

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: Linn Random.

Linn Random is an author of romance, mystery, and suspense. She dreamed of being a writer since she was seven years old. She grew up in Japan, where her father was stationed in the army, and she later attended East Carolina University. After college, she cut her teeth at Walt Disney World Marketing where she wrote press releases, developed walking tours, and made appearances on numerous national and international TV shows.

She was hired away from Disney by one of the largest advertising and marketing firms in the country where her clients included the Country of Jamaica, Grand Metropolitan of Europe, and world class resorts around the world (her agency also handled the countries of Mexico, Peru, and Aruba, just to name a few).

Her projects included all aspects of advertising, including developing media campaigns, trade shows, brochures and all aspects of public relations for her clients. Toward the end of her marketing career, she was the National Director of an international advertising company and had developed the number one real estate presale in Canada and the United States.

She has won two International Addy Awards for Client Grand Metropolitan of Europe, and has spoken on behalf of the US Department of Commerce on International Advertising and Marketing. She has also been a consultant to the World Bank and the Caribbean Hotel and Motel Association.

Eight years ago, she decided to retire to do the one thing she'd wanted to do all her life: write! Since exploding into the world of suspense, Linn has achieved top reviews for her novels (her books have even been paired with Nora Roberts on Amazon). She is a member of Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, Sisters in Crime, and Romance Writers of America.

She has been featured in numerous interviews in print and radio. In addition, she is a prominent national speaker—and that is how I ran into Linn. Last fall, she gave an information-packed online course for writers about self-promotion. Her advice has been golden and I'm excited to introduce Linn to all of you Guppies.

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Okay, let's get down to business.

1. **What is your take on the health of mysteries in today's publishing world?**

On any given week, at least half of the books on the New York Best Sellers are mysteries. Most television shows are mysteries, from the successful *Law and Order* series to *CSI*, and both of their spin-offs are mysteries. Plus there are several cable networks devoted to mystery fans. While many genres rise and fall only to experience a revival on occasion, the mystery novel in its various forms from thriller to romantic suspense to cozies, such as *Murder She Wrote*, are staples of the American public. I would say mysteries are flourishing across the board in today's publishing world.

2. **What is your opinion on the various publishing routes—big publishing house, small publishing house, e-publishing, and self-publishing?**

There has never been a more exciting time to be an author with various routes for a authors to see their books published. In order to decide the right path, each author/writer must decide individually what path is right for them. To understand the right one, authors need to understand the industry today. New doors have opened through the internet and through iPods for authors. So, let's explore the various routes to individual success.

If authors' standards are to see their books published by a mainstream traditional publishing house, they first must understand that getting published has nothing to do with talent or whether their books are print-worthy or not. It has everything to do with money because it costs publishers enormous amounts to market new and unknown authors. These publishing houses are asking their current stable of authors for more books because they have a following and because they are also launched. Most also require an literary agent.

Today, there are six large publishers (in New York), 300 to 400 medium-sized publishers, 86,000 small presses or self-publishers. Please refer to Dan Poytner's book, *Industry Statistics*; see his website www.parapublishing.com. You will find not only an excellent source of good information, but some wonderful marketing books from which to choose.

Also, know that if your book gets accepted, it will generally have a six to eight week shelf life at the bookstore. Your local book seller is likely to keep local authors a bit longer, but don't count on it. Thus, you have a six week selling cycle in the real world. Also, understand as a first time author, you can expect an advance of between \$3000 to \$7000 and a royalty of 3% to 7%.

Another avenue is to publish through an e-book publisher. E-books are electronic books produced in various formats and then made available through publishers or at one of the other 200 electronic book stores online (FictionWise; Amazon, through their electronic format Kindle; Sony; Franklin, and through their e-publisher.) E-publishers offer no advance, but your royalty can be anywhere from 35% to 50% of the

book. And there are plenty of e-book authors who are making six figures a year. Also, many e-book publishers take their top e-books and convert them into a print format either through printing them at a book publishing house or through a Print-On-Demand (POD) Publisher.

Your online book and a POD book will exist in cyber space forever and can be ordered through book sellers for years to come.

And if you are wondering about the selection process—where the big houses are acquiring “new” authors—many are coming from the e-book business. These e-book authors have a following, have proven they can write great books, and have the demonstrated ability to write more.

Print-on-demand (or short print runs) is a viable way to get your book to the public, but keep in mind there are some rules. If an author chooses to go with a POD, he or she must have their book professionally edited, have it in proper format, and hire a really good artist to develop the cover. (I recommend Jinger who designed my covers. Those interested can write her at jinger@jingraphix.net.)

I feel POD books are the way of the future, as they are easily produced through printing houses such as Booksurge and Lightning Source. With a POD book, the author or publisher will have to absorb the costs of developing the books, but then you will earn 100% of the royalties.

