

Making the Leap: Small Time to Big Time

by LOIS DUNCAN

THE FIRST ARTICLE I sold to a magazine brought me twenty-five dollars. I was thirteen years old at the time. Those were the days when teenagers babysat for thirty-five cents an hour, and twenty-five dollars seemed like a fortune. How proud I was to have made it into the Big Time at such an early age!

Over the next fifteen years, however, my definition of the Big Time had changed considerably. By then I had been married and divorced and was writing twelve hours a day to support myself and three children, grinding out stories, articles, and verse by the carload and

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selling most of what I wrote. But the two-figure checks I was receiving (supplemented occasionally by a three-figure windfall) were barely keeping us in macaroni and cheese. Every time I mailed a submission off to one of the large-circulation, national magazines, it came back so quickly it was hard to believe anyone had even glanced at it.

I gazed wistfully at those high-paying slicks with their glossy paper and full-color ads and asked myself, "How does anyone ever get published there?" There were some writers whose by-lines appeared there regularly, writers who were paid thousands of dollars. Obviously, I thought, those contributors knew something I didn't. What was the secret? How did those lucky people break in?

Now, years later, my children are grown, and I am one of those writers I used to envy. My own work now appears regularly in such publications as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Woman's Day*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Editors even phone me to offer assignments.

It is just as much of an ego trip as I dreamed it might be, but my present enviable situation was a long time coming. The journey from two-figure to four-figure checks was an agonizingly slow one. The process could have been made shorter and easier if I had known in those early days some of the "magic truths" I learned along the way.

Here are a few pieces of advice I wish somebody had offered me back when the Big Time seemed so totally unobtainable:

"To interest national markets, the subjects of your articles must be as fascinating to a reader in Chicago or San Francisco as they are to your next-door neighbor in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. . . ."

(1) *Don't underestimate the connections you can make at small magazines*

In publishing, as in any other business, personal contacts count. Given a choice between assigning a story to a writer with whom she has worked before or to an equally talented newcomer, an editor will invariably choose the writer she knows.

But few people are born with editorial connections. You have to make your own contacts with editors. One of the simplest ways to accomplish this is to become established with editors in *their* fledgling days. The story I wrote at thirteen sold to a youth publication called *Calling All Girls*. The young woman who pulled it out of the slush pile and passed it on to the editor-in-chief was a college student who was working there as an intern.

At 22, I submitted a young adult novel to the "Seventeenth Summer Literary Contest" (sponsored by Dodd, Mead). Knowing how great the competition was, I had little hope that my manuscript would even be considered.

To my amazement, my book won the contest.

Along with my prize money and the contract to publish, I received a hand-written note from one of the judges. "Hooray for you!" she wrote. "The minute I saw your name on that manuscript, I knew this was one submission I was going to read immediately."

Nine years before, this editor, now working for a major publishing company, had been the intern who had "discovered" me at *Calling All Girls*.

The world of publishing is one big game of musical chairs. Editors keep shifting back and forth from one position to another, inching their way up the ladder toward the top of the editorial heap. The assistant-to-the-assistant you met back

when you both were just getting started, you may well encounter again, years later, in an important editorial post. Don't ever dismiss anyone as "unimportant." Good people at any level are well worth cultivating. At the very least, they will enrich your life in a personal way, but there's a good chance they will prove important in other ways as well.

(2) *Think universal*

Many writers get their start writing for regional markets, in newspapers and city magazines. This is great as a take-off point, because the competition there is not so stiff, and appropriate subject matter is readily available.

Everybody likes to read about friends and neighbors. Feature stories about local people and events are the meat and potatoes of regional publishing. On a national level, however, they often fall short. The teacher voted "Best In the City"; the child who rescued a dog from a burning shed on Second Street; the beloved owner of Harry's Diner, who is celebrating his 90th birthday, may be important personalities in their own home setting, but they will not make the lead story in *People* magazine. To interest national publications, the subjects of your articles must be as fascinating to a reader in Chicago or San Francisco as they are to your next-door neighbors in Poplar Bluff, Missouri.

This does not mean that regional subject matter is never worthy of anything other than local publication. Such stories succeed nationally when they strike a universal chord that people everywhere respond to.

Here are some articles I wrote for national magazines that used material from my hometown, Albuquerque, New Mexico: "The Rape I Tried To Put Behind Me," for *Ladies' Home Journal*, was the story of a woman who was raped by a

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family friend and didn't report it until her teenage daughter was raped by the same man. "The Paper Route," for *Woman's Day*, was a sentimental account of my learning disabled son's first job experience. "Foster Family," for *Woman's World*, was an article about a family that adopted an orphaned orangutan. "I Had to Live For Tim," for *Good Housekeeping*, was the story of a woman who dragged herself out of a hospital bed to give testimony against the man who had murdered her son.

These human interest stories could have been set anywhere in the world. The locale did not matter; what counted was their emotional impact. In contrast, "They Paint With Their Hearts," a personality piece about five women artists who live in the Southwest, could not have gone anywhere but to *New Mexico Quarterly*, or another similar magazine in that area.

