

Y-City Writer's Conference
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Zanesville, Ohio

- First – congratulations to all of you for taking this important step in your writing career. Continuing to learn and grow is all-important to your craft.
- From the moment an idea takes shape in one's head, to the final flourish of The End, writing is an all-time high. But when the story is finished and the search for publication begins, every writer rides the same roller-coaster of frustration.

WHY IS THIS SO HARD?

- Every writer secretly dreams (or not so secretly) of making it big in the literary world. We think how great it would be to hit the *New York Times* or *USA Today* lists. . . be admired by our friends, families, and other authors. . . and perhaps even make some money!
- This is not an impossible dream, but it IS one that comes only to a select few. In today's economy, even fewer authors are making it to the top.
- But there's plenty of room on the way up for anyone who is willing to persevere and not be overwhelmed by the countless stumbling blocks along the way. My comments relate mostly to writing fiction, but 95% of this also applies to non-fiction writers.

- A senior editor from a large New York publishing house recently stated that getting published takes talent, hard work, and luck.
- Sounds a little trite to me. Getting from writing the story to seeing it in print is a very complex process, one that cannot be take lightly. As an author, you mostly need to focus on your writing skills. But understanding some of the other aspects of getting published can be helpful, both mentally and logistically.
- Let's take a look at that editor's statement: *getting published takes talent, hard work, and luck.*

Talent is perceived.

- What one person likes is what someone else hates.
 - Writing talent comes in many forms.
 - The ability to describe a scene or place for the reader
 - A unique way with words, or lyrical writing

- An in-depth knowledge of a particular subject or era
- The list goes on, but the point is that if you write like Nora Roberts, a fan of Elmore Leonard will not like your work.
- So matching your talent with the right editor can be a tricky deal.

What can you do?

- Talent can also be considered as natural ability. Like any other exercise, the more we work, the better we become. Writing improves with time and patience.

What IS your talent

- Knowing your strengths is a positive step toward success.
- Belief in oneself is critical for a writer's existence.
- Don't let an editor or other "authority" tell you that whatever you're writing doesn't sell.
- In 2002, several editors told me that books about horses don't sell. A literary agent echoed that sentiment. They all said "get rid of the horse stuff and you've got a great story."

But I wasn't looking for the New York sales, I wanted to tell my stories to the people who love and live with horses. Today my four novels are top sellers among thousands of horse lovers around the world.

- Popular genres and themes come and go, and there are really no new stories – only new ways of telling them.

getting published takes talent, hard work, and luck

HARD WORK is the part that is mostly misunderstood by emerging writers.

- From writing the manuscript, to selling the story, to promoting yourself and your work — no one ever imagines just what is involved.

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

You get writer's block

You reach a plateau

Your plot flounders

Your characters develop seemingly unfixable flaws

Your pacing is all over the map

What can you do?

Most writer's block is simply weariness or anxiety caused by outside factors. Take a break, even several days. Think about things other than the story. You'll return to it with a fresh outlook.

- Plot mechanics and character problems can usually be solved by dissecting the story, either on index cards or with sticky notes on the wall. Being able to see the individual pieces sometimes shows where the gaps and problems lie.
- I use pastel index cards and assign a color to each character. I can see the entire character thread without being distracted by the plot or typos or whatever.
- Timelines are valuable for complicated stories. I even modified one for *Gambling with the Enemy* so that I could see the pacing also. [explain chart]

A GREAT STORY ISN'T ENOUGH!

- No matter how excited you may be about your plot and characters, if you don't present them to the reader in a coherent manner, you will never sell your book. A polished manuscript is the first step to getting a sale.

What can you do?

- Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and proof-reading are essential skills that every writer should master early in his or her career. Not only do typos, misspelled words, or poorly constructed sentences turn-off an editor, they destroy a story by distracting the reader.

- Ideally, you should have a professional proof-reader or English expert read your manuscript before sending it anywhere. You should use individuals with whom you have no personal relationship, and you should plan to pay for those services.
- If you are unable to hire a professional, then at least read the entire manuscript **out loud**. This will help you spot misspellings and typos, and possibly grammar problems. Any time you edit a manuscript, re-proof those areas. A chance to edit is a chance to goof it up!
- Many writers think that once the manuscript is sold, the publishing house will fix the mistakes. Think again. The manuscript won't make it that far.

We all need to hear how good our stories are, but we also need constructive feedback from professionals and others in the industry. Contests and critique groups are an excellent way to get this. People who write UNDERSTAND what we are trying to do.

