

# Don't worry, you'll learn

By Ellen Crosby

It was midnight and I was in a nightgown when the Moscow bureau chief at ABC News offered me the job as their radio correspondent.

"I don't know anything about radio," I said.

"Don't worry," he said. "You'll learn."

I should admit this was a telephone conversation, and he was still at work, calling from the bureau. In 1990, I lived in the now non-existent Soviet Union, a vast unhappily stitched-together amalgamation of "republics" which made up the largest country in the world and spanned eleven time zones. A 14-hour work day was normal.

Though I'd been looking for a job in print journalism, I signed on with ABC — and I did learn. Working in radio taught me three valuable lessons that helped when I started writing fiction.

First, the importance of writing tight and using precise language. I had 37 seconds — including my signoff — to deliver my report. "Think of a guy washing his car," my boss in New York said, "and talk to him."

Okay, a distracted audience, too. If the story wasn't compelling, he'd change stations or turn me off. At first I tried to work around the time restriction. It was tough distilling pages of notes in a reporter's notebook into a few pithy sentences. I didn't fool the newsroom editors back in the States.

"We can tell you're a print journalist," one of them told me. "You're the only correspondent who doesn't breathe when you file your piece. Slow down and stop cramming so much into your stories."

So I worked on keeping that car washer listening to me — by writing sharp, clear prose that would grab his attention. When I moved over to fiction, my goal was to keep a reader up past bedtime.

My second lesson was about deadlines and staying focused. In radio, the news at noon is over in minutes. File late and your story doesn't get aired. Sometimes there isn't much time to pull it together, either. So I learned speed and how not to feel like I'd been shot out of a cannon when New York needed a piece for the next news cycle — and I had 15 minutes to write and voice it. Fortunately, in fiction the deadlines are longer — but I've kept that radio urgency about turning in my work on time.

The third lesson involved reading aloud what I'd written — even when it wasn't for radio. If it's bad on paper, it sounds worse when you hear it. I never deliver a manuscript to my editor without first mumbling all 85,000 words. If you feel silly, read to a pet. They're the perfect audience. They already love everything you do.

To me, the difference between journalism and fiction is like working different sets of muscles at the gym — though it's all exercise. As to *how* they're different, I like what John Hersey, the Pulitzer-prize winning journalist-turned-novelist said: "Journalism allows its readers to witness history — fiction gives its readers an opportunity to live it."

*Ellen Crosby has since returned to the United States. Her latest book is The Merlot Murders.*