

THE TEACHER'S EDITION

After-School Sessions with Our Favorite Teachers—by Ann Charles

Hello, everybody. I've set out to interview some of my favorite writing teachers and learn more about them as teachers, not just as authors.

Today, I'm staying after class to talk with: **Katie MacAlister**

For as long as she can remember, Katie MacAlister has loved reading. Growing up in a family where a weekly visit to the library was a given, Katie spent much of her time with her nose buried in a book. Despite her love for novels, she didn't think of writing them until she was contracted to write a non-fiction book about software. Since her editor refused to allow her to include either witty dialogue or love scenes in the software book, Katie swiftly resolved to switch to fiction, where she could indulge in world building, tormenting characters, and falling madly in love with all of her heroes.

Two years after she started writing novels, Katie sold her first romance, *Noble Intentions*. More than thirty books later, her novels have been translated into numerous languages, been recorded as audiobooks, received several awards, and placed on the New York Times, USA Today, and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. She also writes mysteries as Kate Marsh, as well as for the young adult audience as Katie Maxwell.

You can find her at www.katiemacalister.com or www.katiemaxwell.com.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **Years ago, you were one of the first authors to tell me to get my act together and write a career plan. What are the elements of a career plan?**

A writer's career plan really depends on what the writer wants out of his/her career; some writers expect to support themselves with the fruits of their labors, others are more focused on less financial goals.

The key to forming a good career plan is to:

- Know what it is you want out of your career. Do you want to simply have a book published? Write a series? Single titles? Write in multiple genres?
- Understand your expectations. Do you expect to support yourself with your writing, or is money just an added bonus? How important is it for you to walk into a bookstore and see your books on the shelves (i.e. traditional vs. alternate methods of publishing)?
- Know your abilities. How many books a year can you reasonably write? How much will you be asking your family to give up in order for you to write? How much are you willing to give up in order to work toward your goals? Can you multitask (i.e., be writing one book while editing a second, promoting a third, and writing an outline for a fourth, all at the same time)?

- Include your support team. Make sure your agent and family are on board and fully understand what it is you want in your career. Your support team can't help you achieve your goals if they don't know what your goals are, and what their respective roles are in the game plan.
- Define success. Success means different things to different people; is your idea of it to be published, be a happy mid-lister, or hit the bestseller lists?

Don't be afraid to revise. As you meet goals, re-evaluate your career plan and set new goals, revise ideas, and eliminate those parts of the plan that just aren't working for you.

2. **List three of your favorite writing self-help books—can be craft- or promotion-related. (For example, Chris Roerden's book, *Don't Sabotage Your Submission*; or J.A. Konrath's free book, *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*.)?**

I'm afraid I don't have any. I have never read a book on writing; I believe that writers are readers, and I learn what works for me, and what doesn't work, by reading fiction.

3. **In your workshop, *From Slush Pile to New York Times List*, you mention that it is important to define and maximize your voice. How do you define voice and how would one go about maximizing it?**

Ah, voice, that ever-elusive element of writing that is so necessary to a successful author, and yet so hard to pin down with a hard and clear definition. In its most simplistic form, I think of voice as playing god—I create a written world, make up the rules that go with it, put some people in it, give them a variety of personalities, and then, often with a cackle and accompanied by hand-rubbing and someone playing Bach's Toccata in D Minor in the background, I make them suffer. A lot. For I am a vengeful god, and have decreed that none of my characters shall have their happy ending until I feel they have earned it. But I digress...how you go about playing god is voice.

If you take a formal writing class at a university, they will often teach you that voice is defined by three elements: person, tone, and audience. From a publisher's point of view, voice is your brand, your signature, it's what you do that is uniquely you, what sets your books apart from everyone else's, but it goes beyond just being "different"—it's being different in a way that people care about, i.e., they relate or connect with your voice.

Five ways you can maximize your godliness.

1. Don't worry about putting your voice into every single word you write. If you relax and let the words flow, your voice will shine through naturally. Honest.
2. If you've ever read a Damon Runyon book, or watched *Guys and Dolls*, you have seen an example of how an author can write like he talks. If you are a naturally flip person, quick with puns and one-liners, then your voice will positively sparkle if you write in the same fashion. If you have a flair for the dramatic, indulge that in your writing. Have the soul of a poet? You guessed it—let all that lyricism show in your writing.

3. If you are passionate about what you are writing, that, too, will show in your voice. If you don't love the story you're writing, you're going to have a harder time appealing to readers because they will sense the lack of passion in your writing.
4. If you write with only yourself in mind, you're doing your readers a disservice. Thinking of the reader as you let the story unfold will make your voice stronger and more defined because you are actually working at the storytelling aspect of writing, that part of the whole reading experience that keeps readers enthralled. You hook them with your voice; you keep them turning the pages with an outstanding story. The two things have a symbiotic relationship, and both are vital to an author's success.

Don't hold back when you're writing—let your emotions soak the pages, and your readers will love you for it.

4. **I've heard you talk about the importance of a support network for authors. Please explain what you consider to be a support network and why you believe it is important?**

Let's take a look first at who makes up a typical support team:

- Your spouse/significant other/domestic whosit.
- Your agent (assuming you have one).
- A critique partner/group/writing buddy.
- Your editor. Editors get their own entry here separate from the publishing house because the editor is your contact person, the one who handles presenting you to the marketing and sales teams, and who assumedly will be going to bat for you in order to get you bigger, better, more.
- Publisher/marketing/sales teams. "Publisher" is used here to mean the individual, not the publishing house itself. The publisher is the person who oversees the entire house (if it's under an umbrella corporation), and to whom the editors and editorial directors report. You may also include an editorial director on your support team, since generally editors answer to those individuals.
- Non-writing family and friends. Why non-writing? Sometimes the business is so overwhelming, you just need to take a step back from it to put things into perspective.

