

## So You're Going to Conference...

### By Kristen Painter

*I'll meet an editor who will fall in love with my work and I'll be published in no time!  
Agents will be fighting for the right to represent me! I'll hobnob with the multi-published  
and end up on their dedication pages! Nora Roberts will want me as her critique partner!*

Um...good luck with that. While it's fun to dream of the possibilities attending your first RWA National Conference holds, don't quit your day job just yet. Conference is an exciting, event-filled, opportunity-abounding happening but it's also not going to turn you into an overnight bookselling machine. At least, it didn't me.

However, it was one of the best times I've ever had. The conference was informative, fun, exhausting, inspiring, and I was ready for the next one before I left for the return flight home.

**Agents** – They're all over the place. You may not know who that woman washing her hands at the sink next to you is, but that's what those name badges are for.

**Editors** – Somewhat intimidating, since we all want them to not just like us but love us *and* our work. In truth, the editors I met were very nice people. They were easy to talk to despite my shaking hands and mile-a-minute speech. When I calmed down, I realized that those editors are partially there because of us, the attendees. Sure, they'll meet with their stable of writers but I can't help but believe they have high hopes the conference will result in some fabulous discovery of a previously unknown talent. Like me.

And the rumor that they all wear black is not entirely true. Just the ones from New York.

**Published Authors** – Most of them are just as down to earth as you and I. Okay, maybe you. I tend to be a little jewelry dependant so I don't know if that qualifies me as down to earth. I've even become friends with a few I met last year and we still keep in touch.

Some of them are well, let's just say they're probably the presidents of their own fan clubs. I met one in particular who I won't name but who seemed rather miffed that I didn't know who she was. So you have 40+ books out, sorry, it just so happens you write a genre I don't read. Forgive me and pass the butter, will you?

### **Tips – What should you know before you go?**

#### **What To Wear:**

Think of your wardrobe as your calling card. My mother always told me to dress for the position you wanted, not the one you had. Wise words but what does that mean for an unpubbed writer? I wanted to look professional, like I not only meant business but that I also understood it. And I didn't want to sacrifice my personal style. I went for a look I like to call "Booksigning Chic". Here are a few important pieces that will serve you well.

\*The Black Suit – Basic black pants and jacket. Basic black isn't boring. Ask anyone who saw me at the CRW Conference in November. If you don't already own one, think about

getting one. Buy the best you can afford and keep it simple. Straight legged pants, dyed to match buttons, moderate lapel. This will not go out of style.

Here are three conference worthy outfits you can get from that suit:

Outfit One –Black pants with a sweater set. The sweater set can be as safe or trendy as you prefer. Choose something that expresses who you are in a color that makes you happy. And really, what doesn't go with black? A sweater set will also help you deal with the sometimes unpredictable temperature changes from room to room.

Outfit Two – The Jacket with jeans. What you wear beneath the jacket can be as simple as a tank top or as dressy as a silk blouse. Either way, you'll still look pulled together. And another word of advice: no one, and I mean no one, looks good in high-waisted tapered leg jeans. If that's all you've got, add new jeans to your shopping list.

Outfit Three – The Suit. I'd save this one for the day you have your editor/agent appointment. The trick to making the suit work for you is...

\*Accessories – These will turn your black suit into whatever look you desire. And they don't have to be expensive. Don't hesitate to borrow from a willing friend. Examples:

Classic – a strand of pearls, gold hoops, chunky gold bracelet, crisp white shirt, Chanel-inspired pocket square and ballerina flats. Very uptown.

Funky – chandelier earrings, beaded collage-style tee, bold stone ring, brightly colored pointed-toe mules and matching bag. Think Sex and The City goes to the office.

#### **\*Other Items:**

Comfy Shoes - You're going to do a lot of walking between workshops and the last thing you need is a blister. Save your heels for schmoozing at the bar and the Rita Gala.

Makeup - If you don't normally wear makeup, it's time to stop kidding yourself and buy some mascara. Seriously. Not since the lead-based facepaints of the Elizabethan era has makeup killed anyone. A little foundation, mascara, a swipe of blush and some lip-gloss are very manageable and will make you looked rested. Even when you're not. And chances are you won't be. You didn't come to conference to sleep anyway, did you?

Bathing Suit - The hotel offers a pool, so bring a suit. Will you use it? Probably not but if the opportunity arises and you don't have a suit, you're gonna be bummed. Rumor has it some great deals have been made in the hot tub. Okay, I made that up but it could happen.

