The Poets & Writers Guide to the Book Deal

The essential guide from the authoritative source on everything you need to know about the book deal, including an overview of the publication process, a breakdown of book advances, a look at jacket design from the author's perspective, working with a copy editor, the most important clauses in an author agreement, and more.

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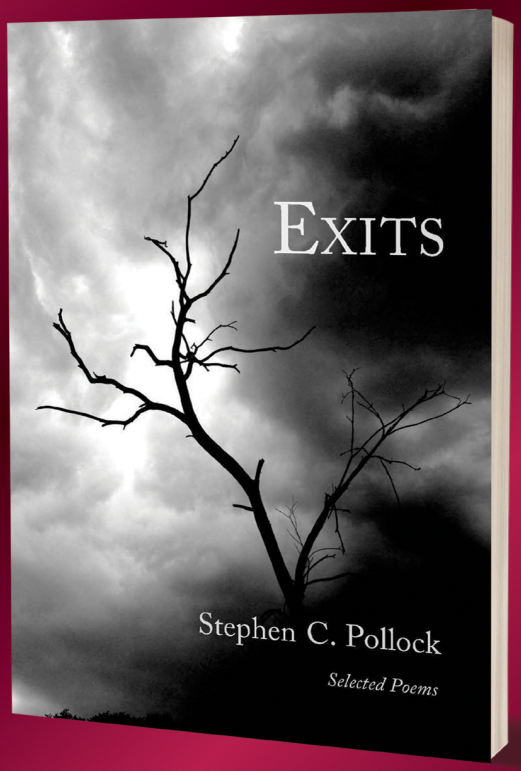

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ORDER. We hope you enjoy *The Poets & Writers Guide to the Book Deal*, which includes thirteen articles packed with insider tips and information to help you navigate every step of the publication process, from acquisition to cover design to the book launch, plus practical details on contracts, advances, and rights.

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The Staff of Poets & Writers, Inc.

Poets&Writers Guide to the Book

Deal

An Author's View of the Editorial Process

From Manuscript to Published Book

By Jimin Han

ONE of my most vivid writing workshop memories is of novelist Paul West saying to a roomful of undergrads that immediately after typing "The End" on a manuscript and mailing it off to his editor, he began to write a new book. In graduate school no one told me anything different; I believed we write until we finish, and then we begin again on our next project. So when I sold my first novel in 2016, I was unprepared for the work I still had to do in order to hold my published book in my hands.

What happens between the time you type "The End" and the time your book becomes available in bookstores and libraries? Quite a lot, it turns out. After accepting an offer you will engage in a publication process involving several stages that altogether can take over a year. I was surprised by how much I was expected to do, particularly in the editorial phase. With my first novel, I went through the tasks asked of me without fully grasping how I could make the most of the experience. In 2021, when I sold my second novel, my hope was to feel more at ease in partnering with the publisher throughout the stages that led to the final book, knowledgeable about how to be its advocate.

Part of the challenge with my first novel was balancing my feelings of gratitude (along with deep-seated fears and erratic self-confidence, let's be honest) with clarity about the publishing process. What were the roles of those in the publishing company with whom I would be working? What part was I to play in making my book a success? How actively involved could I be without delaying the publication of the book? These questions really boiled down to a single larger one: How could I work with the publisher to produce a book I'd be proud of, a book that would be a success for both me and everyone involved?

Because having information about the publishing process is key to moving through it with this confidence, I reached out to several other writers by e-mail for their advice. It was eye-opening and reassuring to hear about their accomplishments and struggles on the path to publication. They helped me make sense of bits and pieces I'd heard over the years about how a book is edited. While each publishing house has its own process, most involve similar steps and casts of publishing professionals. As you navigate these steps for the first time, it's great to have a support network in place. As Christine Kandic Torres, author of *The Girls in Queens* (HarperVia, 2022), recommends, "I feel strongly that flexing on any and all mental health benefits you have access to is crucial."

SO HOW does the editing process begin? Your initial point of contact at a publishing house will probably be an acquiring, or acquisitions, editor. This is the person who buys your book from you. The acquiring editor can have a title like "associate editor," "editor," "senior editor," "executive editor," or even "publisher."

Before my first novel was published a writer told me that when her book was up for auction—a situation in which several acquiring editors offer you a contract for your book, making bids until one is chosen—she picked the offer from the editor who wanted the fewest changes made to the manuscript. At the time, that confused me. Isn't the writing of your book done when you sell it?

Enter the stage of developmental editing. In rare instances you might

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be able to skip this phase. Generally, though, after you've sold your book, your acquiring editor will summarize the vision they have for your novel and send you off to work. This process might involve all or some of the following: a phone call, an editorial letter, hand-written comments on a printout of your manuscript, or a Word document with Track Changes highlighted. The editor who acquired your book will typically be the person to work with you on these edits. That was the case for me and many writers I spoke to, but occasionally the developmental editor can be someone else at the press.

When buying my first novel, my future editor raised a few very specific questions that determined the sale of the book. We talked at length by phone, and I knew immediately that her ideas would strengthen the story. This is where the editor-author relationship you've dreamed of hopefully becomes a reality. When my second book was completed, I was thrilled to receive an offer from this same editor, who was now working at a different publishing house. This time around, however, she recommended a number of changes.

When I was faced with the task of deep edits, impostor syndrome set in. I'd sold my book, but now could I deliver? She sent me a comprehensive editorial letter outlining her recommendations, and we embarked on two rounds of revisions. There was a part of me that questioned whether I could actually do the work the book needed. I wanted my editor to continue to believe I was the writer she thought I was.

I geared myself up to return to the world of my story. Although I knew, after my first novel, that there was more to do, I still had a tangled net of impatience and doubt from which to free myself. When daunted by the prospect of returning to my manuscript, I found strength after I remembered that my editor believed in my book and she was there to help me. We had a proven track record together. I listened to her advice and knew she was right. Once I reread the very first page of the manuscript, I became absorbed by the story, and I was able to make the necessary revisions, which took the book to another level. At this point I was also already working on my third book, as my professor had advised many years ago and which I knew was essential to my mental health. Don't we all, as writers, only feel like writers when we're writing? Having other writing projects or something else that you're intent upon during the publication process may also help you. There's plenty of downtime as you wait for people in the publishing house to get back to you—periods that can last weeks or stretch into months—and I was grateful for the distraction.

THE MAIN POINT IS TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION OPEN AND FLUID. TRY AN IDEA ON FOR SIZE BEFORE DISMISSING IT OUT OF HAND. YOUR EDITOR BOUGHT YOUR BOOK BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE IN IT AND IN YOU.

Kirstin Chen's *Counterfeit* (William Morrow, 2022) also went through many rounds of edits. "I had felt pretty sure the book was close to done," Chen says, "because we'd gotten great interest from editors, as well as from TV studios and streaming services. Oh, how wrong I was!" It takes courage to be willing to make more changes after that kind of positive reception, but Chen dove in. "She pushed me harder than I've ever been pushed," she says about her editor. "All in all, it took four rounds of significant revisions to make all the pieces of the story fit together, and I am forever grateful she didn't let me bail out when the book was simply good enough."

Even when you're working with an editor you trust, conversations with them can sometimes feel uncomfortable: You've worked long and hard on your book, and you may be reluctant to rethink elements of your approach, or it very well may be that your editor makes a suggestion that doesn't ring true. The main point is to keep the conversation open and fluid. Try an idea on for size before dismissing it out of hand. Your editor bought your book because they believe in it and in you. It is through the back-and-forth of a conversation that solutions may arise.

Understanding how long each step toward publication will take eases some of the pressure, especially during the book's early stages. You may hear from your editor the day after you sell your book, or you might not hear anything for many weeks. Questions abound: When will your editor give you feedback? When are you expected to submit your revisions? When is your publication date? Jennifer

N. Baker, author of *Forgive Me Not* (Nancy Paulsen Books, 2023), says communication is critical. Editors are busy with numerous authors and often overworked. "I think the main thing is that it'd be great if writers got as much clarity on schedules as possible up front," she says. "It's good for people to understand what's expected in terms of turnaround. Ultimately I rewrote about 40 percent of the book, and it did get longer, but overall the story strengthened due to sensitivity reads and deep editorial feedback."

Some writers sell their books before their manuscripts are completed, which makes the developmental editing process even more complex. Kristen Arnett, author of *With Teeth* (Riverhead Books, 2021), experienced exactly that scenario and received extensive notes from her editor: "I would say that we went through two serious rounds of edits. That made sense because when Riverhead bought the novel, I'd only written around seventy pages." In the first round of edits, Arnett addressed comments that her editor had upon reading the finished draft. This took the majority of Arnett's editing time. The second round addressed inconsistencies in tone and any remaining questions.

After the developmental edit, your manuscript goes into production. When your manuscript enters this phase, it will be copyedited and then formatted into page proofs (also called galleys). Weeks or months might pass between the developmental edit and the copy edit—or the stages could overlap if your publication date is imminent.

For my first novel I dealt directly with the copy editor and then the proofreader. For my second novel, however, everything was handled by the production editor, who explained to me that I'd receive changes to my manuscript, made by a copy editor, on a specific day and asked me if I agreed to return my responses on a due date. My contract stipulated I'd have two weeks for this, one of the few timelines it actually specified. Having this in print was intimidating. There didn't appear to be room for negotiation. Other writers confirmed that two weeks to a month was standard.

It wasn't just that I was on a tight schedule at this point; a variety of emotions competed for my attention. For one thing we were locking in the text of the manuscript. No more substantial changes after this phase. Was it as good as it could be? I had longed for my editor to say the manuscript was ready to go into production—but now that the moment had arrived, was I ready? I am an endless reviser, and the finality frightened me.

"It can be a nerve-racking period, certainly," Michael J. Seidlinger, author of *Anybody Home?* (Clash Books, 2022), says of this part of production. "The best bet is to give the book a thorough pass once or twice during the copyediting phase, listening to the copy editor's suggestions—because they may be more familiar with style guides and even your own writing tendencies—and take your time with it."

Copy editors are vital. They can catch any changes you made during the developmental edit that didn't get carried over throughout the rest of your novel. Beyond spotting typos, they flag grammatical errors, query word choice, and detect inconsistences. As part of this process, they may provide you with what's called a style sheet, a list of words that come up often in your book that you want to be sure to spell and style the same way every time they occur. I welcomed this aid. I also wondered if the copy editor would make assumptions that were not the right fit for my novel. In my first book, for example, I used a colloquial manner of spelling certain Korean words in English rather than the standard style. My editor backed me up on this, and the copy editor understood that my choices were deliberate. Once again communication was key. "Especially if you are a marginalized writer writing characters in the margins," Kandic Torres says of a similar experience, "feel free to push back on corrections that may possibly be more grammatically sound but not correct for your characters in the communities you're depicting."

Matthew Salesses, author of *The Sense of Wonder* (Little, Brown, 2023), further explains the balance between your role as a writer and that of a copy editor: "I pay a lot of attention to every word and punctuation mark, and when I break the rules, I do so on purpose. So it can be stressful to go through a manuscript as if your choices weren't choices you made purposefully. On the other hand, a good copy editor can tell you when sentence structure or something else might get in the way of clarity, or can help notice timeline details or other inconsistencies, and in those cases and others, I'm extremely grateful to have someone read so carefully. You need to meet each other at that point of care."

For my second book, this process was easier. Knowing what to expect helped me feel more comfortable asking questions. When this stage was completed, the production editor sent me a note from the copy editor saying how much she'd enjoyed my book. I was grateful for that surprise boost.

After copyediting come page proofs. Up until then I'd received Word

documents with Track Changes employed. Now my manuscript was a PDF. Here's where it becomes real. There it is. On the page. Set. The margins and font all there. Just like the actual page of the final book. The production editor told me I had one more chance to catch any errors before the book went off to the printer. (I've heard that writers might receive a second round of galleys to review during this stage—but then that's it.) If I needed to make changes the production editor advised me not to exceed the actual space of the line. For example, I could replace words but I couldn't add sentences that would then make the paragraph longer on the page. These changes were to be listed in a particular format in a separate document. I was not able to make any alterations to the PDF itself. And again I was given two weeks to complete this task.

While I was reading through these pages once more, the production editor assured me that a professional proofreader was reviewing the book too. The production editor checked the galley after the proofreader.

DeMisty D. Bellinger, author of *New to Liberty* (Unnamed Press, 2022), enjoyed seeing her page proofs. "I was surprised with how short the book was," she says. "Really, though, it made the whole project that much more real—it looked like a book, not just a manuscript. I think I felt scared and excited, and it was then that I knew the book was actually happening."

Seidlinger also relishes this moment. "By the time I get those," he says of the page proofs, "I make it a point to only glance at them. If you're still thinking like it's a copy edit, you might cause yourself more anxiety and may even slow down the production process."

One of the ongoing conversations you might have with your acquiring editor, throughout this period and certainly before your manuscript is finalized in page proofs, is about your book's title. Some writers find that their original title works well and it ends up being the final title, while others reconsider. Many of the writers I asked were able to keep their original titles. For my second novel, *The Apology* (Little, Brown, 2023), Marcia Bradley, author of *The Home for Wayward Girls* (HarperCollins, 2023), suggested the title upon reading an early draft, and it won out.

A few writers I contacted found their titles through their editors. The editor of my first book, *A Small Revolution* (Little A, 2017), chose the title based on themes she saw in the manuscript. I knew when I heard it that it was the right one. Bellinger landed on her title in a similar fashion. "The editor wasn't too impressed [with 'Kansas Quiet'] and found the words 'New to Liberty' within the text of the novel," she says. "I loved her suggestion because *liberty* referred both to the town and to the freedom each woman experiences in the book." Including the setting in the title was also recommended by Kandic Torres's editor for *The Girls in Queens*, a nod to the New York City borough of Queens, where the novel is set, as well as "the unresolved wounds we carry [from childhood] that influence who we become."

Arnett had more of a struggle with her title. When her editor suggested a change, she was stumped. "I am the kind of writer who always titles every project first thing before I even start writing. But [my editor] made a compelling point. It was possible that readers unfamiliar with my work might only hear or see the title of my book ['Samson'] with no explanation and think it was Christian fiction or some kind of nonfiction biblical work." Compiling a list of potential titles helped Arnett arrive at *With Teeth*, a better fit.

Depending on the press with which you're publishing, your editor may be more or less involved with the design of your cover, a step that begins the transition from editing your book to preparing for its publicity. When it came time to talk about covers for my second book, I was fortunate enough to be advised by Marie Myung-Ok Lee, author of *The Evening Hero* (Simon & Schuster, 2022), to request an Asian American designer. "Do I get to ask that?" I queried. She assured me I could. My worries about the cover for my first novel had been eased by knowing I had an Asian American editor who shared my point of view when it came to avoiding stereotypes and exploitative images. She'd guided the cover design exactly as I hoped she would. With my second novel, having the additional assurance of an Asian American designer in an industry with so few BIPOC publishing professionals made me even more excited about this stage of the publication process.

Salesses and I have the same editor, so I asked him if he had a comparable experience. He agreed that "it helps a lot to have an Asian American editor who can navigate the pitfalls of racist covers." He was pleased with how well the designer represented his book: "I couldn't actually imagine what my cover would be like, and I was surprised to find the designer did such a great job fitting different elements in and also keeping things from being too literal."

Concerns about the cover also came up for Baker, who had the additional factor of genre to weigh. Explaining that original illustrations are favored for young adult books, Baker worked within those parameters. "We were

able to find something that fit my vision and also speaks to the book itself," she says, "to showcase a Black teenage girl…and not fall into the potential to age her up, make her look angry, or put her in a particular light given the book's subject matter. Ultimately my input was received once we had a basis for comparison."

Other participants in the publication process can also have a significant impact on the cover design, particularly those who have perspective on what will reach readers and drive sales. Bellinger knows about this firsthand. "I did go over my expectations and desires for a cover with an in-house designer. She gave me a few mock-ups, and we agreed on one," she says. "But the distributor wanted a cover that depicted a person, so the designer created something else. The second cover was beautiful, and the colors were attractive and refreshing. I did suggest some changes with font and kerning but nothing extensive."

If final say on a cover design is essential to you, you can ask to put a provision into your contract with your publishing house like Kandic Torres was able to do. She says the experience turned out to be "friendly and collaborative."

Is the writer's job done yet? Not quite. Around the corner are publicity and promotion. You will be asked to contribute to these efforts. To help get your book into the hands of booksellers and reviewers, the publisher may print advance reader copies, or ARCs. An ARC is a version of the book with a cover but without the quality of paper and ink that will be used in the published novel. Hopefully by this point, all the steps that you've navigated have made you more comfortable with your publishing team—and, most importantly, you've come to trust your instincts and step up as an advocate for your book. You've made it so far. It's happening. Your book is looking great. Deep breaths. Just a few more steps. Publication day is closer than you think.

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Bill Garten's poems were short-listed & long listed as a finalist in the *Fish Anthology 2022* & his poem "I Lost" was a semi-finalist in the 2022 James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition from the *North Carolina Literary Review*. Bill's poetry book *Asphalt Heart* was published by The Main Street Rag in 2018 & its chapbook version was a finalist in *The Comstock Review*'s 2017 Jessie Bryce Niles Chapbook Contest. *We Have to Stop Here*, Bill's most recent book, is a recent semi-finalist in the 2020 Willow Run Poetry Book Award. Bill is the winner of the 2017 Broken Ribbon Poetry Contest; a Finalist in the 2018 & 2022 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards for Poetry; a Finalist in the 44th *New Millennium* 2017 Awards & a Finalist in the Writers @Work 2018 Contest for a group of poems from *Asphalt Heart*. Bill is also the winner of The Antioch's Writers Workshop Judson Jerome Scholarship & a finalist in The Beverly Prize in the United Kingdom. He has a B.A. in English from Marietta College & an MFA from Ashland University's Program in Creative Writing. Bill won the Emerson Prize for Poetry & the Margaret Ward Martin Prize for Creative Writing.
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Book Advances 101

An Author's Guide to Getting Paid

By Lincoln Michel

THERE are few things authors enjoy talking about *less* than money. It feels icky to dwell on spreadsheets and percentages when we're trying to make art. At the same time there are even fewer things authors want to know about *more* than money, especially since the ins and outs of the business side of publishing are often confusing and opaque. When I first started writing I felt I didn't have any idea how things worked. So I decided to teach myself. Since then I've published books with both a small press and a Big Five publisher and worked in various parts of the industry. Here are some of the things every author should know about a seemingly simple yet complex part of publishing: book advances.

LINCOLN MICHEL is the author of the novels *The Body Scout* (Orbit, 2021) and *My Metallic Realms* (Atria Books, 2025) and the story collection *Upright Beasts* (Coffee House Press, 2015). His fiction and criticism appear in the *Paris Review*, Literary Hub, the *New York Times*, *Granta*, and elsewhere. He writes a semi-regular newsletter about craft and publishing demystification called *Counter Craft*. You can find him online at lincolnmichel.com.

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Just what is an advance?

On the most basic level an advance is the up-front money a publisher pays an author to publish their book. (Although increasingly much of that up-front money doesn't appear until later. We'll get to that in a bit.) More technically, an advance is an advanced payment against, or out of, the royalties that your book may earn. A royalty is the percentage of each sale that a publisher pays the author. So this means you will not get any more checks until your publisher has earned back the advance. Some people call an advance a "signing bonus," but a bonus implies extra money, whereas in fact an advance is paid back by the royalties the book will earn.

Advances also represent more than just the dollar number. The more a publisher pays for a book, the more likely it is to invest in publicity, marketing, and so on when the book is released because, naturally, the publisher wants to recoup that larger investment. In short, a bigger advance usually signals that more resources will be spent in-house on the book's promotion.

Do I have to pay it back if my book doesn't sell?

Thankfully, no. You *might* have to pay back your advance if you don't fulfill your contract—for example, you don't finish the book—but not because of poor sales. An advance is not a loan. The publisher is taking a financial risk, which also means it will gain potentially higher rewards. "One thing I always tell authors is that the publisher is making money on the book long before the advance earns out," says Michelle Brower, founding partner at Trellis Literary Management. "So unearned advances don't mean that the publisher has lost money on the book." The reason: A publisher's share of a book's cover price is larger than the author's royalty percentage, so a publisher can be in the black on a book long before the advance is earned out.

Ka-ching! So how much will my advance be?

Maybe a million dollars! Or maybe zero bucks. The average advance varies wildly by imprint and genre. A small press poetry collection is likely going to have a lower advance than a big press commercial thriller. In general agents say the average advance is between $5,000 and $50,000 for a debut book. But countless debuts have bigger or smaller advances, and the math often changes once you have a track record.

So what factors determine the size of my advance?

