

Booksquare

October 4, 2005

In Which We Force An Author To Succumb To A Really Long Interview

There is a special joy that comes with laziness — in today's example, we do an interview, but the interviewee does all the work. How cool is that? With our usual mix of guile and deal-sweetening, we convinced Lynn Isenberg to spill about her latest novel, *The Funeral Planner*. In fact, she had so much to say, we're spreading the interview over two days. First, Lynn discusses the idea behind the book and how writing *The Funeral Planner* led to the creation of a real-life business (real-life: that's where you pay taxes). Tomorrow, we'll get a peek at Lynn's marketing machine — let's just say she was born to the role.

What came first: the book or the business?

The novel *THE FUNERAL PLANNER* came first in that the idea for the business was first and foremost the subject and motivating force behind the protagonist inside the novel.

At one point did you realize you were creating a novel and a business plan? How did you juggle the two?

I realized I was creating both a novel and a business while I was doing the research for the novel. I immersed myself inside the funeral industry by attending funeral conventions and workshops and then immersed myself in the University of Michigan's MBA / Entrepreneurial Studies Program. Part of the plot involves the trials and tribulations of Madison going about starting her new business. In order to write that, I went through a similar process myself. I wrote addendums for the novel, such as Madison's MISSION STATEMENT, NEEDS/SOLUTION CHART, LIFE BIO VIDEO TEMPLATE, and a TABLE OF CONTENTS that mirrors the anatomy of a business plan. I thought those pieces would be part of the book or be included in an index or footnote. Unfortunately, my editor felt the book was at its bulging peak and suggested I place them on the website instead.

While I was writing the novel and the business plan—there was no juggling between the two. My focus was to first finish the novel. Though I had initial inklings that this could indeed be a business, I had not officially launched it. The juggling act was more a process of writing the novel and coming to understand that the concepts of the business plan were not just fiction, but viable. If Madison believed it could be possible, then why couldn't I? My own intimidation about starting a business could be squelched by the reassurance of the research and proof of concept that Madison proves fictionally. I believed that “if you can build it, surely they will come,” or rather, “if Madison can build it, and they come, then why can't I?”

How are you balancing the needs of the book against the needs of the business now?

Author Debbie Macomber once told me that books have the lifespan of a carton of milk. And it's true. You only get so much time on stage. Shelf space is limited and there's always a new crop of books following right behind you. So because the amount of time and shelf space one has to promote a book is limited—*The Funeral Planners'* first three months of life are my

priority. I believe that *The Funeral Planner* will organically promote the business of Lights Out Enterprises. In addition, my book tour affords me the opportunity not only to promote the novel, but the perfect forum in which to promote the business. My clients at Lights Out Enterprises understand that I am on book tour and are fine with it. After all, Lights Out Enterprises caters to the pre-need client (not the time-of-need client — which means time's up and they need a funeral now). However, before leaving on book tour, I did practice the experience design consultation component of the business and had many meetings with my clients to work out the road map for their end of life celebrations. Doing so has brought me great pleasure and also provided a natural outline for a segment layout for interest I received from 20/20 to do a story on Lights Out Enterprises (though that has not materialized yet, but if it does, I and my Talent Team will be primed and ready).

You've structured *The Funeral Planner* in a manner that allows readers to view it as a template for creating a business plan. How did you develop this structure, and did you write the story with the structure in place?

I don't think I realized I was creating a structure that would be a template for how to start a business until after the fact. It was more an organic process, with a linear narrative that dictated the structure. In hindsight, I might have removed that entire aspect of the novel — but I felt it was important to see how Madison overcame both the real and psychological obstacles of this business and that the reader experience those highs and lows with her. Along the way, we learn that tenacity is a key trait required to start any business.

You were working through your own grief as you wrote. In what ways did this affect the story and characters?

I was able to tap into my own personal grief to understand and feel what Madison and other characters were feeling. It was also a way for me, through Madison, to hang on to the spirits of my loved ones, and then to learn how to let go. I'm not sure it's about how I affected the story and characters as much as how they affected me in my growth around grief.

How did you balance your own feelings with those of your characters?

