

How to Collaborate – and How Not To

By Holly Lisle

Collaborations are the proverbial double-edged sword – they can hurt you even as they help you. They're fun to do, but they're harder to sell than solo novels. If you get one with a big-name author and no one has ever heard of you, the chances are the book will sell pretty well and you'll make some money, but you'll do ninety percent of the work and even though a lot of people will read the book, no one will know who you are. If you get one and you *are* the big-name author, the collaboration won't sell as well as your regular work, you'll do ninety percent of the work, and the few of your regular fans who read the book will complain that it isn't much like your usual work.

And now the careful readers and the math whizzes among you will be saying, "If Collaborator A and and Collaborator B each do ninety percent of the work, that's one-hundred eighty percent. That doesn't add up.

Unfortunately it does. Collaborations are much more work than solo novels. They can be much more frustrating. They present special legal problems. They can cost you in a lot of hidden ways.

And you're saying, "Yes, but my friend and I have this idea and we still want to do a collaboration."

All right. If you're going to do one, here are the things that I've learned that can help you, and the things I've found out the hard way can hurt you.

- **Always determine in advance who will do what and who will own what. And put down your agreements in writing.**

Now **you're** going to say, "Okay, that one doesn't apply to me because I'm going to be doing **my** collaboration with my best friend. Next!"

- Wait. Please. This is the most important thing that you can do, right now, to make sure that you and your friend are still friends after the collaboration is done. I lost a friend – a good friend – over a collaboration, and I might have lost her anyway, but if we had written down, in advance, what each of us would be required to do to complete an acceptable collaboration, maybe we wouldn't have ended up never speaking to each other again. Here are the absolute minimum number of things you need to agree on, in writing, before you start your project.

1. Who owns each character and the universe you have created (or each part of it), and whether either of you has the right to do solo works in the universe or whether it can only be used for collaborative ventures.
2. What each of you may and may not do to characters owned by the other.
3. Who gets final edit on the manuscript or manuscripts, or if this will change from book to book, how you will determine in advance who will get final edit each time. (And I'm telling you right now, you cannot both have final edit. Only one person can ever have the last word. Figure out before you type the first word who that person is going to be.)
4. How you will divide the work itself.
5. What will happen to the universe and its characters if one or both of you want to drop out.
6. How you will resolve differences if one of you does work that the other deems unacceptable, inappropriate, or simply wrong for the world.
7. Whose name will go first on the cover. It's going

to have to be the same one every time, so figure it out now.

There is a further list of things that you'll need to work out in advance if one or both of you have already sold solo works, or has an agent and/or a publisher.

1. Whose agent or agency will negotiate contracts and subrights.
2. Who will deal primarily with the editor.
3. Who will write outlines and treatments.
4. How the money will be divided in both best- and worst-case situations, and who will be the one who receives payment and will be responsible for paying the other one.

An agent can help you with some of this stuff, but some of it you're going to have to figure out on your own. It isn't fun. It is important.

If you're like most potential collaborators, this little list has startled you. None of us, when we're sitting down with a friend hammering out story concepts and shaping our universe and characters together, is thinking, "Now who's going to get first billing on the book and who is going to edit whom, and what happens if my friend turns out not to be able to finish his half of the work so that I get stuck doing all of it?" We're just having fun, playing around with the magic of creation, and all the things that can and eventually will go wrong are still a million miles away. Please believe me when I tell you that all the best intentions in the world won't help you when things start going wrong. Then you need to have things in writing.

- **Write a good outline and stick with it.** This doesn't seem like such a big deal. You and your friend share a vision. You've talked endlessly about it, you know who your characters are and where you want them to go, and the fact that you don't have the whole story worked out doesn't seem relevant.

- **Divide your workload clearly.** If one of you is going to do the even chapters and the other one is going to do the odds, fine. If one is going to do all the scenes with Elmira Fairclothe and the other is going to write only from the point of view of Studly Stallionbritches, that's okay too. If you want to write the first draft and have your friend do the second, that also works. What you **don't** want is to be bopping along on chapter three and have your collaborator suddenly start having ducks because you've stepped on what he saw as his territory. Nor do you want to have your collaborator complain that you're a lazy slob who's not holding up your end of the workload.

- **Figure out why you want to do a collaboration in the first place, and both of you sit down and work out what each of you contributes.** The ideal collaboration is one in which the book you are writing together is one neither of you could write alone. If one of you is a brilliant mathematician and the other is a professional-caliber sculptor and you're doing a book on the mathematics of sculpture, you're heading in the right direction. If one of you has vast knowledge of military history and the other is equally proficient in all things magical and fantastical and you're developing a huge fantasy series that involves magical battles with well-thought-out tactics and strategy, you're right on the money. If, however, both of you are doing this because you think it will be easier than writing a whole book by

yourself, go home, go to bed, and stay there until you come to your senses. Good collaborations are not simply as hard as solo novels; they aren't even merely twice as hard to write as good solo novels. They are harder by a full order of magnitude.

- **Remember your priorities.** This can be tough once you're well into the project, when it stops being one big hoot and starts feeling like real work. So give some thought to the question while you're still having lots of fun. Was your goal just to do a fun story with your friend? Was it to get both of you published? Was it to make both of you financially independent? (Good luck if that's the case – collaborations are not usually the golden road to riches.) Or were you aiming for something else? And what is going to satisfy both of you? Just completing a whole book? Selling it? Still being friends once it's done?

However – from my own experience here – the act of writing changes the vision, and even **with** an outline you can end up in trouble. My friend and I had agreed to write a book together in a universe that I created in which the heroine was so strong in her faith and her love of her fellow humans that she transformed and redeemed the fallen angel who was sent to lead her astray. It was supposed to be both a life-affirming and a funny book, the start of a series of collaborative books in which humans would interact with denizens from Hell and Heaven, and in which God would demonstrate a seriously warped sense of humor. I wrote the outline, she was to do the first draft, I was to do the final draft.

Somewhere along the way, she veered seriously from the outline. What had started out a fun and funny book turned very dark, ending with the heroine seduced away from her faith, left hopeless and broken and bound for Hell, with the fallen

angel triumphant. When I got her manuscript, I had a problem. As she'd written it, it no longer set up the second, third, and fourth books, which I'd sold at the same time with three other writers, all of whom were already working on their books. I tried to rewrite it, but I couldn't. It was too far from what I had to have, in both tone and content. I ended up sending it back to her with a long letter explaining why I couldn't use it – I wrote a completely different solo book in just under a month to meet the deadline, an exhausting experience in itself, but made worse because my friend was deeply hurt that I'd rejected her book, deeply hurt that I had written a letter to her explaining my decisions instead of telling her in person (a piece of sheer stupidity on my part – my publisher told me to give her the news in writing and instead of treating her like a friend I did as he suggested and treated her as any other business associate), and just plain hurt because. She never spoke to me again, and I'll tell you, no book is worth a friend.

The deal is different for two established pros working together than it is for two beginners. Agents frequently introduce potential collaborators – you frequently meet the person you're going to be working with for the first time after you've already signed the contract (though you both will have done a fair amount of prep work before.) You don't have emotion or the potential loss of friendship riding on your project if it fails. Usually both of you already have a pretty good idea of how the business works. It's less exciting, but you have less to lose – and you can make some good friends if you and your collaborators get on well.

If you've gone through this list and you know how you want to divvy up the work and you've covered all your potential trouble spots and worked them out in advance and you still want to do the collaboration, you should do fine. Remember that joint projects always take longer than you planned, always contain some surprises, and rarely go turn out the way

you expected. They can be fun if you if you know this in advance and have already made allowances.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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