A whole heap of variables come into play with advances beyond just genre and publisher: the author's track record (if any), the agent's negotiations, the sales of recent comp titles, and so on. Often if a book goes for a lot of

money, it's because there's an auction in which multiple publishers bid against one another, effectively driving up the price. But most of these things are out of the author's control. It's also worth pointing out that sometimes it is preferrable to negotiate a *lower* advance in exchange for *higher* royalty rates. Bottom line: You want a good agent guiding you through the process.

What on earth is a comp title?

"Comp titles," or "comparable titles," are what they sound like: books your book is compared to. When your agent pitches your book, they will list comp titles to drum up enthusiasm. And when your editor buys your book, they will use comp titles internally with the sales and marketing teams to guess sales potential. For a publisher, comp titles are "a means of conveying the best-case scenario for a book," says Mika Kasuga, executive editor for fiction and classics at Union Square & Co. Since no one can see the future, publishers rely on the sales of comparable books to guesstimate what a book can do.

Comp titles are similar books with good sales records that were published in the past few years. Remember "similar" and "last few years." No, you won't trick an editor by pitching your literary short story collection comped as "*Harry Potter* and *Gone Girl* and *The Goldfinch* all in one." Basically comp titles say, "Here's what the book can do in the current marketplace if everything goes right."

Okay, I sell my book idea. Do I quit my job and live on the advance?

In the past an author might get a big advance to live on while completing research and writing a book. In 2024 that's unlikely to be the case.

While many nonfiction books are sold "on proposal"—essentially a long book pitch—this is much less common for novelists, poets, or short story writers. Most works of fiction are sold only after they are completed. The exceptions are books that are part of a multibook deal, such as a trilogy being sold after only the first book is finished, or a very established author with a great sales track record. No one is going to turn down a Stephen King novel that's in pitch form. Regardless, while some books are sold before completion, most advances are not high enough for an author to live on that alone. And even when an advance is high, the author will get only a third or a quarter of it upon signing. So don't quit your day job just yet.

WHILE SOME BOOKS ARE SOLD BEFORE COMPLETION, MOST ADVANCES ARE NOT HIGH ENOUGH FOR AN AUTHOR TO LIVE ON THAT ALONE. AND EVEN WHEN AN ADVANCE IS HIGH, THE AUTHOR WILL GET ONLY A THIRD OR A QUARTER OF IT UPON SIGNING. SO DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB JUST YET.

Paul Lucas, an agent at Janklow & Nesbit, notes that an advance can be used however an author wants but that "there are no guarantees that future books" will get the same advance. "Until an author's books are earning royalties or the money is so substantial…I would suggest being very judicious in making multiyear commitments—for example, a mortgage—with the expectation that the advance will serve as a baseline salary. Guard it like a dragon with a hoard."

Wait, I don't get my entire advance in advance?

If you hear that someone got a $100,000 advance, you might assume they are now $100,000 richer. Not exactly. Advances are paid out in equal chunks that might stretch across a couple of years. Today payments are typically split into thirds or fourths. All of this will be laid out in your contract and can be negotiated between your agent and the publisher. If your payment is split into thirds, you will typically get a third on signing, a third on delivery of final manuscript, a third on publication day. If it is fourths, you'll normally get the final payment either on paperback publication or twelve months after initial publication.

Indeed, the money from advances can be spread out over quite some time. Imagine you sign a contract in July 2025. Your book might be scheduled for publication in July 2026, and then delays in the editing phase or other factors might push the book to January 2027. If your final payment happens a year after that, then you're looking at an advance spread out over

four calendar years. And all that's before the agent's cut and—don't forget—taxes.

There's an agent fee?

Yes, typically 15 percent. But unless you are publishing with a very small press that you trust, under circumstances in which minimal money is involved, you'll want an agent. Good agents absolutely pay for themselves.

Do I at least get paid royalties immediately?

No, unfortunately royalties also take time to roll in. Publishers typically pay out royalties only once or twice a year, and royalty statements are a few months behind when you get them. This isn't because your publisher is scamming you. It's because books are sold on consignment to bookstores, and bookstores can return books that they don't sell. Basically everything moves slowly in publishing. And anyway, remember that you won't get any royalties at all until you "earn out."

How do I "earn out" to get that sweet, sweet royalty money?

The goal for every book is to "earn out," which means you've paid back your advance via your book sales. When a book earns out, the publisher knows it made a good bet on the book, and the author begins receiving royalty checks. Everybody's happy. Yay! Sadly most books do not earn out. For many authors the advance is the only money they will see directly from book sales.

But some books do earn out, and hope springs eternal. To earn out you need to sell enough copies of your book that you pay back your advance via your royalty rate. Let's use some simple math. If you got a $10,000 advance and your royalty rate is equal to $1 a book, then you would "earn out" at 10,000 book sales. Starting from sale number 10,001 you would earn royalties.

Give me the real math. What are the exact royalty rates?

Like most things in publishing, royalty rates vary depending on different factors. But there are some industry standards. For traditional publishers, the rates are about 10 percent of the cover price for hardcovers and 7.5 percent for paperbacks. For e-books and audiobooks—which tend to have fluctuating price points—the standard is 25 percent of net receipts.

Contracts can also have escalating rates in which, for example, hardcover rates jump from 10 percent to 12.5 percent after 5,000 sales and then to 15 percent after 10,000 sales. To complicate things further, retail prices vary. And even more complicatedly, if your publisher buys rights that it sells to third parties—for example, foreign rights or audiobook editions—then a large portion of those sales are counted toward paying back your advance. Basically we're talking about a buck or two per book sold.

So the publisher is taking 90 percent of my sales!?

Although a lot of self-publishing authors will claim that publishers steal 90 percent of your book's sales, this is not the case. The reason? The publisher and author aren't the only ones taking a cut. Much of the cover price is divided between the retailer (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, your local indie bookstore, and so on) and the distributor (the company that delivers the books to bookstores), with the retailer getting the larger chunk. When a bookstore offers a discount, it is typically discounting its own percentage of the cover price. This is why Amazon, as an online store without the same physical location and employee costs, is able to discount books more than brick-and-mortar bookstores. Whether this entire situation is optimal is a debate for another time. It's also good to remember that the publisher's cut goes to paying for a lot of things, from the actual cost of printing the books to editing, cover art, proofreading, and more.

What about multibook deals and joint accounting?

As if all the above weren't convoluted enough, there's also the existence of multibook deals, which further complicate things. A multibook deal is, as the term suggests, a deal for multiple books. These can take plenty of shapes. An author might be writing a four-book YA fantasy series and have only the first completed. A literary author might sell a short story collection and an idea for a future novel. Or a big-name commercial author might want to just lock in a long-term deal with their beloved publisher.

When you sign a multibook deal, one thing to be on the lookout for is joint accounting. When book royalties are calculated separately, then you can begin earning royalties after the first book earns out its advance. Let's say you sign a $150,000 contract for a trilogy with an advance of $50,000 per book. If you sell enough copies to pay back the advance on *book one*, you might be in the enviable position of earning royalties while you're still writing *book two*. If *book two* and *book three* don't sell that well, you'd still get that book one royalty money.

However, under joint accounting—which has annoyingly become the norm—you wouldn't earn any royalties until the entire $150,000 advance was paid back. So if *book one* is a huge hit and the others flop, you're out of luck on royalties.

My last book didn't earn out its advance. Is all hope lost?

"Not at all," says Angeline Rodriguez, a former associate editor at Orbit, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, and my current agent. "Sales are just one of many factors that go into publishers' acquiring a book and far from the sole deciding one." Earning out is always a good thing for both publishers and authors, but remember that a book can still be a financial success for the publisher even if it doesn't technically earn out. Each book is also an individual thing—unless it's part of a series—and publishers know that a new book can potentially do much better. This is especially true if the new book is notably different from the last in, say, genre, style, or subject matter. Or if publishers can identify reasons that a previous book might not have succeeded. So while earning out is always good, failing to do so is not a death sentence.

This is all a bit complicated—just give me the bottom line.

While advances are a major part of an author's income, they're only one part. A book with a lower advance can start earning royalties sooner, and then there are foreign editions, Hollywood options, speaking fees, teaching opportunities, and other potential revenue streams. Publishing can be confusing and complex, but when you inform yourself, you'll be in a better position to navigate the industry and figure out the best path for you. Then you can get back to the most important thing: writing.

So the bottom line is write the best book you can, educate yourself about how the industry functions, work with an agent and publisher you trust, and then move on to the next book.

Persistence, Partnership, and Keeping the Faith

What Your Agent Wishes You Knew While You're on Submission

By Brenda Ferber

AFTER years of writing, revising, and submitting, after loads of rejections and months of self-doubt, the miracle has happened: You signed with an agent. Your book is one enormous step closer to publication. Most likely there is more revising to conquer, although now you'll be working with comments from a professional who is eager for you to elevate your manuscript to a place where an editor has no choice but to publish it. Finally, when your manuscript is in the best shape of its life, your agent will begin the submission process.

If you're like most debut authors, you probably have no idea what this phase of the publishing journey entails. And as eagerly as you've hoped for this moment to come, the mystery and the lack of control can make the submission process stressful, particularly when you don't know what to expect from your agent—or what the agent expects from you.

Even seasoned authors find this moment nerve-racking. Author Carolyn Crimi, whose books for young readers include *Secondhand Dogs* (Balzer + Bray, 2021), says, "I'm actually the worst when it comes time for my agent to submit my work. I turn into an impatient, neurotic, cranky mess. I go into full-blown Nancy Drew mode and investigate every editor on the list. What have they acquired in the past? Do they have a nice smile? Did they really mean it when they said they were excited to read it, or are they already composing their rejection letter?

"As the months drag on, I get more and more desperate. The crystals come out. My cuticles bleed from constant biting. I send angry e-mails to my alderman about potholes.

"I know I shouldn't read about all the fabulous acquisitions in *Publishers Weekly*, but I do. I know I'm supposed to start writing something new, but I don't."

Crimi is not alone. Often the nearer authors come to getting published, the more their imaginative brains go a little haywire. So how can an author prevent their dream-come-true moment from turning into a nightmare? Here's what agents wish authors knew about the submission process.

Agents are experts. They spend years developing relationships with editors and researching imprints, and they create a targeted list of editors to submit your particular work to, calling upon those years of expertise.

Most agents begin to think about where they want to submit a manuscript before they offer to represent a new client. As Jenni Ferrari-Adler, an agent at Verve Talent & Literary Agency, says, "Even on a first read, when you know a project is really hitting it for you, you can already think of four or five people who would be excited to see it."

In the broadest terms, agents are considering where your manuscript falls on the literary-to-commercial scale and what genre it is. But it's not simply a matter of finding an editor who

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publishes books in the same category as yours. Dorian Karchmar, an agent at William Morris Endeavor (WME), explains: "I'm trying to ensure a temperamental and creative match between author and editor; I'm looking to identify publishing teams that are going to be the most passionate and skilled at launching a given author. I'm also working to create competition between houses in order to increase leverage, maximize the advance, and negotiate the strongest additional deal terms." Catherine Cho, agent and founder of Paper Literary, values communicative editors as well as engaged sales and marketing teams. "So much of publishing a novel, especially a debut, is about the teamwork and the collaboration behind the scenes," she says.

This expertise is one reason authors need an agent in the first place. But that doesn't mean authors can't have input on the submission list as well. Perhaps you met an editor at an MFA program event or a conference. Or maybe you've engaged with them over social media. Did an editor reach out after reading some of your work in magazines or journals? Or are there editors you admire based on books they've published in the past? If so, share this information with your agent. They want to know.

The submission process will likely take longer than you expect. After the submission list is set, your agent will pitch the editors by e-mail, by phone, or in person. You can ask your agent if they want you to collaborate on developing this pitch. Some are open to this idea, and others are not. They might end up using the same language you used in your query letter that successfully hooked them, or they might have a completely different angle. As your agent pitches your book, they're helping its chances of landing with a publisher in two ways. First, every response to a pitch gives your agent new information about how editors are receiving its presentation, which allows them to hone that pitch further and think about who else to pitch. The second benefit of the pitching process is that your agent gets to sing the praises of your manuscript, hoping to catch the attention of just the right editor. Some agents pitch and attach the full manuscript so everything is in one place. Others pitch first and only send the full manuscript when the editor has expressed interest in reading it.

Agents are vying for attention from editors in the same way you vied for attention to get an agent. A lot of publishing is about being patient and persistent. "One of the most difficult things about going out on submission is that timing is very unpredictable," says Cho. "Sometimes it's very quick and we can have an overnight response; other times it lingers for months and months."

Karchmar says there's a new normal in terms of response times from editors: "Whereas it used to take days (or even, occasionally, hours!) for editors to start registering interest or deciding to pass on a project, it now often takes six weeks or longer to start hearing first impressions of a manuscript, and it requires more persistent and aggressive follow-up on the agent's part to solicit these responses." Ghosting is more common now too. In a newsletter that Jonathan Karp, president and CEO of Simon & Schuster, sent to agents in March 2024, he announced a new policy with regard to submissions: Agents should feel free to try another editor at the company if they haven't heard back in three weeks.

It's important to remember that a whole range of time lines are normal and not necessarily an indicator of the ultimate fate, or merits, of your book. "Publishing is absolutely a business that thrives on momentum," Ferrari-Adler says. "If you have one person moving fast, suddenly you've got a book that's moving really fast, and that can be great. But other books have gone slower, and sometimes we've even pulled them back and done revisions and gone back out with them. So there's not only one time line."

The waiting and uncertainty can be very difficult for authors. Some agents suggest that it may be helpful to discuss how often you want to hear updates about your book's submission. Are you a person who wants to block out the entire process and hear only when you've received an offer? Let your agent know that. Or perhaps you fall on the other end of the spectrum. "Some authors desire to hear every pass as it comes in, and that is their agonizing, masochistic choice," says Ian Bonaparte, an agent at Janklow & Nesbit Associates. If you fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, you could ask your agent for a weekly check-in. Think it through and talk to your agent so that your working relationship relieves stress rather than creates it. "I promise that it's a softer experience reading rejection letters after you have a publishing deal in place," says Bonaparte.

Don't blab on social media. It might be hard to not let your social media followers know that your book is out on submission. You're proud. You're excited. You're a little scared. It's natural to want to get support from your online friends. But agents recommend against this practice.

Renée Zuckerbrot, an agent at Massie & McQuilkin, says, "It's possible the book may not sell during the first round, and then that information is out for everyone to see. And that can make an agent's job harder if there needs to be a second or third round of submissions. Also, it's probably embarrassing for the writer, if there is no deal, to answer questions from friends on social media about who is publishing the book and when." Cho is also wary of authors going on social media and talking openly about their submission. "I think that any communication needs to be carefully managed," she says. Your agent is trying to control the positioning of your brand and your book, and by talking too much on social media, you may be undermining their hard work.

Take care of your emotional health. Agents want two things from their authors while they are out on submission: Start working on your next project, and take care of your emotional health. These tasks go hand in hand. The obsession you feel about the submission process will be lessened as you focus on a new manuscript.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Cho, who is also an author, says, "Focusing on your next project is difficult, but there isn't really anything an author can do to help with the submission process."

Laura Ruby, who writes for teens and adults and whose book *Thirteen Doorways, Wolves Behind Them All* (Balzer + Bray, 2019) was a finalist for a National Book Award, suggests taking a break when you first go out on submission. "Spend time reading books unlike yours. Go to museums. Knit. Cook. Paint. Sing. Filling your creative well will keep you from refreshing your inbox every forty seconds."

Author Sarah Aronson, whose new book, *Abzuglutely!: Battling, Bellowing Bella Abzug*, is forthcoming this fall from Calkins Creek, emphasizes the importance of community during this stressful time. "When I feel alone, every disappointment feels bigger. Time slows down. When I'm interacting with other writers, I'm more optimistic. Braver."

Agents concur. "By all means, find someone trusted in your life to stand beside you during a sometimes challenging and anxiety-provoking process," Karchmar says. "But try not to unload free-floating anxiety on your agent. Agents are most impactful when we're level-headed, optimistic, and able to conserve some of our own emotional resources."

Not every project sells. Despite their enthusiasm and expertise, all agents have projects that don't sell. And though of course that's heartbreaking for the author, it's also no fun for the agent. As Karchmar says, "Sometimes, we are forced to recognize that the project may not be the author's strongest or most marketable work and that the long-term health of their career is best served by developing and selling a different book."

It's a tough decision to make, and it shouldn't be taken lightly. Zuckerbrot says that if editors are giving similar reasons for rejecting the project in the first round, it's wise to pause and address those concerns. But after three rounds, "if the agent has submitted to every viable publisher and has not come close to getting an enthusiastic response," that's an important sign.

At that stage Cho usually tells a writer that they should focus on the next book and let this one go. "It doesn't mean that it's over by any means, but it's in the writer's interest to focus on the next book. There are so many writers whose first book did not sell on submission, and they find great success with the next book."

Ferrari-Adler adds that sometimes pausing for a couple of years can make a huge difference. She shares an example of having a hard time finding a home for the debut novel *Goodnight Stranger* (Park Row, 2019) by Miciah Bay Gault.They pulled back so Gault could address some revisions, then they went out a second time. Two years had passed, and many new people were making decisions, so it worked to their advantage, and they sold it. The book went on to be a finalist for several major awards and underpin a larger writing career. "That was a hard-won victory," Ferrari-Adler says. "It's good to remember you only need that one person who really gets it and sees it and aligns editorially."

Hang in there. Your agent is your agent precisely because they believe in your talent and are ready to stick with you. "We agents are generally a persistent lot," Karchmar says, "and if we truly love and believe in a given project, most of us will be very resourceful in finding a home for it."

Cho says her favorite part of her job is calling someone to say that they've received an offer. Once that happens, "It's the beginning of trying to play out the next steps and negotiate the best deal."

For an author, there's nothing more exciting.

Or maybe there is: seeing your book in bookstores. But how you get to that destination is another leg of the journey. For now, it's time to celebrate.

Nonfiction Book Proposals

The Fine Art of Crafting a Literary Business Plan

By Michael Bourne

FOR YEARS journalist Chloé Cooper Jones, who was born with a rare congenital disorder called sacral agenesis that affected the development of her hips and legs, had been filling free moments between assignments by writing journal entries on how strangers viewed her body. These private reflections grew into an essay about a trip Jones took to Lake Como, Italy, titled "Such Perfection," which caught the attention of literary agent Claudia Ballard when it appeared in the *Believer* in 2019.

Ballard, an agent at William Morris Endeavor, e-mailed Jones and suggested she might want to consider turning the material into a book. If Jones had been writing fiction, she almost certainly would have had to write a complete novel before Ballard could take it to editors. But because this was nonfiction, Jones instead sold the book, *Easy Beauty*, which was published in April 2022, based solely upon a proposal, then used the advance from her publisher, Avid Reader Press, to help finance the writing of the rest of the book.

The proposal for *Easy Beauty* included a twenty-page overview of the book and its market potential along with four sample chapters, one of which was the original *Believer* article in June 2019. "I just turned in the final book, and I'd say only about 20 percent of that is in the book," Jones says. "That's a very freeing thing to remember, I think, that your proposal is just that—you're proposing your vision and your ideas, but very little of the proposal might make it into the actual book."

At its heart, a nonfiction book proposal, like the one Jones wrote for *Easy Beauty*, is a business plan. The writer outlines the book they intend to write, who is likely to read it when it's finished, and why they're the person to write it. If the editorial team at a publishing house likes what they see, they invest in the project. As industry insiders are quick to note, a smart writer will season this nuts-and-bolts business document with a healthy dollop of literary seduction.

"You're making a business case, but I think one mistake people make when they're first trying to do it is they make the case too businessy and they make it sound like a PowerPoint presentation," says Alia Hanna Habib, an agent at the Gernert Company in New York. "Nobody who works in this industry doesn't love books. We don't fall in love with PowerPoint presentations. It should read engagingly. Even when you're making the business case, it should sound like a writer on the page."

No two book proposals are exactly alike, but if you're a debut author, your proposal will likely need to include a brief overview of the book that makes a case for why it needs to be written and published; a chapter-by-chapter summary showing the book's narrative arc; a discussion of published books that are similar to yours; a marketing and publicity plan that includes some discussion of your target readers; an author biography that makes it clear why you are the writer to tackle this material; and, finally, one or more sample chapters from the book-in-progress.

While most nonfiction titles, from self-help books to works of history or journalism, are sold on proposal, memoir remains a special category dependent on the author's "platform," an industry term for how well a writer is known among

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their target readership. Authors with long track records and writers who are already famous or who are involved in a highly publicized event or news story can often sell a memoir on proposal, agents say. A memoir by a debut author without a platform, on the other hand, will be treated more like a novel, and the writer will probably have to write most or all of the book before it's sold.