The grief we shared was the same, but the circumstances were different. Thus, the circumstances dictated different choices. Had I been in the same circumstances I'm sure I would have done exactly what Madison does, at least I hope so. She shows a lot of courage, vulnerability, and balls, but never at the expense of her integrity.

Were there points when you realized you were working through your own issues — and did you have to take a step back and or did you allow the characters to channel you?

Yes to all of the above. There were times I had to go deep into “feeling” my grief which was scary, emotional, and liberating all at the same time. There were times I had to take a step back and allow myself to cry for my losses, and for their losses, who reminded me of my losses. And there were times a symbiotic relationship occurred between my characters and me where we channeled through each other. I'm not sure if they channeled through me or me through

them.

What did you learn about yourself and grief as you wrote this book?

I learned that you never really get over grief, you simply get used to it. Natural life cycle events will always bring up the memories of loved ones who are no longer there to share in the joys and sorrows and that hurts. But what's important is to feel your grief and to be acknowledged for your grief. That's something society needs to work on—to acknowledge grievers for their grief, and give them wide open space to grieve without putting time constraints on them. Much of this is explored in the grief guidebooks I wrote with real life funeral director David M Techner, who buried my father and brother. Like Madison, who writes grief guidebooks with funeral director character Richard Wright — I followed her footsteps and did it in reality. The books are GRIEF WELLNESS: A Guide to Dealing with Loss, and GRIEF TRIBUTES: A Guide to Life Celebrations. Like Madison, I e-published the grief guidebooks at www.TheFuneralPlannerInc.com. And like Madison, I now have publishers who want to publish the e-books as real books.

You were inspired by a solo performance at your brother's funeral. Lights Out Enterprises aspires to address the issue of death in a forthright manner, treating the end as a celebration. What sort of reaction have you received to this model?

Enthusiasm, Joy, Connection, Understanding. Sometimes shock. Sometimes you see people trying to wrap their brain around the concept. Other times people wonder why it's taken so long to have this approach to begin with. Most of the time, there's an underlying expression of relief — to be able to think about it and talk about it openly is a healing in and of itself. Also, I think people who are genuinely happy with their lives are most open to it. Though there are some people who are modest and simply don't want a big to-do and that's fine. No one says you have to go out with a bang. Having a quiet intimate ceremony is just as valid as an extravagant event. During my radio interviews I've been asked to give books away to callers. I suggested having the give away be tied into a question — the question being HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED? This is the same question I used for Pre-Need Podcast which you can listen to at: www.TheFuneralPlannerInc.com or www.LightsOutEnterprises.com. The response during radio interviews has been tremendous. We've been inundated with people calling in to share their ideas and even more importantly, to share their grief. People want to be acknowledged for their grief and this was an open, welcoming forum for them to do so. Also, getting people to answer that question forces them to think about their mortality—the result is that by thinking about the end you get to make the beginning and middle that much better.

I know you spent quite a bit of time learning about the funeral industry. While Six Feet Under fans have a certain view of what happens, what did you learn that changed your impression of the “dead business”?

I didn't have an impression of the “dead business” to begin with. Who would even think about that? I suppose I realized it's a business, like any other business, like the adult entertainment industry is a business, too. I suppose I had a certain amount of humor in my approach. I couldn't help it. And that humor is part of Madison's approach as well, without being

irreverent, of course. I suppose it's a little odd hearing funeral directors talk about funerals as though you might listen to auto manufacturers talk about windshield wipers. But then you realize, that's their business. How else are they going to talk about it? It doesn't mean they don't care or they're not sensitive. They're just used to talking about death and bereavement and we (the general public) aren't.

Since this is a work of fiction, did you have to deal with elements that were too real for the story?

I think that part of my job as a writer is to integrate what might be deemed "too real" into a story. After awhile, what's real and what's not becomes a blur. A chance piece of dialogue overheard on the street finds its way in, a slice of a memory, a portion of an experience, playing with "what ifs," being subjected to daily news and advertisements... all find their way inside a story. To paraphrase the famous oral storyteller Donald Davis, he says that life is like taking a pile of bricks (that represent incidents and experiences in our lives) and building a house with those bricks, only in fiction, you tear the house down and rebuild it with the bricks, so the bricks are all re-arranged. Everything that happened there is real, but it's been rearranged to call it fiction.

