

Making the Most of Your Membership

by Tanya Michaels

I'm always happy to look around at chapter meetings and see all the new faces. It seems GRW is constantly growing! I wanted to say welcome to any new members and share a few thoughts on how you might be able to get the most of your membership in Georgia Romance Writers (and Romance Writers of America, our parent organization, which you must belong to in order to join GRW).

One of the most obvious benefits of belonging to RWA is the *Romance Writers Report* that arrives every month, packed full of industry news, contest opportunities and inspiration. There are also new-and-improved RWA e-loops you can participate in to share knowledge and support with other RWA authors. And don't overlook the RWA website at www.rwanational.org. Agent and publisher information is updated regularly, and past articles you may have missed are archived in the Members Only section. If you're hunting for an agent, you can also call the RWA main office to inquire whether or not a prospective agent has had any official complaints filed against him/her by other members.

GRW is not set up with loops such as RWA or some of the specifically online chapters, such as Outreach, but those who come to GRW meetings quickly see all of the benefits we do offer members. It starts in the first half hour--every month, a different published author hosts a thirty minute Q&A session, where new and/or unpublished members can ask about craft and industry, as well as meet chapter-mates in a smaller group environment than the meeting at large. If you never come to a GRW meeting, you still get the monthly benefit of our award-winning, online newsletter *The Galley*, but you'll be missing out on networking, informative discussion and important friendships that will sustain you through rejections and make celebrating triumphs even more enjoyable. No one makes it to every meeting, but showing up goes a long way toward making the most of the opportunities GRW provides.

Some newer members might not be aware of our tape library and annual March workshop. For a safety deposit of a couple of dollars, you can check out an audio tape from past RWA and Moonlight & Magnolias conferences, bringing you sessions presented by authors and industry professionals. The March workshop is a chance for our unpublished members to submit a synopsis and first chapter for feedback from a published author. The entries are distributed to participating authors in February, then at the March meeting, we all get together and break into small groups for discussion. I love that GRW does this. Our goal is for all of our members to sell their work, and this is one small step we take to help each other achieve that. Many writers pay contest fees to get objective opinions from published judges, but this is free (beyond the normal small meeting fee we pay for our lunch and to reserve the room). The March workshop also helps you polish up your entry just in time to participate in the prestigious Maggie Award of

Excellence. And don't forget, GRW members pay a discounted rate for the Maggies and for the exciting Moonlight & Magnolias conference each fall.

Another way you can help yourself and help the chapter at the same time is to volunteer, especially for the conference. (Don't worry, no one expects you to jump right in with an intimidating job.) Even when you start small, you get to know a lot of fellow members, sometimes striking up critique groups or making other valuable connections. We all have busy lives--I'm not suggesting you volunteer your time at the expense of your writing--but if there's something you know you can do, throw your name in the ring. If it ends up that someone else is already taking care of the job, people will appreciate that you offered and keep you in mind for next time.

You can also write an article (under 1,000 words) for the chapter newsletter, a short term volunteer act that can be done and emailed without ever leaving your home. Don't let having not sold a book yet stop you from submitting an article for the editor's consideration. Is there one area that contest judges routinely compliment you on? Maybe you could share your secrets. Are you racking up credentials in the short story market and have some tips? Or is there an aspect you've been wrestling with, and you'd like to give an overview of what did or didn't work for you, to help the rest of us? It doesn't necessarily have to be a craft article, either. Got time-saving suggestions? A recommendation for a book on publishing we should all read? Not only will a newsletter byline help your fellow members get to know you, many articles are picked up for reprints in other RWA chapter newsletters. Free promotion and potentially wide spread name recognition!

I hope these suggestions are useful to you and that if you have any questions, you'll ask someone--either by email or at the next meeting! Before you know it, *you* may be the veteran member who's now published and sharing your experiences with someone who just walked in to her first GRW meeting.

RITA-nominated author Tanya Michaels joined GRW in 1999--unpublished and clueless at the time. She is now serving as vice president of programs, and her seventh book, SPICING IT UP (Harlequin Flipside) will be available in June 2005.