Whether they're writing memoir or narrative nonfiction, Habib advises clients to open their proposals "in the voice of the book," so that it reads like an especially engaging introduction or prologue. From there she encourages her writers to guide readers through the book's principal subject matter, characters, and themes in the style of marketing copy found on the inside jacket of a published book. "One of the best exercises you can do as a writer of nonfiction is go to a bookstore, look at the nonfiction books you love, and read the jacket copy to see how they're able to very quickly convey what the book is about," she says. "That's the kind of language that a proposal has, except it's longer."

This opening section, along with the chapter summaries and writing sample, represents the core pitch to editors, because if a book isn't compelling on its own terms, no amount of marketing wizardry is likely to save it. But writers are also wise to devote time and attention to making a case for where their book fits in the publishing marketplace and what they can do to help sell it.

Easy Beauty, for instance, could have easily been pigeonholed as a disability memoir, but that wasn't the book Jones wanted to write, a point she made clear in her choice of comparable titles, or comps. She did mention *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy's 1994 memoir about the author's diagnosis of Ewing's sarcoma when she was nine, which led to the removal of a significant portion of her jawbone, but Jones also referenced books by Eula Biss, Leslie Jamison, Helen Macdonald, and Maggie Nelson, authors she admired for their ability to interweave memoir with history and literary theory. *Easy Beauty* is also a travel memoir, which Jones made clear by including comps for literary travel narratives like Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (Knopf, 2012).

In most cases agents will help writers assemble their book proposals, especially the sections focusing on the marketing and positioning of the book, but that doesn't mean a writer can simply knock out a few pages pitching their idea for a book and expect the agent to do the rest. "When you've done everything to get it in the best shape you can on your own, that's when you should start seeking an agent," says Habib. "You should not be going to a potential agent half-dressed."

Making serious headway on research and planning out how you want to structure and write your book before you reach out to an agent can also help prevent your work from succumbing to the pressures of the publishing market, which favors projects that are similar to books that have sold well in the past, leading to a certain level of conformity and pigeonholing.

To guard against this homogenizing pressure, Jones says, writers need to write "a clear, intentional statement about what their book is, what its goals are, and how it's going to reach those goals" before they enter into a collaboration with an agent. "I've seen really good versions of this that are three paragraphs long, and I've seen really good versions of this that are closer to thirty or forty pages long, but they are your own true aims and goals and intentions for the book, and you go into the conversation with the agent saying, 'Here's what I want for this book, here's what the book is really about, and here's the structure I want to use to achieve these aims,'" she says.

Of course the best way to guarantee that the book you sell is the one you want to write is to work with an agent who shares your artistic vision. "If you feel the people you're working with ultimately don't understand and want to change the nature of your work and are not looking out for your best interest, they are not the right publishing fit for you," says Jade Wong-Baxter, an agent at the Frances Goldin Literary Agency. "It can be really hard to turn that down and look for other alternatives, but it's important for writers to have the backing and support of people who get it, people who will advocate for what they need."

This can be doubly true for writers of color and others from underrepresented backgrounds, Wong-Baxter says. Over the past few years, in response to the national reckoning over race and diversity that followed the police killing of George Floyd, publishing has become more welcoming to the work of writers of color, she says. But publishing remains overwhelmingly white, and writers of color still have to be on the lookout for cultural misunderstandings and market pressures that can distort their work. "If you say yes in that moment, if you say, 'Yes, okay, I'll rewrite this so the main character is white or so the book is no longer a comedy and it's this sad, trauma story,' then there are going to be all these compromises down the road," she says.

FINDING the right agent was especially crucial for Daniel Barban Levin, whose memoir, *Slonim Woods 9*, details the years he spent as a student at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, enmeshed in an allegedly abusive cult led by Larry Ray, the father of one of Levin's roomates. Ever since he'd extricated himself from Ray's orbit, Levin, a graduate of the UC Irvine poetry MFA program, had been trying to write about his experiences in the medium of poetry, with little success.

Then, in April 2019, two reporters from *New York* magazine broke the story of the alleged cult, and suddenly some of the worst moments of Levin's life were national news. He was approached by executives at Blumhouse Productions, best known for producing horror films, who wanted to buy his "life rights," which would have prevented Levin from ever writing a version of the story himself.

All this left Levin uniquely vulnerable. At the time, he was working as a valet parking attendant at a hotel in Los Angeles, and the Hollywood money, about $50,000, would have been life-altering. He was also still recovering from his time with Ray, which, Levin says, had made him distrustful but also, paradoxically, ingrained in him a need to please powerful people.

So he e-mailed PJ Mark, an agent at Janklow & Nesbit Associates, who represents one of Levin's favorite authors, Maggie Nelson. Mark introduced Levin to Chris Clemans, another agent at Janklow & Nesbit, who advised him about the "life rights" offer and whether he should try to write a memoir of his own. "I sat by the lake here in Echo Park, and he said, 'Tell me the story and we'll see if it's a book,'" Levin recalls. "He was very gracious and sat on the phone for something like two hours while I told a very fragmented version of the story, trying to recapture these memories. He said he thought it could be a book and he thought I could write it, and he wanted me to try to put together twenty-five pages and maybe an outline."

Ultimately, Levin declined to sell his life rights and wrote his own version of

the story in *Slonim Woods 9*, published by Crown in September 2021. But it all started with that e-mail to PJ Mark, whom Levin felt he could trust thanks to his association with Maggie Nelson.

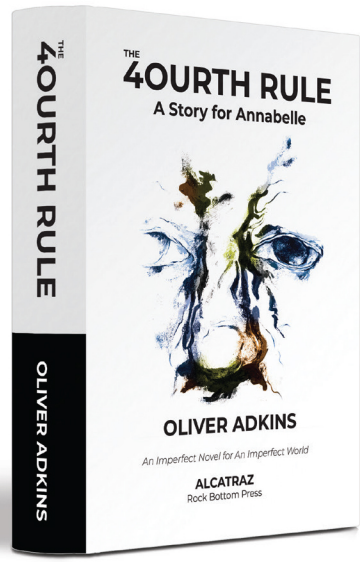
This is a point worth emphasizing: So much of the success of a nonfiction book proposal depends on finding the right agent to help you write and sell it. Because they're created before the book exists and because they focus so much on marketing and positioning, proposals can be something of an agent's medium. Pick the wrong agent and your project can stall out before it even leaves the gate, or, worse, you could find yourself contracted to write a book you barely recognize.

One secret to finding the right agent is having the agent find you, as happened to Jones when her essay appeared in the *Believer*. Habib, the Gernert agent, estimates that about half of the clients she takes on are writers she contacted first, usually after she read something they published, and she encourages writers looking to sell a nonfiction book to first pitch shorter pieces on their topic to reputable publications in print or online, where their work can be discovered by an agent looking for salable book projects.

"If there's a subject you're interested in or something you want to write about, start by publishing pieces in smaller publications," says Habib. "It establishes you as an expert, it gets your name out there, and often an agent will come calling."

However you connect with an agent, you'll want to have much of the research spadework completed and a strong sense of how you want to structure the book before you try to sell it. The proposal itself, especially the sections dealing with marketing and positioning of the book, can be a collaboration between writer and agent, Wong-Baxter says, but writers should work to retain control over their book's subject matter, along with its structure and voice.

"You really want to make sure that the agent is on the same page as you," she says. "They'll hopefully bring in some good ideas for how to shape it, but they're not fundamentally changing the nature of what you're writing."



At 3:37 a.m. on a warm summer night, the chamber pressure in a Barrett MRAD sniper rifle with sound suppressor and muzzle brake reached over 60,000 (psi) pounds per square inch. A single bullet weighing 16.2 grams left the barrel with a muzzle velocity of 3,030 feet per second (fps) and carrying 5,096 foot-pounds (ft-lbs.) of energy. It passed through the raised center window of the Blue Room at the White House overlooking the South Portico. The target was sitting at a recently acquired kidney shaped ormolu-mounted mahogany desk in French Neoclassical style. The Tiffany lamp on the desk displaying a custom motif of cascading hamburgers had been turned on.

The bullet struck the occipital bone at the back of the head with 2,475 foot-pounds (ft-lbs.) of force approximately 2.7 centimeters below the peak of the lambdoid suture. There was a slight parting of bright red hair upon impact before the projectile continued to travel straight through. The body no longer possessing a recognizable face listed forward dropping down across the desk, where it laid still. A few moments later someone walked over to turn off the desk lamp. They stood quietly looking out into the night. The faint sound of barking in the distance drifted across the South Lawn. Perhaps an early jogger near the Ellipse with their dog. The window was slowly closed.

Commitment and Care

Publishing With a University Press

By Aaron Gilbreath

IN 1878, Johns Hopkins University's first president, Daniel Coit Gilman, founded the Johns Hopkins Publication Agency to publish important material for scholars and the public outside of the academy. "It is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures," said Gilman, "but far and wide." Gilman was onto something: Nearly one hundred fifty years later, Johns Hopkins University Press—the oldest continuously operating university press in the United States—is just one of over 120 American university presses striving to enlighten readers everywhere. But the conglomeration of the publishing industry and evolving reader habits have significantly changed the U.S. commercial book economy over the past few decades, and university presses now serve even broader roles than what Gilman envisioned—and arguably more indispensable ones. Besides offering regional expertise and deep dives into academic and niche subjects, university presses provide readers with the kind of innovative voices and literary forms that commercial operations can't always justify publishing because of their bottom line. They also help authors build lifelong careers in a field fraught with financial and professional challenges. That mission serves writers, readers, and the wider world.

Despite their name, university presses don't just publish class textbooks or arcane scholarship in stuffy tones. They are book publishers like any other, though a larger vision or mission drives them in place of the pressures of living and dying by profit margins. Some university presses specialize in local history and Indigenous culture. Some focus on the American West, others on the American South. For instance, the University of Texas Press publishes some of the best music books in the country. University of Arizona Press provides crucial literary and scholarly coverage of the U.S.-Mexico border. Niche is where university presses excel. So, too, is longevity and the capacity to mark a writer's place in a larger historical literary tradition. Book series like the Pitt Poetry Series from the University of Pittsburgh Press, the Yale Series of Younger Poets at Yale University Press, and the Iowa Short Fiction Award from the University of Iowa Press connect their authors to their forebears—and are themselves a testament to the durability and consistency of university presses. Many university presses also publish memoirs, essay collections, poetry, and short stories whose forms may be too experimental or unconventional for commercial publishers to touch, like the graphic essays in Dustin Parsons's collection *Exploded View: Essays on Fatherhood, With Diagrams* (University of Georgia Press, 2018) or Sorayya Khan's sweeping memoir *We Take Our Cities With Us*, published in 2022 by Mad Creek Books, an imprint of the Ohio State University Press.

Many run unique series that focus specifically on a style, genre, or approach. The Machete book series at the Ohio State University Press, for instance, aims to "break new aesthetic ground in nonfiction…from authors whose writing has historically been marginalized, ignored, and passed over." The University of Georgia Press's Cave Canem Poetry Prize series is "dedicated to the discovery of exceptional manuscripts by African American poets who have not been professionally published." The variety of books that university presses publish each year—and keep in print—helps make this a beautiful and opportune time to be a reader and an aspiring author.

AARON GILBREATH has written for *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, *Adventure Journal*, *High Country News*, the *Dublin Review*, the *New York Times*, *Red Canary Magazine*, and *Columbia Insight* and is the author of *The Heart of California: Exploring the San Joaquin Valley* (Bison Books, 2020), which was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award.

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If your ultimate goal as an author is to get your book read by people who will appreciate it and to have it produced and distributed by an organization filled with individuals who value your hard work, then consider these many reasons to submit your manuscript to a university press.

The basics

The average reader doesn't bother worrying about types of book publishers—trade, academic, vanity. Readers just want a good book. But when writers think of book publishers, they often think of the large, well-known commercial book publishers that have historically been based in New York City, like Random House and Harper-Collins. The country's biggest have consolidated over the years into five publishing houses that industry insiders call the Big Five.

Yes, New York book publishing looms large in the literary culture. Even authors who have never stepped foot in Manhattan know its mystique: literary roundtables at the White Horse Tavern, the sense of achievement from meeting your editor in a tall building in the ultimate big city. The Big Five can offer writers larger advances than university presses can—sometimes by whole orders of magnitude. There's also a myth that they will necessarily provide better publicity and marketing support. But in that quest for the greatest visibility and remuneration, authors can miss the unique strengths of a university press.

A personalized experience

Marisa Siegel, senior acquisitions editor for trade at Northwestern University Press, sees university presses offering many significant benefits, including a stable, long-term home for the book; a prioritization of quality above profit; the ability to position the author's work for adoption for school courses, as well as selling to trade audiences; and a more personalized experience, from acquisition to publication.

"Yes, my title is acquisitions editor," Siegel says, "but I also do developmental edits on the book with the author, and I remain the author's primary point of contact as the book goes to our production department, goes into copy edits, and gets to cover design and sales and marketing. I'm shepherding it through, so in that way, the author has my personal attention from start to finish. That's often true at small independent presses, but in the bigger publishing houses, I don't think there's one person authors can go to when something isn't feeling good and they need to talk to make it right."

Many editors will tell you that university presses also help build careers, rather than just publish salable books.

"We want to build lasting, career-long relationships at Northwestern," says Siegel, who also notes that university presses sometimes serve as springboards to commercial publishers. "We can be a first home for an author who might not break out in a big publisher but whose next books after their university press experience may go to bigger publishers." They can help launch careers this way partly because they can take creative risks when signing books.

Sharing university resources, or having nonprofit status, means university presses are more insulated from fiscal pressures than the Big Five. That means editors can often make decisions that are less driven by the bottom line and more about contributing to a larger body of literature, or elevating a particular voice whose work may be too challenging to sell huge numbers of books, despite its merits, literary and otherwise. Sure, some of the most influential books in the literary canon came out on big commercial presses, and many of the books that sell well are also highly creative, challenging works. But being mission-driven, nonprofit, or partially subsidized by a university affords an editorial openness to challenging, unconventional, formally inventive work.

"On the trade side, I like hybrid work that's harder to classify and maybe more difficult to put on a bookshelf," says Siegel. "But because we are doing a lot of work on our scholarly side, it means that I can take a risk on something that might be weirder, and therefore make a little less money, or might be doing something that a Big Five publisher wouldn't be comfortable putting out. I can't do this with every project; we need to make money so that we can keep making books, but profit is not the first thing I think about by any means—ever. And for me, that's how I *want* to be thinking as an editor."

Breadth of material

For authors looking to publish their books, university presses offer a multitude of opportunities. "What I love about working with university presses, both as a writer and an editor, is how expansive the idea of good writing is," says Nicole Walker, series editor at Crux: The Georgia Series in Literary Nonfiction at the University of Georgia Press. "Books can be genre-bending, sentence-wilding, subject-dancing, deeply researched, and deeply felt. This broad field is a democratizing force. Writers whose work might not fit a commercial press because it's not 'commercial' enough can find audiences who are looking for books that embrace distinctiveness."

University presses publish some of the most formally inventive memoirs that come out each year—even as

memoir itself is no longer the viable, commercially popular genre it once was, according to some agents. Few commercial presses publish that many essay collections, which is a form creative writers often study in graduate programs but that some literary agents shy away from representing because essay collections aren't considered commercial. University presses by and large do not share this aversion. This commitment to all kinds of work hearkens to many university presses' mission, which is tied to art, knowledge, public service, civil discourse, and the specialties of the institution they are affiliated with.

Crux publishes literary nonfiction written by diverse writers working in what Walker describes as "a variety of modes." In editing the series for the past two years, Walker has enjoyed the freedom she has to curate a particular aesthetic, publishing work that is "sometimes wild, often imagistic." She sees this as evidence that the university values the series' unique literary personality, what it brings readers, and what it reflects about the press itself.

When you're a writer working in a genre or a style that is not considered "commercial," university presses provide support, a platform, and recognition. "Having your book published in a series like Crux is an important step in that [career-making] process," says Walker. "For one it is critical validation for your work by your peers. Additionally, because of the editorial structure of a series like Crux—one that includes a series editor and an advisory board in addition to press staff—an important by-product of having your book selected is the expanded network and community that comes with it." That's built into the process.

Jason Bennett, the publicity and social media manager at the University of Georgia Press, points to that community of writers affiliated with a press as part of its career-making powers: not in terms of landing new jobs, but in a broader sense. Crux's advisory board includes authors Steve Fellner, Kiese Laymon, Lia Purpura, Paisley Rekdal, Wendy S. Walters, and Elissa Washuta—all accomplished writers, respected by their peers. "To have a book chosen by them puts you in great company, *and* it validates your hard work and talent as a writer," says Bennett. "Now, none of these people are obligated to raise a finger to help promote these books, but they often do it anyway because they are genuinely enthusiastic about them—and often in ways I can't even see or won't know about. This aspect of our work doesn't necessarily fit neatly in a bulleted list of 'what's great about university presses.' But this is where the community aspect of what we do differs significantly from a large trade press." To him, facilitating conversations around the press's books is an essential part of marketing and promotion. "So, in this context, a series is not just a series; it's also the people who are a part of it."

While the Big Five aim for revenue-generating hits, university presses' mixture of risk-taking and community support sometimes produces a commercial hit too, like West Virginia University Press had with Deesha Philyaw's debut story collection, *The Secret Life of Church Ladies* (2020). Declined by the Big Five, this university press book sold around 30,000 copies in six months, was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction, and won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for First Fiction, and the $20,000 Story Prize. Then it got optioned by HBO. So art and commerce can coexist. But it takes the proverbial village.

Staying in print

Although university presses aren't protected from the vagaries of commerce and individual books' sales—many still have to fund part of their operation from book sales—their operating model means they are more insulated. That, and the evergreen subjects their books cover, means many university press books stay in print so they can remain available to scholars and educators and be part of an ongoing cultural dialogue. Whereas the Big Five often let their older books fall out of print based on sales histories, some university publishers, like Northwestern University Press, think like a library, aiming to be an archive for authors' books that exist in perpetuity. That's another manifestation of a more personalized experience.

Ready to submit?

If you have a manuscript you want published, take a look at a few books that you loved, or that share certain qualities with your book, and find out which university press published them. Your book might fit their wheelhouse and aesthetic too.

Before a writer can sell a book to a commercial publisher, they need a literary agent to represent it, helping with everything from shaping an initial nonfiction proposal to navigating the contract for the sale of a novel. Literary agents are advocates and important guides in the legal world of contracts, rights, and payments. But landing an agent can be difficult and time-consuming, and many agents simply cannot represent the kind of book you want to write—or already wrote. What to do with your poetry or essay collection in a commercial world that publishes few of them? Or what if you're a prose writer whose agent won't represent your poetry? Submit it yourself

to a university press. No agent, no problem. Follow the press's submission guidelines and contact the press directly.

Submitting to a university press puts a certain responsibility on the writer to think more holistically about the process, do the research, and make sure the potential publisher is the right one for them. If the legal stuff intimidates you or makes you feel vulnerable, university presses often will have your back there. "I try really hard to go slowly through the contracting process with my authors," says Siegel. "Editorial transparency and financial equity have become pillars of the work I see myself doing, so for me, with or without an agent, the conversations are the same. I'm making you the same deal whether or not your agent is in the room, I'm not going to lowball you, and I'm going to answer every single contract question that many authors have." While not all editors have the bandwidth for this level of thoroughness and advocacy, university press staffers are generally there to help unagented authors with contracts and questions.

So what makes a book a good fit for a particular university press? Besides being well written and fitting the publisher's lists, editors look for a variety of elements in potential books to sign. "Is the author saying something important or unique to the subject?" says Bennett. "Representation is important: Are we publishing books by and for the community we serve? If it's a scholarly book, is the scholarship solid and does it make a significant contribution to the field? If it's a trade book, does it fit with our strengths? On the other hand, if a book is outside our established areas of expertise, does it help us grow in areas we'd like to grow?"

And remember, if an editor finds your manuscript promising enough to share with colleagues and outside readers for deeper consideration, that publisher may be asking a similar question: How can the press help *you* grow as a writer in certain areas while you help it grow? With the right publisher, it works both ways. At a university press, you'll flourish together.

The Fine Print

How to Read Your Book Contract

By Michael Bourne

LET US imagine you've sold that book you've been working on for years. Say, too, that you and your publisher have hammered out the broad terms of a deal you can live with. When the contract shows up in your inbox, you may well let loose a private little whoop of joy. You might even post a picture of it online so you can bask in all the likes from your writer friends.

But then you have to read the thing.

As anyone who has seen a book contract can tell you, it is a long, dense, at times confusing document. And once you get past the big-ticket items like your advance and the subsidiary rights you're electing to keep or let the publisher have, a book contract is packed with boilerplate language that spells out the obligations between you and your publisher, some subtle, some of which may never come into practice. But, as with any legal document, you need to read it carefully to protect yourself in case something unexpected does happen.