You essentially self-financed your the tour for your first book (My Life Uncovered). Is Red Dress Ink supporting this tour?

I am my own entertainment marketing and pr firm. Red Dress Ink has been a wonderful back up support system, but they don't finance author book tours. I don't think any publisher finances an author's book tour unless the author is of a John Grisham or Stephen King or Nora Roberts caliber. Based on my experience in the entertainment industry, I find the publishing industry on the whole to be incredibly antiquated in their marketing approaches. But that's okay. It gives me wide open space to be incredibly creative and playful with my own marketing — which I have TM'd as "Narrative Marketing." Everything I do now is under my umbrella company — a Narrative Marketing™ Agency called Focus Media, Inc. Focus is an acronym for Finding Opportunities Creating Unified Success, because at the core of me, is the desire to inspire others and be a catalyst for positive change. Like Madison, I love connecting the dots — whether its in business or interpersonal relationships. Under Focus Media, Inc. I create organic narrative driven branded entertainment properties for myself and for others whom I believe in. My approach is also holistic. I believe you need to look at the sum parts that make up the whole. So I like to be involved in creating the content of those sum parts that will include organic built-in narratives to drive the product, brand or lifestyle from conception through distribution.

Marketing dollars are scarce for most authors. How did you prioritize your spending? What was worthwhile and what was a waste of money?

I cut back on my book tour this time, choosing to do less and spreading the travel out so that I would have time to rest and work in between and not wipe myself out. I also decided to dovetail my book tour with other events; so an invitation to a bat mitzvah in Toronto got coupled with a reading, and a desire to go to Charleston, SC where I've never been turned into a birthday present trip for my mother coinciding with a reading. What's worthwhile is stopping

in every bookstore of every airport I'm in and signing books and promoting it to travelers and booksellers. Well, I'm not so sure how worthwhile it is, but it's fun and exciting.

As for prioritizing my spending — part of it is an experiment to put a little money in many different aspects of marketing to test the waters and see which ones work best. The 300 pink handkerchiefs turned out to be a big hit — now people ask me to sign them as limited editions. The branded coffee sleeves and bookmarks with calendars (a la *The Funeral Planner*) also received wonderful reactions. But I carefully chose promotional marketing items that were an organic fit to the narrative. The media training was definitely worth the money. The website for both the novel, the grief guidebooks and the business was the best thing I ever did. Hiring an outside pr firm — not so sure — I think there's no one better to promote your novel than yourself. And ultimately, it was more cost effective for me to hire an assistant and do it myself as I did before, unless you have big bucks to pay or can make it a pay or play deal. I can't say much more than that — because these experiences and findings are going into one of my next novels.

How does one go about setting up a book tour? It seems so easy, but surely the details are daunting?

Again, this is going into a novel, so I can't say too much — but I think this happens to be natural fit for me. When I was 8 years old I wrote a story called *The Tall Tale of King C*. My story and I were chosen to represent my school at Oakland University's Young Author's Conference. My mother recently reminded me that I was so proud of my unexpected accomplishment that I called the local paper, *The Birmingham Eccentric*, to tell them about it, but when I called the operator for the number I apparently asked for the Birmingham Excedrin. My mother said I was promoting my work then and I'm still doing it now. Of course, I eventually learned to divine the difference between painkillers and characters with free-wheeling imaginations.

Unlike many authors, you wholeheartedly embrace the essential self-promotion aspect of the job. Where does this marketing savvy come from?

I think I answered this in the question above. I guess at the core, it comes from a deep sense of pride. I'm proud of my work and I'm not afraid to share that. I believe that I have something valuable to share and that if it inspires me — it will inspire others — because in a deep spiritual sense — we're all one anyway. So my self-promotional desires come from pride and my marketing savvy comes from a playful competitive spirit to see just how clever I can be against my own wit. I like to outwit my own wit, if you will.

I imagine that part of the business of writing is developing a marketing strategy. Is this true, and, if so, what are the key elements to consider in developing a plan?

Again, unless someone out there wants to retain the services of Focus Media, Inc., I'm going to save those answers for one of my novels. But I will say this, or rather write this — that if you want people to remember you, your product or your brand — you need to tell a good story. It's my experience that information conveyed as facts are not as easily retained as

information conveyed via story.