Casual Clothes - Bring at least one casual outfit for exploring. This could be your jeans, a fun summer top, and a pair of flip-flops. I'm also a fan of the little black dress with strappy heels for hanging out after hours but wear what makes you comfy and confident. Don't forget something fabulous to wear for the Romance Divas get-together!

#### **What To Bring:**

Tote Bag - RWA provides a book bag but I also carried another one. I didn't carry a purse, just threw my wallet and odds-n-ends into the second bag. This really came in handy because I had space for personal items, a bottle of water, my cell phone, digital camera, books I purchased and received, a notebook for notes, the RWA Workshop handout book (big!), business cards, and the pens imprinted with my name and website that I handed out to everyone near me.

Laptop or Alphasmart – You will get inspired, think of changes you'd like to make to a current manuscript or come up with the best plot you've ever thought of. I kept a journal of each days experience. At any rate, you may want to check your email.

Business Cards – If you don't have some, get some. Vista Print offers wonderful free business cards. (All you pay is shipping.) Don't get more than 250. You don't know what info might change.

Why are business cards important to the unpubbed writer, you ask? Because they are much better than trying to scribble your info onto a scrap of paper every time you meet someone you want to exchange info with. I even put blurbs for three of my books on the back. I'm all about promotion!

Camera – There will be moments worth remembering, trust me. You'll definitely wish you had a camera if you don't bring one. Conference photos also make a great addition to your personal web page. Think you and your favorite author.

#### **What Not to Do:**

Do not, under any circumstances, approach an editor while she's in a bathroom stall. Yes, this happened. Don't become the 2005 what not to do example. Now, if an editor waves frantically under the door of the stall you're in, begging for a copy of your latest work, that's a different story. They're allowed.

Do not bring printed copies of your manuscript. No agent or editor is going to ask for one. I promise. You think they bring an extra suitcase to lug home 100 lbs of paper they could have had sent to them? They don't. Wait until you have a request, then send.

Do not send requested material without writing "RWA Conference Requested" or something similar on the envelope. Getting material requested is one of the benefits of going to conference; don't let it go to waste.

Do not try to attend every workshop. You can't do it. Unless you've perfected that whole cloning thing. Pick the ones you think will be most useful. If you're five minutes into one and you realize it's not what you thought it was going to be, get up and go to a different one. Seriously. You're paying to be there, aren't you? Make the most of it.

#### **What To Do:**

Pitching – If you made an editor/agent appointment, by all means practice your pitch! Don't spend 7 ½ of your 8 minutes blathering. Been there, done that, didn't get the contract.

Find a friend to play editor/agent and go over it. Make notes on 3 x 5 cards of your blurbs and get it down so that it comes naturally. Be prepared to answer questions about conflict and motivation. Practice, then practice some more. And don't forget to breathe. They know you're probably going to be a bit nervous, so don't tell them you are. That's just wasting time.

Also, be prepared to pitch more than one story if the editor/agent isn't interested in the first.

Volunteer – I get wicked stage fright. My voice cracks, my palms sweat, my vision blurs and the urge to go to the bathroom is overwhelming. I still volunteered to moderate a workshop. I'm just nuts that way. However, there are lots of areas that don't require speaking, like taking meal tickets, helping set up for the Literacy signing, stuff like that. Check out the options and get involved. You get what you put in. Pitch in and you'll benefit, I promise.

CD's – Buy the workshops on CD if you can afford it. This way you won't miss anything and you can listen to them in the car or at your leisure. For as many workshops as you'll get, the CD's are really a bargain.

Shipping Books – You will be given books. Lots of books. If you didn't bring an extra suitcase, ship them home. Ask around at the hotel and they'll direct you to their shipping department. Most likely, they'll box them up, take your credit card number and you're done. Media mail is pretty reasonable, too.

Goody Room – Do visit the Goody Room early and often. New items show up on a daily basis. But don't be a hog. If you go in the first day and there are free books, TAKE ONE. If you go in on the last day, all bets are off. No one wants to take their promotional items home. Take extras and distribute them to your chapter-mates who didn't get to attend.

Socialize – You're there to meet people and learn. Hard to do if you don't speak up. Everyone else is there for the same reason, so introduce yourself. Then ask questions. That's the best way to put the other person at ease. Everyone loves to talk about themselves and their work. "What do you write?" "How long have you been writing?" "Where are you from?" "Is this your first conference?" "What was your favorite workshop today?" "Do you have any chocolate?"

Have fun. Relax. Enjoy!