

# Work for Hire – Up-side and Down-side

By Holly Lisle

A lot of writers do work-for-hire writing at some point in their careers. It can be an okay thing, a bad thing, or a complete career-wrecker, depending upon the deal you get.

A semi-related thread in the Forward Motion Writers' Community spurred me to think about this: I commented that a submission agreement included in a current open call for writers at WOTC was extremely bad for writers, considering that writers would be submitting completed original works, and I also noted that if the WOTC deal included bringing out books under the company copyright rather than authors' individual copyrights, the deal would be appalling. At the moment, the site does not include anything like a sample contract to look over, nor does it make any mention of the ownership of copyright of works accepted under this open call, a significant and serious omission that needs to be corrected promptly.

I've done work-for-hire writing. (Three BARD'S TALE books for Bill Fawcett Inc.) I don't recommend it.

But there are times when work for hire is not a completely bad deal.

YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER IT IF:

- 1) You're getting a LOT of money up front.
- 2) The packager has already done all the world-building and has a complete series bible for you to use.
- 3) You have no false expectations that this work is going to give you any sort of name recognition, or be a stepping stone in your career. (You give me Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis,

I give you the seven thousand nameless others who've been toiling away writing Dragonlance and other shared-world series for the last umpteen years.)

4) You have the time to do this work-for-hire writing and still keep up with your original work, which is what will give you the career you actually want and can, perhaps, live on.

IF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING CONDITIONS EXIST, work for hire will be a very bad deal for you. Run in the opposite direction.

1) The money is marginal.

2) You will be contributing original worldbuilding, a bevy of brand-new characters, or other significant original material for which you will not own copyright, and which you will never be able to use elsewhere.

3) You think that the fact that a packaged, series-branded book that sells a hundred thousand copies will in any way boost your sales of your solo work. Unless you established a solid solo career first, as Timothy Zahn did, it won't.

4) You're already fighting for time to do your original work.

WORK FOR HIRE WILL WRECK YOU IF:

You give up on your own work to pursue work-for-hire projects.

If you do this, you're likely to become disillusioned by the working conditions and by the lack of rewards. If the book sells 500,000 copies, you'll get exactly as much from it as if it sells 5,000 copies. The same money, the same recognition. No one will actually have to tell you how the book is doing, either – you don't own it, so you have no right to know.

You won't be creating anything solid that you can hand to a publisher in the future – the numbers for your books won't be your numbers, they'll be the packager's numbers. They won't count AT ALL if ever you tire of work-for-hire writing and

want to step out on your own. You'll be an experienced writer with all the clout of a first novelist.

You won't own anything you've done – you'll be in the miserable position of the life-time renter looking enviously at homeowners and wondering how the hell they scraped together a down-payment.

If you have to make the choice between owning your own business or working as an employee at someone else's whim, consider taking the risks necessary and employing yourself. Work for hire is just another rat-race job, generally with worse-than-average deadlines and a frequent exploitation mentality in the employers.

Doing your own original work is an investment in a career. Invest in yourself.

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