

TRANSCRIPT: The Patreon Q&As

Question #1

Hi. I'm Holly Lisle, and this is The Patreon Questions: Episode 1 – How did you go from working as a nurse to writing fiction full time?

To understand the answer for this question, first realize that back in 1985 when I was an ER nurse and decided I was going to do this:

- Only scientists and universities had access to the internet
- Information came in three forms: Hardcover, paperback, and magazine
- And was available in two places: Libraries and bookstores
- The very first desktop computers were just coming out, and the least expensive ones, which had two floppy drives and no hard drive, cost about \$2500 – **\$5821.24 today**. <https://www.officialdata.org/1985-dollars-in-2018?amount=2500>

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

In that world, if you wanted to be a writer, you subscribed to Writer's Digest, and you scoured the library for anything that might be even tangentially related to what you wanted to know.

And you wrote, and used a copier to copy your stories, which you mailed out in envelopes with return envelopes and postage if you wanted the manuscript back.

I got started as a writer when, as my 1985 New Year's resolution, I resolved that I was going to write a novel before I turned twenty-five. I quit a good job to write that book. And I did write it, with a few weeks to spare (I turned 25 in October of that year). My novel was a category romance for a line I liked, *Second Chance at Love*.

And I thought that the fact that I had written a complete novel meant that the publisher would buy it.

Instead, I got back this full-page single-spaced rejection letter from the editor explaining that while she liked parts of the story, the ending simply didn't work for her. She found it unbelievable, so was rejecting the story.

In retrospect, this was a "smack on the head" moment.

I was a total neophyte, and the novel had been my very first submission of anything anywhere. I did not know a

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

single-spaced full page of comments from a genuine editor was an astonishing thing to receive. I did not yet understand that over 99% of all rejections are done by form, and go back to the author with the box checked that says, "Does not meet our needs."

I did not know that manuscripts could be revised, and that I could use the long letter she sent me to fix the problems she had with the manuscript. I knew manuscripts could be edited (and I'd done that), but I did not understand the process of revision – which bears absolutely no relationship to editing. In 1985, there was nothing that taught it.

But I discovered to my astonishment that I loved the process of writing. So I bought every romance novel I could get my hands on, and went through them with highlighter markers, and marked out DIALOGUE, DESCRIPTION, and ACTION. Action got hot pink, because in those books it mostly was.

The whole time, I was reading SF and fantasy because those were my genres, and had been since I was nine.

But it hadn't yet occurred to me to write what I loved, not what I read to supplement my miserable marriage. *Women wrote romance, so I was writing a romance.*

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

The first and biggest recommendation I can make to any writer today is this: Write what you love to read. Not what “women write” or what “men write” or “what’s selling now” but what you sit down and devour in your free time because it thrills and delights you.

But back to that first novel. I compared what I’d written to what those women who’d sold their books had written. Carefully dissected, did math to figure percentages, compared their content to my content.

I added more dialogue, took out some of my lengthy, pointless description, improved my action.

Sent it to a different line. Got back a form, with “Does not meet our needs.” That was a rude awakening. No page of details?

I revised the whole thing again while taking a short story writing class through Writer’s Digest with a pro named Stephen Leigh, who wrote science fiction. He introduced me to “show, don’t tell” and was genuinely encouraging about what I sent him – pointing out that while I mostly wasn’t telling stories, my writing was pretty good.

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

He effectively got me away from "Term Paper Writing" and introduced me to picking stronger verbs and ripping out filler words. I still didn't get plotting. But I was sneaking up on it.

I revised the novel again. I could see it getting better, could see my understanding of what it needed to become better. Sent it to another place, got back "Does not meet our needs."

I joined a writers group that was just starting up, and was the only one in it who had written a novel. Like me, everyone in the group liked SF and fantasy, so I built my first world so that everyone could write in it. No one did much with that world, but it became Settled Space – in which I'm still writing a lot of years later.

I spent a total of seven years taking apart the novel and putting it back together again, but at the same time, following my class with Stephen Leigh, I was writing short SF and fantasy stories that were getting little comments from editors – critical notes about the problems, but not "does not meet our needs." I kept all the rejections in a big shoebox, along with the growing stack of rejections for the novels.

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

And I wrote all the time.

I wrote while the kids were taking naps, I wrote at night while my husband was out drinking and playing cards with his buddies, I wrote instead of doing housework, I wrote on days off. I took my notebook to the ER, and if we were empty – I worked Baylor weekends, and Sunday morning usually started pretty slowly – I wrote at work.

I went to writers' meetings and we each read our work aloud while the other writers took notes. Each listener explained what they liked first, then the problems they had with the story. The writer got to keep all the written notes. Then we moved around the circle, and repeated the process. Meetings started at around eight or nine PM, and sometimes didn't break up until two in the morning. It was intense, focused, deeply educational. We had rules, and we followed them, and the rules made all the difference.

I wrote a couple of science fiction sonnets – one about a male sexbot, and one about computers, and both of those sold (for \$25 apiece) to *Aboriginal SF*. **After seven years and more than a hundred rejection slips in that shoebox of mine, those were my first sales.**

Episode 1: How did you go from nursing to writing fiction full time?

Meanwhile, after seven years of revising the romance novel, from which I learned a phenomenal amount, I got an offer from a small publisher of airport books to buy it for \$500 if I could cut the length in half. I did not accept the offer. I decided at that point to let that novel die. I'd decided to pursue SF and fantasy, because that was what I loved.

By that time I'd been divorced for a couple years and was most of the way through writing my second novel, *Fire in the Mist*. I revised it using the process I'd figured out, which was brutal and gruelling and took a lot of time and effort.

But when I sent out *Fire in the Mist*, it sold to the first place I sent it within one month of the day I mailed it out.

And when, on the strength of its sales, I got a three book deal from my publisher, **I quit nursing.**

That's how I GOT to writing full time.

That's NOT how I survived while writing full time, which is a beast of a different nature. And will be the next video in this series.

RESOURCE LIST on next page

RESOURCE LIST

[My Fiction-Writing Patreon](#)

[One Good Enemy](#)

[The Sexbot Sonnet \(Mentioned in the video\)](#)

[The Computer Sonnet \(Mentioned in the video\)](#)

[How To Choose A Writers' Group](#)

[QUIZ: Are You Right for Writing?](#)

[How to Revise Your Novel](#)

[The HollyShop: Links to My Fiction and Writing Classes](#)

[My Personal Website](#)

[My Writers Community Site](#)