Having a support team will ensure that you don't sit in a darkened room, staring at a computer screen, muttering to yourself as you type frantically at all hours of the night. Or if you do, at least they will ensure that you have ample food and beverages, and gently guide you outside just long enough to give a faint tint of color to your flesh before you scurry back to your computer, tossing over your shoulder as you go, "I have a deadline next week and still have four chapters to go!"

A support team can help you deal with stress. Those of you who are still in the process of marching down your path to publication are probably snorting to yourself and muttering things like, "She has no idea what stress is until she gets five rejections in one day." Ah, but the stresses don't end when you are published—quite the reverse, unfortunately. They get much, much worse, and your support team is

there to help you cope with all the demands and strains placed on you because you're suddenly writing for a public readership.

5. **You have said that it is important to think about career goals rather than single-book goals. How do career goals differ from single-book goals?**

I have a book coming out February 2nd. I have goals for this book, naturally enough. Because it's breaking new ground (steampunk romance) not only in the romance world, but for my publisher, my goals for it are a bit different than for my other books. For this book, my goals are:

- Usual bestseller list hits
- 75% sell-thru after six months
- Healthy re-orders
- Excitement amongst my readers for something new and different.

Every single one of those goals focuses on the particular book, and while the book's performance will affect my long run goals, they don't take into consideration the big picture.

My career goals might look like:

- Top 5 on the NYT list in the next two years
- List longevity increased by two weeks each year
- Continued increase in print runs, ship numbers, and sell-thru
- Increase in cross-over readers
- \$200K advances/book
- Increase in subsidiary rights sales

Pretty lofty goals, eh? They are, but lofty is OK so long as your goals aren't so far out of your reach that you can't reasonably expect to achieve them.

If you break down the career goals, you'll see that they consist of:

- Improving sales velocity
- Improving staying power
- Better numbers (larger print runs indicate more advance orders, and thus more books in stores)
- Growing the audience
- Money! Lots of it!
- Diversification of market by publication of books in other countries, as well as in audio and other formats.

You'll notice that those goals have a broader reach than just how well an individual book does.

While new authors won't have quite the same sort of goals, they may have ones with a similar basis, and can also include other aspects of the career plan, such as number and frequency of books published, genres, building name recognition, etc.

6. **You have managed to build a huge fan following since your first historical novel in 2002. What's your secret? Writing thirty-plus novels? An active online presence?**

I believe that a good portion of my success comes from knowing what I wanted, what wasn't going to work for me (i.e. turning down offers that didn't fit into my career plan), and realizing what was important to me.

From the beginning, involving readers has been of primary importance. I noticed in fan letters a theme regarding the pleasure readers found in the worlds I'd created, and I set about making a way for those people to participate in the worlds, so they would feel like they were a part of it all.

Rather than focus on getting my name out to booksellers, I grew my audience by reaching out to readers, knowing that if they felt like they had an investment in the books (involvement), they would likely recommend them to their friends. That's one reason why I have so many ways for readers to interact with me and the worlds I've created, via various memberships, an online community, and an active presence in the social networking sites.

7. **You have a multi-level, expansive forum filled with posts from your fans and a very active blog, both of which you visit often. Plus you write multiple books a year. How do you do it? What time management tips do you have to offer?**

Play *World of Warcraft*. Seriously. If you get addicted to WOW like I did, you'll do anything to get your daily writing done, just so you can go play.

Or you can simply cut out of your life those things that aren't in your career plan. If I know I'm going to be crunched for time on a fast-approaching deadline (or one that's zipped past me), then I stop lolling around reading, watching movies, and eating bon-bons while having Raoul the masseuse attend to my many and varied needs. Instead I focus on the bare-bones important stuff: meeting the deadline, paying appropriate amounts of attention to my husband, and staying sane so I can write the following day.

8. **On this same note, in addition to the forum and blog, you also have a newsletter. What would you say has been your most effective promotional tool, besides writing fun, entertaining stories?**

I offer a number of memberships in which people can partake, and those are tremendously popular. People want to be involved in the worlds contained in my books, and I do my best to accommodate them with any number of freebies, and online rewards for participation in my online community.

9. **What compels you to take the time and energy to teach other authors about writing and getting published?**

I wish I could say I was just altruistic like that, but alas, my motivation has a baser source: I believe in paying it forward. I received no end of support and help from friends when I was just getting started, and I try to do the same for new authors whenever I can.

10. **What are your plans for the future? Any more workshops? More promotional heavy-hitters? More mysteries?**

I'm a solitary creature by nature, so I don't have any more workshops planned. My future basically consists of a lot of writing, both in the paranormal and steampunk genres, including more mysteries. Later this year is my first conference, dubbed KatieCon by my readers, which should be a lot of fun, if somewhat scary to a shy little hermit like me. Beyond that, it's pretty much business as usual: write, let my dogs in and out approximately five million times a day, and tease my husband by telling him he's going to be the hero in my next book

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Thank you, Katie, for sharing your time with all of us Guppies; and thanks to all of you Guppies for reading along! If any of you have a particular "teacher" you would like me to interview, please email me with his or her name and any other helpful information.

Until the next after-school session...

Ann Charles

When was the last time you had fun with a [skeleton](#)?

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