

A DIVA'S CHRONICLES...



FIRST TIMER AT NATIONALS: OBSERVATIONS

by M.G. Braden

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Back in February of this year I decided it was time for me to go big or go home. Which meant signing up for RWA Nationals. I had done some smaller conferences and now I was ready for the big time.

I decided that this is the year I'm ready to look for an agent and this is the year I want to point my pen (so to speak) towards New York. This is the year I'm going to get involved and learn more about the association I belong to and really look at the writing business from all angles.

Therefore, two weeks ago I left my family, got on a plane and headed to San Francisco. I was almost trembling with excitement. I may have even had a few stars in my eyes. I was going to meet up with other writers, many of whom I deal with regularly on the internet, but never meet in person. Not only was I going to meet writers, but writers of romance. People who would not, could not, look down their nose at my HEA's and HFN's. People who knew that love made our books all that much better.

Well, there were plenty of writers and they were all wonderful. From the minute I arrived, to almost the minute I left I was surrounded by those who understood where I was coming from. At almost any time of day you were able to congregate in the lobby of the hotel and find someone to chat to about writing. And to network with.

Being with all those writers is awesome, but I have some more suggestions to first-timers at conference: Visit, Volunteer, Attend, & Do.

The Goody Room – Visit this room filled with books and goodies of all shapes and sizes. I recommend going early (around lunch time on the Wednesday). True, not all the authors have had a chance to drop stuff off, but it was still easy to maneuver through the room, get some nice things and see what everyone else uses for marketing and promotion. I've heard the go early and go often, but I only went once after that and it was packed with people. I'm not a big fan of packed and I couldn't see much that was new. I know I may have missed something, but I was also happy with what I had previously received.

The Literacy Signing – I volunteered to cashier for this event. This meant that I did not really have a chance to go around and buy books and get them signed, although we did have about five minutes before the start to try to do so (I managed to get three books before I had to be back). However, for me it was entirely worth it. My three hours of volunteer time zipped by and before I knew it there were no more people to cash out. Books and money flew at me and I the line "round up for literacy" came automatically from my lips. I found it very rewarding, especially when they announced that we'd raised over \$57k in that time (and the book signing was really only officially open for two hours). I can't remember how many authors were signing in that ball room, but I believe it was over several hundred. Several hundred authors! All signing in one place. Unbelievable. For someone who loves books and loves to read, what a better way to be introduced to being a volunteer. Some day I hope to have my own books to sign there, but until then I am more than happy to volunteer at the event.

Agent/Editor Appointments – These are tough. Because, unless you are an award winner (past or present) or a PAN member, there are not a lot of slots left by the time they open them up to PRO and general membership. In fact, by the time I got on there were no slots open with either editor or agent. But if you can get an appointment, do. In the end I got lucky because some more agents/editors signed up and I was able to snag an agent appointment. Although it was not with "dream" agent, it was still an opportunity and I didn't want to waste it.

These are my suggestions for dealing with these appointments, especially if you haven't got one or are hoping to snag another one. Show up early on the first day of appointments and put your name on the waitlist. Then sit patiently and work on your pitch or read a book if you have it down pat. I'm not going to give any info on pitching because you can find other, much better, pitching advice elsewhere. I'm just telling you how to get an appointment if you didn't get one.

You see, not only did I have my one pitch appointment (that didn't go spectacularly I might add), I was in the right place at the right time and got an open slot that no one was there to fill. That was my second pitch (much better, thank you). Then because I hung around, I was able to get a third, impromptu one.

I also volunteered for the afternoon session of agent/editor appointments (which is another way to get close to the agent/editors of course – volunteer!) and was in charge of the open appointments. Everyone wanted to know how to get one – put your name on the waitlist, sit and

wait. Not everything that comes open will be what you want, but you never know. I know someone who got in to their dream editor/publisher because she put her name on the waitlist. It happens.

Chapter parties – Sign up to attend as many of the chapter parties as you can. Not only does this usually get you some kind of food & beverages at minimal cost (and really it is a lot less than what you are paying in the conference hotel on your own), you get more chances to talk to agents and editors in casual settings. I was very nervous about this, but when I just relaxed and didn't worry about pitching it was much better. I actually received an agent's card this way, because I didn't try to sell her anything, we just laughed and talked. It's also a way to get to know them on a more personal basis. You can see if your personalities work well together. Suddenly "dream" agent may not be the person you thought she/he was and maybe someone you never thought about before turns into the new "dream" agent.

Publisher's Signings – Go to these. You meet cool authors, you get books signed for you. Free books. Lots of them. Your favourite authors. Often with their editors behind them, so if they don't have a huge line-up and ask you what you write you might actually have two interested parties. When some day it's your turn these authors will teach you how to be gracious and, unfortunately, some will teach you what not to say. Did I mention the free books? Also, I should add that you should NOT just go in grab books without standing in line for the author to sign them – that's rude. I saw people with boxes, stick their hands through line-ups grab books, drop them in their box and move on to the next pile. I'm not sure if they even knew whose books they were or if they cared. I would say if you don't want the author's book for yourself or a friend, leave it for someone else. There is not an unlimited supply. Be considerate and treat the authors as you hope to be treated yourself some day.

Awards Night – Even if you are not nominated or no one you know is nominated, I suggest going to this event at least once. It is glamorous and everyone looks incredible. It is our version of the Oscars. Hearing the Golden Heart & RITA winning speeches is heart-warming and funny. There is a lovely cheese & dessert banquet afterwards and it is yet another chance to network (and while you are looking particularly gorgeous, I might add – not sure about you, but I don't often get to wear semi-formal/formal attire in my "real" life).

Sure, there is more to conference than the above – there are workshops and panels and numerous other functions (yet even more opportunity to network), and you should go to as many of those as you can. All I'm saying is that for your first time around, the above are things I found very valuable.

Finally, you need to know that conference is exhilarating, inspiring, emotional and overwhelming. I never realised that it would be that way. It is nothing like the local conferences I've been to. Mostly, I just think if you can swing it, go to Nationals. For the workshops and networking alone, it is worth it. Everything else is gravy. It is an experience you will never forget and it can only enrich your writing. I dare you to go to your first Nationals and not come away a changed writer. A writer with at least a few more industry contacts and, likely, a lot more friends.



About M.G.

Ahh...that is a question I ask myself often. Who am I? Where am I going? What am I meant to do?

I do have a wild imagination so I could be anything, really. I could do anything. What I want to do is write.

I want to write stories that tug at the heartstrings that make you want to turn the page. To make you smile and laugh saying, "Yeah, I get that" or "I'd love that". Or perhaps make you cry, get angry and say "It's not fair" and then look for justice. Because in my fiction world, just as in the real one, life isn't fair. But, unlike in the real world, here you will always find justice, there is always a happy ending. Happy ever after or happy for now? It could be either, but it is happy.

From reading Nancy Drew mysteries at a young age to sneaking Danielle Steel books under the covers to read all night, I have always had a love for books. Even now I read two or three a week when I'm able.

I am a wife, a mother and a friend. I am neither old nor young and have lived a full life. When you read my books you will see parts of me. Experiences I've had, people who I know and some I don't. I am an observer of life (which drives my husband mad) and I find stories all around me. I am blessed to be loved and try to bless those I love.

Come join my world - you never know where it might take you. I don't know either, but I'd love to have you join the ride.

For more about her, visit her online home at <http://www.mgbraden.com>