

Panel Discussion: 9 Things a First-Timer Should Know About Book Publishing

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Panelists:

Deborah Burns, Storey Publishing
Martha Cook, Trafalgar Square Publishing
Jacqueline Duke, Eclipse Press
Elizabeth Carnes Rowland, Half Halt Press

Moderators: Jennifer Bryant and Cathy Laws

1. *How does one get started in book publishing?*

Deborah Burns: You start with a good idea—one that is unique, timely, and provocative. That is the all-important seed of a book.

Martha Cook: Polish your writing skills! Next, find a subject that needs publishing. These things probably sound obvious, but there's no point in trying to break into publishing without them.

Jacqueline Duke: We prefer to work with published authors. Therefore, a would-be author should get some credits to his or her name, at the very least as a published magazine and/or newspaper writer.

Elizabeth Carnes Rowland: Come up with an idea for a book that interests a publisher. This usually means something unique, a new approach, a novel idea. Check the publisher's list to see if they already offer a title on the same subject; publishers are loath to duplicate.

2. *How do I go about finding a publisher or the right contact?*

DB: It's better to begin with the actual books they publish than with a reference book on publishers. Best thing is to visit a bookstore and browse through the shelves on your topic. You need to know that your chosen publisher can get the books out into the world where people can find them. Pick out the books whose look and feel you like, the ones that stand out from the herd, whose ideas feel compatible, but not redundant, with your idea. Look to see if they have any multi-author series into which your concept might fit. Find out the publishers' names, then check their Web sites (or reference book on publishers) to see what else they've published and how to contact them.

MC: Spend time with lots of published books and note which publishers produce books on topics similar to yours. There's no point in pitching a proposal to a publisher who shows no sign of publishing in the area in which you're writing. Sure, it would be great to be published by Knopf or HarperCollins, but if you're writing an instructional horse book the odds are lottery-like. Once you've narrowed down a list of publishers you think interest you, go to their Web sites and send emails asking for submission guidelines and the name of the acquisitions editor.

JD: *Literary Marketplace* is a great resource. Authors should examine existing books on their topic and see who publishes them. Amazon.com is a good place to check. Also, horse-magazine publishers often have book divisions.

ECR: Research! There is a wealth of information available online or in books such as *Writer's Market*. Go to a library or bookstore and find a book in the same genre (not the

same subject!). See who published that book, and contact that publisher directly. Ask for the publisher's guidelines for writers. I'm always puzzled by the fact that although our guidelines specifically say we do not publish fiction, children's books, or poetry, we are deluged with such proposals.

3. What is a book publisher looking for?

DB: At Storey we look for books that are unique, useful, and user-friendly and that will appeal to a fairly broad audience. We also look for strong, promotable authors with the credentials to establish their authority on a subject.

MC: Back to question 1! A well-written, thoughtfully conceived proposal on a subject that needs publishing. We ask for a letter of introduction explaining the writer's qualifications, reasons why the writer believes her/his book needs to be published and a brief overview of the perceived market for the book. Also, a detailed table of contents or outline, one to three sample chapters, and an indication of how the book will be illustrated and how extensively. If you have an entire manuscript, ask the publisher if she wishes to see it before sending it. It's traditional and expected by publishers that you state in your proposal letter if you are sending your proposal out on "multiple submission," i.e., sending it to more than one publisher at the same time. This means a publisher knows if she/he is or isn't the only one with the proposal in hand. This is something a lot of people do not know.

JD: Publishers are looking for books that sell. We want books that differ from the competition; books written by experts in their fields; and books that sell season after season.

ECR: See the answer to question 1. We want something unique and special that offers something new to the literature and is saleable, especially in this current market. We also want to see something reasonably well-written and organized, although some of our authors are "riders" instead of "writers." We can work with that if the book concept is a good one.

4. What kind of compensation can I expect? What type of advance? What about residuals or royalties?

DB: These vary according to the experience of the writer, the size of the idea, the estimated breadth of the market. Advance usually in the 4 figures; royalty percentage usually in the single digits but this goes up (escalates) over the years as the book sales pass certain milestones. Work-for-hire is also an option.

MC: If you're publishing a book about horses or any specialized subject, don't channel Tom Clancy or Jodi Picoult. No one gets wealthy publishing a book on horses or riding. You should expect royalties, of course, and each publisher will have a standard royalty structure that will be shared at contract stage. Some publishers offer advances against royalties, others do not, but remember, it's not just about the advance. An advance is just that, monies a publisher pays you up front to write and prepare your book for delivery. The bigger the advance, the longer the time before you will receive royalties. This is often forgotten or not completely understood by prospective authors.

JD: We work with authors in two ways: work-for-hire agreements and author royalty agreements. With the former, we pay a one-time fee, with half upon signing. With the latter, we typically offer an advance, and the author is entitled to royalties based on net sales if the book sells beyond the advance.

ECR: Our authors receive a royalty on each book sold. Any advance that may be paid is dependent on many factors, including how well-known the author is, the performance of previous books if applicable, and so on. For us, advances are not a given.