Literary agents, who spend their lives negotiating book contracts, are your chief advocates and advisers here. If you don't have an agent, you can hire a lawyer with experience in publishing contracts. If you want to educate yourself about the process, the Authors Guild (authorsguild.org) offers a useful "Model Trade Book Contract," with standard contract language and commentary explaining what each provision means.

Ultimately, though, two factors will determine whether the contract you sign protects or costs you. The first and most important of these is your bargaining leverage. Every book contract is open to negotiation, and if a press wants to publish your work badly enough, you can demand quite favorable terms. But even if your bargaining power is relatively low, if you understand what you're agreeing to and why it's in the contract, you can still do a lot to safeguard your interests.

"The key thing to remember when anyone is looking at a contract is that it's really about balance," says Renée Jarvis, a literary agent at Triangle House Literary in New York City. "It's an agreement. You want to remember that just because it's in the document doesn't mean it can't be changed. Negotiating contracts is a conversation, and the end result should be something that, even if you're not 100 percent happy with it, you feel relatively comfortable signing because you're entering a business relationship."

At the most basic level, when you sign a book contract, you're signing over the rights to your work to a publishing house, which then pays you a percentage of what it earns from selling it. To sweeten the deal, presses usually offer an advance, to be paid out in two to four lump sums pegged to milestones in the publishing process such as signing of the contract, delivery of the manuscript, and publication of the hardcover. The good news is that, as long as you fulfill the terms of your contract, the publisher can't take back the money it has paid you. The not-so-good news is that the advance may well be the last payment you'll get for your book.

Advances are paid against royalties, meaning that each time someone buys your book, you're paying down a little bit more of your original advance. If you pay it all off, and your book "earns out," you start earning money directly from your book sales again. If not—and roughly two-thirds of all books never earn out their advance—you won't see any money from sales of the book.

For obvious reasons the advance is usually the most hotly negotiated item in any book deal, with authors

MICHAEL BOURNE is a contributing editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine*. His debut novel, *Blithedale Canyon*, was published in 2022 by Regal House Publishing.

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trying to drive the number higher and publishers trying to avoid paying any more than they absolutely have to. But a small advance isn't necessarily a disaster for the author, says Michelle Dotter, editor in chief of Dzanc Books, an independent press in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "You should take as much money as a publisher will give you, and you should run with it, but there are advantages, especially for small press books, to having a smaller advance," Dotter says. "Books that earn out, we're much more interested in coming back to that author for a future project."

To earn out your advance you need to earn royalties, which in most standard contracts rise as you sell more books. For instance, under the standard contract used by the major New York publishers, known collectively as the Big Five, you'll earn 10 percent royalties on the first five thousand hardcover copies you sell, 12.5 percent on the next five thousand copies, and 15 percent on all copies after that. (Standard royalties on trade paperback books, where profit margins are tighter, are 7.5 percent across the board.)

There's a crucial bit of fine print you must read. Big Five presses typically base their standard royalty rates on the book's list price, also known as the suggested retail price, but some smaller presses, which farm out their distribution to outside book distributors, base royalties on net receipts or net monies earned. These "net" contracts pay a percentage not of the book's cover price, but of the money the publisher receives from booksellers and wholesale distributors after the costs of shipping, distributing, and warehousing the books have been deducted. In short this means it will take you longer to earn out your advance if your publisher is considering net rates rather than list prices.

For the writer the difference between these two accounting methods can be substantial. "Typically, the rule of thumb is that 5 percent of list price is equal to 10 percent of net," explains Jonathan Lyons, a literary agent who also represents agents, publishers, and authors on contract issues at his New York law firm, Lyons & Salky. "A lot of the smaller publishers account just on net, so if you're trying to negotiate along industry standard terms and you know that 7.5 percent is the industry standard for paperback, and the publisher is insisting on paying on net, then you would ask for 15 percent of net."

> "THERE ARE ADVANTAGES, ESPECIALLY FOR SMALL PRESS BOOKS, TO HAVING A SMALLER ADVANCE. BOOKS THAT EARN OUT, WE'RE MUCH MORE INTERESTED IN COMING BACK TO THAT AUTHOR FOR A FUTURE PROJECT." — MICHELLE DOTTER

If royalties cover your earnings from editions of your book the press publishes itself, subsidiary rights set out how you will be paid for any use of your work the publisher doesn't handle. For instance, first serial rights cover the publication of an excerpt of your book before the book comes out, while second serial rights cover publication of part of your book *after* the book comes out. (Typically writers receive 90 percent of profits from first serial rights, while second serial rights tend to be split evenly between the publisher and author.)

Translations and other overseas editions can also fall under subsidiary rights—if, that is, you allow the press to acquire those rights. U.S. publishers typically buy North American rights, which include the United States and Canada, but a publisher can also acquire the right to publish everywhere in the world in English, which includes the United Kingdom, Australia, and other Commonwealth countries, or everywhere in the world in *every* language, which allows it to sell translation rights.

If you give up these foreign rights, the publisher can export the English language edition through foreign distributors, publish your book in English or other languages through one of its foreign subsidiaries, or try to license rights to your book to publishers in other countries; either way, the publisher will keep some of the proceeds. If you retain those rights then you, or more likely your agent, can sell them instead, allowing you to keep all the profit for yourself.

For this reason literary agents, who often have foreign rights specialists at their agencies, will typically argue for retaining foreign rights. But the calculus can be different for a writer

selling a book without an agent or with an agent who lacks contacts with foreign publishers. In that case, since the writer has little chance of exploiting the foreign rights on their own, they might as well allow their publisher to try its luck.

"If you're not agented it's probably better to let the publisher have world rights because it's not as though you're going to fly yourself to Frankfurt or the London Book Fair and get someone to take a meeting with you as an individual writer," explains Nicole Aragi, principal agent at the New York literary agency Aragi, Inc. "But you're obviously giving up a chunk of money, so if you have someone who knows what they're doing, which is usually the agent, you're better off having the agent do it."

In the days when audiobooks were on cassette or CD, publishers were often happy to let authors keep audio rights. Now, in the age of smartphone downloads, most Big Five presses create audiobooks in-house, and it's rare for an author to keep audio rights. Writers can, however, argue for more control over the final product, including having the right to approve the narrator of the audiobook.

Writers working with smaller presses, which typically don't produce their own audiobooks, can try to hold on to audio rights and either sell the rights to an audiobook publisher like Recorded Books or Brilliance Publishing or try to record an audiobook on their own.

"I've found small presses will let go of audio rights because they don't have the same argument," says Aragi. "When they're publishing them in-house, they can argue that promotion they do for the book affects the sales of the audio, so why would they advertise a book and then have people buy the audio from another publisher? But if a publisher doesn't have the capacity in-house, there's no legitimate argument, and very few try to make it."

When it comes to dramatic rights, which cover film, television, and stage adaptations, agents typically argue for keeping them and selling them separately, using their own contacts or those of dedicated film agents they work with. But just as with other subsidiary rights, an unagented writer without contacts in the film or television business may want to let the publisher keep the dramatic rights. "At least that means that somebody's actively trying to sell the rights, but I don't think publishing houses are as effective as a film agent," Aragi says.

Of course, before you can profit from your book, you have to finish writing it, and the standard contract provisions covering delivery and acceptance of the manuscript can be among the most nerve-racking for writers signing a contract for the first time.

Book contracts lay out a schedule for when you're expected to turn in the final draft and typically contain a clause saying the publisher can void the contract and get its advance back if it isn't acceptable. In truth, industry experts say, this provision is rarely invoked. If you're late with revisions, most editors will grant you a reasonable extension, and if there are problems with the final version, most editors will work with you to fix it.

"I've never had a contract cancelled for nondelivery," says Aragi. "It's sort of a movable feast, and mostly what you want to do is say to your publisher, 'You know what, I'm way behind.' You need to give them three or four months' notice so they can adjust their schedules accordingly."

Still, to be on the safe side, you should insist on clauses in the contract requiring the editor to explain any problems they have with the manuscript in writing and give you a month or two to revise. And, Aragi says, make sure all substantive discussions you have with your editor about the book are in writing, not just by phone. "I love a paper trail," she says. "They don't necessarily hold up in court, but they make it much less likely that you'll end up in court."

As for the finished book, it's rare for publishers to grant writers approval over the cover design, industry experts say, but you can negotiate for the right to be consulted about the decision. Once the book is out publishers will sometimes spring for the costs of a book tour and other promotional expenses, as long as the publisher has approved the expenditures. "If the author wants to fly to Boise for a reading, and the publisher doesn't think the cost justifies the potential sales resulting from such travel, then they won't cover it," says Lyons, the agent and publishing lawyer. "The author has to get approval from the publisher in advance to get this type of promotion covered." This, too, will likely be outlined in the contract.

If things go seriously awry with the published book, the warranties and indemnities sections set out your rights and responsibilities. Warranties are basically promises. For instance, according to the terms of most book contracts, you will have to promise that you didn't plagiarize the work of another writer, that any statements of fact you make are based on careful research, and that you haven't libeled anyone. (In general, writers are expected to fact-check their own work, though in practice some of this gets

covered by copy editors and by lawyers sometimes brought in by publishers to check for potential libel and other legal issues.)

Indemnities protect the publisher in case you break any of those promises and your publisher gets sued. Here, agents say, the goal is to ensure that your contract allows you the option of continuing with a lawsuit if the press decides to settle.

A relatively new wrinkle comes in the form of morality clauses inserted in some publishing contracts in response to so-called cancel culture. These clauses invalidate the contract if the author behaves in a way that could hurt sales. Most publishers, if they've written one of these clauses into their standard contract, aren't likely to get rid of it, says Jarvis of Triangle House.

"Our goal in these cases is to make the language as restrictive as possible for the publisher and as open as possible for the client," she says. "A lot of the morality clauses contain wording that amounts to: 'If you have some sort of incident or behavior that could potentially harm sales of the book, we, the publisher, have the right to do blah, blah, blah.' So what we try to do is say, not just harm sales, but harm sales to the targeted audience, or include behavior that is inconsistent with the client's reputation at the time of the deal because some authors have 'personalities,' and we don't know who is going to disagree with what when."

But whatever the contract says, how it will be enforced depends a great deal on how well the book is doing and how eager the press is to keep the writer happy, agents say.

"The reality is that publishers will do more for you if you're a big writer and take on more of the legal responsibility and expense if you're a big writer, and if you're not, hmm, maybe they will, maybe they won't," says Aragi. "That's the reality of how things work. We all have a contract, and we all have a sort of handshake thing, and most things are contingent on how much they want to keep the writer and the book."

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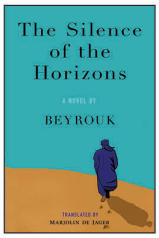
New Titles



The Silence of the Horizons
By Beyrouk, trans. by Marjolijn de Jager
Schaffner Press, Inc.

In this taut psychological thriller that channels Albert Camus and Antoine de St. Exupéry in its mystical exploration of the Sahara, a young Mauritanian guide flees the scene of a crime to join up with a friend who leads eco-treks in the desert for foreign tourists.

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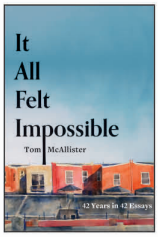

It All Felt Impossible: 42 Years in 42 Essays
By Tom McAllister
Rose Metal Press

In this meditative and lyrical collection, Tom McAllister challenges himself to write a short essay for every year he's been alive. Funny, insightful, and open-hearted, this book aims to tell the story of McAllister's life through brief glimpses, anecdotes, and fragments that radiate outward and grapple with his place in the culture at large.

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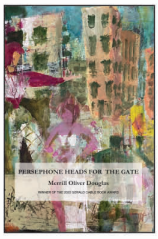

Persephone Heads for the Gate
By Merrill Oliver Douglas
Silverfish Review Press

Not dependent on a first-person "I", the poems in *Persephone Heads for the Gate* move the reader's focus from quotidian detail to big idea with confidence. Attuned to the musical quality of language, these poems invite you to read them aloud to enjoy their mouthfeel and sonic quality. Douglas creates fresh, engaging imagery that holds tension between beauty and harsh truths.

www.silverfishreviewpress.com

The Unmoved Mover
By Ronald Pies
Independently Published

This compact novelette tells the story of Judaic studies professor Aaron Shavoor and artist Rachel Gold, following a horrific school tragedy that overturns their world and unites them in bereavement. How does life go on after the worst occurs? How can two people who have experienced unspeakable loss find one another, and again find meaning in life? And who can ever believe in a benign and loving God, after such a tragedy?

www.amazon.com

Divine in Essence
By Yarrow Paisley
Whiskey Tit

Ten tales of the Strange to unchain you from the Real: attune your mind and be transformed! "Darkly playful, unsettling horror stories in a classical vein."—*BookLife by Publishers Weekly*. "Paisley's prose is hypnotic, weaving lyrical beauty with sinister undertones. […] Not for the faint-hearted, the book is graphic, provocative, and deeply layered."—*The Prairies Book Review*.

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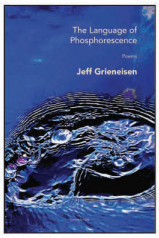
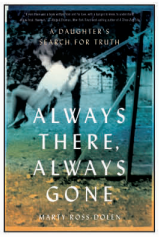


The Language of Phosphorescence
By Jeff Grieneisen
Lavender Ink

The poems in this collection examine the individual's relationship with place and the natural world. The speaker often struggles with the geographic and ecological sense of home and the passage of time as relates to the spiritual separation of body and soul. Publisher and poet Antonio Vallone says of the volume: "Jeff Grieneisen's poems are the real deal."

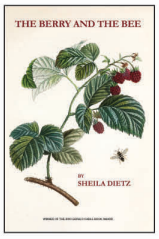
www.jeffgrieneisen.com



Always There, Always Gone: A Daughter's Search for Truth
By Marty Ross-Dolen
She Writes Press

Ross-Dolen's grandparents, owners of *Highlights for Children* magazine, died in 1960 in an airplane collision over New York City. In her genre-bending, grandmother-mother-daughter memoir, she mixes 'wisps'—long and short form prose, photos, erasure poetry, and letters—to lay bare the ways in which grief and intergenerational trauma shape us all. "…wise and thoughtful…."—*NewPages.com*. "…touching…skillfully written."—*Kirkus Reviews*.

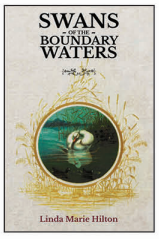
www.martyrossdolen.com



The Berry and The Bee
By Sheila Dietz
Silverfish Review Press

Sheila Dietz confronts experience with the acuteness and steadfastness we associate with poets such as Hopkins and Tranströmer. Like them, she understands her investigations of the natural world and the workings of memory can offer a glimpse of divinity at one moment, and a reckoning with dread in the next. These are the poems of a mature and fearless poet.

www.silverfishreviewpress.com



Swans of the Boundary Waters
By Linda Marie Hilton
Atmosphere Press

Take flights of fancy like a swan perusing vegetation patterns: see what can be wrapped in a poem: a pita full of the savory haiku surprise. Linda Marie Hilton's second volume of poetry: *Swans of the Boundary Waters*!

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I, No Other
By Yarrow Paisley
Whiskey Tit

New revised edition! Ten offbeat narrations & exaltations for your delectation! "A Rorschach test made of prose."—*SPR*. "Bold, bizarre, even confounding fictions with precise, pyrotechnic power."—*BookLife by Publishers Weekly*, Editor's Pick. "A book to be felt, wrestled with, and ultimately absorbed. A stunner."—*The Prairies Book Review*.

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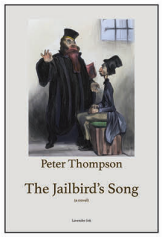


The Jailbird's Song
By Peter Thompson

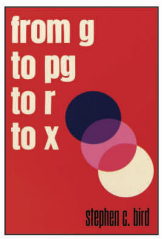
The Jailbird's Song: Rhodes, in this incarnation for the last novel of the Harrison Rhodes Quintet, by Peter Thompson. This jail, this hapless "crime," mirrors all the missteps (bitingly funny) of the other novels. He's childishly altruistic, but often sallies forth in the most vicious terms against horrible bosses and an unfair share of other monsters.

www.dialogosbooks.com

The Twilight Zone Haiku
By Chad Ellis Boykin
Jobber House Press

The Twilight Zone Haiku explores the essence of the iconic, uncanny 1960s television show through haiku, giving dazzling, spot-on snapshots of each episode. *The Twilight Zone* captured our national psyche. Boykin's haiku conjure the trappings of each haunting plot, but more astutely, its scalpel-edged soul. "Rod Serling was a master storyteller and Chad Ellis Boykin is his poet protege."—Carol Owens Campbell.

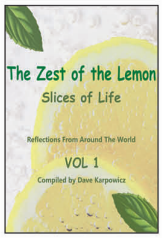
www.jobberhouse.com



From G to PG to R to X
By Stephen C. Bird
Hysterical Dementia

Death, dreams, dystopia, hallucinations…abuse, rebellion, political turmoil, gender confusion, morphing identities…secret ceremonies, sacrifice, epiphanies, transformation…inform the chaotic worlds of this tragicomic novella.

https://amzn.to/45lQ97d



The Zest of the Lemon: Slices of Life, Vol 1
Compiled by Dave Karpowicz

In the premiere edition of *The Zest of the Lemon*, 65 poets and writers from around the world share their reflections on life, joy, and happiness. Those interested in submitting their work for future editions can do so on the website.

https://thezestofthelemon.com

The Leaking Heart
By Kim Marie Farris

A journey through pain to self-worth. The poet makes us take a raw emotional journey, from a bleak sense of unwantedness that so many rejected children feel, through shame over inability to control destructive thoughts and then liberation through a love affair that seems spiritual as well as emotional. We root for her—and for all.

www.kimmariefarris.com

Ghost or Guardian: A Guidebook for the Pre-Dead
By Cyndy Wulfsberg
Hunter Street Press

This book is for everyone considering mortality and what to do about it. Easy to consider when the examples are real, the content is helpful, and there is a chuckle on every page. Large print and audio versions are also available. Add the companion workbook and choose to be a Guardian rather than a Haunting Ghost.

https://fromthefilecabinet.com

In A Multiverse of Infinite Possibilities...We Must Be Happy Somewhere
By Kelly Mowers
BookLeaf Publishing

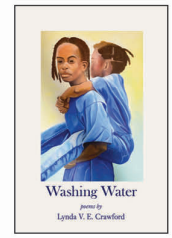
This collection of poems follows a couple's journey across the globe. Both advocates for a better world; their connection transcends the present, revealed through visions of their shared past lives. Despite the recurring challenges they face in this lifetime, the narrator finds solace in the belief that their love endures across infinite timelines in this multiverse of endless possibilities.

www.kellysbooknook.com

A Million Tomorrows
By Kris Middaugh
Rebel Publishing

"So it isn't exactly time travel?" Dr. Perry Roberts turns to a radical and cutting-edge technology to help save a dying patient—who happens to be the love of his life. A poignant and powerful blend of contemporary romance and grounded sci-fi.

www.amazon.com/dp/B0CW1NB6NW



Washing Water
By Lynda V. E. Crawford
World Stage Press

This collection is about girls and women who've lived the fat belly of life and understand its joys and imperfection. The poetry vignettes move from 'girl into woman' where resilience is gathered and given in laughter, ancestor-dance, and talk of rain while washing water. Voices in this collection move through the journey, at times with a Caribbean lilt.

www.worldstagepress.org

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The Agents & Editors Series

offers a wealth of information about the likes and dislikes and the dos and don'ts of industry leaders. In this series of in-depth interviews, which was started by *Poets & Writers Magazine* contributing editor Jofie Ferrari-Adler and continued with Voracious vice president and publisher Michael Szczerban and Atelier26 editor and publisher M. Allen Cunningham, is now led by Vivian Lee, a senior editor at Little, Brown. More than fifteen editors, with experience in big houses and small, discuss how they acquire books, in addition to their approaches to editing, how writers can help themselves navigate the industry, what authors should know about agents, and more. Read the full interviews with editors such as Sarah McGrath of Riverhead Books and Michael Wiegers of Copper Canyon Press at pw.org/content/agents_editors_the_complete_series. Here are some excerpts:

Ben George formerly of Little, Brown

With a newly acquired writer, how do you assess the level of editorial involvement the writer will need or want?

It always starts with a conversation with the writer before you acquire the book, whether on the phone or in person. If I love a manuscript enough to try to acquire it, there aren't usually make-or-break editorial points for me. Maybe on rare occasions there's something essential that I feel would have to be addressed for the book to succeed, and in that case I might want to suss out the writer's openness to such a change. But in that first conversation I'm mainly trying to communicate my passion for this manuscript that the writer has spent years of her life making and to articulate what I see the work trying to do—so the writer understands how closely I've read it and how much I believe in it. That's crucial because you're starting this long relationship which, ideally, will be only the beginning of many books to come.