- Distancing oneself from the emotional aspect of the work is one of the hardest things a writer can do. We love our characters and ideas, and feel obligated to defend or justify.
- Be able to listen and accept suggestions.

- Most importantly, RESIST the temptation to have friends and family read the work and give you feedback. One of two things will happen:
 1. Most likely, you'll get glowing comments from people who love you and don't want to hurt your feelings.
 2. Possibly, someone will thoughtlessly give you their true opinion, without any knowledge or insight about what writing a story entails.
- the SAD RESULTS of receiving bad feedback are a loss of self-confidence in one's craft.

AND THEN LIFE STEPS IN

- No matter how much talent and ambition we have, outside forces can—and will--interfere.
 - Break an arm – let me tell you how hard it is to type with a full arm cast! With three magazine deadlines looming!
 - A parent or sibling needs care – as we grow older, we may find ourselves in the role of caregiver. This drains time, energy, and creativity
 - Personal or family health issues – you may have to take on additional responsibilities
 - Empty Nest – Finally the kids leave home and we think we'll get to all those things we want to do, but we can't adjust to the new situation.
 - Death of a loved one, Divorce or separation – these are life-altering experiences and will affect many areas of one's life
 - Loss of family income – we either have no time to write, or anxiety over the situation prevents productivity

What can you do?

Manage the best you can and know that when the time is right, your craft will be waiting for you.

- Okay, you've finished, polished, read and re-read your work. It's time to begin the long submission process. And I DO mean long!
- In this electronic age, the competition for publication is huge, the publishing houses are closing ranks, and online publishers are burgeoning like rabbits. At last count, 4,755 companies offer online publishing. Booksellers, of all things, have gone into the publishing business. Amazon and Barnes & Noble are the two that come to mind.
- A few of the major houses still require snail mail submissions, but even with electronic submissions, the response time can be 6 to 8 months. Additionally, most publisher don't want you to send the manuscript to anyone else at the same time, so submitting consecutively to 3 publishers could conceivably take almost three years.

For one book.

With no guarantee of a sale.

Will they know if you send your story to other publishers?

Probably not. So just do it. Take care of yourself and the rest of it will fall into place.

If you're lucky enough to have **2** editors vying for your work, I don't want to hear about it!

- What about an agent? With thousands of agents searching for new voices, you'd think getting one would be simple. Unfortunately, agents want the top 2% of the best authors and have no interest in representing emerging writers. Most agent queries are rejected within about 3 weeks, and many of the larger agencies require an introduction via either an established client, author, or editor.
- The truth is that it is easier to get an editor than it is to get an agent.

- Here's a situation which might catch you by surprise.
- You've spent months, maybe years, writing, rewriting, correcting, re-plotting, working, and dreaming of finishing your book. You've reached the topmost point on the rollercoaster.

HOWEVER, Writing THE END can have a startling effect on a writer's mental well-being.

The manuscript is off in the mail and. . . what the devil do I do now?

- A huge void fills that place in your head that churned with the story, and for me, at least, I cannot for the life of me think of something new to write about. I clean the desk, sort the papers, put away the research. . . anything to avoid leaving my tiny writing nook and admitting I'm at a standstill.
- Ideally, you should immediately begin a new project, but for most of us, a cooling down period is needed before we can rejuvenate the creative cells.

- If you submit to traditional houses, be prepared for rejection. **LOTS of it!** Editors receive thousands of submissions per week. What you send must be outstanding to even be read. In his book, The First Five Pages, Noah Lukeman says... "Agents and editors don't read manuscripts to enjoy them; they read solely with the goal of getting through the pile, solely with an eye to dismiss a manuscript..." (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000)

- As I said earlier, feedback is good, but sometimes it can be destructive. Rejection is the plunge from the top of the roller coaster.
- Don't take any rejection letter personally. Most will be form letters, often photocopied crooked on plain paper. They seldom say WHY the manuscript was rejected.
- Remember that the perception of talent is subjective. Many publishers have rejected works that later rose to fame.

33 publishers rejected *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, saying that "parables don't sell."

The author of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* was told 'for your own sake, do not publish this book'

***Lord of the Flies* was labeled 'an absurd and uninteresting fantasy which was rubbish and dull'**

Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* was rejected 16 times, but when published it went on to sell about 25 million copies. Reason for rejection: 'a long, dull novel about an artist'

Publishers told Stephen King that 'we are not interested in science fiction which deals with negative utopias. They do not sell.' The book was *Carrie*.

