



Being Genre-Fluid

Marnie Riches

SOME ASPIRING AUTHORS write for a couple of years, attending crit groups to buff one particular manuscript until it gleams, and eventually, that manuscript finds an agent and publisher. I'm surprised by how many write a novel, fling it on the slushpile, and hey-presto! They get an agent and a deal on the first try. I, however, was one of those poor souls who laboured away for nigh on a decade before being published under my own name.

Admittedly, I got my first agent pretty quickly. At the time, I was writing for kids, and my first published titles were a commission via a book-packager, published by HarperCollins Children's — a series of six historical adventures for 7+ year olds, penned under a pseudonym. The experience taught me how to write fast to an editor's specification and edit myself thoroughly. Yet still, I craved seeing my own name on the cover of a middle-grade title, published by one of the Big Five. So I wrote and I wrote and I wrote, but sadly, I was writing the wrong thing at the wrong time and I never got a deal for children's fiction as Marnie Riches.

Scroll forward by several years, and it was 2009. I had started to write my debut crime thriller, *The Girl Who Wouldn't Die* — an Amsterdam-set murder mystery. By the time it finally reached readers in 2015, not including the six commissioned children's books that I'd published, I had written... wait for it...one picture book, one-and-a-half YA historical fantasies, two middle-grade adventures, one contemporary women's novel, one pilot episode of a drama and one pilot episode of a children's programme. *None*



of those efforts ever found a home. Not a single one. They remain nothing more than files on now-defunct laptops. They were ‘practice’.

You may be asking, *What’s so great about a backlist of unpublished failures?* Well, my answer is that the willingness and ability to be genre-fluid affords you versatility and experience. The market can be brutal, and good deals for commercial fiction (so, the stuff that you might actually pay the bills with) are like hens’ teeth. Supermarkets are paring back bookselling space to flog Flash Bathroom or Maltesers instead. Covid has swept many sub-genres du jour off the editorial menu. It’s fair to say, *staying* published for a mid-lister has never been harder. If the bottom falls out of the women’s fiction market, as was the case a decade ago, being able to turn your hand to historical, crime, romance or nonfiction might well save you from the poorhouse. If you can write for different age groups, so much the better! When my children’s fiction floundered, crime fiction took me to where I needed to be. When my crime-writing contract ended, and Covid stalled the negotiation of a new deal, I fortuitously had a deal to write three historical sagas under a pseudonym. The chips are down but I’m still published. Genre fluidity is without doubt an author’s number one tool to literary survival.