Keep in mind, if you do POD and have your books with book sellers, the book seller expects 40% of the asking price. This is a standard cost and how they make a profit. With a POD, authors can go to any bookstore and offer their books. Don't overlook the over 200 bookstores online, including Amazon.

Other avenues are Mobipocket and Kindle, which allow authors to put their books for sale online through the Mobipocket Retail Stores worldwide and through their own site. Kindle books are available only through Amazon.com.

Audio books is one of the fastest growing segments of the book industry today. Many people don't have time to sit and read. I've often told authors that their competition is not the writer sitting next to them, but the 500-plus cable networks and the demands on our time from soccer games to fixing dinner. People are listening to Audio Books on their iPods, in their cars, and through their CDs while they are at the gym. To sell your books to this exploding market, contact the audio publisher the same way you market your book.

Amazon has its own audio publisher through CustomFlix. You can take an audio master to CustomFlix; they will attach your cover, duplicate it on a POD style program, wrap it in shrink wrap, and attach a bar code to it. They take 50% out of your profit, but with Audio Sales being the fastest growing segment of the book industry, this is a fantastic program to join.

3. **What is your next class on the slate? What will you be covering in this class?**

After devoting nearly three years to teaching classes and working as a volunteer for several organizations, I haven't had time to write, so I

plan to work on my writing (plus other writing endeavors) for the next several years.

4. **What do you think is the most important promotional skill writers should try to master in order to be successful at selling their books?**

The reality is that as an author, you cannot depend on your publisher to help you sell books. An author must learn marketing and promotion in order to drive book sales. So, it's important for an author to learn how to create and write a press release, develop an online presence and public speaking skills, and then make sure everything is tied neatly together through the author's brand. Authors also need to develop some salesmanship to introduce themselves to book sellers and to radio and TV audiences.

The creative process is only half of an author's world; marketing and promotion is the other half. I tell authors constantly, the books into which they have poured their hearts and souls are not their babies; writing is a business, and an author needs to learn promotional skills to become financially successful.

At most major houses there are less than ten publicists for every 125 authors. The majority of the publicists are fresh out of college, as the seasoned publicists have moved on to more lucrative positions elsewhere. The majority of these publicists are going to work for the publishers' top selling authors.

As a midlist author, it pays to learn how to do your own publicity; you don't need to spend thousands or even hundreds of dollars on advertising or publicity.

5. **In your own experience, what kind of promotion has been the most productive in spreading the word about your books and acquiring more Linn Random fans?**

I wish I could give you a short answer, but the truth is all the branding, all the promotional work, and all the efforts work together. After any event, from a book signing to a conference lecture, I see my book sales spike. These sales could be from the 50 to 100 books I sold during the day, or the sales from the radio talk show I did prior to the conference. Or, maybe they are from the press release issued a week before the event, or the follow up press article after each event.

Another example is if I am on an online radio show or have an online chat, my promotion goes out to thousands. I've had as few as six people at an online chat, but again the promotion before the event, reached out to over 100,000 viewers. Everything works together, so it's important to strategize and make each appearance, chat, conference lecture, or book signing into an event.

6. **Do you measure the results of all of your promotional work, and if so, how?**

I judge success of my promotional work by increased hits to my website (notice the counter at the bottom left of my novels page) and by how

many books I've sold. Some events, such as library book lectures or speaking to small groups, might not reap a large volume of sales, so I gage and enjoy my success in the knowledge that I have enriched others. You cannot put a value on the personal satisfaction of simply helping others, whether it's a high school student wanting to become a writer or a senior citizen who I have inspired to write her first book.

7. **What is the most common mistake you see writers doing when trying to promote their books/themselves?**

They don't take time to learn the business. For example, if an author is being featured in an online chat, I recommend they attend other chats, understand the protocol, and be prepared. In a book signing, first follow appropriate business protocol in scheduling a book signing. An author cannot simply show up and expect to have hundreds of people waiting. An author has to make it successful.

I've synopsised the following key points as example of how to do a successful book signing from my twenty-six chapter book, *Driving Book Sales through Public Relations & Promotions*.

First, take the time to call ahead to schedule an appointment with your local bookstore manager to talk about your books. While most bookstore managers will try to be accommodating to authors, you may catch them when they are busy assisting customers. When you get your interview, stick to the subject at hand. Tell them your high concept, show them reviews, and mention friends, family, and groups who would attend your book signing. Offer to send out flyers, brochures, or post cards promoting your book signing. Tell them what other publicity you have planned. Do not expect a bookseller to do the promotion for you. They will help if they can, but it's ultimately up to you to plan and implement a successful book signing.

Ask if you can do a special mailing to their customer base. If the book seller agrees, find out how far ahead you need to bring in your flyers or postcards of the event, how many pieces you need to bring along with the proper postage already affixed. If they are reluctant to simply give the list to you, supply them with stamped envelopes or postcards.