(3) *Study the markets and match your subject to the magazine*

People who are used to writing for such category markets as confession and religious magazines, craft and handyman publications, and trade journals often regard "women's magazines" as a category in itself and submit material to them indiscriminately.

This mistake will cost you sales. The major women's magazines cannot be lumped together. Each is an individual entity with its own particular readership, and its editors select material with that readership in mind. The typical *Redbook* reader is between 25 and 44; you will not sell that magazine an article on setting teenage curfews. *Good Housekeeping* readers are middle-aged and conservative; the story of your abortion will not sell there. *McCall's* wants articles that are short, upbeat and inspiring; *Woman's Day* likes first person, drama-in-real-life stories. To sell to national markets, you must be aware of each

magazine's special ground rules and idiosyncrasies. No matter how well-written your story may be, if the subject is inappropriate for the magazine to which you submit it, it will not be accepted.

(4) *Make sure your facts are correct*

You should do this, of course, no matter for which magazine you are writing. In a small publication, however, a minor mistake might occasionally slide past without serious consequences. When writing for national magazines, you're allowed no such slip-ups. Your hometown newspaper may have several thousand readers, but *Reader's Digest* has a circulation of eighteen million. An inaccurate quote in the *Podunk News* might be rectified by a retraction, but an error at a national level could be fuel for a major lawsuit.

Chances are your mistake will not make it into print. The large magazines employ "fact checkers" who will catch your errors. But if your research turns out to be sloppy, your next article won't be accepted. There are too many writers standing in line for assignments for an editor to have to make do with one who can't be relied upon for accuracy.

(5) *Be a perfectionist*

When you write for the Big Time markets, the extra hours and days you spend polishing an article cannot be considered a luxury; it is a necessity. At a dollar a word, each word has to be the right one. There are days in which I do nothing but revise a single page, shifting sentences about and cutting excess wordage. I proofread for redundancy and word repetition. I trim away qualifying adverbs like "truly" and "very." I substitute strong adjectives for weak ones and replace passive verbs with active ones. I tighten

my anecdotes and try to make them sparkle. Time is far less important than the finished product.

Editors of top-paying magazines have high standards. If my article isn't perfect, it had better be close.

(6) *Be willing to rewrite*

A writer friend recently got her first assignment from *Modern Maturity*, a magazine with a circulation of over seventeen million. She worked very hard on her article, and when she finally had it completed, she and I went out to lunch together to celebrate.

Ten days later, she phoned me in tears.

"The editor wants me to change it all around!" she wailed.

"So, change it all around," I told her unsympathetically.

"But I like it the way it is!" my friend protested. "What would *you* do if *you* were asked to rewrite completely a story you felt was fine the way it was?"

I did not have to think long to come up with an answer. There in the typewriter in front of me sat the final page of my fourth rewrite of an article for *Woman's Day*.

Did I resent that extra labor? Yes, of course, I did. Not enough, however, to withdraw my story, and accept the fact that I probably would never receive another assignment from this excellent market.

Like other craftsmen, professional writers are in the business of creating products and selling them. Nobody forces them to do this. If they wish, they can find other ways to earn a living and reserve writing for fun and self-expression. Since I have chosen to write professionally, I will do whatever is necessary to satisfy the editors.

(7) *Take your writing seriously and treat it as a business*

This final piece of advice may not be easy to follow, because the world does not give much credence to people who set their own hours and work at home. When I go to parties, people ask me, "Are you still writing?" in the same condescending tone they would use to ask if I were still collecting match box covers or crocheting hot pads. Nobody asks my husband, "Are you still in engineering?" Nobody asks my dentist, "Are you still pulling teeth?" Yet, because I don't get dressed up each day and report to one regular employer, it's taken for granted the job I hold isn't "real."

Because of this, I make sure it is real to *me*. I have a home office with my reference books, files, typewriter, tape recorder, and word processor. I sit down at my desk in the morning and work until noon. I sit down again after lunch and work until five. I have a separate line, so when the family phone rings while I'm working, I can ignore it. I keep records of what I spend for postage and office supplies. I have a chart of assignments tacked over my desk and check them off as they are completed.

There was a time when I classified people who wrote for the top magazines as "lucky." I have changed my mind. I have come to realize that writing is one field in which people with a moderate degree of talent can create their own luck through hard work, perseverance, and professionalism.

The Big Time is not beyond reach — it is there for the taking — but you alone can decide how much you are willing to invest in an effort to break into it. □

Manhattan or Kalamazoo?

There are writers in every suburb, town, and hamlet from coast to coast who have more work than they can handle. You do not have to live in Manhattan to succeed in magazines. . . . You can manage an ongoing article writing career, whether full- or part-time, from a kitchen table in Kalamazoo or a den in Des Moines as easily as from a penthouse on Park Avenue. . . . As a rule of thumb, if you can come up with a title or a lead sentence or both, you probably have a viable idea. . . . But I would advise you to be honest about your own mastery of the language. . . . you must learn to ask the questions an editor would ask and then answer them *before* you submit your manuscript.

Sondra Forsyth Enos, *Breaking Into Article Writing* (The Writer, Inc.)

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