

# Vampires, Romance, and Deadlines

By Susan Frith

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It was 3 a.m.. Leslie Esdaile W'80 sat at the computer on the third floor of her West Philly Victorian twin, working on a novel in her vampire-slayer trilogy. With her husband and their children sleeping below, she had only the company of coffee, cigarette, and imagination as she pushed to meet her deadlines.

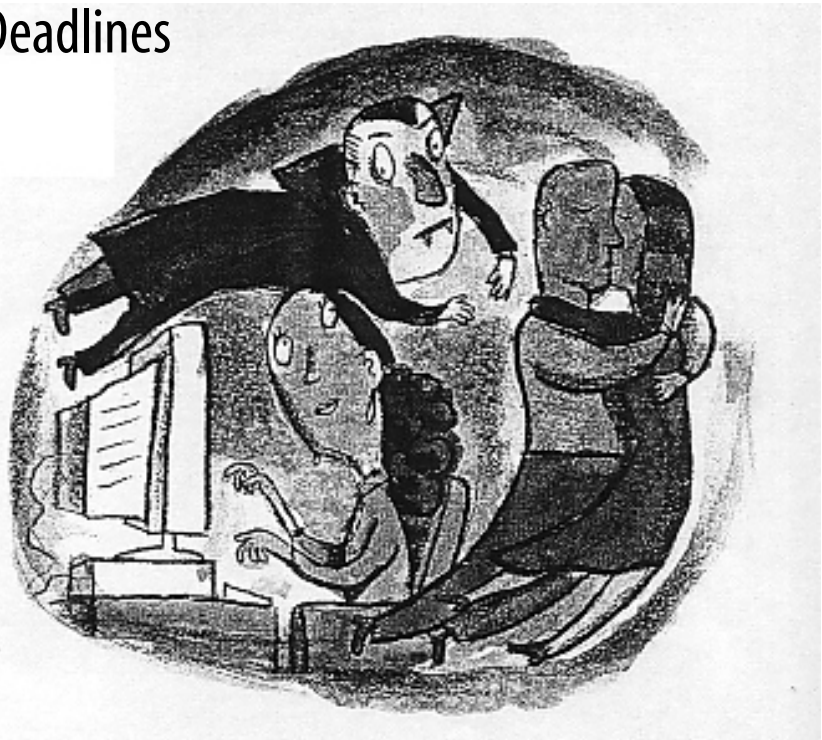
By day she focused on her African-American military romance. By night, this multicultural fantasy, filled with scenes like the one she was just typing, in which a woman is attacked by a vampire that has morphed into a panther.

Getting up to make some more coffee, Esdaile opened her office door. In the dark hallway a black animal with glowing eyes rose from the flo and lunged toward her.

It was her Labrador retriever, Girl-friend.

"I was so caught up in the scene, I screamed! I lost the cigarette, coffee, everything," says Esdaile, letting out a generous laugh as she recalls the incident. "The dog scared me so bad. After that, I was like, 'I'm going to have to switch an do vampires during the day.'"

It was not the first time that Esdaile, a corporate executive-turned-author of more than a dozen novels, has shown flexibility under pressure. Twelve years ago, she was on a V.P. track, "doing marketing and sales for a Fortune 100 technology firm. She was about to leave for a business trip one afternoon, when she got a call that her six month-old daughter had been badly scalded down her left arm and hand in a daycare accident involving a toppled clothes iron.



"Immediately, like that," Esdaile snaps her fingers, "My life changed."

At the time of her daughter's injury and hospitalization (there would be 17 surgeries in the years that followed), Esdaile was going through a divorce. So when her company told her she could take an unpaid family leave or get laid off, she knew she had to choose the latter. Even with insurance coverage, her daughter's extensive surgery left \$100,000 in bills. Esdaile got her bill reduced by half through a letter-writing campaign, sold her home, and moved to Delaware.

She wrote grants for non-profits. Then she started assembling gift-baskets out of her home. And, because she was too wound up to sleep at night, she stayed up reading African -American classics. "Those books were so damned depressing," says Esdaile, "I did not want to read about anybody's husband dragging them down the steps and abusing them. So a girlfriend brought me a bag of romance novels. I was able to put away one a night. I kept thinking to myself, 'Why don't they have African-American heroes?'" She also noticed that there was a formula to these stories.

One night, she came across a magazine notice for a short-story contest with a \$2,500 prize. Esdaile began writing and couldn't stop. Her girlfriends made copies on the job and started circulating the story-"a Latino-African-American James Bond with some paranormal stuff"-asking for more installments. At a friend's urging she attended a romancewriters conference in New York. There, a luncheon speaker, the editor of a new publishing line, called for multicultural manu scripts. Esdaile snagged the woman as she came off the dais and pitched her novel.

"She said, 'Ooh, send it to me.'"

"Really?"

"Yes, have your agent send it to me."

Agent? What agent?

Undaunted, Esdaile waylaid the next speaker, who happened to be an experienced agent. "And she doesn't do little people any more, right?" But Esdaile walked up and said, "I've got a sale. See that woman over there?"

All you have to do is physically mail [my manuscript] to her and I will send you the postage." Esdaile was so persistent that the woman gave in. A month later she got a call offering her a two-book deal (Sundance and Slow Bum).

Moving back to Philadelphia, Esdaile opened her gift-basket business in a West Philadelphia empowerment zone. Things were going well until the store got robbed and Esdaile lost the customer base off her computer. What now, she wondered. Esdaile used her experience to teach entrepreneurship and marketing to small-business people; she even taught at a crackrehabilitation center, recognizing that for many women without formal education, "entrepreneurship is the only way" to support their families.

Realizing that her books were reaching a mass audience, Esdaile began to use her writing as another way to teach, filling her novels with entrepreneurs and "everyday Joes," as opposed to 11 some rich guy who rides in on a white charger."

She later helped turn around an ailing Philadelphia program that granted small loans to minority- or women-owned small businesses, dramatically reducing the default rate through "characterbased" loans. "I would not take people's [homes] as collateral" and risk "suck[ing] out the only asset that is still left in the hands of the African -American community." Instead, Esdaile asked clients to put up things like their wedding pictures "that I knew people would die to get back."

Even after she left that job, Esdaile continued to support African-American businesses. In her Rivers of the Soul, a financially strapped, divorced mother (whose story is modeled after her own) takes a bath while read-

ing a romance novel. Esdaile came up with the idea of packaging that book with a gift basket featuring a music CD and locally made incense and bath products. (Not coincidentally, in that same book, the protagonist's high-school sweetheart, Jerome, comes back into her life decades later. Esdaile is now married to her own highschool sweetheart, Aldine Jerome Banks Jr.)

In the period of uncertainty after the September 11 attacks, Esdaile decided she needed to stay home and write full time, but the publishing business was stalled. Finally, in February, her agent called. "I had so many projects sitting on my table I almost couldn't get to them all": Two books based on the Paramount/ Showtime TV series, Soul Food (including For Better For Worse, Pocket Books, October 2002). A military romance (Tomorrow's Promise, Genesis Press, September 2002) to raise money for the Silver Shield Foundation. A vampire trilogy (first in the series, The Slayer Chronicles: Minion, St. Martin's Press, October 2003). Plus two anthology novellas. (For some books she writes under the pen names L.E. Banks or Leslie E. Banks.)

Though she can now support herself by writing, Esdaile says, "I'm a businesswoman first. The moment the book [is finished], I'm thinking, how do you move that product? I'm sitting up here right now and thinking of the T-shirts I could do with the vampire series." And maybe spill-proof coffee mugs ... \*

-Susan Frith