Publishing is Hard

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Publishing is hard. A lot of people think it should be easy. Hell, I think it should be easy! And even people who know better will sometimes get frustrated at just how hard it is. People think their books deserve to get published.

This is not necessarily a conscious thought! But a lot of times it is a thought that gets in the way of your ability to get things done properly.

Here is something that I say a lot, and I'll continue saying it: Writing is an art. Publishing is a business.

(Publishing is also an art, but it's a different sort of art.)

Also, I am going to let you all in on a secret: *Writing is hard*.

Oh, you've all figured that out already?

Well, publishing is just as hard as writing—maybe even harder, because you don't know anything about it! You have to learn from the beginning. That's rough. None of us really quite remember what it was like to not know anything and have to learn stuff from the beginning. Plus, publishing's not an organic thing. A lot of it doesn't make sense to people who aren't learning it *holistically*.

Even for people in the business, it's hard to think of it holistically. Most people don't. (A lot of people think they do, and don't.) It's a business where you have to think about the big picture and the little picture at the same time.

All right, it's true, a lot of, say, editors, do not bother to think all that much about marketing stuff. And a lot of, oh, publicists, do not understand what editors do. We have that problem sometimes at Tor—many people don't understand the jobs of the others in the company. People who have been in the business twenty years! But if you've been in accounting for twenty years, running royalty statements and cutting checks, it's probably pretty difficult to know that much (and care that much) about what someone in editorial is doing.

(For editorial's part, lots of editors call the people in accounting "wonks"—like "policy wonks"—so that should give you an idea of how editorial thinks of number crunchers!)

It is hard to figure stuff out, but worth the work.

Do your research and act like an adult.

If you want to get your work published, make the decision to commit to learning about publishing as a business.

Do not take this too far. You do not need to take a class in "The Business of Publishing." You do not need to buy six million books and spend fifty thousand dollars doing research.

What you want to do is figure out what your primary genre is. Let's not go back to how your book is a special snowflake butterfly. Look at a bookstore, figure out what books are the most like yours and therefore where your books are going to be shelved, and go with that.

A quick explanation of genre

Genre is a marketing device used to sell books. It is generally used for the lowest common denominator. Therefore two books that have a primary story arc about a relationship will usually be put in the same place, despite one being authored by Nora Roberts and one being authored by Dorothy Clark. Two books with primary arcs about spaceships will usually be put in the same place, despite one being authored by Ann McCaffrey and one being authored by Candas Jane Dorsey. This is a gross oversimplification, but hopefully you understand my point, neh?

Next, go find a national advocacy organization for your genre. If you are writing SF/F, go to the Science Fiction Writers of America website. Mystery writers have the Mystery Writers of America. Romance writers have the Romance Writers of America. I think you see where I am going with this. Almost every single genre has one.

If you are writing literary fiction, you're screwed. (Haha.) (Sorry.) You're not, not really—just do some research. Do a couple of web searches. Check genre pages to see if they've listed other writers' organizations. Very often there are statewide writing organizations.

*You are not looking for a **writing group**.* You are looking for an organization designed specifically to help you. This will probably cost a little bit of money—maybe $100 - $200 per

year. Maybe less. I don't recommend paying much more than $100 for a membership fee into an organization, but joining one can be invaluable, especially if it has a good reputation.

These organizations will help you learn about publishing. Even if you decide not to take the step to join one and gain access to its BBS/mailing list/etc., the websites provide valuable information about submission, editors, agents, what to expect, and various other details.

Do not buy a lot of books about the industry. They mostly will not help you. Don't buy Writer's Market or any of that. What do you need it for?

(Literary writers, short fiction writers, poets—you're on your own. I know nada about your markets.)

Now you have a start.

Now you want to jump right in! And send out your manuscript! And go to conferences! And meet editors!

Don't do it. Take a breath. There are a million conferences and you don't need to go to them all. Research the websites. Read the bios of the editors and agents carefully. See what the purpose of each conference is.

For example, some of the RWA chapters have mini-conferences every year—a one day workshop devoted to understanding the business of publishing, learning how to pitch, understanding how to write a synopsis, etc. A lot of those mini-conferences will bring editors and/or agents in to talk about what they're looking for, what the state of the market is, etc. Heck, I am doing two of those this year!

You might want to look in to something like that. Why? Because an editor will *not* expect someone attending one of those to be polished. Here's how I think of them: the people attending those mini-conferences is trying to learn about the business. That—like following the submission guidelines—shows an understanding of the need for us to work together and be on the same page.

On the other hand, you might not be able to afford to go to any conferences at all.

I don't think it matters.

That's right. I don't think it matters.

How many manuscripts have I ever bought from a conference? Not many.

Now, other companies are different. I buy an average of 15 or 16 books every year. Some editors buy *40*.

I am pretty sure that there is no editor who buys more than 1/3 - 1/2 of their list from conference attendees, and that is a really generous estimate.

So have you realized yet what this all boils down to?

Common sense.