Amy Einhorn of Crown Publishing

What's the most important thing you do after you acquire a book?

I'm a complete pain in the ass to everybody. [*Laughs.*] Whether it's the authors, or publicity, or the art department. If you ask my assistant, she would say that too. I worked really, really hard to get where I am, and I expect that level of effort from everybody involved in the book.

Ibrahim Ahmad of Viking

When you open a query, what are the kind of things that pop for you?

I tend to work closely with my authors, and we go deep into the trenches together. So I am very cognizant about who I'm doing business with. I think my ideal author is someone who has a generosity of spirit about the way in which they operate in the world. And I'm not making a political statement here, but it's more about the sort of essential humanity of the people who I'm working with. This is as true, I think, for the historians I'm working with as it is for the novelists. Beyond that there are, of course, editorial affinities as well.

Rakia Clark of Mariner Books

What are you looking for that will give you one of those magic moments?

The writing has to be really good. It has to feel like something I've not read before, even if the topic is something that I have read about before. I see a lot of books about race and culture and music and fashion and feminism. And I see a lot of memoir. So it's not that the topic itself needs to be new. What is really new? Very few things. But the treatment of it needs to feel new. I [want to] feel whatever that experience is for you. Writers who can do that are really special.

GEORGE: TONY GALE; EINHORN: CHRISTY WHITNEY; CLARK AND AHMAD: ANDRES HERNANDEZ

Negotiating Your Contract

The Power of the Informed Author

By Daphne Kalotay

FOR many writers, an agent agreement or publishing contract can be an elusive thing. As with four-leaf clovers, having one in your hand can feel like a matter of luck as much as hard work and perseverance. Because of the dismaying odds and long years of effort these achievements usually require, the relief of finally landing a representative or publisher can override all other instincts—including any doubts concerning the legal contract.

The literary agency that sold my debut book, *Calamity and Other Stories*, to Doubleday, a trade imprint of Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, was a "boutique" agency, meaning it was small and specialized, serving a select group of clients with generally modest sales. Likewise the contract I had with the agency was short and simple—straightforward enough that I understood the terms clearly without the need for counsel. It was when I moved to a much larger agency and received a much longer, wordier agent agreement that I thought twice about signing.

I understood the basics of agency agreements—that the author is agreeing to be represented by the literary agent or firm. Typical elements of such a contract are a clause spelling out the terms of representation (that your agent has the exclusive right to represent your interests on your behalf), the terms of the contract (either limited by time—often a year—or by the specific project/book), commission rates (standard being 15 percent of the total income from the domestic sale of your book), and termination notice (often stipulating payment to the agent up to 90 or more days after termination, should the book sell during that time). But that second agency agreement was more complex.

When I showed it to a lawyer acquaintance, he explained that there are two approaches to legal contracts. The first—like that of the new, big, influential agency I was moving to—uses broad language to include everything unless specifically declared exempt. An example of such language would be "the work and any derivative works in all forms now existing or hereafter developed and in all languages throughout the world." My lawyer friend calls this everything-but-the-kitchen-sink grab *overreach*; it is up to you, the author, to try to grab back, by specifying every single right you don't want to sign away.

Instead of signing the agency agreement as it was drafted, I had a lawyer draw up the opposite type of contract, in which the agency represents only what is specifically declared. I was slightly apprehensive about asking for changes to a standard contract with a powerful agency, but the negotiation went smoothly, and the agency went on to sell various rights to my first two novels.

Fast-forward to my fourth book, another novel, *Blue Hours*, published in July 2019 by TriQuarterly Books, an imprint of Northwestern University Press. With no offers from a commercial publisher, I submitted the book to TriQuarterly, even though my agent at the time informed me that her agency would not pursue deals with small publishers. I supposed the agency's reasoning was simply that such contracts were not lucrative enough to be worth an agent's time, but the explanation I received from my then agent was that small-press contracts were too "draconian" for the agency to support.

Hearing this, I was prepared to have to negotiate—and to have to do so without the help of an agent.

DAPHNE KALOTAY is the author of the novels *Russian Winter* (Harper, 2010), *Sight Reading* (HarperCollins, 2013), *Blue Hours* (TriQuarterly Books, 2019), and *The Archivists* (TriQuarterly, 2023).

This article was originally published in *Poets & Writers Magazine* in 2019; it was updated for this guide in 2025.

Not that I would ever sign a contract without the aid of a legal expert. I've long been a member of the Authors Guild, an important organization with an impressive history of advocating on behalf of writers. If you're an author and don't belong to the guild, I strongly suggest you set aside this article right now, look up the organization, and consider joining (for an annual fee) before you read the next paragraph.

What I discovered in negotiating a contract without an agent was eye-opening—so much so that I want to tell every author I know: No matter the initial terms of a contract, "draconian" or otherwise, an informed author *can* negotiate with great success.

In my case, before receiving my contract, I spoke with the press's acquisitions editor and asked if what I had heard about the unusually strict contracts of university presses was correct. She explained that to stay afloat, small presses often do such things as offer lower royalties than commercial presses and request comprehensive subsidiary rights—things like first and second serial rights, audio rights, translation rights, book-club rights, and so on. This conversation was important and did more than prepare me for the contract coming my way; it also let me signal to the editor, in a casual, nonconfrontational way, that I planned to negotiate.

Indeed, the contract I received was not what I considered to be a good one. Not only did the press want to own the book in all possible forms, languages, and territories, but it also wanted to register the copyright in its own name. I immediately e-mailed a copy to the Authors Guild, since my membership dues include a free contract review.

At its most basic, a book contract takes into account these terms: the work itself, including approximate word count, and the specific forms (print book, e-book, audiobook) and markets (domestic/international) in which it will be published, as well as subsidiary rights (merchandising, serial, dramatic), payment schedule and royalty rate, dates of manuscript delivery and publication, the financial and accounting obligations of both parties, a clause about the publisher's right to option the author's subsequent work, and terms of termination. The lawyers at the Authors Guild—an overseeing lawyer and a legal intern—swiftly responded to my e-mail with an explanation of which clauses I should try to change, while being up front about which ones a university press might try to hold on to. In those cases, the lawyers offered strategies for alternatives, should my initial requests be denied.

NO MATTER THE INITIAL TERMS OF A CONTRACT, 'DRACONIAN' OR OTHERWISE, AN INFORMED AUTHOR *CAN* NEGOTIATE WITH GREAT SUCCESS.

As a woman I am especially aware of how difficult it is to ask for something that hasn't been offered. Think of how you feel when you need to ask for a letter of recommendation when applying to a writers conference or residency. Now imagine asking for something from the only press that has offered to publish your book, while knowing that women are not only statistically less likely to try to bargain, but also more likely to be viewed as pushy or whiny than men who do so.

Luckily I had recently attended a salary negotiation workshop specifically for women. After listening to our many fears—that by trying to negotiate, we might lose a job offer or contract-in-progress, or simply be viewed as "unlikable"—the workshop leader, who had worked for years in human resources, repeatedly stressed that by the time an offer is made, the employer really wants you and wants to complete the deal.

Pushing aside my lingering skepticism that this perspective applies to authors or their books, I decided to go into my own contract negotiation with a positive mind-set. I was not going to worry that by firmly asking for something, I risked losing my contract. I told myself to stay upbeat, with the thought that both the publisher and I wanted to settle the agreement as smoothly, quickly, and professionally as possible.

And guess what—it worked.

Here's how I did it: After receiving advice from the Authors Guild and looking back at my previous book contracts (all with "Big Five" publishers) for comparison, I drafted a "deal memo" detailing the changes I wanted. Since some of the lawyers' points were more applicable to my situation than others, I decided to prioritize my requests and to signal my priorities through the language I used. For instance, I absolutely would not give up my copyright—even the press's editor agreed it was extreme to expect writers to turn over their copyright—so I began with that point. Then there was the fact that, since my

previous books have sold well in certain foreign markets, I wanted to make sure to retain foreign and translation rights. And since I was being paid a much smaller advance than usual, I wanted to retain any possibility of selling subsidiary rights such as audiobook, film, television, and radio. Never mind that my book is a literary novel that might not easily convert to another form. You never know what sort of success your book might have, so why not be ready to make the most of whatever good things might happen?

In this way, negotiating a contract became for me more than an exercise of my rights as an author. I was also exercising my belief in the value of my work and in the possibility…no, the likelihood of success—that readers will love my book enough to buy it and tell others about it.

For instance, my previous book contracts had a tiered system of royalty rate increases according to number of books sold. (In a traditional hardcover contract, once the advance is earned back, royalties are paid as follows: 10 percent of the retail price on the first 5,000 copies sold, 12.5 percent of the retail price on the next 5,000 copies sold, and 15 percent of the retail price on all copies sold thereafter.) Maybe it sounded crazy to my university press when I asked for both a higher rate and rate increases after the first 5,000 and 10,000 copies sold. Probably I'll be lucky to sell even 5,000 from a small press. But to allow for this possibility is a show of faith in my work as well as basic, smart business sense.

My experience negotiating taught me a few things. The first is that even authors in less lucrative genres such as literary fiction have bargaining power. The second is that a deal my former agent made sound like an impossibility (or at least not worth her while) ended up being perfectly doable without giving away the proverbial store. In the end it took two e-mails and a phone call with my publisher to iron out the final details. Definitely worth the effort. In fact, negotiating a contract is one of the most invigorating and empowering things I've done. It's also probably one of the most important steps I've undertaken for my books and career.

Hybrid Publishing

By Michael Bourne

An Alternative Model With a Price Tag

As she neared her seventy-fifth year, Linda Moore figured she had little time to waste in launching her literary career. She had put herself through the query process with literary agents once before with an earlier, as-yet-unpublished novel, and when she heard a prominent agent say that during the pandemic agents were taking as long as six months to respond to an initial query, she decided to bypass traditional publishing altogether for her next book, *Attribution*.

So she paid to have *Attribution* published with She Writes Press, a hybrid publisher that specializes in fiction and memoir by women authors. By ponying up the $7,500 fee, Moore not only shortened the time between query and publication, but also gained a measure of control over the design and marketing of her book that she would be unlikely to receive with a traditional press.

MICHAEL BOURNE is contributing editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine*. His debut novel, *Blithedale Canyon*, was published by Regal House Publishing in 2022.

This article was originally published in *Poets & Writers Magazine* in 2023; it was updated for this guide in 2025.

Moore says *Attribution* has been taken up by more than fifty book clubs and has sold more than eight thousand copies since it came out in October 2022—a strong sales record for a debut novel from a nontraditional press. This has enabled Moore to earn back her initial publishing fee and printing costs, though at the time of this writing she admits she has a way to go before she can recoup the $100-per-hour publicity contract she signed with BookSparks, a sister company of She Writes.

Still, she's pleased enough with her results that she published her second novel, *Five Days in Bogotá*, with She Writes in May 2024.

"I consider myself to be a co-investor," Moore says of her relationship with She Writes. "As an investor I have agency in a lot of ways about the size of the print run, the cover design, how we will or won't handle promotion, how the advertising copy reads on different platforms. I am a partner with them, and of course I do receive higher royalties than authors with traditional presses."

She Writes Press, founded in 2012, is among the pioneers of the hybrid publishing model, which aims to chart a course for authors between the high barriers of traditional publishing and the isolation and uncertain returns of self-publication. These presses charge authors to publish their work in the way fee-for-service "vanity presses" do but claim to operate more like traditional publishing houses, rejecting a significant number of authors who submit and, in some cases, offering distribution deals that can get their authors' books into brick-and-mortar stores.

But critics like Jane Friedman, author of the influential publishing industry newsletter *The Bottom Line*, say hybrid presses are too often just vanity presses with a better marketing pitch.

"This is why so many people end up in situations that are less than ideal, and they end up disappointed because they think hybrid is somehow better than some other paid-for publishing service, and it's not," she says. "Hybrid publishers have done a great job of portraying themselves as innovators, disrupters, and 'Oh, you're going to get the best of both worlds,' and it's just nonsense."

Yes, Friedman says, hybrid presses are more selective than vanity publishers, and many—though not all—offer distribution deals unavailable to self-publishers, but the bottom line remains that writers are paying to publish their own work, and the publishers are taking little to no risk on the authors they publish.

"These companies would not survive if authors weren't paying the bills," she says. "It doesn't matter if your book sells. They've already made their money."

In an effort to legitimize the new publishing model, She Writes publisher Brooke Warner helped create an eleven-point "Hybrid Publishing Criteria" for the Independent Book Publishers Association suggesting that all hybrid presses should, among other things, "define a mission and vision for its publishing program, vet submissions, [and] commit to truth and transparency in business practices."

Still, any company with a website and a Kindle Direct Publishing account can call itself a hybrid publisher, and even a quick survey of the field turns up a dizzying array of services and price points. On one side are established hybrids like She Writes, which recently raised its prices and now charges an author $10,000 to design, proofread, and distribute a book. Then there are newer, scrappier hybrids like Atmosphere Press, which charges less money—the standard package runs $6,300, according to its CEO, Nick Courtright—and puts more focus on editing and mentoring writers than on distribution. (Average sales for an Atmosphere title are "a couple hundred," Courtright says.)

Still other hybrids like Amplify Publishing Group offer would-be authors ghostwriting and editorial services and have specialized imprints focusing on business and politics. A typical publishing package at Amplify's Mascot Books imprint, which publishes fiction and memoir, costs between $12,000 and $16,000, according to CEO Naren Aryal. Like many other hybrids, Amplify offers authors the option to hire an in-house publicist, which can add another $3,000 to $10,000 to the cost of launching a book, depending on how long the publicity campaign lasts.

(The hybrid world was rocked in recent years by the implosion of one of its major players, Scribe Media, which abruptly laid off at least eighty-seven of its employees in May 2023, leaving many of its authors to wonder what would happen with their books. As of this writing, Scribe is operating under new leadership, even as the company fields a class-action lawsuit from its former employees.)

Sorting through this profusion of services and slick promises and testimonials requires an eye for detail as well as an honest assessment of what an author wants—and can reasonably expect to attain—from publication with a hybrid press.

She Writes, to its credit, is among the more transparent of the hybrids in explaining on its website what its authors can expect to pay and what they can expect to get in return, and a close examination of its publishing process is instructive in understanding how hybrid publishing works. A submission to She Writes will land either on the Coaching Track or the Publishing Track. A writer whose work ends up on the Coaching Track, which Warner concedes amounts to a "soft rejection," will be offered a list of recommended writing coaches, who, for a price, will help an author revise the book.

Many hybrid presses offer a version of this service. At She Writes, the writing coaches are freelancers the press knows and trusts, but they don't work directly for the company, and the press makes no promise that a revision supervised by a recommended coach will lead to publication. At Atmosphere, on the other hand, editing and mentoring writers is a core element of its mission. Every writer who submits a manuscript receives a phone call from one of the press's editors to discuss the book, says Courtright, its CEO. If the editors believe it's a good fit for Atmosphere, and the writer is willing to pay the fee, the press offers two editorial meetings lasting an hour to an hour and a half with its editors as the writer revises the book for publication.

Courtright wouldn't put a figure on how many books his press accepts, saying, "We get hundreds and hundreds of submissions. We take about twenty books a month." Warner at She Writes is firmer about her acceptance rate, saying about 20 percent of all submitted books end up being published by the press. This is similar to the rate Amplify CEO Aryal gives for the press's Mascot Books imprint.

Once a book is accepted, and its author pays the fee, most hybrid presses will design the book's cover and interior, manage the publication process, and arrange for distribution. How the books are distributed varies widely from press to press, though. Atmosphere publishes mostly print-on-demand, which means that each book is printed only when a customer orders it, either online or at a bookstore.

She Writes, on the other hand, currently distributes through Simon & Schuster and previously distributed with Publishers Group West, which services many well-known indie presses and warehouses an author's books free for the first year. This matters for writers who want to see their work on the shelves at bricks-and-mortar bookstores, which tend to resist ordering print-on-demand titles because they can't return unsold copies for a refund as they can for traditionally published books.

For executives like Warner and Aryal, these distribution networks constitute a key distinction between hybrid presses and other fee-based publishing outfits that simply put a book up for sale online and let print-on-demand technology handle fulfillment. But in practice it can be a struggle to get a bookstore to stock *any* debut novel from an indie press, much less a press that charges its authors to publish their work, and as Friedman notes, to make that happen at any kind of scale, an author will need to work with a publicist, which can add upwards of $10,000 to the cost of launching the book.

More to the point, the very digital technology that makes hybrid publishing possible has also moved most book sales onto the web, where print-on-demand titles can compete on an even playing field with traditionally distributed books. "A lot of authors don't understand that 60 percent to 70 percent of book sales are happening online, and you don't need a hybrid to compete in the online space," Friedman says.

Another key distinction hybrid publishers make between their businesses and other types of fee-based presses is that hybrids have "skin in the game" and take a cut of the earnings of books sold through the retail market. This helps the hybrids defray the costs of shipping and warehousing their books and means they share an incentive with the author to sell as many books as possible.

At She Writes, for instance, the press takes 40 percent of the net earnings of each print book sold via its distribution network. Thus, according to figures listed on its website, shewritespress.com, after deducting the publisher's royalty and the costs of printing the books, an author will earn between $1.39 and $3.39 on the sale of each $17.95 paperback, depending on printing costs. This compares with the standard $1.35 royalty an author could expect to earn on the sale of a similarly priced paperback published with a traditional New York City house.

HYBRIDS EXIST BECAUSE MANY AUTHORS DON'T WANT TO PUBLISH A BOOK ON THEIR OWN, AND, ROYALTY MATH ASIDE, HYBRIDS CAN MAKE THE PROCESS OF PUBLISHING A BOOK OUTSIDE THE TRADITIONAL SYSTEM LESS LABORIOUS AND LESS LONELY.

Authors' earnings do rise somewhat for an e-book, for which She Writes' royalty drops to 30 percent, and for any book the author manages to sell on her own, for which She Writes takes no royalty at all—though, of course, in the latter case, the author isn't making use of the distribution network that distinguishes She Writes from other types of fee-based publishing services.

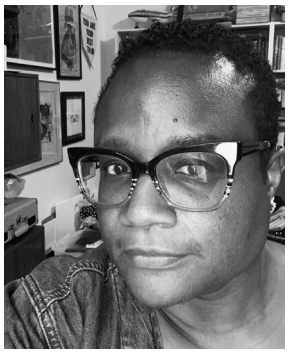
It's this kind of math that illustrates for Friedman why hybrid presses aren't always a great deal for authors. A resourceful self-published author, she says, can produce a decent-looking book for between $2,000 and $5,000 and recoup that expense more quickly because they're earning much more from the sale of each book. "You're paying the middleman, and you're paying to some extent for not wanting to learn how to do this on your own," she says of working with hybrids. "It's not beyond any author, so I would much rather see people take the time to learn how to do it themselves."

But of course hybrids exist because many authors don't want to publish a book on their own, and, royalty math aside, hybrids can make the process of publishing a book outside the traditional system less laborious and less lonely. At Atmosphere, authors receive two hour-plus sessions with a professional editor to help them revise their book for publication. At She Writes, authors join an ever-expanding "sisterhood of She Writes authors" who attend book fairs together and communicate on a private Facebook page. And at most hybrids, writers work with talented editors, designers, and publishers, many of whom are themselves former players in the traditional book business.

"The demographic is not necessarily people who make their living writing and being authors," says Aryal of the writers who choose to publish with Amplify Publishing Group. "It is typically a side project or a passion project. These folks understand that they don't necessarily have the expertise in the various substantive areas of producing and distributing and marketing a book, and they want to partner with somebody who has done this many, many times."

Agents & Editors Recommend

Publishing professionals share advice, anecdotes, insights, and suggestions for books, movies, music, and more. Read the full series at pw.org/agents_and_editors_recommend.



I edit fiction, nonfiction, and graphic narrative, and what unites all of these projects that I've had the pleasure of working on is a really strong point of view. My job is not to interfere with that and to protect voice above all else. It's important for the author to remember that the editor is a proxy for their future readers. Editorial feedback is the opportunity for the writer to hear an unfiltered, immediate response to the work, which reveals not only what requires revision or restructuring but also what is working. Of course, the book is the author's work. But I think the writer benefits from paying attention to that deep input because working with an editor offers a safe environment and place where they can get feedback in a manner that respects their artistic intentions before the book is in its final form.

One of my favorite quotes of all time comes from Lorraine Hansberry: "In order to create something universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific." This sentiment almost always comes up during the editing process. As an editor, I am reading closely and looking for where specifics sing and where and how the writer can reach for more.

—Retha Powers
Henry Holt

To capture an agent's or publisher's attention with your query letter, begin with the end in mind. The best queries irrefutably answer the most critical question for any book published today: Why should someone pay up to $28 for your book?

