

## **Website Development for the Aspiring/Soon-to-be-Published Author**

By Dorothy McFalls

This July I attended my first RWA national conference and had a chance to chat with a real-live editor. Once I got my tongue working in concert with my head, I asked her what she thought was the best resource for new authors looking to promote their books. Websites, she said, was the basis to any promotional push nowadays. I was proud to be able to say that I had been running a website for the past two years and now had an average of a thousand visitors a month. As an author just getting my feet wet with my first book, I felt ahead of the game.

With the popularity of the Internet growing, any aspiring author can build readership while honing her craft. To figure out what makes a successful website, I went to three authors who have each done fantastic jobs of developing a web presence and asked them to share some insights.

Our very own newsletter editor, Su Kopil is the creative force behind the ezine, *The Dream Weaver*, and runs Earthly Charms, a promotional service for authors. Jesse Petersen, who has recently signed a two-book deal with Avon books, runs *The Passionate Pen*, a valuable resource on the publishing industry. And Rochelle Bailey, who has several action romance novels in the works with Echelon Press, ran a poetry website the three years before she sold that first book.

### **Why a website?**

Su Kopil was looking to the future when she started her first website. She wanted to accumulate a subscriber list to use when she finally sells that first book. Her efforts have been successful. Today, she has 500+ subscribed to her *Dream Weaver* ezine and 400+ subscribed to Earthly Charms promotions. Those are all potential readers all ready to hear about her first book!

Jesse Petersen found that when she started to submit her first romance manuscript in early 1999, she couldn't find any kind of clearinghouse listing where to find information on the publishers and their guidelines. "I knew nothing about the industry and hadn't joined RWA yet, but I felt like if I wanted something like that, other people might, too," Jesse says. So she started to gather a list of publisher guidelines and *The Passionate Pen* was born.

Rochelle Bailey's first author website went live in the fall of 2001 as a vehicle to sell her poetry books. She was driven by a desire get her poetry out to the public in an effort to eventually sell and promote more of her survivor poetry collections.

My own reason for starting a website was similar to Rochelle's. I wanted to get my work into the hands of readers. So in 2002 I launched my first website featuring four short stories that had been rejected by various publications over the past couple of years. This leads to one of the more important components of building a successful website: content.

### **What do you have to offer?**

"Make sure you have something to say if you want visitors to come back again and again," Jesse Petersen says. "Just information about books no one can probably buy won't give you a lot of traffic, so really examine why you're doing a site and what you hope to gain out of it. Then try to find content that will interest people."

Su Kopil wanted to develop a mailing list, so she created *The Dream Weaver* (soon to be renamed *The Motivated Writer*) that visitors to her site can sign up for. The ezine offers conversations with best selling authors, a column on writing habits, "the call" scenarios from

new writers, among other things, including offering a place to purchase her romance anthologies featuring her work as well as the works of others.

Rochelle Bailey's website sold books of poetry. Other successful websites have daily/weekly/monthly blogs (web-logs) that describe the lifestyle of a writer.

What they all have in common is that they offer a service to the reader. I had short stories that I wanted to get read and a desire to write more of them.

Websites should be dynamic. They should give the reader a reason to come again and again. "Updating is key," says Jesse Petersen. She suggests updating the website at least once a month, if not more.

"There is much an unpubbed can provide with free stories, links to favorite author sites, newsletters, and articles," Rochelle Bailey points out.

### **At what expense?**

My personal website is hosted by my Internet provider. The space is included in the basic price of service. And when I first started I used the free web-publishing software they provided online. The only cost was time.

There are several free services available to help build a website and to get it out onto the Internet.

When first starting out both Su Kopil and Jesse Petersen used free web services. Su used the web space provided through her Internet provider, AOL, and Jesse used an ad-based free service called, Tripod. Only when their needs and their sites' popularity grew did they purchase a domain name (such as: [www.passionatepen.com](http://www.passionatepen.com)) and pay for the web space.

Rochelle used a paid service for her web space from the get-go, but found a friend to design her web pages for free.

### **If I build it, will they come?**

Simply creating a dynamic website doesn't ensure that you will attract visitors. Readers have to be able to find you. Listing the site with the major search engines, such as Google.com and Yahoo.com is one of the easiest ways to drive traffic to your site. For a list of links and an easy how-to discussion on how to submit your website to various search engines, go to Richard Seltzer's website ([www.samizdat.com/public.html](http://www.samizdat.com/public.html)). Also, Paranormal Romance author, Margaret Marr provides a nice listing of individual websites that will provide free links to your site ([www.margaretmarr.com](http://www.margaretmarr.com)).

### **Will it get me published?**

There are stories out there of how an author was discovered through a website. And, although editors of small magazines have contacted me through my website to invite me to submit stories, which is flattering, simply having a website probably won't sell that first book for you.

"I don't think that my website helped me sell anything (except my family on my talent) but I value the experience of set-up/design and intent behind having a web presence," says Rochelle Bailey, who now has a successful author website featuring her upcoming books. "Having the no-pressure learning curve of the poetry site has made it somewhat easier to determine what I want from this site. From what I've learned in the recent prelims of publishing-it (having a website) helps assure the publisher that you're serious about promotion and success."

Jesse Petersen agrees. She mentioned *The Passionate Pen* in her query letters but didn't see how it made a difference in selling her first book to Red Sage. Yet with her recent sale to Avon she did see how *The Passionate Pen* did help her get noticed. "My agent used my website to do research on her current agency and when she saw my name and reference to Passionate Pen in my query, it made her read my sample chapter faster and request my full and read it faster," Jesse says. "She used Passionate Pen extensively in her pitches for my books (the 'built-in audience' factor and the industry knowledge factor). I also know Passionate Pen was some factor in contract negotiation. Now my agent took me on and Avon bought my book because they liked my writing, but Passionate Pen was one of the external factors, too."

As always, it is solid storytelling and professional writing that ultimately sold these author's works. Simply building a successful author website might not get you sold, but it can build writer confidence, showcase talents, and give you control over a piece of your career in an industry where control can sometimes feel like a rare treat.

### **Resources:**

Rochelle Bailey (w/a Regan Black) released her first novel, *Justice Incarnate* in March 2005 and her latest novel *Invasion of Justice* was released in February 2006 from Echelon. Details are available at [www.reganblack.com](http://www.reganblack.com) and [www.echelonpress.com](http://www.echelonpress.com).

Su Kopil has short stories in several romance anthologies, including her latest in *Love Sizzles* released in 2002. You can visit her websites at [www.earthlycharms.com/1/sukopil.htm](http://www.earthlycharms.com/1/sukopil.htm) or go directly to The Dream Weaver at [www.themotivatedwriter.com](http://www.themotivatedwriter.com).

Jesse Petersen (w/a Jess Michaels) will be releasing her latest erotic romance "Fallen Angel" in *Parlor Games* June 2006 (Avon Books). Also (w/a Jenna Petersen) her Avon historical romance *Scandalous* hit bookstores in October 2005. You can visit her websites at: [www.jennapetersen.com](http://www.jennapetersen.com), [www.jessmichaels.com](http://www.jessmichaels.com), or [www.passionatepen.com](http://www.passionatepen.com).

*When not tinkering around with her website, Dorothy McFalls enjoys writing Regency romances. Her first book, The Marriage List, was released in May 2005. She has two new ebooks coming out in March 2006: a short Regency, Lady Sophie's Midnight Seduction and a paranormal romantic suspense, Neptune's Lair. You can visit her website at [www.dorothymcfalls.com](http://www.dorothymcfalls.com).*