That's my motto, guys, and it should be yours, too. Don't be an idiot. Act like a grownup. Use your brain. Like I've said before, it's amazing how many people write a book and suddenly become blithering morons.

I know you're thinking that all this research will take a lot of time—and you're right. But it's time well-worth spending. Like the time you spend researching which editor to submit to, which agent you want representing you, these are important things to do.

No one expects you to know everything about the business and how it works. But if you pay attention and realize that it *is* a business, you will be less inclined to make a jackass out of yourself in public by asking the editor you're pitching to if she'll offer you a contract right there, or by carefully explaining that your romance novel is actually literature. No, really.

(And, come on—it will take slightly more time than it takes to research which vet you want to take the beloved family pet to, which nursery school you want to send your child to, which freaking paperback novel to buy when you're in Target. Yes, it's time, and time is precious, but learning the basics now will save you time later on.)

Be polite to everyone.

Publishing is complicated. I am not going to try to give you a complete and holistic view right now. That *would* take an entire book, seriously. And *I* am still learning. As I said above, most people in publishing aren't very good at understanding what other departments do. That's why there are a lot of *publicity assistants* and not a lot of *publishers*.

What you need to know is that all the departments come together to help sell your book.

Accounting and contracts are two departments that make sure you get your money! Sometimes it seems really annoying, and everyone hears horror stories about screwed up royalty statements (and how the royalties department of a Publishing Company That Shall Remain

Nameless (*cough*Tor*cough*) keeps trying to send China Mieville a royalty check for Herman Melville) and terrible contracts and blah blah blah.

Get over it.

The royalties department at Holtzbrinck deals with hundreds of thousands of authors, millions of titles and editions. If they only screw up a hundred thousand out of three million, they're doing pretty good. Cut them some slack—they're only human. Not to mention most of this stuff is generated automatically by the computer, and a big part of their jobs are actually to fix the computer errors.

And they *want* to fix them! The accounting/royalties department wants to make sure everyone gets the right amount of money (at least, on the author's end!) because at the end of the year, our books have to properly balance!

Yes, checks take a long time to get to the author. That is because first they get requested. Then they have to be approved. Then they have to be approved again. Then they go to royalties, where the amount is double checked and another request is filled out. Then the check is cut. Then the cut check is approved. Then it is sent to the agent. This takes about two or three weeks!

We also all hear horror stories about the terrible contracts publishers are using to take advantage of writers. Give me a break. Even if you don't have an agent, anyone signing a contract should have a lawyer who specializes in that particular type of contract read through it first. Read: if you don't have an agent, hire an entertainment lawyer to be sure you're not being screwed over.

Publishing is a *business*. Businesses want the best deals for themselves. They want to make a lot of profit without having to expend a lot of cash. That's what business is. (Well, that's what capitalism in the States is. Blah blah, whatever, don't give me a hard time.) That doesn't mean that the editor or publisher is actually out to screw you. It means you need to make sure that you protect yourself.

This is another one of those things that takes time—but it's time you need to spend.

And it's not the fault of the contracts lawyer at the publishing company, either. Publishing companies have a boilerplate contract that the contracts lawyer follows. S/he inputs your name and information into the boilerplate, prints it out, and wants you to sign it.

You should bring it to someone and make sure that you're not signing away one of your children—or, at least, that you're signing away the child you love the least.

The art department makes the cover. Seriously. Editorial usually gives the art department a cover concept that the art director may or may not work with. I tend to work with my authors on what they'd like to see on the cover before I go to the art director, with the caveat that what the authors request may not be what ends up on the cover.

However: ultimately the art department answers to sales and marketing. Ultimately the art department has to make a cover that is going to sell the book. This means that sometimes the cover will not exactly represent what is inside the book—in the book, the hero might have long hair, and on the cover he'll have short hair.

This is common. It happens because the art department has to make a cover that will sell the book, and someone in sales/marketing doesn't think the long hair works.

Sometimes a cover is approved by marketing, sales, the editor, the authors, the agent, and the art director loves it—and WalMart or B&N says, "Sorry, we hate it, and if you use that cover, we'll only take 1/8 as many copies as we'd take if you put an elephant in a blue tutu on the cover. Seriously, an elephant with a blue tutu, and we'll put this book on the *Times* list."

You know what happens then? Your thoughtful treatise on the wonders and joys of love, fatherhood, and the aliens who built the pyramids gets a cover that is an elephant in a blue tutu, whether you like it or not—and you blame the art department, which is not fair.

(Okay, sometimes books just get bad covers. It happens. Sometimes the art department just can't get it right, or we're all high when we give the approval. We can't be right 100% of the time! Life sucks!)

The production department. Holy Viggo. Where do I start? Production is another department that tends to get a bad rep—and it's really easy for an editor or writer to blame stuff on the production department that really isn't their fault.

Production handles *making the book.*

Production organizes the schedule on which the book is produced, organizes getting the book copyedited, typeset, proofread, designed. Production organizes getting the map made and the cover proofread and makes sure the book doesn't cost too much to make.

