



The Best Advice I Received as a Writer

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I'VE BEEN PART of many groups over the years. The Devon Mushroom and Toadstool Spotters. The Devon Fruit and Seed Spotters. The Tufty Club. Ballet classes, swimming lessons, cross-country teams. As a seven-stone student I was vice-captain of Lancaster University's Women's Rugby Football Club. But I'm not a natural joiner. Like many writers, I'm an observer, but I do find safety among people with a shared interest, be it for fungi or front crawl.

On the Myers-Briggs test I am an INFP-T (Introversion, Intuition, Feeling, Perception-Turbulent) known as 'the mediator'. I might seem quiet or shy but inside is another matter. Many writers fit this category. Empathy is a key trait and enables us to write characters, relationships and emotions. We are a small group, out of step, off-kilter, curious about human nature, with a passion to make the world a better place in our own creative way.

When I began to take writing seriously, I joined Exeter Writers which was not a group for sycophants but rather for constructive feedback and support. One of the more established writers gave me the best advice. 'Join the RNA', Margaret said. I must've looked blank — and not because I thought this stood for ribonucleic acid or the Royal Navy. 'I'm not a romantic novelist', I said. 'You write about relationships', she countered. 'You write about love. The Romantic Novelists' Association is a broad church. And they throw fabulous parties.'

So, I joined. I went to the Christmas party. It was indeed fabulous. I was



slightly starstruck by all the writers with books in supermarkets and libraries, on bestseller lists and Underground posters. I went with Margaret and another friend. I stood with them in a huddle until Margaret made me introduce myself to Katie Fforde, doyenne of romantic fiction who'd once given me first place in the Yeovil Literary prize. 'Right', Katie said. 'Lizzie (Elizabeth Buchan) and I will find you an agent tonight.' They introduced me to three agents. I did the embarrassing pitch. One agent told me no-one would buy my book. The other two asked for the first three chapters. By the end of the night, one requested the full manuscript and by the end of the week I'd signed with Broo Doherty who has doggedly stuck with me and sold five novels.

According to its website, the RNA was founded in 1960 to provide a voice and network for romantic authors. It currently has 1,000 members, writers across the spectrum of commercial and women's fiction, and is constantly evolving. The mission is: 'We're passionate about creating an inclusive RNA that promotes and values diversity. Romantic fiction portrays all types of people. We're on a journey to ensure the RNA does too. Be kind. Be you. We write better that way.'

I am very glad to have found my pew in this broad church. Acting on Margaret's advice helped me as a published writer and continues to remind me that what I do is important. To quote the RNA once more: 'Romantic fiction explores and celebrates love in all its messy, unexpected, improbable, imperfection'. And that to me is as valid as a red squirrel making young children road-safety conscious.