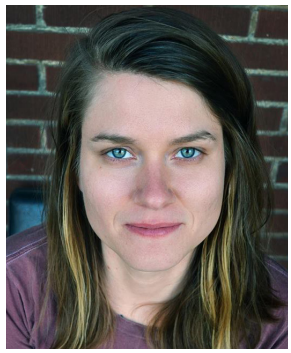
With this end result in mind, you can reverse-engineer: First identify, then highlight the key components of your book that will stop a reader (or agent!) in their tracks.

In your query letter, describe your book as you would in its description on Amazon. (No matter what an agency's guidelines say, there is no tool more proven to sell books than Amazon.)

You can also use Amazon to search for similar books in the same genre. You've now landed on some compelling comparative titles (or "comps," which are necessary to include in your letter). Like Hollywood, publishing is a lookalike business. If your book resembles other popular titles, your chances of persuading an agent to take you on as a client increase. As I explain in my book, *Get Signed: Find an Agent, Land a Book Deal, and Become a Published Author* (Hay House, February 2024), comps have to be a good fit, not a perfect fit. You will also need what I call "the differentiator"—an element that sets it apart from other titles—to help your book stand out in a crowd.

—Lucinda Halpern
Lucinda Literary

I know this might sound strange coming from a publisher, but I believe there's too much emphasis on the act of publishing itself. Not that getting your book published isn't a goal—it definitely is—but I've seen many writers become so fixated on publication that they lose sight of what's actually best for their book. My advice boils down to this: Don't send your work to presses you don't genuinely love or that don't align with the kind of writing you do; your book deserves better. The right press will be your partner throughout the publication process, and you want a partner who truly understands your book and knows how to best bring it into the world. If you're worried that you don't know how to find the right press, trust me—you do. There's no magic to it; it's simply research and hard work, which you're more than capable of—you've already written the book! Here's some practical advice I often give: First, read widely, and not just the best-sellers—seek out books from indie and university presses, too. When you find a book you admire, one that feels like it's in conversation with your work, note the publisher and check their submission guidelines. And do this again and keep doing this until you've found a press that feels like a true home for your book—because your work deserves nothing less.



—Christine Stroud
Autumn House Press

Most first-time book proposal writers fall short by falling flat. That flatness is usually the result of focusing solely on the expository requirements of a proposal, producing a document that just isn't interesting to read. I call this method "Death by PowerPoint," and I blame Google.

If you search smple book proposals on the internet, you'll find a lot of formulaic advice along with dry sample proposals with even drier "marketing" or "platform" sections, often involving bullet points and statistics. Despite what the internet tells you, this is not the most successful approach to getting the attention of an agent, and eventually, an editor. A book proposal is a selling device, but it's not an advertising campaign for homeowners insurance. Always keep in mind that the thing you are trying to sell is a piece of writing, and thus the proposal can—and should—be as interesting and engaging as the book itself.

This might seem counterintuitive. Since submitting a proposal feels a bit like sending in a CV, you may feel a need to be as codified as possible. That approach feels safe and perhaps appropriate—you are, in a sense, "applying" for the job of being a writer. But a proposal is a job application in the same way an audition is. You're showing you're qualified for the job through a distilled version of it, and giving a taste of the finished product—the book—in the process.

Thus, I often advise writers to avoid opening their proposals with a description or synopsis of the book, which is the format you usually see when you Google "book proposal." Instead, open with a mini-scene or excerpt from the proposed book. Don't be afraid to pick your very best one. Then launch into your elevator pitch, and liberate yourself from the PowerPoint approach to proposal writing.

Not sure what kind of scene to pick? To get in the right headspace, I tell my writers to imagine pushing off the wall of a pool to swim a lap. The scene is that wall: Choose material that will give you momentum to power the rest of your proposal, that demonstrates your strengths as a writer, and that sets up your book's thematic concerns. As for the oft-voiced fear of giving too much away, keep in mind the reason you tasked yourself with writing a book proposal in the first place: You want to sell a book, and to do so, you need to interest buyers. If there is ever a time to hide your light under a bushel, the proposal is not it. Go ahead and shine.

—Alia Hanna Habib
The Gernert Company

Ode to a Copy Editor

A Writer's Best Friend

By Courtney Maum

MY THIRD novel, *Costalegre*, was unlike anything I'd ever worked on with a publisher. The story of a privileged girl who is shipped to Mexico with a bunch of exiled surrealists by an art-collecting mother at the brink of World War II, this novel had reasons to give an acquiring editor pause. An unreliable narrator writing from an epistolary point of view, swaths of text in foreign languages, a word count perilously close to that of a novella, multiple illustrations, and fictionalized facts—it's a testament to the mettle of Tin House that I was able to work with a publisher on it at all. During my initial phone call with publisher and editorial director Masie Cochran, before we'd officially started working together, she said, "I have a lot of questions about this book, and I don't want any of them answered." After I toiled on my last two novels to make every character's motivation transparent to both the reader and myself, hearing permission to keep my writing strange made me feel untethered and free. During this conversation, I was sitting on a dock covered in spilled beer and seagull poop, at a writers conference in Tampa, and when I hung up the phone, I cried.

In elementary school I had a best friend with whom I invented a language of hand signals that we could use to speak to each other during boring assemblies at our girls school: Cross-legged on a carpet, separated by other bodies, silently, we'd talk. The architecture of our communication was insular and separatist, the language building (and the understanding of that language) ours and ours alone. The first months of the editing process with Masie were like those Friday assemblies: cloistered, intimate, a moving work in progress. Because *Costalegre* is a diary, we decided that all of the bold text and italics I'd used had to go—including the sections that were written in foreign languages. Certainly it would be confusing to readers if they came upon a foreign sentence in the same typeset as the English sentence before it, but you don't use italics in a diary—you *don't*. Any textual maneuver that might pull the reader out of the narrator's hallucinatory landscape was put on the chopping block. The novel had become a pact between us, and this pact had rules.

But when the first pass pages arrived with edits from the freelance copy editor Tin House had hired, Anne Horowitz, it felt like the arrival of a marriage counselor that our relationship didn't need. Jolted from the felted cocoon of developmental edits, suddenly the system that I'd built with Masie was being prodded, poked. In her notes on the text, Anne gracefully reminded me that more than a decade of life lived on the Internet has ruined my ability to spell ("it's sleeping *berths*, not *births*"); that my historical research wasn't airtight ("*parenting* might not have been a very common word during this period; keep anyway or maybe change to something like *child-rearing*?"); that I was sometimes incoherent ("This is another sentence that makes sense once the situation comes into focus for the reader but on a first read is quite confusing") and repetitive ("The phrase 'of course' appears sixty times throughout. Perhaps do a search to decide if it's too many?"). But there was also the suggestion that the house rules Masie and I had invented

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were jeopardizing the reader's enjoyment of the text. "Okay that some of these entries lack end punctuation?" she asked. "Foreign words are italicized on first usage (in accordance with CMS 11.3)," she noted, referring to the Chicago Manual of Style, the copy editor's bible. The confidence I'd had in the novel's scaffolding was punctured, as was my confidence in the novel itself. With every query that politely indicated a section was confusing, irregular, opaque, I was reminded that just because I loved this book didn't mean it would sell.

I remember stepping away from the computer where the red Track Changes glowered from the screen and going for a run. I remember telling myself—while running—that the copy editor wasn't there to compliment me or to tell my editor and me what a pretty job we'd done. It was this person's *calling* to identify the places where the story went off track. Anne was a metal detector on a beach of grammar, a hunter of the wrong. Additionally, I assessed—still running—she was a newcomer to the party. Maybe she just needed time to warm up to our text.

These affirmations allowed me to go back to the copyedits with less defensive eyes. And something magical occurred when I let down my guard. Somewhere around the sixtieth query, I could actually see Anne surrender to the rhythm of the text and the rules that we'd defined. By the seventieth, Anne was dabbling in some rule-bending herself. (Comment 71: "'our same house' is colloquial but seems intentionally so.") By the eightieth, she was actually starting to *defend* the narrator's style. (87: "In general I'm allowing colloquialisms and some non-CMS formatting to stand, as this is meant to be a diary.") In the two hundreds, Anne Horowitz was a ticket-carrying passenger on the train of weird, and her queries had some bite: "CMS 6.19 might add serial comma after 'milk' (unless you want the milk and cream to be more of a bonded pair?)" and "I *think* Jack means that one or some of his friends committed suicide and others walked to Czechoslovakia, but it's a little opaque." Italics hers.

And so it was that my relationship with my copy editor, and the regard in which I held copy editors, completely changed. By sitting with Anne's copyedits and allowing them to help me, Anne went from policewoman to stylistic ally. Better yet, when I stopped reading Anne's queries as accusatory, they became an invitation to dig up the character motivations I had initially been so giddy to hide. I wasn't just reading Track Changes on my copyedits anymore; I was engaged in a dissertation defense. Anne's queries about my bonkers use of kinship titles, for example (the narrator calls her mother *Mum*, *Mumma*, and *Mother* throughout the text), forced me to explain—to *know*—that my heroine, Lara, called her mother "Mother" when she was feeling distant from her, or stung by something she'd done; "Mumma" for when she was feeling close to her (not often); and "Mum" when she was jotting down something mundane in her diary, with little feeling attached to the event she was describing. On one occasion, when Lara receives reciprocated love from her perennially distracted guardian, she calls her "Mumma-Mum."

As I delved deeper and deeper into the defense of my protagonist's syntax, I was surprised to find how much I loved the copyediting process, once I repositioned it in my brain as a championship of sorts. I decided to call my copy editor to tell her how much I was enjoying reading her queries. It was the first time Anne had ever received a phone call from the author of a manuscript she'd already edited.

My conversation with my copy editor—and her surprise that we were having one—inspired me to get in touch with the copy editors of other contemporary work that I admired. "I wonder whether editors realize what kind of contribution copy editors could be making if they were allowed more contact with the authors," said veteran copy editor Mark Handsley, who was the managing copy editor at the London office of Penguin Books for decades before going freelance more than twenty years ago. "The copy editors are completely divorced from the author today, and I think that's a complete shame. There is a territorial instinct; editors think, 'This is my book; I've been dealing with the author, and I don't want someone interfering.'"

We were discussing Handsley's experience copyediting Guy Gunaratne's prize-winning *In Our Mad and Furious City* (MCD x FSG Originals, 2018), a book I'd much admired that presents a snapshot of modern-day London via a collage of vernacular voices from the city's streets. Handsley admitted that he'd initially found the book "quite difficult to read" until he slipped into its rhythm, at which point, he turned into the guardian of its style. "I don't want the reader to be given pause in the way that I might have been when I was working on the book," Handsley said. "Whether it's vocabulary or tone—even if it's only for a few moments and the reader is able to ignore the inconsistency and carry on, there shouldn't be cause for that kind of problem. The copy editor's job is

to smooth out those problems and get rid of them so that the process is invisible."

One thing that surprised me during my quest to speak to copy editors of my favorite wild books is that some of these books didn't have copy editors at all. Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (Coffee House Press, 2014) didn't even have a line-editing pass, and Matthew McIntosh's iconoclastic *theMystery.doc* (2017) was acquired by Grove Atlantic already type-set, definitively "as is."

"I had spent a lot of time editing, myself, so I was confident when I sent it that it was exactly what I wanted to publish," McIntosh explained via e-mail about the copyediting process for his 1,660-page novel, edited—or rather, acquired—by Morgan Entrekin. "I was fortunate that Morgan agreed and didn't want to change anything. I've been told that this is rare. The manuscript needed proofing—spelling, some punctuation, the odd incorrect word choice—but as far as the larger issues of editing, the book was published pretty much just as it had been sent in."

theMystery.doc was actually copyedited by Matthew's wife, Erin, but in this book in which movie stills and asterisks become emotional guideposts, rather than point out grammatical irregularities, her task was to assist her husband in his quest to develop a new form, primarily through design and storyboarding, as well as contributing to the book's many redactions. There are pages of blackouts and whiteouts throughout the text that lend the story an almost unbearably vivid portrayal of a life in flux. "The reasons for blackouts were always dependent on the case: to obscure identifying information—names, e-mail addresses, etc," McIntosh recalls. "They also served to conceal personal, private, and holy things, to create big swatches of black set against white, to overwhelm the text like a cancer, to adjust speed and flow of the read without erasing or removing the actual space, to have something to hide behind, to avoid being sued for copyright infringement, to hide the original title of the original book, to

suggest the ever-present unknown."

The success of Benjamin Dreyer's best-selling copyediting memoir, *Dreyer's English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style* (Random House, 2019), as well as Mary Norris's *Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen* (W. W. Norton, 2015), has reminded both readers and writers how much copy editors contribute to the books and pieces they love. Nevertheless, even authors whose copy editors lack Dreyer's wit ("If you're going to have a house style, try not to have a house style visible from space" is a personal favorite) should go the extra mile to show their copy editor some love. Copy editors are not a set of red editing commands on your computer screen; they are living, breathing humans whose eyesight has diminished from their continued improvement of, and on, our work.

Anne and I ended our collaboration on equal footing. There was truth–talking on her part ("Your book has a higher curve of getting orientated—it really takes a while to get your bearings" was one thing she admitted during our phone conversation) and compromises on mine. For example: Tough titties if no one uses italics in their own diaries; you just can't stumble on a foreign word like *genug* and keep going about your business without your brain going, "What the hell was that?" (*Genug* means "enough" in German, and it, like every other foreign word and phrase that appears in *Costalegre*, is now italicized in the text.)

I've always had respect for copy editors, but the copyediting process for my third novel has left me inebriated with gratitude for what these specialized editors do—or rather keep us from doing—on the published page. I look back on my connection with Anne not as a relationship of circumstance, as copy editor to author, but rather as a deeply personal alliance built on the principles of clear communication. She was more than a copy editor; she was an online therapist of sorts—the newfangled kind you can text at a dark hour when your writing needs a friend.

The Brass Tacks of the Publishing Process

Making Sense of the Author Questionnaire

By Destiny O. Birdsong

YEARS before I became a published author, I'd heard about author questionnaires, and nothing I'd heard about them was good. Writers whose books lined my shelves often tweeted about having to complete these long and sometimes outdated documents provided by their marketing and publicity teams, and when I finally sat down in front of my own, I understood their frustration. Shortly after I finished multiple rounds of edits for my debut poetry collection, I received my own multipage form, which included questions about my work and publication histories, the groups of people I thought would be most interested in purchasing my book, and one of the more harrowing inquiries: "Has any article or story of yours attracted particular attention?"

As an early-career writer I felt woefully inadequate for the task. Did it matter that I had yet to write anything that had gone viral? What if my number of interesting hobbies had shrunk in the years since I began working on my collection? What if I personally knew only one or two booksellers in the city where I now lived, and they, like me, were not famous but fellow writers with whom I commiserated about rejections and writer's block?

For many writers, I suspect author questionnaires are hated, not solely for their length, but also for the ways they require us to enumerate our past accomplishments and current connections and to predict the potential commercial value of our work. Also, after many submissions and rejections, rewrites, and relays of edits, they ask us to articulate what might still be inarticulable: why we have written what we've written, and what we believe it has to offer to public discourse, the literary canon, and complete strangers who might happen to pick up our books.

In both their timing and tenor, author questionnaires (which are also sometimes called marketing questionnaires) are the brass tacks of the publishing process, and the fact that they often arrive in an author's inbox at the peak of exhaustion does little to bolster their reputation among us. However, these documents are vital. During my quest to find out why they exist and how they are used, nearly every person I spoke to in publishing—from editors to independent publicists—agreed that author questionnaires are one of the most important documents a writer might ever submit to their publisher on behalf of their book.

FOR the purposes of this article I am talking about author questionnaires as a single genre, but they can come in many forms, and the information requested in them can differ between presses. Some questions that almost always appear are those concerning a writer's biographical information, past jobs and publications, current affiliations, and media contacts (individuals working at print and digital news outlets and in television and radio), a detailed description of the book, a list of comparable titles, and ideas for cover art. However, other sections may vary between large and small presses or university imprints versus those of Big Five publishers. For

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Deesha Philyaw, award-winning author of the story collection *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* (2020) and the forthcoming novel *The True Confessions of First Lady Freeman* (2026), her first questionnaire, from West Virginia University Press, was a Google Doc that asked many of the questions listed above. But at her new publisher, Mariner Books, the questionnaire is accessible only via Author Connect, an online portal where authors can continually update its contents and alert editors when they have completed single sections or the entire form. Philyaw was surprised to see some of the requested information, such as the birth years of her children and a list of commercial products mentioned in her book. "That's new!" she told me. "[But] do you know why this is hilarious? My main character is a brand whore. Think of every luxury designer you've ever heard of." In Philyaw's case, this information could lead to fruitful brand collaborations that could boost the book's sales. And for Mariner, which is an imprint of HarperCollins, a subsidiary of News Corp, such questions might be important because of the parent publisher's already-established relationships with other corporations or even previous collaborations on past titles.

Pitch interviews, reviews, or even a regular column to an online media outlet such as the *Believer* or Electric Literature. I started as an intern at *BOMB* and eventually wrote reviews for the publication's blog. Later I penned a column, Various Paradigms, for the *Believer* Logger about films, art exhibits, politics, and poetics. The benefit of writing for such outlets is that you establish a voice and a readership. If your pitches aren't accepted, start your own blog and promote it on your social media channels. Either way, as your pub date nears, the followers of your column or blog know your voice, are excited about your ideas, and will await your book with anticipation, boosting presales and buzz.

Consider starting an online literary magazine. It's a great way to promote the work of others while making a name for yourself, plus you can do it cheaply and promote it easily through social media. I once launched an online journal called *Gigantic* with a group of graduate school friends. Our first launch was at a warehouse space in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick, far from subway service. We had over five hundred people attend the launch just by creating a Facebook event page and publicizing online. Those readers and writers you've connected with online become a dedicated community, and many of them will go on to follow your work as a writer.

For nonfiction writer Greg Marshall, whose memoir, *Leg: The Story of a Limb and the Boy Who Grew From It*, was published by Abrams Books in 2023, author questionnaires were a new thing: He'd heard little about them before his book was sold on proposal and had no qualms about their length or specificity. "When [a questionnaire] arrived in my inbox after I'd turned in a draft of *Leg* in 2022, I felt like I was being given a pop quiz I knew I'd ace," he says. "For the first five or six years of working on the book, it had just been me. I'd spent years perfecting my pitch in query letters, revised proposals, and, haltingly, over drinks with high school friends. [But now] there would be folks helping me publish *Leg*. There would be an 'us.'"

Marshall completed his questionnaire in multiple sittings over the course of two days and specifically remembers his excitement about the cover art section, where publishers ask authors to share phrases and images relevant to the themes of their books. While most authors have only what is called "artistic input"—the ability to make suggestions and minor edits for their covers—the images requested in questionnaires are used for inspiration and can help in-house folks get a clearer sense of how an author envisions their physical book. Marshall, who was born with cerebral palsy but did not learn of his diagnosis until adulthood, had an important conversation with his editor, Zack Knoll, about how his experience with disability should be represented on the cover. During this conversation he had to clarify some of the information he'd included in the questionnaire. "One early concept included a leg brace," he explains. "Zack asked if it was representative of my own experience with walking aids. I'd jotted down 'leg brace' on the author questionnaire, noting that I'd briefly worn one in elementary school. However, when it came to the cover, I asked that we steer clear of casts, leg braces, and wheelchairs. I felt that putting [those] on the cover might misrepresent my own experience." In Marshall's case, both the questionnaire and the conversations it engendered helped create a cover Marshall loves. "The first cover that was presented to me as an option was the one we went with," he says. "I actually felt bad for not having more notes."

Marshall's experience illustrates the ways in which completing author questionnaires is more than just an annoying bookend to the editorial process; it is the first step in a writer's building a powerful relationship with their publisher. Once the forms are completed, they are usually distributed to what Kamrun Nesa, a publicity manager at Grand Central, calls "key stakeholders," or anyone who is working with the author on their book, from editorial assistants to publicity and marketing directors. Nesa points out that publicists use the completed documents

to strategize about a book's publicity. "The document serves as a foundation for ideas for outreach, blurb requests, and markets to target for events and in-store promotion, and it offers insight into the author's network of contacts that we may be able to tap for coverage or collaborations," she says.

Stakeholders can receive these documents anywhere from eight to fourteen months before a book's release, but in many ways, that can feel like a late arrival in the life of the forthcoming book. For Molly Templeton, who is now a publicist and awards administrator for the Ursula K. Le Guin Foundation but once worked as the publicity manager at Tin House Books, the questionnaire is a way for the publicity team to play catch-up and get to know writers who have, up until this point, spent most of their time talking with editors. "The form is the beginning of a conversation among the writer and their publicity-marketing team. It's a starting point for ideas: Does this writer have any unusual hobbies that we can somehow weave into the presentation and promotion of this book? Have they written for or worked at outlets or organizations that [we] would want to know about?"