Production does a hell of a lot behind the scenes that writers don't get to know about.

And here is something I bet you don't know (unless you work in publishing): the production department gets yelled at a lot, especially for stuff that isn't their fault at all. Production gets yelled at when a copyeditor is late, when a proofreader has an off day and misses some spelling errors, when the printer runs out of paper, when the paper costs more than we expected—I mean, you name it and the production department has probably gotten yelled at about it.

It's because, like editorial, production is a catch-all department that does a lot of different things for different people, and *a lot* of what they do is dependent on other departments, freelancers, etc.

You know that saying about how if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself? Well, production doesn't have that option. They are always understaffed. They are always underpaid.

Authors, if you want to put something good and kind into the universe? You will send the production department a thank you card for working so hard on your book. You will send them a box of chocolates or some popcorn or homemade cookies.

I mean it.

Production, like editorial, catches a lot of crap from the other departments, and they just have to take it. Editorial and production are seriously underpaid and understaffed departments, and they do it *for the love of the book*.

Don't get me wrong. I am not maligning other departments here, or saying that editorial works harder, or anything of the sort. But production and editorial are the notoriously underpaid departments who get blamed for every single thing that goes wrong. And lots of stuff will always go wrong.

The marketing department is not the same thing as the publicity department. The marketing department—at least at Tor!—decides how much money the budget can afford for a particular book, and how it is going to be spent. The marketing department says they can afford $X for print media, $Y for trinkets, and $W for an author tour.

The marketing department also works closely with sales to do things like the sales conference, where the sales people are told all about the book. The marketing department does

industry advertising—which means, for example, that the marketing department might do a galley mailing to bookstore owners and bookstore managers.

The sales department sells the book to stores. Barnes & Noble's, Borders, Walden, Target, WalMart, etc.—these stores are actually owned by companies, and the sales department not only works with the companies, but they also work with individual stores, the stores' requests, etc.

The publicity department plans the author tours that the marketing department approves/requests. They put together packets of clipped reviews and hand them around the office. They handle all requests from the media, plan some finished book distribution, send out galleys to review publications, write press releases.

Between the marketing and publicity departments, usually the job of the website is shared. Marketing handles the marketing of books through the website, while the publicity department writes the newsletters, etc.

The advertising and promotion—aka ad/promo—department designs everything. Print ads, promotional mugs, the catalogue, all of it. Anything that is an advertisement or a promotion, the ad/promo department gets tapped to handle. At some companies, the a/p designs the company website, too, but that's not how it works at Tor.

The editorial department does everything else. Seriously. The number one job of an editor is to be the book's internal advocate—to get people in the company excited about the book, to get more promotion, to get more advertising, to get galley mailings and finished book distribution, to get publicity to *want* to send authors places, to suggest to the marketing department, "Hey, this would be a great author to send to BEA!"

Plus writing copy, editing the book, negotiating the big points of the contract with the author's rep/agent, keeping abreast of what's happening in the industry—I can't even think of all the stuff editors do. And I'm probably leaving out stuff other departments do as well.

Remember, though: *Your mileage may—and probably will—vary company to company.*

And, last thing—this is not a department, but I think it's important to mention assistants. Every department has assistants. Every single one. You want to be polite to those assistants. If the production department has pissed you off, that is *not* call to be nasty to the production department's assistant if you happen to get him/her on the phone. If your editor has pissed you off, do *not* be nasty to your editor's assistant.

It's a common human trait, to want to take your anger out on someone who is lower on the totem pole, someone who has to listen to you, whatever—but don't do it. Assistants make sure your book goes to the good copyeditor, assistants double check the proofreading and make sure that your corrections make it in to the manuscript. Assistants make sure you get paid. Assistants are often called on during meetings to testify as to whether your book really is good or not.

Frankly, most assistants, no matter how annoyed they get with you, won't take it out on your book. Like I said—editorial does it for the love of books. We're not going to sabotage that love.

But we'll *remember.*

Don't think I don't remember every single author and agent who was nasty to me when I was an assistant, just because they could be, or because my boss had made them angry. I have a *list.* I hold a grudge.

Publishing is a business of opinions (remember that from one of my other posts?) and it is also a business of *relationships.* Cultivate your relationships—the assistant you're berating on the phone because the accounting department made a mistake on your royalty check and the production department gave you less time to review your proofs than you'd like and the marketing department decided not to give you promotional mugs might some day be the editor in chief. And I guarantee you that if we can only buy one book, and it comes down to you, the nasty author who is mean to everyone, and an author who is more polite, and your sales are similar—we're going to go with the polite author. Every single time, we're going to go with the polite author.

People work harder when you're nice to them, because they like you. People will always take that extra step, go the extra mile, give you a bit of their personal time to make sure everything is exactly perfect three times over, if you appreciate their efforts.

(This is part of “Don’t be an idiot” and “Act like an adult” I think. I am generally of the opinion that if more people were just a little nicer to each other every day, the world would be a better place.)