a while ago that was fabulous! It had that special spark that can't be quantified, it had an interesting plot, great characters, and I gave it a nearly perfect score. I couldn't wait to see the finalists because I wanted to know who'd written

this story. I think I was every bit as disappointed when the entry didn't final as the writer herself must have been. I still wanted to know who'd written it, and I waited for a thank you note--which never arrived. By not sending a note, this woman lost a possible opportunity. I'm not Nora Roberts, but I'm still a connection.

In a different contest, I judged an entry that ended up being a finalist even though it had some serious problems. If I'd marked it down because of subjective things, I would have shrugged and said, okay, others didn't agree with me, but this entry had huge problems with plotting and logic. Maybe it was a first draft like RF was in its first two contests, who knows? But I couldn't believe it finaled. So, in other words, judging is totally subjective. Don't get down on yourself if you don't final or dismiss the critical judge's comments if you do final.

Tip Five. Know why you're entering a contest. Is it for feedback? Or are you entering to final?

My main goal with the revised version of **RAVYN'S FLIGHT** was to final. Yes, I made changes based on the feedback, but that wasn't my aim. My thinking was this: Futuristic romance has very few publishers willing to look at it. Did I really want to chance submitting it to an editor who I didn't click with, and close off that publisher as a potential market when there might be another editor in the same house who would love my story enough to buy it? My choice was to enter every contest that had an editor for one of the houses that published futuristic romance and see what happened.

Earlier, with the first draft, my goal was feedback, but I lost sight of that when I finished in the middle of the pack. Instead, of beating up on myself, I should have been thrilled with the comments I'd received. If I'd remembered why I'd entered, I would have saved myself some heartache.

Tip Six. Some books aren't right for the contest circuit.

**RAVYN'S FLIGHT** happened to have a beginning that fit the romance score sheet well. Not every story does. If yours doesn't, there isn't much point in entering a bunch of contests if you're not going to final or get helpful feedback. In this case, you're better off going straight to an agent search and saving the money.

Tip Seven. Don't become so fixated on winning contests that you forget the goal is to make that first sale.

I think this one is pretty self-explanatory. Refining your contest entry repeatedly, but never finishing the book (or never polishing the rest of the book) isn't going to bring you a contract. Contests are a tool--don't lose sight of that. Finish your story. Polish your entire story. Start the next story. Just keep writing.

These are my observations from both sides of the score sheet. Others might have a different experience, and that's part of the subjective nature of contests. Can finaling in

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contests bring you that first contract? You bet! But there are other roads to publication too. Use them all.