(Taken from *Rotten Rejections: The Letters that Publishers Wish They'd Never Sent* by Andre Bernard (Robson Books)

What can you do?

- At some point, you may decide to stop wasting time with the traditional methods of getting your work into public. Self-publishing may be the answer. **Don't Cringe.**
- Self-publishing no longer has the stigma of years past, and it has opened the publishing industry to the newcomer. A number of successful self-published authors have eventually signed with traditional houses, but in today's economy, don't count on it. The purpose in self-publishing is to share your work with the world in a timely manner. Making that decision does **not** give any less value to your work.

There are several ways to self-publish.

E-BOOKS: While still not the mainstream choice of most readers, the e-publishing model can often get your work out there quickly, and the industry is growing at a rate of over 60% per year as more and more of the digital generation begin to embrace the idea. E-publishers are eager for new materials and have a lower rejection record. However, E-books sell for less, and don't usually go on to a print copy.

The newest kid on the block is SmashWords, and if you own your content, you can publish it in all e-book formats at no cost. AND each sale will generate an author return at 85% of the sales price. <http://www.Smashwords.com>

KINDLE: Any author who owns the rights to his or her manuscript can publish it with Kindle. It costs nothing and is immediately available to readers owning the device. Amazon states that Kindle sales account for 35% of book sales. Over 350K books are available, and Amazon just reduced the price of the reading device by \$40. All my books are available as Kindle books, and I see a modest check every month for these sales.

AMAZON SHORTS: Stories up to 2,000 words are accepted and published on Amazon. Most sell for a very small amount, but it is another venue in which to put your shorter work and gain exposure.

ONLINE PUBLISHERS: These companies take your manuscript and create your book, then market it at no cost to you except for purchasing copies. Examples: Amazon CreateSpace and Lulu.com

PRINT ON DEMAND PUBLISHERS: There are hundreds of online publishing companies that will produce your book for a package fee, usually between 3 to 7 hundred dollars. Quality and service varies, so research carefully before choosing one.

HOWEVER. . . be sure you understand the online contract and services because most companies will print **exactly** what you send them. They do not edit, make corrections, tell you about spacing or line problems, or any of the other myriad glitches that can befall a print job.

SMALL PRESSES: These companies utilize both traditional printing and print on demand. Fees vary, as does quality and dependability. Try to find one that has a proven history, or that another author recommends. An advantage to a small press is one-on-one contact, either by phone, in person, or via email.

- Finally, be sure to search the Writer Beware Board at Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers Association to see if a company has a trail of problems and complaints. The database is huge and includes up-to-date information on both publishers and literary agents.

<http://www.SFWA.ORG>

OK... Now The REALLY hard work!

- Regardless of how your book is published, YOU will be the one who does all the promotion. Publishing houses do not spend much money on emerging writers, or even mid-list authors for that matter. Realizing this early in the game will give you time to plan your budget and strategies.
- The single most important tool in a promotion plan is a WEBSITE. It is HOME BASE from which you will market both yourself and your work, a place where readers can meet you, and where you can post your calendar, promote personal appearances, blog, introduce your new books, or any other information you wish to share. Begin planning and implementing your website well before publication.
- Romance your readers. Connect with them, both in your writing and in person. Readers love to meet authors, and book signings and readings are an economical way to meet your fans.
- If you want promotional giveaways, go with bookmarks. They are welcome in bookstores and libraries, and fairly inexpensive to have printed. The hundreds of promotional items available

today is amazing and enticing, but can also be costly. Your money is better spent on your website.

- A Columbus author who writes romantic comedy is also a PR agent for several companies. She has a 240-page guide to promotion that she'll send you for free if you go to her website and request it. <http://www.MarciaJames.net> Tell her Toni sent you.
- Book Connector.com is a free service where you can locate reviewers, book-signing venues, and book-related newsletters.
- Try to do as much no-cost promotion as you can. I can tell you from personal experience that the return on printed advertising, or specialty giveaways is always a negative number.

Let's see. . . .talent – hard work --- Oh yeah. LUCK.

I disagree with the editor who said that luck is an integral part of getting published.

We make our own luck. If we find our talent and work hard enough, we CAN realize our dreams.

The beginning of a writing career is all hope, promise, and excitement for the future.

It is the only time you will ever work in complete freedom.

There are no disappointing sales figures, unpleasant reviews, or piles of remainders.

Only the eager anticipation of the next chapter or story.

Hard work? yes. But oh so worth it!