Comprehensively completed questionnaires and the discussions that follow can help stakeholders find both large and niche audiences for a book, even when an author isn't already a household name. "There are authors who are still early in their writing careers and still getting their bearings, and that is perfectly okay," says Nesa. "There have been several instances in which an author mentioned a contact for media coverage, or blurb requests, or a new angle, and it helped us prioritize our outreach and see the book in a new light."

There is also another, far more practical reason for taking these documents seriously, one that was echoed by Philyaw's editor, Rakia Clark, and Michael Taeckens, an independent publicist and a founder of Broadside PR. Clark, who is now an executive editor at Mariner after stints at Beacon Press, Viking Penguin, and Kensington, says that her use of author questionnaires is supplementary; still, she encourages her writers to begin working on them early and often because when they're thoroughly completed, they make everyone's job—including hers—a bit easier. "I don't use them to get media. Publicity and marketing use them," says Clark. "[Instead] I am trying to get the house as excited about the book as I can. My launch presentation will get the room hyped, and people will be like, 'Well, let's see what she's talking about!' It's like, if somebody is trying to set you up on a blind date, and they make this person sound like they were the most amazing person on the planet, you'd be like, 'I want to see a picture!' I use the author questionnaire as the picture." For this reason Clark implores her authors to complete them promptly, but she also asks that they do so thoroughly. "When people walk out of the room after a launch, and they feel more excited about my list [of soon-to-be published books], I don't know how much of that I can attribute to the author questionnaire, but in my experience as an editor, if you're trying to get people to do their very best work at the very highest level, giving them everything they need as well as you can makes them do a better job," she says. "That gives the book a better shot."

Taeckens, who worked in marketing and publicity at Graywolf Press and Algonquin Books before cofounding Broadside PR, where he has represented clients such as Clint Smith, Safiya Sinclair, and current U.S. Poet Laureate Ada Limón, has long emphasized the importance of author questionnaires. "What I tell authors is that author questionnaires are incredibly helpful for every single department in the publishing company: publicity, marketing, sales, editorial—everything." Taeckens also reiterates the benefits of being comprehensive: "The staff at publishing houses are spread pretty thin. They have so many projects going on, and it's just a big help to them to have all the information right there at their fingertips," he says.

According to both Clark and Taeckens, authors should always err on the side of abundance, particularly when it comes to listing one's media contacts. "No media contact is too small," says Taeckens. Clark agrees. "I encourage [my writers] to be as exhaustive as possible," she says. "Because if we're trying to get to Oprah, and nobody knows Oprah, tell us everybody you know who might know Oprah." And though there are some limits to whom one should list, Clark points out that it's important to be strategic. "Don't list your dog walker," she says. "But if your dog walker is an intern at Seth Meyers, then list your dog walker."

As for strategy, Taeckens says that if he had to choose the items that are most important on a questionnaire, they would be those concerning media contacts, comparable titles, and an author's description of their own book. While media connections can help get the word out, comparable titles can be exponentially helpful with marketing, and the reason is simple. Comparing new books to books people already know and love can spark interest. "For every book that gets published, the sales team is putting together what are called tip sheets, and they have comp titles on those," he says. "When they're preparing for sales conferences to pitch

an entire season's worth of books to all the sales reps—the entire sales team that is based nationally—and selling the book to all the independent bookstores, libraries, Amazon, and Barnes & Noble, they will use that information." Taeckens recommends doing more than simply listing books that are similar to one's own. Pointing out a book's similarities and differences makes a stronger case for the use of those titles in marketing campaigns.

When it comes to an author's description of the book, Taeckens points out that an author's voice is a lovely addition to publicity materials, even if, as is the case with comp titles, their words are not being used verbatim. Oftentimes the way a writer describes their own work can be helpful when pitching the book, or for descriptions that appear on the jacket, in the galleys, and in catalogues. Taeckens will often use these same descriptions in his own work. When writing his pitch letters, which accompany the galleys of his clients' books that are sent to media contacts, he sometimes takes phrases and sentences from the descriptions written by authors on their questionnaires, which are shared with him either by his clients or their publishers. "I mean, these are writers, and they're so talented at language and description," he says. "There are often just really beautiful nuggets in there that are helpful. And if it's not necessarily the language, it's the ideas."

Despite their seemingly superfluous questions, poor timing, and general tedium, perhaps this is the unsung magic of author questionnaires: They may be the first time an author can speak coherently and enthusiastically about the work they've finally completed and, in so doing, collaborate with publishers to plan for a book's entrance into the world. Author questionnaires are an essential part of a writer's work, and so they feel like labor for a reason and for a very important cause: the books to which we have dedicated our time, our energy, and our lives. "I understand that it can feel like a tedious bit of homework," says Taeckens. "But it's homework that will pay off in the long run."you get out of it what you put in. Dive in wholeheartedly. Head first.

The Nitty-Gritty

How to Seek Permissions

By Michael Bourne

SAY you've just written a scene into your novel in which a character puts in her earbuds and joins Adele in belting out a few lines from her 2015 hit "Hello." Or say you've written a collection of essays and want to use quotations from your favorite poets and writers to introduce each essay. Depending on how many words you use and how you display them on the page, those decisions could cost you when the book is published, in terms of both licensing fees and hours spent tracking down who owns the rights.

Writer Anjali Enjeti learned this lesson the hard way when she began seeking permission to use five brief quotations in her debut essay collection, *Southbound: Essays on Identity, Inheritance, and Social Change*, published in April 2021 by the University of Georgia Press. The Atlanta-based former attorney had read the fine print in her contract that stipulated that she, not her publisher, had to seek out and pay for the rights to use the quotations. Despite understanding the basics of U.S. copyright law, she was unprepared for how much work it took to get permission to use the five passages.

Enjeti had planned, for instance, to use lines from an essay by Indian scholar and social reformer Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, considered by many the father of India's constitution, but after some digging Enjeti learned that the Indian government owns the rights to Ambedkar's work. Enjeti sent a few e-mails to officials asking for permission, but when she didn't hear back, she cut the epigraph from her book. "I just gave up," she says. "I seriously doubted I was going to be able to go through all the red tape of a bureaucracy to get a quote for an author, so I abandoned it."

In the weeks she spent tracking down rights, Enjeti says she found little rhyme or reason in how rights holders responded to her requests. She had assumed she would have to pay for a three-sentence passage from Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart: Collected Nonfiction* (Haymarket Books, 2019) that she planned to use as an epigraph for her collection, but Roy's publisher said she could use the lines for free. But in another case involving a quotation by Maya Angelou of roughly the same length, Enjeti had to sign a contract and pay more than $300.

"I would say it was a good week of work," Enjeti says of the time she spent securing permissions for her book. "It was spread out over time, but it was a good, solid week of work, and it was a week of work that I really did not anticipate because I had let it get down to the wire before I even started looking."

Many new writers either don't realize they're responsible for seeking permission to use other artists' words and images in their books or, like Enjeti, underestimate the time and expense of securing them. In the best-case scenario they will spend a few boring hours scouring the internet and trading e-mails with rights holders to nail down permissions. But in the worst-case scenario writers who start too late clearing rights can delay publication of their book or risk getting sued for copyright violation and having to pay thousands of dollars in damages.

Such dire consequences are extremely rare, says Fred Courtright, president of the Permissions Company, who has been securing copyright permissions for authors since 1989. Still, Courtright says, writers should start seeking permissions as early as possible, preferably as soon as their book has reached its final edited form.

"Many rights holders won't get back to you for weeks and weeks, so

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if you're doing it late in the process it could stop a book," he says. "I have a book right now with a major publisher and a major author that is stopped in its tracks because we have a request that just hasn't come back yet, and they're waiting on the approval letter before they publish the book even though it's been promised."

As a first step in the permissions process, Courtright says, writers should make a list of every scrap of borrowed material in their manuscript, whether it's an epigraph, quoted text, lyrics of a song, or a photograph, and decide whether they need to seek permission for each item. Unfortunately federal copyright law can be maddeningly murky about what is protected and what isn't.

U.S. law offers copyright protection for written work for ninety-five years, meaning any book published after 1929 is potentially under copyright. The same rules apply to photographs, though images taken before 1978 may be in the public domain if their owners didn't apply for copyright protection.

But even if a written work remains under copyright, you can sometimes still excerpt short passages under the "fair-use doctrine." Every copyright holder interprets the law slightly differently, but in general the longer the quote you plan to use, and the more prominently you use it, the more likely it is that you'll need permission. In most cases you can safely use one or two lines from a song or a poem, or a slightly longer excerpt from a prose work, within the text of your story. But if you use any copyrighted material as an epigraph or set it off from the rest of the text, you will probably need permission. Whether you have to pay for it is up to whoever is managing the rights, which in most cases is the work's publisher, not its author.

AS A FIRST STEP IN THE PERMISSIONS PROCESS, WRITERS SHOULD MAKE A LIST OF EVERY SCRAP OF BORROWED MATERIAL IN THEIR MANUSCRIPT, WHETHER IT'S AN EPIGRAPH, QUOTED TEXT, LYRICS OF A SONG, OR A PHOTOGRAPH, AND DECIDE WHETHER THEY NEED TO SEEK PERMISSION FOR EACH ITEM.

Simon & Schuster, for instance, allows writers to use up to two hundred fifty words from the work of any of its thousands of authors for free if the words appear within the paragraphs of the book, according to Yessenia Santos, the publisher's senior permissions manager. But if you use even a few words from a Simon & Schuster author in an epigraph or in a highlighted text box, you can expect to pay. How much you will be charged depends on a host of factors, including the popularity of the author being quoted, the size of the print run for your book, and the countries it will be published in, Santos says, but fees typically range from $60 to $200 per page of text.

"We are definitely open to negotiation," Santos says. "Obviously, from a thousand-dollar fee we cannot go down to $200, but it's always open to negotiation. On many occasions we take into consideration the budgetary constraints or the nature of the project, so you have nothing to lose in asking for a reduction."

Outside of major publishers, fees can vary enormously, says Courtright, though typically the larger the publisher holding the rights, the higher the fee will be. Popular song lyrics, many of which are controlled by large music publishers or licensing firms, can be especially pricey. You can expect larger music-licensing firms, which handle the music catalogs of pop icons like the Beatles and Bruce Springsteen, to charge at least a few hundred dollars even for brief excerpts in small-press books, Courtright says. Poetry and lyrics to more obscure songs may cost considerably less, depending on who holds the rights to them.

The consequences of failing to secure permission for copyrighted material are potentially severe, including a nasty lawsuit over copyright infringement, but most of the time, Courtright says, all the writer will lose is leverage in negotiating a fair price for the borrowed material.

"It technically could cost you tens

of thousands of dollars," he says, "but practically speaking what will happen is a writer will say, 'Oh, we forgot to clear for the hardcover. I'm sorry, we want to clear for the hardcover and the forthcoming paperback. Can you quote us a right?' and 90 percent of the time the rights holders—even mean, nasty music publishers—will kick out a license because they want that. They may knock up the fee a little bit, but normally they want to see that happen because then they get money."

Of course rights holders are under no obligation to grant permission, and if you're using an author's words in a way they don't like, they can deny your request. At Simon & Schuster, which controls the rights to the works of Ernest Hemingway because he originally published with Scribner, now a Simon & Schuster imprint, Santos says, the novelist's estate has forbidden any use of his words in a way that would link his name to alcohol or alcoholism in a derogatory way. "Let's say your book is called 'The Biggest Alcoholic in the Whole World,'" she says. "I see that title and you want to use Hemingway, I'll say, 'Thank you but no thank you.'"

For this reason requests for permissions often must include some sense of the context in which the requested material will be used. This is especially true of song lyrics, whose publishers often want to see the manuscript page on which the borrowed lyrics will appear, along with the page before and the page after, says Courtright. But most of the time rights holders are eager to grant permission because it represents easy revenue. Authors also tend to welcome the use of their work, though they typically have to split any fees fifty-fifty with their publishers and then allow their agents to take their customary 15 percent cut before they see any income.

So for writers seeking permissions, the biggest hurdle typically is figuring out who owns the rights to the material they want to use and managing the paperwork involved in securing the rights. Editorial assistants at a publishing house will occasionally lend a hand for a valued author or in the case of an anthology requiring large numbers of permissions, but most of the time writers are on their own.

Perhaps the easiest search involves an excerpt from a published book. Many large publishers have permissions portals, though in the cases of smaller presses you may need to search the website to find a contact address and e-mail your request. You can save yourself a lot of time by putting all the information publishers will need into your initial request, including the verbatim text you want to use and any context they ask for, your book's title and publisher, its initial print run, and the publication date, along with the number of pages and the list price of the print and e-book editions.

Song lyrics may take a little more sleuthing, but you can often find the publisher of a particular piece of music by searching the databases of performance-rights organizations BMI or ASCAP or one of the major licensing firms like Hal Leonard or Alfred Music. Rights for photographs tend to be controlled by photo agencies, and for historical news images your best bet is to start with the major agencies like Getty Images or the Associated Press, Courtright says. Many fine-art images are controlled by Art Resource (artres.com), which represents a host of galleries, museums, and individual artists.

Stickier problems can arise when a book containing material you want to use has gone out of print and the rights have reverted to the author or if the passage never appeared in a book in the first place. That's when a writer can vanish down a virtual rabbit hole of endless internet searches and unanswered e-mails, as Anjali Enjeti did when she learned that the quote from scholar Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar belonged to the Indian government, or when she started looking for the rights holder for another quote she wanted to use in an epigraph, this one from author Grace Lee Boggs, which had originally appeared in a magazine interview.

Enjeti wasn't sure who owned the rights to Boggs's quote, so she contacted the magazine and Boggs's estate, all to no avail. In the end Enjeti gave up and used a different quotation from *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, a 2012 book Boggs wrote with Scott Kurashige, whose publisher, the University of California Press, granted her permission to use the line.

By then Enjeti had learned her lesson, and when it came time to consider an epigraph for her debut novel, *The Parted Earth* (Hub City Press, 2021), she decided to skip it.

"I have the dedication of the novel to my grandmothers," Enjeti says, "and then I was like, 'Do I really need an epigraph?' It was one of those days when I was going around and around with getting the permissions for the epigraphs for the collection, and I was just like, 'I'm going to leave it.'"

Agent Advice

Iwalani Kim of Sanford J. Greenburger Associates

Areas of interest: Adult upmarket and literary fiction, literary memoir, cultural criticism, narrative nonfiction

On her bookshelf: *Luster* (FSG, 2020) by Raven Leilani, *Sabrina & Corina* (One World, 2019) by Kali Fajardo-Anstine, *Salvage the Bones* (Bloomsbury, 2011) by Jesmyn Ward, and *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls* (Bloomsbury, 2019) by T Kira Madden

Looking for: Query letter and the first few chapters in the body of an e-mail

Preferred contact: E-mail ikim@sjga.com

Agency contact:
Sanford J. Greenburger Associates
55 Fifth Avenue, Fifteenth Floor
New York, NY 10003
greenburger.com

Read every installment of the Agent Advice series at pw.org.

I have finished a rough draft of a novel. As someone who knows no one personally in publishing or literary circles and has no following (even though I've worked in publishing), how do I get an agent?

S.C. from New York, New York

While connections to publishing or literary circles can work in a writer's favor, neither a referral nor a significant following will win over an agent if the project isn't right for their list. In fact, the "slush pile" is meant to level the playing field, and most of our agency's clients have come to us by querying. Make sure you understand the genre in which you're writing and submit your work to agents who are passionate about and understand the market for that genre. Research the agents who represent books that share similarities with your novel or authors you admire. Some free resources include the databases at Poets & Writers (pw.org) and Manuscript Wish List (manuscriptwishlist.com), and agency websites.

When you address an agent, what is an effective and proper way to get the attention of the person who reads it?

Jenya from Canton, Massachusetts

The most effective and appropriate way to get an agent's attention in a query letter is to appeal to their tastes as a reader. Any meaningful connections you can draw between their stated interests and your manuscript will help you—perhaps your book is similar in style or theme to a book they sold, or it fits the bill for a dream project on their #MSWL. Do your research: Look at their bio, their list of clients, their online presence, interviews, etc. Then tailor each query letter thoughtfully to the agent. A few "attention-grabbing" strategies that will likely backfire: being overly familiar in tone, citing details from an agent's personal life, and marking your e-mail "urgent."

What advice can you provide about submitting a book of short stories to an agent? Is it wise to compile samples from each story?

Catherine from Fairfax, Virginia

Before submitting your collection to an agent, it's a good idea to first submit some—but not all—of the stories for publication in established, highly regarded literary journals and magazines. Publication credits are especially important for writers of story collections, as they demonstrate the strength of each stand-alone story and indicate an existing audience for your work. You'll want to be sure that at least half of the material you're submitting hasn't yet been published. Once you're ready to query, choose one or two complete stories to submit as a sample, based on the individual agent's submission guidelines.

If, after sixty days, you have not heard back from a queried agent within an agency, should you send the query to another agent within that agency?

Leonard from Santa Fe, New Mexico

This depends on the agent's policy. Check the agency's submission guidelines and those of the individual agent. These guidelines usually specify whether the agent responds to each submission and, if not, the amount of time after which you can safely assume the agent has passed and whether you're welcome to query another agent within the agency.

Selling Your Second Book

Warnings and Reassurances

By Chloe Benjamin

PEOPLE will trash your second novel no matter what," one of my graduate professors once said. "You might as well get it out of the way and move on to the third." This professor was a writer I had idolized since my teens and whose work was, to me, flawless. She used her cell phone to pull up the Amazon reviews on her second book and began to read aloud comments so cruel they seemed to warn against publishing anything at all.

Shortly after my first novel found a home, I began work on my second with a hefty dose of trepidation. After all, warnings about the fate of second books extended far beyond my professor's red flag.

If your first book didn't sell well, good luck getting a publisher to buy your second.

And once it's out? Well, no media wants to cover a second novel. Unless your first book was a smash hit, readers won't want to buy it either.

If your first book was a success, good luck: Readers will hate the second book if it's too different from the first. Come to think of it, though, they'll probably hate it if it's too similar, too.

And yet, as my professor had pointed out, it was impossible to move on to a third book without writing a second. Besides, I had another problem: I liked my second book. I wrote feverishly on weekends and made what progress I could on weekdays, staring at the computer screen in the early mornings before I left for my job in social services.

"This is *the book*," I told my agent, Margaret Riley King of William Morris Endeavor (WME). "The book I was meant to write." Unfortunately, it was also my second.

If your first book didn't sell well, good luck getting a publisher to buy your second.

Agent Dorian Karchmar, whose clients at WME have included Amor Towles and Helene Cooper, has been an agent since 2005. In that time, she says, it's only become more challenging for second novels—particularly when they follow debuts that were not perceived as successes. "[Twenty-five years] ago we had Borders, a very nascent Amazon, many more independent bookstores, no or less reliance upon BookScan, many more places for book reviews to appear, and far less competition for readers' time and money," she says. "Now the economic ecosystem of books is pegged to fairly precise tracking systems, so publishers and booksellers have records of how an author's first book has done in the marketplace. Because booksellers generally determine their order quantities based upon a given author's track record, it can prove extremely challenging to sell a follow-up book from an author whose debut, published by a mainstream trade house, has sold very modestly. This is especially true if that debut performed far below publisher and bookseller expectations."

My first novel, *The Anatomy of Dreams*, sold after five weeks on submission. In the end, it went to a whip-smart junior editor at Simon & Schuster. My agent, editor, and I worked valiantly on its behalf: calling in every favor we could, writing countless e-mails to writers and media we

CHLOE BENJAMIN is the author of *The Immortalists*, (Putnam, 2018), and *The Anatomy of Dreams*, which received the 2014 Edna Ferber Fiction Book Award and was long-listed for the 2014 Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize. She is a graduate of the MFA program in fiction at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and lives with her husband in Madison, Wisconsin.

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admired. I was grateful that the book received strong coverage, won a regional award, and was long-listed for a prominent national first novel award, but I knew it hadn't been reviewed in major publications. Within a year, it began to disappear from bookstores.

"It didn't sell *terribly*, did it?" I asked my agent while at work on my second novel, *The Immortalists*.

King hesitated. "No."

"I mean, wasn't it within the range of what's normal, for a debut?" I was desperate, not because I hoped to make more money from the book; judging by my royalty statements, that was about as unlikely as winning the Pulitzer. I wanted only to be able to publish another one.

"Look," she said. "It wasn't great—which *is* within the range of what's normal for a debut. My concern is whether this will impact the kind of offers we get for the second one."