Send out press releases two weeks before the book signing. Make sure your signing is posted on all community calendars in your area. Schedule radio and television interviews ahead of your book signing and make sure to mention the location of your book signing as well as the bookstore's name.

Have display signs made for your book signing and deliver them to the bookstore a week in advance. Window signs are important, but also have some outdoor signage for curb appeal the day of the book signing. Leave behind autographed copies of your books. The bookseller will soon be asking for more.

Announce your book signing at any speaking engagements you have and post additional display signs at retail store windows promoting their event. The local library might be very receptive to promoting an author event.

The day of the event, come early and be prepared to help set up. Bring whatever you may need to the book signing—from books to candy for your table, free bookmarkers, and a nice gatefold display sign featuring your books. I bought my nice display sign from Office Depot for \$14.

This is a strategy from “soup to nuts,” but I wanted to give you a quick overview of how to make each marketing endeavor a success. By understanding the bigger picture in any marketing initiative, an author can incorporate promotion planning. Plan the work, and then work the plan.

(You can see how each strategy becomes entwined in other types of publicity to make this or any event planned a success.)

8. **List three of your favorite book sales/promotion self-help books. (For example, *Intent to Sell* by Jeffrey Marks.)**

- *Driving Book Sales through Public Relations and Promotions* by Linn Random
- *Selling Beyond the Book Store* by Brian Jud
- Any book written by M. J. Rose.

9. **How did you go about finding a production/film company to turn your books into film? Did you send them a proposal or pitch to them in person; or did they contact you/your agent? How can I get my book produced as a film?**

Before, authors considers selling their movie rights, they need to check their contracts and understand who owns the movie rights. In most cases, the publisher owns the movie rights and has definitive control over the books. However, if the authors own their movie rights, a viable producer is closer than you think.

States, counties, and even cities and municipalities have a Film Commissions. I would urge an author to contact their local film commission and ask for a list of experienced film producers. (Notice I said “experienced!”) When you have located a producer, simply call, email or have a meeting with the producer and pitch your film. This will be a great place to use your high concept.

If your producer likes the book, the next step is to develop funding for a film version. Don’t sign away your rights until you know the funding is in place. If the funding is not in place, the movie will never be made and your film can be tied up “until the cows come home.” Again, make sure you find an experienced producer who knows how to get your book from script to US and overseas release.

The traditional route is to contact a studio or interest a studio producer. To do this, contact the studio, locate a producer, and pitch your book. Secure a Hollywood Film Agent if you can, he or she will know producers and how to present your book. Many writers’ conferences have Hollywood film agents in attendance, so check out who is going to attend a conference and be prepared to offer your book.

My own journey began years ago, as I have developed multimillion dollar funding incentives for several businesses. When in discussion with

one business contact, I told her about my books and she immediately put me in touch with several producers. One producer and I "clicked" on many levels and we agreed to form our own independent film company. We have several investors at the table now, so it's a matter of time and securing funding, which looks like will happen in 2009.

Post script: If your movie is released in theatres, unless it's a Hollywood block buster with the marketing budget behind it, it will likely be seen by a relatively few thousand or so people, especially if it's done by an independent studio. If your movie is released on television, you can count on up to three million viewers each time it runs. More viewers, more sales.

10. **I see you have a book out now called, *Linn Random's Guide to Driving Book Sales through Public Relations and Promotions*. Is this a compilation of all of your classes and/or new information that you've discovered as you continually promote your current books?**

Yes, *Driving Book Sales through Public Relations and Promotions* is a compilation of all the marketing and promotional classes I've done and my own experience. This book is easy to read, easy to understand, and includes information on branding to Blogging, on how to have successful book signings and online chats. It includes instructions on how to create a newsletter, develop a top selling high concept, and have elements of a successful website. The last chapter tells authors how to develop a successful marketing plan that works for them.

It's not necessary to do everything showcased in my book or use strategies recommended to you by others. For instance, if public speaking is just not your cup of tea, don't plan any public speaking events; focus instead on what you can do and enjoy doing, such as online chats or scheduling book signing in your hometown or state. Do no publicity and your book will likely not get the attention it so richly deserves.

My next area of focus is finishing out several books I have started, but I've not retired my promotional hat. In addition to the movies, I'm also working on a radio play for my book, *Haunted Hearts*; selling foreign rights; taking my books to Audio, which will happen in a few months; and selling my rights to book clubs, and first and second serial rights to magazines.

I will end with saying, thank you so much for the privilege of speaking to so many dedicated authors. It's my hope and wish everyone finds success.

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Linn enjoys hearing from readers, writers, and everyone in between. Feel free to contact her at linnrandom@earthlink.com. You can also read more about Linn on her website: www.linnrandom.com.

Thank you, Linn, 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
Mystery, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sun!

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