

Nancy's Notes From Florida

Author Nancy J. Cohen discusses the writing process and life as a Florida resident.

Avoiding Writer Burnout

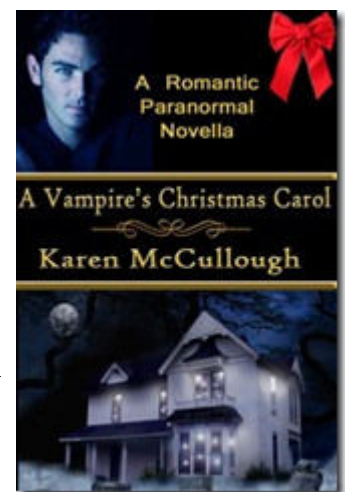
Posted by [Nancy J. Cohen](#) on December 13, 2011

Karen McCullough is the author of eleven published novels in the mystery, romantic suspense, and fantasy genres. She has won numerous awards, including an Eppie Award for fantasy. She's also been a four-time Eppie finalist, and a finalist in the Prism, Dream Realm, Rising Star, Lories, Scarlett Letter, and Vixen Awards contests. Her short fiction has appeared in several anthologies and numerous small press publications in the fantasy, science fiction, and romance genres. Her most recent releases are *MAGIC, MURDER AND MICROCIRCUITS*, a paranormal romantic suspense now available in most electronic formats; her Christmas vampire story, *A VAMPIRE'S CHRISTMAS CAROL*; and *A GIFT FOR MURDER*, published in hardcover by Five Star/Gale Group Mysteries.

Avoiding Writer Burnout by Karen McCullough

In a long and varied series of careers, I've burnt out of more than one profession. Right out of college I took a job as a social worker. I was too young and naive to realize it was no job for a tender-hearted, workaholic-leaning introvert. I actually lasted three years, which was longer than most people in the agency I worked for remained on the job.

After a return to school for a further degree, I moved into computer programming, which turned out to be a much better fit for me. I worked for a number of different small companies, and they tended to go out of business or be bought out by megaliths, so I changed jobs fairly often. The last time was with a small company under a lot of pressure. Changes in the computer industry were eating away at their niche. They'd had to let people go, with the result that they leaned harder and harder on their remaining staff. My stress level grew with each day. I knew I was burnt out when I realized I was dreaming lines of code. No kidding. Lines of COBOL or Basic would scroll through my dreams.



I'd already started writing short stories on the side, so I moved into doing freelance writing and editing. I was hired by a magazine as an associate editor, but ending up running their newly formed web department. Then a larger publishing conglomerate came calling and lured me to the same job on a bigger scale. Pretty soon I was a corporate bureaucrat managing a bunch of websites with the associated stress and high blood pressure.

All this is just a preamble to my real point and meant only to show that I know what burnout feels like and have some understanding of what leads to it, since I've been there more than once.

Most beginning writers laugh at the idea of burnout. They're so excited to discover the way writing opens up new worlds and to find the satisfaction of creating something completely (dare I say it?) novel and uniquely theirs that it's hard to imagine it could ever become old, even a burden or a drag.

But authors who've been at it a while no longer laugh. As with any activity you do too long and/or too intensely you can become overwhelmed by it. I know of at least two multi-published authors who felt that they'd written all they could and were done with it. I don't want that to happen to me.

I'm sharing a few things that have helped me in hopes that they might be of use to you, too:

First, and most important, know yourself. Assess your habits, your work style, your motivating factors, etc. Are you the sort of person who needs deadlines to keep you moving and who works well under pressure? Great! If you're published, your publisher will help you with those deadlines. If not, set your own goals and resolve to stick to them.

But if you tend, as I do, to be a bit too driven at times, be sure to schedule some down time for yourself. That includes days off from writing, too. Yes, I know a lot of authorities will tell you that if you want to be a serious writer you have to write every day. No, you don't.

You have to have the discipline to write enough to get your story done. You have to keep moving forward with the story you're working on. If you're under contract you have to meet your deadlines. But you need to figure out what pace and schedule works best for you.

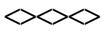
If three hours a day every single day doesn't stress you out, fine. Or if setting yourself a word count goal for every day works, so be it.

If those don't work, don't beat yourself up over it. Instead figure out what does work for you. Personally, I can't write every day, but I do write for several hours on Saturdays and Sundays and for an hour or two on days I can manage it.

Still find yourself getting tired of writing, reluctant to face the blank screen or even think about your current work in progress? If you can, give yourself a break from it. Try writing something different. Because I write both mystery and paranormal/fantasy, I like to alternate genres. It helps to keep me fresh when I come back to one after completing a book in the other.

Finally, sometimes you just have to stop and remind yourself why you started writing in the first place. For me, I began writing because it was fun to turn my fantasies into stories to share with others. It satisfied a creative urge that had no other outlet.

If you're not enjoying the process anymore, stop, back up, and figure out why not. Then change whatever needs to be changed so you can get that feeling back.