Without impressive sales, she planned to highlight what advantages I did have: the reviews, the award, and my relationships with independent booksellers, which I had cultivated during the first book's promotion. I had also worked hard to become an active and encouraging member of local and national literary communities. In my hometown I taught workshops, gave readings, and supported other authors' events. Beyond, I established a presence on the social media platforms that felt most natural to me, attended conferences, and reviewed books by other early-career authors.

Karchmar agrees that those kinds of efforts are helpful. Still: "The real key for a second novel to be successfully placed in the face of a weak debut is for the new book to be even better than the first, and indisputably compelling—ideally, in a way that feels like a departure from the first, and that feels 'big,'" she says. "The publisher needs to be able to make a strong case that the new book is not only unimpeachable in terms of its writerly qualities, but that it has the potential to reach a broader readership."

THE PUBLISHER NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO MAKE A STRONG CASE THAT THE NEW BOOK IS NOT ONLY UNIMPEACHABLE IN TERMS OF ITS WRITERLY QUALITIES, BUT THAT IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO REACH A BROADER READERSHIP.

King shared my excitement about Novel No. 2. After reading the first half, she wrote, "THIS BOOK IS A GAME CHANGER," a sentence that buoyed me through another year of work. At that point, my editor at Simon & Schuster said she wanted to try to buy the book as a partial manuscript. We submitted what I had. One month later, she called.

The publisher was offering the same amount of money I received for the first book. I could hear the disappointment in my agent's voice. I had been incredibly grateful for that advance, but once taxes and agent fees were subtracted and I paid off my credit card, what remained supplemented my day job for little more than a year.

"Do you want to take it?" King asked.

The choice was not just monetary. If I took the offer, I could be certain the book would be published. It was possible we'd find a much better deal if we sent the book to other houses, but it was equally possible that we'd have no deal at all. And my editor at Simon & Schuster was passionate about the new book. I knew how hard she'd fought for it and that she was disappointed she hadn't been able to offer more. More than that, though, I liked *her*. In turning the deal down, I would also lose our partnership.

Deep down, however, I'd already made my choice. It wasn't just that I hoped for more money so that I could build a more sustainable life as a writer; I also knew I'd written a novel that was better than my first. Just as my agent was my advocate, I had to be my book's advocate, and I didn't want to foreclose the chance of finding a publishing house that felt as strongly about it as I did. Amicably, we parted ways with Simon & Schuster. I spent the next year finishing the novel and revising it extensively with my agent's help. We both felt that the stakes were high, and that we had to make the manuscript as airtight as possible to attract the kind of attention we wanted.

One Thursday afternoon in the spring of 2016, she submitted it to a list of editors. I felt queasy with anxiety. While my first novel was on submission, I struggled to sleep and function at work; each rejection sent me into a tailspin so painful that I eventually asked my agent to stop sending them.

This time I e-mailed my closest friends and booked them for a Saturday night antianxiety extravaganza, complete with strong cocktails and a home screening of *Magic Mike: XXL*. Then I went to sleep.

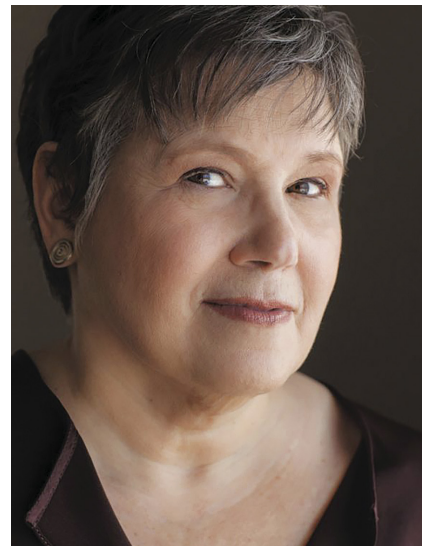
Less than twenty-four hours later, the responses began to come in. On Monday morning King e-mailed, "Can you hold Thursday for calls?" A few hours later she asked if I could hold Wednesday, too, and then Tuesday as well. That week was one of the blurriest of my life, filled with ecstasy and more anxiety and one seriously ill-timed stomach flu. King held an auction the following Monday. That night we sold the book to an editor I loved as much as my first for an amount that allowed me to leave my day job—a privilege I had never dared let myself dream about.

"I can't believe it," King said, laughing. "Not one person brought up the sales of the first book."

And once it's out? Well, no media wants to cover a second novel. Unless your first book was a smash hit, readers won't want to buy it either.

Judith Claire Mitchell approached her second book, *A Reunion of Ghosts* (Harper, 2015), with similar apprehension. By the time it was finished, ten years had passed since the release of her debut, *The Last Day of the War* (Pantheon, 2004). That publication had been plagued with problems: Before it came out, Mitchell parted ways with her agent, and the editor at Pantheon who bought it left publishing, leaving *The Last Day of the War* orphaned before it was passed to another editor at the house.

"The book, which had to do with the Armenian genocide in the aftermath of World War I, received very nice reviews—the *New York Times* called it 'a bravura performance'—but as my new agent, Eric Simonoff, said, it didn't exactly set the world on fire in terms of sales," says Mitchell. "Still, Eric assured me this was nothing to worry about so long as I wrote a really, really good second book. No pressure there. During the years I worked on my second novel, I was not optimistic about its prospects in the marketplace. The book is about three sisters who decide to kill themselves on the last day of the twentieth century. This didn't strike me as wowza best-seller material. And indeed, when we gave it to my [previous] editor, she passed. That was a dark day of the soul. But, to my surprise, when we sent the book around to other editors, a number of them were quite interested. We wound up selling it in a matter of days to an editor who really, really adored it and a publisher who really, really supported it. It felt like a miracle."



Judith Claire Mitchell

Bolstered by a passionate agent and publishing team, *A Reunion of Ghosts* received swift acclaim. Excellent trade reviews were followed by coverage in *People* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as an array of accolades: It was a Kirkus Best Book of 2015, the winner of two awards, and a finalist for several more, including the National Jewish Book Award.

Still, many sophomore authors struggle to attract coverage. Aside from the Encore Award, which is open only to U.K. and Republic of Ireland residents, and the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets, given for a second book of poetry, few opportunities exist to highlight second books. In 2014, seeing a real need in the community, Porochista Khakpour—who at the time had published two novels, *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (Grove Press, 2007) and *The Last Illusion* (Bloomsbury, 2014)—wrote the tweet that launched a prize. "Can someone please create some prizes and lists for SECOND novels?!" she wrote. "Trust me when I say we sophomores need more help than the freshman."

Three months later *Slate* announced the Slate/Whiting Second Novel List. Not quite an award, the list was billed as an opportunity to celebrate five excellent and under-recognized novels published in the previous five years. The finalists—Akhil Sharma's *Family Life*, Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods*, Eileen Myles's *Inferno*, Daniel Alarcón's *At Night We Walk in Circles*, and Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*—were publicized via interviews with the authors and essays by the judges.

The list was enthusiastically received. "Publishing professionals were grateful for an honor that targeted underselling books. I also saw a lot of relief from writers at the freedom to be honest about a book that didn't perform the way they hoped but that was still really good," says *Slate* writer and editor Dan Kois, who announced the list.

Kirstin Chen

Still, "in general, it remains really hard to get any novel covered, reviewed, purchased, or read. Second novels remain the hardest."

"It is a problem," says Sandi Torkildson, former co-owner of the independent bookstore A Room of One's Own in Madison, Wisconsin. "The industry does influence how we buy."

Larger economic factors are also at play: Following the recession of 2007 to 2009, the closure of bookstores like Borders led to a slump in sales. On the other hand, independent bookstores have filled that void, creating an ideal environment, Torkildson argues, for readers to discover lower-profile authors. "People go to bookstores to find the things they never knew they wanted," she says, citing the power of written staff picks, verbal recommendations, and good, old-fashioned browsing. As for whether they'd take a chance on a sophomore author whose freshman year had gone south? "We wouldn't *not* buy a second novel just because the first one didn't do well. It takes a while to build an audience."

If your first book was a success, good luck: Readers will hate the second book if it's too different from the first. Come to think of it, though, they'll probably hate it if it's too similar, too.

Kirstin Chen's first novel, *Soy Sauce for Beginners*, was published in 2014 by New Harvest (at the time an imprint of Amazon, distributed by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) to praise from *USA Today*, *Glamour*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*. "It sold pretty well and quickly racked up a number of Amazon reviews," says Chen. "[Readers] appeared to enjoy just about everything about the book except for its final pages. They said the story cut off too abruptly and that too much was left unresolved. When it came time to write the final scene for my second novel, *Bury What We Cannot Take* (Little A, 2018), I found myself composing the same kind of ending I guess I've always written: crisp, succinct, open-ended, and, to my mind, utterly elegant. That's when the doubts seeped in. I thought about those readers and how much they'd despise what I'd written."

Brittany Cavallaro, author of the young-adult best-seller *A Study in Charlotte* (Katherine Tegen Books, 2016) and its sequels, felt similar pressure. Because her novels were slated to be published one year apart, she wrote the second book in the trilogy, *The Last of August* (Katherine Tegen Books, 2017), before the first was released.

"I had no idea if readers would like my characters, my setup, my writing style. As early reviews of *A Study in Charlotte* began to trickle in, I was so tempted to take each one as a directive as to how I could 'do better' now that I was writing my second." She took pains to hide her panic from her agent and editor. "I kept thinking, 'I don't want to let anyone down, these people who have believed in me.'"

Brittany Cavallaro

Undeniably, a beloved first book makes readers hungrier for the second—and can foster a sense of letdown, even betrayal, if it doesn't live up to expectations. After *White Teeth* (Random House, 2000), Zadie Smith's lauded debut, her second novel, *The Autograph Man* (Random House, 2002), fell flat. Donna Tartt's first novel, *The Secret History* (Knopf, 1992), inspired such cultish hysteria that *The Little Friend*—published by Knopf ten tantalizing years later—was denounced with particular passion.

But these stories, which gain steam in part because of what author Curtis Sittenfeld calls the "satisfaction in knocking a book off its pedestal," obscure the second-time successes. Hanya Yanagihara's second novel, *A Little Life* (Doubleday, 2015), became a best-seller,

short-listed for the Man Booker Prize as well as the National Book Award. Rachel Kushner's first novel, *Telex From Cuba* (Scribner, 2008), and her follow-up, *The Flamethrowers* (Scribner, 2013), were both *New York Times* best-sellers and National Book Award finalists. Indeed, many of the most beloved books of all time are second novels, from *Pride and Prejudice*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Ulysses* to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *On the Road*, and *Sula*.

For a second (or fifth) book to break out, publishers must invest not just in a book, but also in a career. After a period that saw anxiety for midlist authors, Dorian Karchmar believes there's reason to be hopeful. "In the past few years we've seen a noticeably healthier business environment for independent booksellers, an increased appetite for print books, and a modest but very real flowering of indie presses picking up talented non-debut writers whom the big imprints may be skittish about publishing," she says. "I think there is also a renewed feeling among certain publishers that it is important to recommit to authors over the longer-term. If you'd given up after *John Henry Days*, you wouldn't have gotten *The Underground Railroad*; if you bailed after *Abide With Me*, you missed out on *Olive Kitteridge*; if you lost faith after *About Grace*, you lost out on *All the Light We Cannot See*."

Cavallaro lived inside a storm of self-doubt "for about a month," she says. "And then I got to work. I'd forgotten that the reviews were meant for readers, not as a road map for me. Did my fear totally abate? No, of course not. Did it mutate into a new form while I was working on the third book? Yes, absolutely. But at least now I can identify it for what it is and keep working despite it."

Natalia Sylvester

Cavallaro discovered the second novelist's best weapon: her own experience. As second novelists, we've written at least one book; many of us, including me, have written more that were never published. We know what it's like to execute revision after revision and proofread second-pass pages at midnight, our eyes glazed over and a glass of wine on the bedside table. We know what it's like to panic, and we've been able to find our way out of it. We've hit walls and received countless rejections, but we also know that all it takes is one precious, hard-won acceptance.

This served as comfort for Natalia Sylvester, author of *Chasing the Sun* (New Harvest, 2014), *Everyone Knows You Go Home* (Little A, 2018), and *Running* (Clarion Books, 2020). "Even though my second novel required a different process than the first, many of the challenges I encountered felt familiar to me," she says. "Things like a character falling flat or the plot stalling or the brutal helplessness of feeling stuck in the middle of the story—it's not that they were easier to navigate, but at least this time, I knew that getting past them wasn't impossible, because I'd done it once before. As for knowing that your readers and reviewers are out there? I found that the critical reviews and reader comments that hurt the most were the ones that I agreed with. Ultimately, the best thing you can hope for as you write the second book and beyond is that you'll grow and improve with each one."

That growth requires patience from everyone. "For publishers," says Karchmar, "this means understanding that writers aren't football players: They seldom peak at twenty-five, and a couple of sidelined seasons don't have to add up to career suicide. For writers, it means broadening and deepening their work, keeping the faith in the face of a contracted marketplace, and recognizing their role in promoting themselves and their books—being actively engaged in the cultural conversation, and connected to the broader literary community."

After all, the narratives around second novels belie the fact that even publishers don't know the fate of a book in advance. High-profile titles flop; word of mouth turns low-budget books into best-sellers. The industry's unpredictability can be freeing, a reminder that a writer's sphere of control rarely extends beyond the page.

"You've written a novel," my agent told me before we submitted *The Immortalists*. "Let me do this part."

In urging me to trust her—and, okay, to be a little bit less controlling—she was also giving me permission to trust myself.

As Sylvester puts it, experience is empowering. "For once," she says, "I could face doubts head-on and say, 'Oh, I remember you. I remember how you work.'"

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CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: ANTHOLOGIES

LOVE READING extraordinarily interesting short stories? Want to be published in the anthology that readers worldwide rank higher than *Best American* and *O. Henry*? Then read *COOLEST AMERICAN STORIES 2025*—**https://amzn.to/4958AFN**—and let its stories inspire you to write a terrific story to submit to us!

WHISPERING ANGEL BOOKS is accepting submissions of true stories and poetry for our next anthology celebrating real life heroes who have provided inspiration, guidance, love and comfort in our lives. 1,500 words max. Deadline: June 30, 2025. Website: **www.whisperingangelbooks.com** for full details.

CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: BOOKS

FAW (FRIENDS OF AMERICAN WRITERS) seeks book submissions for its annual, 103-year-old literary awards in 2 categories: Literature for adults and literature for children and young adults. Publishers and/or authors are invited to submit books published in 2025. Generous monetary prizes awarded. Guidelines: Authors must reside (or have resided) in the American Midwest. Books set in the region (even if the author is non-resident) also qualify. Fiction or creative nonfiction, please. No self-published or e-books, poetry, genres, or series books. Authors of more than 3 published books are ineligible. (If an author has multiple books published in 2025, all are eligible.) Books nominated for the award must be received by December 13, 2025 but we appreciate entries ASAP. No application forms! For the Adult Literature Award, please send 2 copies of book and author information as soon as possible to: **Carrie Brenner, Literature Awards Chair, 2616 Blackhawk Rd., Wilmette, IL 60091**. E-mail: **carriebrenner123@gmail.com**. For info on previous awards, please visit **www.fawchicago.org/awards.php.**

KINSMAN AVENUE PUBLISHING, INC. is seeking full manuscripts from BIPOC and underrepresented voices for 2025 publication. Selected authors receive a $10K publishing package, including a $1,500 author licensing award. We accept query packages year-round in eligible genres, with selections made by July 31 and December 31, 2025. Submission fee is $25 or free with a priority membership. Review guidelines before submitting to ensure your work progresses through our process. Submit here: **www.kinsmanquarterly.org/manuscript-submissions.**

CALLS FOR MANUSCRIPTS: MAGAZINES

CALL FOR PAPERS: Unruly Catholic Women Writers: Creative Responses to Dobbs. Jeana DelRosso, Leigh Eicke, and Ana Kothe seek contributions for fifth volume in Unruly Catholic Women series. We seek creative pieces—short stories, poems, personal essays—on Catholic (and former Catholic) women's responses to the Supreme Court Dobbs decision, which raises serious concerns around multiple healthcare/reproductive issues: Ectopic pregnancies, IVF, lethal fetal anomalies, intrauterine fetal demise, miscarriage, disproportionate maternal mortality rates of women of color, accessibility of contraception, basic medical and mental health for women. Submissions in English, no longer than 2,500 words, by June 22 to **anam.kothe@upr.edu.**

CONFERENCES

JOIN US FOR SOMOS' 9th Annual Taos Writers Conference, in beautiful Taos, New Mexico, July 25–27, 2025, featuring keynote speaker, poet, memoirist, & playwright Nick Flynn. Over 20 workshops in every genre, including poetry, fiction, memoir, creative nonfiction, YA, & essays. FYI: **somos@somostaos.org**, call **(575) 758-0081**, or e-mail **somos@somostaos.org**.

CONTESTS

$4,000 IN AWARDS. Enter *New Millennium* Writing Awards by June 30—Best Poetry $1,000; Fiction $1,000; Nonfiction $1,000; Flash Fiction $1,000. All winners are published in our anthology and online. "I keep a dream list of journals that I hope to be published in, and it is a thrill to add *New Millennium Writings* to my professional biography. Thanks for making another writer's dream come true!" —Pamela Dillon, 58th *NMW* Nonfiction Award Winner. Visit **www.newmillenniumwritings.org**.

24TH ANNUAL GIVAL PRESS Oscar Wilde Award

for best previously unpublished poem in English that best relates GLBTQ life. Prize: $500, publication on website. Reading fee: $20 per 3 poems submitted, any form, style, length. Deadline: June 27. Details: **www.givalpress.submittable.com** or **www.givalpress.com**. Address: **Gival Press, P.O. Box 3812, Arlington, VA 22203**.

BOOKS ON THE BOSQUE Writing Contest: Short Story; Narrative Essay; Poetry. $3,800 awarded in 2024, including $1,000 Jones Best of the West Award. Deadline: September 22. Conference/Awards: November 8. Clifton, TX. Fees: $15/entry. Guidelines: **www.bosqueartscenter.org**; phone: **(254) 675-3724**. 2024 Winners: Michael Mayes (Jones), Kathryn Howd Machan (Nonfiction), Carol Thompson (Poetry), Miles Wilson (Fiction).

CALIFORNIA STATE POETRY SOCIETY seeks unpublished poems for its *California Quarterly* (year-round, via Submittable.com) and its Annual Contest (accepted March 1–June 30). Poems invited for CSPS Poetry Letter and Monthly Contests. See **www.californiastatepoetrysociety.com** for publications, membership, submission requirements, and details. Write to **CSPS, P.O. Box 4288, Sunland, CA 91041-4288.**

FISCHER CANTOR CONTESTS ... Fischer: 29th Year. Open to all topics, all styles, all poets writing in English anywhere in the world. Judge: poet and Talking Gourds director Art Goodtimes. Last year's winner: Rebecca Foust of Minnesota. Cantor: 8th Year. Open to Colorado poets on any topic, or any poet writing in English about Colorado. Judge: Colorado's award-winning poet José A. Alcántara. Last year's winner: Benny Manibog of Denver. Both: $1,000 winner, five $250 outstanding finalist prizes. $12 fee per poem, three for $30. Start: April 1. Deadline: August 31. Feedback $8 per poem. For more information, go to **www.tellurideinstitute.org/talking-gourds**.

HEART POETRY AWARD: $500, publication in *HEART #20*. $10 covers 3 unpublished poems, reserves your digital copy of *HEART #20*. Entries considered for future publication. Visit website for Featured Writers, guidelines, judge's bio. Deadline: Postmark June 30, 2025. Submit, pay online: **www.nostalgiapress.com** or mail: **Nostalgia Press, 115 Randazzo Dr., Elloree, SC 29047**.

SENECA REVIEW accepts submissions for the Deborah Tall Lyric Essay Book Prize. $2,000 prize, book publication, HWS reading. Judge: Melissa Febos. Lyric essay includes cross-genre and hybrid work. A group of related pieces or a single work. 48-120pp. Submissions: June 1 to August 1, 2025. Website: **www.hws.edu/offices/senecareview/bookprize.aspx**.

RENTALS/RETREATS

CREATIVE WRITING ADVENTURES. Let your imagination flow during Page Lambert's "River Writing Journey for Women" (6 days/Utah/August); or join her "Vibrant Landscape of Writing" retreat held on a private 75-acre Berkshires estate (5 days/Massachusetts/October). Looking to 2026? Check out "Romancing the Story," an intimate retreat held in the mountains west of Denver (4 days/Colorado/February). To be in the presence of other writers while immersed in your own creative vision is a rare and treasured thing. Set your intentions now to join one of these iconic retreats. Page Lambert, a graduate-level instructor, has been leading writing adventures for 28 years. Website: **www.pagelambert.com**.

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