

Candle in the Dark – Learning from Lucy Monroe

By Kellie Finley

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Recently our local chapter hosted a workshop on career planning with Lucy Monroe as the guest speaker. Living over three hours away, I rarely attend these get togethers, but when another “remote” colleague said she’s drive, reminded me I needed a weekend without the husband, kids, or responsibilities, and dangled the potential to squeeze in some shopping, I just couldn’t resist. I didn’t realize I’d return home feeling I’d been blessed with a candle in the dark.

The workshop began as most do, twenty some of us in varying stages of wakefulness, drinking coffee, renewing acquaintances, sharing stories. The welcome speech was given, introductions were made, and it was time to begin. Lucy outlined her topics for us: protecting your voice and your process, writing for more than one publisher, and planning your career. The day was not going to be focused on perfecting our craft, but on each of us as writers – something I’d lost track of in all the “shoulds” of a writing career. Something I needed someone else to shine the proverbial light on for me to re-find. And as the day progressed, with each topic, that light became brighter.

Protecting Your Voice and Your Process

Lucy opened with a simple statement that we all know in our hearts is true but still need to hear – *there is no right or wrong way to right your story*. You can’t force yourself into someone else’s process. You have to find what works for you, whether you’re a plotter, pantsner, a quilter, or something completely different that hasn’t been tagged with a name yet. The “rules” of writing we hear so much about as writers have huge potential to stifle us and push us away from our own creative process. The truth is, most readers do not care about these rule – they care about the story. To truly be successful we each have to quit following all the rules and follow *our hearts* and write *our stories*. But that doesn’t mean sloppy, thoughtless writing – whatever you do, do it well.

Lucy indicated that she no longer attends a lot of workshops on craft, because they can become counter productive. Following someone else’s process instead of your own can freeze your own writing – it can even trigger writers block. You can easily find yourself at the point where you are actually afraid to write your story for fear of “doing it wrong.”

Critique partners can be just as stifling. Something as simple as just knowing that your critique partner is going to read the story can change what you write. Even when what your critique partner says sounds right and is well meant it can change your voice – without either one of you realizing it.

Does this mean that you can’t learn from other writers – of course not. You just have to take what you learn, sort through what’s important *to you* and incorporate it into *your process*. Whatever process is right *for you* is the process that *you* need to follow. Be what *you* need to be.

Writing For More Than One Publisher

As with all things, there are both challenges and rewards in writing for more than one publisher. Lucy shared her views on both with us as a precursor to creating our own career plans.

Challenges: Normal writing challenges are amplified – you can get multiple copy edits, requests for revisions, and galleys in the same week. You now have more than one editor to please. Not being linked to each other, the individual publishers aren’t really concerned that you have other commitments; to them, they are your only priority.

You can also have more than one book hitting the shelf at the same time. When the sales figures start showing, you get focused on the book with the lowest sales and miss the thrills of the books that are doing well. And if you do have a failure in one genre it can impact your books in the other lines. It's very easy to get overwhelmed.

Rewards: Normal writing rewards are sweeter – you can get good news from multiple publishers in the same week. Writing for multiple publishers gives you a freedom you might not otherwise have – no relationships are “make it or break it.” You can say “no” and if their response is to say they won't buy your other books, you're ok because you have someone else that *is* buying your books. You get the joy of writing many different stories which can keep you sharp and enthusiastic about your career.

You also have more than one sales team marketing your name. When Harlequin markets “Lucy Monroe” it positively impacts the Berkley books and the Kensington books – but only if you use the same name or pen name for all of your writing.

Overall: There are lifestyle changes. You have to be very organized, scheduling 18 to 24 months in advance. You have to learn to cope with working on more than one project at the same time, and in different phases of the process. You learn to work with different editor relationships between each publishing houses. If you really don't want this kind of juggling, consider if you really want to work with multiple different publishers.

Planning Your Career

Don't wait to be published to plan your career – start now. But before you can begin your planning, you need to answer two questions:

1. *How much time per day/week/month will you spend on your writing career?*
A career in the arts has always required a sacrifice. Your writing career requires time and you will sacrifice other things – careers, family, hobbies, etc. What you have to ask yourself is what you are going to give up? How many hours are you going to put into this without alienating your family? And then you have to determine how much of that time goes to really writing instead of email, research, talking on the phone.
2. *What is your writing pace?*
Can you really know your writing pace if you haven't finished a book? No, probably not yet. Writing pace isn't just talking about “raw” writing, but about what it takes to write a book, polish a book, write the synopsis, and get it ready to submit. If you spend preparation or “pre-thinking” time, you need to take that into account, too. Writing pace encompasses more than just how many pages can you create in a day.

The answers to these two questions will lead you in determining how many books you are going to finish in a year. You need to know this before you can realistically plan your career. Your career plan is about what you can and will do *right now*. Making a plan that isn't realistic will only set you up for failure. None of us can control when you will sell a book. None of us can control when you will hit a best sellers' list. Your career plan focuses on what you can control.

Begin with your vision – if you could be any where in the world as a writer, where would you be? What publishing house, where in the world, what would you do? If you want to have three spicy romances on the New York Times best sellers' list, with three different publishers, and live in Hawaii while you're doing it, then make that your vision. Dare to dream.

Next develop objectives that will move you towards that vision. What objectives for the next year will help you with your writing? Keep in mind that you can't control the achievement of objectives

– like getting a contract – but these objectives are part of what needs to happen to achieve your vision.

Then map out what goals – things that you do control – will support achieving your objectives. While you can't control getting a contract, you can control finishing the manuscript.

Finally, career plans are not finite. They change and grow as you do. Revisit them often, even every six months if you need to.

If you'd like more information on Lucy, or more insight and inspiration from her, visit her website at www.LucyMonroe.com. You'll find she has a wealth of information there, including a very delightful sections for writers.

Kellie Finley, a retired systems and management consultant, now writes romantic suspense and teaches online courses in website design and change management for writers. She is a member of RWA, CaRWA, and KOD.