Karen invites visitors to check out her home on the Web at <http://www.kmccullough.com> and her site for the Market Center Mysteries series, <http://www.marketcentermysteries.com>

This entry was posted on December 13, 2011 at 6:00 am and is filed under Business of Writing. Tagged: burnout, Business of Writing, fantasy, Karen McCullough, mystery writers, The Writing Life, writers. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

13 Responses to “Avoiding Writer Burnout”

1. *Nancy J. Cohen* said

December 13, 2011 at 6:57 am

I schedule in break time for vacations and before a release to work on promotion and marketing. Otherwise, things get crazy. I also advise allowing time for unforeseen circumstances. Like you, Karen, I like to alternate genres. Each one offers its own challenge and helps keep me fresh and enthused about my work. Thanks for being here today!

Reply

2. *Karen McCullough* said

December 13, 2011 at 7:09 am

Hi Nancy – Thanks for having me here!

Reply

3. *Mac Crowne* said

December 13, 2011 at 8:18 am

Great advice, Karen. Now if I can just get my manic personality to follow it.

Reply

4. *Jacqueline Seewald* said

December 13, 2011 at 8:29 am

Hi Karen and Nancy,

Congrats on the excellent reviews for your novels!

Karen, this advice comes at a good time for me personally. I tend to fall into the driven author category—working too hard much of the time. I will try to lighten up a bit. Smell the roses!

Best,

Jacqueline Seewald
THE TRUTH SLEUTH

Reply

5. *Nancy J. Cohen* said

December 13, 2011 at 9:04 am

This time of year is a good one to take a break with all the holiday frenzy. I'm not writing and am glad to have time for promo activities. December is always a hectic month. Will push myself back into the chair when January rolls around, but I'll be ready by then. Relax, enjoy your family, finish your shopping, and reassess your priorities.

Reply

6. *maggietoussaint* said

December 13, 2011 at 9:08 am

These are all excellent points, Karen. One of the most important things I've found is to be self-aware. It sounds so obvious, but in many ways a career trains us to deny our intuition and do it "by the book," i.e., to keep plodding along in a systematic way.

My first approach to writing was like that – regimented outlines, regimented hours in the chair. I can still remember my husband saying things to me like "if you quit work to do this, how do I know you'll treat this as your job and not goof off all day?" He didn't use those exact words but I got the message – writing would be my new work. Soon, all the stress indicators from my old job – knotted shoulders, aching fingers, TMJ and more – started occurring as I wrote for longer and longer hours so that I'd have a product to show.

I had to turn that around, and the hardest person to convince was me. I listened, adapted how I write, and now I'm one happy pig in the mud-tub. I hope I always remember to trust my writer's intuition above a strict production schedule. I'm not recommending missing deadlines; instead, I factor in enough time into a book schedule to take a mental health day off here or there – and I'm a stronger writer for it.

Maggie

[Reply](#)

7. **[Karen McCullough](#)** said

[December 13, 2011 at 10:44 am](#)

Thanks for all the helpful comments!

Jacqueline, I think a lot of us do fall into the driven category, maybe by definition. It takes a lot of drive to put in the time and effort it takes to write an entire novel, then sit down and start all over again on the next.

Nancy — In some ways the promo is almost as stressing for me as the writing itself. I'm always wondering if I'm doing enough and asking what else I can do. I know I need to draw some lines.

Maggie – I love the idea of calling them “mental health days.” That’s how I’m going to refer to my days off in the future!

[Reply](#)

8. **[Allison Chase](#)** said

[December 13, 2011 at 4:13 pm](#)

Yes, invaluable advice, Karen! Sometimes the stress of the business itself begins to burn me out, and then it's good to step back and remember that being a writer is PART of who I am, but not the entire package. I have a family, a life outside of writing, and enjoying and accomplishing other things helps release the writing stress and refill that creative well. I'm in something of a break right now as I focus on some other priorities, but I when I do turn my attention to my WIP, I find myself wholly engaged by it. That's the magic of writing, I think.

[Reply](#)

9. **[Marilyn Meredith](#)** said

[December 13, 2011 at 7:10 pm](#)

Fun reading this. For me, ever so often I take a day off with hubby. We have lunch out and see a movie and that seems to refresh me for the writing. Marilyn

[Reply](#)

10. **[Nancy J. Cohen](#)** said

[December 13, 2011 at 8:13 pm](#)

Allison, sounds like you have your priorities right. Marilyn, a movie sounds good if only something interesting were playing. Maybe Sherlock Holmes this weekend?

[Reply](#)

11. **[Karen McCullough](#)** said

[December 14, 2011 at 9:29 am](#)

Thanks, Allison and Marilyn! Yes, it's all about balance in our lives. We time to refill the bucket occasionally. I'm definitely planning to see Sherlock Holmes this weekend. It's the only movie for December that looks appealing.

[Reply](#)

12. **[bethtrissel](#)** said

[December 14, 2011 at 9:34 am](#)

Thanks for a good and thoughtful take on one of the casualties of writing. Actually, I think it's the promo doing me in. Maybe that's what I need to take a break from.

[Reply](#)

13. **[Joanne Stewart](#)** said

[December 14, 2011 at 9:50 am](#)

Excellent post. When I start to feel burned out, I allow myself a day where I just don't write or do anything writing related at all. A goof off day.

[Reply](#)

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