

FROM RIDING TO WRITING: MY CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

BY LYNN REARDON

In 2006, I attended the Writers League Agents & Editors Conference. I had a vague, barely formed idea for a nonfiction book. The WLT conference seemed like a good first step for developing that idea, so I signed up – literally at the last minute, snagging one of the few remaining slots. It was a big step for me. I spent most of my time working with ex-racehorses at my nonprofit adoption ranch. My days were full of unruly mounts, muddy boots and lots of hay chum wafting around me. Not exactly an ideal literary environment. How could someone like me become an author? But this book idea kept pestering me, summed up in the phrase: “It’s never too late to become what you could have been.” I used to be a finance manager in Washington, DC, who took weekly horseback riding lessons. Bored with my job, I became fascinated by racehorses, with their tremendous heart and dangerous reputations.

With scant horse experience, I opened a racehorse adoption ranch in Texas. Here I encountered dozens of racehorses, all with special needs, unusual histories and vivid personalities. As I fumbled to help them make the transition to new careers, they returned the favor – by becoming my most memorable mentors in

horsemanship and life philosophy. I thought there just might be a book in that. Before the WLT conference, I hadn’t done much research about publishing or agents. I felt like quite the literary goober among all the “real” writers at the event. But I attended several workshops, hoping to increase my knowledge quickly.



At my first workshop, I learned about “log lines” and how to pitch agents. I then listened to a panel discussion about the nonfiction market. Another session taught me how to follow up with an agent, should one ever ask to see my proposal (an exciting, if unlikely, thought). I also met several writers, all of them friendly and encouraging. One mystery writer coached me on how to appear professional for my assigned agent session. Another novelist let me practice my pitch to her, over and over. And a fellow aspiring nonfiction writer advised me on how to beat writer’s block.

On the second day of the confer-

ence, I pitched my idea during my assigned agent session. And I pitched some other agents too, cornering them during the official conference social hour. Elise Proulx of Frederick Hill/Bonnie Nadell was especially terrific, listening patiently to my idea, then asking me to send along my proposal. Of course, I didn’t quite have a proposal yet. But after I wrote it, I sent it to Ms. Proulx. She gave me some thoughtful feedback and invited me to resubmit. Encouraged, I decided to take some time to think through the project more fully. Remembering the advice of my WLT writer friends, I began to write every day – soon I had nearly 70,000 words of horse stories.

One of the conference panelists had advised unpublished writers to submit smaller sections of their work to magazines. I sent chapter sections to local horse publications and soon had two stories published. Before the WLT conference, I had never heard of Publishers Marketplace or literary blogs. Now I perused several publishing websites daily and researched proposal writing.

Eventually, I revised my original proposal and resubmitted it to Ms. Proulx. She signed me up as a client, suggested some editorial changes and then contacted several publishing houses. And within three weeks, she sold my book proposal.

Thanks to the WLT conference, I met the world’s best agent. And learned enough about the industry that I could persuade her to take me on as a client. What a great return on my \$309 investment!