5. How do I create a quality proposal to present to an acquisitions editor?

DB: You flesh out your good idea (see above) with a concept statement and an outline. You then approach a publisher with a proposal that also includes your credentials for writing on the topic (bio or resume), a writing sample, and an analysis of the market.

MC: Don't rush. Do your research thoroughly and create a good outline. Put it aside, and then revisit it. Don't dash off something and hurriedly send it to a publisher because you are excited. If you wish to have editors give your work thoughtful consideration, then put the same into the proposal. Get a friend or advisor to read your submission and offer feedback, or at least proofread it for you. You'd be surprised at the number of proposals we receive with typos.

JD: Many publishers have submission guidelines. We require a detailed outline and/or table of contents, sample chapters, and a list of competing or comparable titles and how the proposed book differs. A huge turn-off: typos in the cover letter and samples.

ECR: Be very clear on what the proposed book is about. We see many proposals that rely on a clever title but are fuzzy on exactly what the book is about. For us to consider a proposal, we must know exactly what the book is to be, the parameters it covers, in effect to be able to imagine the published book. The proposal should be well-written and -edited; you would be surprised how many come in with spelling errors or bad grammar, or are just plain badly written. Don't bother spitting out the statistics about the number of horses in the US, or the number of riders. You needn't sell me on the number of people in the equestrian community: this is not news to me! Finally, I don't care if your proposal is in a fancy binder, with a slick presentation: that carries no weight whatsoever in the decision-making process.

6. Is self-publishing a realistic alternative to traditional publishing?

DB: Lots more options are possible now with the Internet. In general though it's much easier to publish a book than to sell it. On your own you can create this great product but you can't reach very far with it. However, you own it, you make all the decisions about it, and all the income is yours. A traditional publisher will get your book out there, all over the world, distributing, publicizing, and promoting it. However, you have to give up a good amount of control and income in exchange.

MC: Maybe. I think it completely depends on the topic and the author's level of commitment to getting it right. Today in the world of digital short-run printing a lot of books get released that haven't been edited, well designed or produced by someone who knows, and can assure, quality.

JD: Self-publishing could have some advantages: The author has total control over the product and would be entitled to all sales revenue. However, the author would have to pay manufacturing, distribution, warehousing, and related costs.

ECR: Only if the self-publishing author has the knowledge and resources (including time) to market the book. That's where most self-publishers fail, in the marketing. They are very good at making the book but have no clue as to how to distribute and sell it.

7. What type(s) of distribution techniques are most successful?

DB: Selling to bookstores, to tack shops and other special outlets, to online and print catalogs, to book clubs, to foreign publishers, usually in that order.

MC: A professional publisher will have distribution systems in place for the specialty markets and the traditional book-selling trade. Distribution is one of the reasons to go with

a pro publisher and not self-publish. We regularly get sent self-published works when authors suddenly realize they have their book but don't know what to do with it after selling to friends, family, and via their small Web sites. Word often spreads that authors don't need publishers (hence editors, designers, production experts, warehousing/ fulfillment, and distribution channels), but I suggest thinking again before heading out into self-publishing land.

JD: The most successful distribution techniques take out the middleman, i.e., a mainstream distributor. Direct sales — from author to reader or publisher to reader — leave more on the table. We sell more than 60 percent of our books directly to readers and to dealers/specialty shops.

ECR: Our actual techniques are proprietary, but I can recommend a many-pronged approach.

8. *What does it take to turn a magazine-article series into a book?*

DB: We haven't done this, but again it would start with a terrific idea and a terrific author.

MC: The ability to write cohesive connective tissue so the book doesn't read like a group of loosely-pasted-together magazine articles, and a good editor.

JD: We have done this successfully with two series that have appeared in *The Blood-Horse* magazine: *Country Life Diary* and *Merryland: Two Years in the Life of a Racing Stable*. Josh Pons, the author of both, is well known in the industry and has a following. A topic(s) that has a long shelf life and great reader interest is an attractive, often cost-effective proposition for a publisher.

ECR: If the author has permission to do so (it seems to vary), then the collection could be offered to a publisher as any other proposal.

9. *What is the future of print and online book publishing?*

DB: Both look very bright. I think I can safely say that books and other traditional print media will always be able to hold their own against online publishing because people will always, no matter what, be uncomfortable taking their laptop into the bathroom. Seriously, I think reading is tactile as well as visual, and people just plain like the feeling of a book or magazine in their hands, the turning of pages, the back and forth to check or reread things, etc. But the younger generations from now on will look online first for their immediate answers: news, data, definitions, obscure trivia, etc. The traditional paper-bound print media, more set in stone, is better at providing durable, solid information, the complete picture. Books have more automatic credibility, as part of a spectrum from online sources to newspapers to magazines to books.

MC: Digital publishing is coming, but it will be a while before full-color instructional books are fully integrated (if they ever are) into the digital world.

JD: Publishers are publishing more books, but Americans are reading fewer books a year. Book publishing is tougher every year as the big chains grow more powerful, Amazon.com sets pricing standards, and printing costs rise. Eclipse Press is now testing electronic versions of several titles with Amazon.com for use on the Kindle product.

ECR: Oh, Lordy, don't I wish I knew!

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