You're promoting *The Funeral Planner* and *Lights Out Enterprises*. What about your other work? How do you remind readers that you have a previous book. Does the promotion on the current title impact sales for *My Life Uncovered*?

The nice thing about doing a book tour is that the booksellers (for the most part) automatically include your earlier titles — so it's a built-in format to promote all of your work. And yes, doing the book tour for *The Funeral Planner* has helped spur sales for *My Life Uncovered*.

Initially, I was not concerned about promoting “*My Life Uncovered*” — in fact, I was timid to promote it because I didn't want run the risk of being stigmatized by earlier misconceptions transferring over to my new work. Earlier misconceptions included my belief that people out there judged “*My Life Uncovered*” by its cover in more ways than one. Though not the Italians because for some reason it's done incredibly well in Italy! I think that many people automatically assumed from the title that it was pure autobiography or they simply didn't get the fact that it was an entrepreneurial sex comedy in the same vein as “*Sex in the City*” — and by the way, far more tame than that! Then I thought that maybe it was just a bad year for “porn”. After all, the cable networks at that time were afraid to consider it because the cable series “*Skin*” crashed and burned and because there was such a public backlash over Janet Jackson's right breast.

Ironically, long before it was a novel, it was a treatment for a television series with a bidding war for the rights to it and before that it was an idea for a serial magazine story that *Premiere Magazine* wanted just before its parent company imploded sending all the executives interested in other directions. *My Life Uncovered* was also the first *Red Dress Ink* title to become part of a distribution-triage-campaign. RDI thought if they published more books that there would be more readers. They discovered that the third new title of the month was minimized by reader's budgetary constraints so they've gone back to a two-title per month distribution plan. And I've since learned that readers now look at me quite differently — now that I've got two novels under my belt — and that seems to make all the difference. “*My Life Uncovered*” is now viewed as part of my greater growing collective work and rightly perceived as fiction with a greater interest for it... and now there is renewed interest in it as a TV series. Go figure.

You mentioned that you tap into a network of friends from many years of working in Hollywood. How do you make this type of relationship mutually beneficial?

I'm not sure what you mean by this question. Do you mean in terms of my novels or in terms of *Lights Out Enterprises*? I'll go with the latter — *Lights Out Enterprises* has a Talent Team of A list Hollywood talent on board to write, direct, and produce Life Bio Videos for pre-need clients. That includes the co-creator and executive producer of “*In Living Color*”, the producer of “*Something's Gotta Give*” and “*What Women Want*”, the writer of “*Murphy Brown*” and “*Cosby*”, and the comedy writer of “*The Tonight Show*” with Jay Leno, to name a few... in addition to myself (my film/tv credits and relationships). Here's an example of that means: Let's say my client “Jack” loves movies and his favorite actor is Dustin Hoffman. Because I grew up working in the industry with Dustin's agent, I call him up and say, “Hey, would Dustin entertain the idea of narrating or making a cameo appearance in Jack's life bio video?”

This actually happened and the answer was yes. So it helps that I have these long standing relationships in the industry. Now this Life Bio Video, by the way, is not only for viewing at an end of life celebration, but can be pre-purposed (as opposed to repurposed, or multi-purposed, if you will) and shown to friends and family at say, Jack's 50th birthday party, and again at his 60th birthday party, etc. And maybe along the way, we'll do updates with more cameo appearances from the likes of Dustin Hoffman. But all that is being cleverly designed into the narrative about Jack's life, integrating his friends and family and storyline that identifies and celebrates the essence of Jack. Involving my Hollywood friends in the creative process is mutually beneficial for all of us, because ultimately it's about being able to be creative with people you like and generate some income from it along the way.

Two books in, what have you found to be effective when it comes to marketing? What have you found to be ineffective?

Effective: Tenacity tempered with Timing on all fronts.

Ineffective: Paying a PR agency for their "efforts" is not good enough. The entire business model for PR makes no sense to me. What's the point of it without results. I think PR firms would be more effective if they were pay or play or if they had a some sort of commission from the sales of the book.

You've tackled the porn industry and the world of funerals. What's next?

The White House... and various other stories in negotiation so I can't really say more than that at this time. Check back with me next month.