



Photo courtesy of Akashic Books

HOW TO GET A BOOK DEAL

The road to getting published has never been so paved with grueling competition and arbitrary rejections. So you're a poor, starving, unrecognized writer with the next great American novel on your hands? Here's a start-up guide on how to become a poor, starving, published writer.

By Ling Ma & Kate Rockwood

It's called the slush pile, and every book publisher has one. Unsolicited queries and manuscripts regularly get dumped into it, while little gets salvaged for a thorough read. When asked if his pioneering literary publishing company, Small Beer Press, has published anything from the slush pile, co-publisher Gavin Grant pauses. "Hmm," he says, checking the catalog. The answer, after some shuffling, is brutally definite: "Um, no."

In an era of a declining number of readers and an influx of manuscripts, the odds of getting published are not good. "Just to throw some numbers out there," says *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market* editor Lauren Mosko, "according to a Jenkins Group survey, 6 million Americans have a book manuscript, but according to Bowker's numbers, only a little over 25,000 adult fiction titles were published in 2004."

Enough with the depressing figures. Good books are deservedly published all the time — Grant, after all, still makes an effort to look at everything that's submitted — so it's not impossible to get your fiction out there. Half the battle is getting your manuscript into the right hands. Here's how ...

FOOLS RUSH IN

Ask any publisher or author the secret to getting published, and the answers are resoundingly similar: Target your work. From major houses owned by German media conglomerates to independent publishers in Brooklyn to Midwestern academic presses, different publishers are looking for different types of material. "The question for a writer," says Mosko, "should not be 'Who will take me?' but instead 'What type of publisher is the best fit for my book?'"

Sage advice, maybe, but surprisingly ignored. As Grant notes, "We get queries from people who have seen our [logo] in a book, or seen an article about us, and say, 'Hey, I have an historical Greek novel about spaceships and seems like a good fit for your press.' No. What would give you that idea?"

Given the amount of uninformed submissions publishers receive, research is gold. If you're interested in a publisher, check out their current and previous titles. Read a few to get a feel for what they're interested in and scout out the acknowledgments pages for editors who seem especially receptive to fiction similar to yours. The more info you gather, the more informed your submission package.

A word of advice before you break out the Trapper Keeper and head to the library: If you're simply looking for your name in print, you'd be better off penning another Lincoln biography. Fiction, with its elusive quantifiable value, is a notoriously difficult market to tap into. Unlike nonfiction, which is accepted during proposal stage, the manuscript should already be completed before you begin shopping it around. Novels are more marketable, while short-story collections are trickier to sell unless your stories have already been published in several magazines. Assess whether it's the right time for you (still working out the Kafka allusions in your genius debut?) before jumping into a very tedious, masochistic process. If the time is right, read ahead.

THE BIG BOYS' NETWORKING DINNER

When you're first checking out places to submit to, major publishers, like the mammoth Random House, seem like the obvious choice. "I feel kind of duty-bound that people try the traditional route first," advises author Kelly Link, also co-publisher of Small Beer Press and a cult fiction author in her own right. Not only do major publishers undertake larger print runs, but they're better equipped with marketing dollars, contacts for media coverage, and automatic access to wide distribution. Novelist Ariel Gore, who penned the upcoming guide *How to Become a Famous Writer Before You're Dead* (Three Rivers Press), says major publishers "tend to have ins with booksellers and media people, so you get a free ticket into the big boys' networking dinner."

Then of course, there's the advance. If there's an immediately apparent difference between major and smaller publishers, this would be it. Having worked with different types of publishers, Gore says, "I've gotten advances between \$25,000 and \$100,000. With smaller presses, I've never broken \$10,000 and I can't think of anyone I know who has." At Akashic Books and Soft Skull Press (both smaller presses), \$1,000 is the norm.

All great news, but with more titles regularly published compared to other presses, the resources aren't always spread evenly. "Obviously, the publicity machine for a major publisher can be more effective than a small press — if they choose to prioritize your book," says blogger and author Jami Attenberg, whose short-story collection *Instant Love* (Shaye Areheart) was released in summer 2006. "I set up about half of my tour and hired my own publicist, because I was told — very nicely, I must emphasize — that it did not make much sense for a debut author of a collection of short stories to tour. I, of course, saw it totally differently."

A LITTLE FRICKING LOVE

Because manuscripts have to pass multiple committee rounds and marketing speculation before being accepted, major publishers generally publish more conservative material with commercial appeal. To fill the void for niche interests, independent and academic presses have taken up the slack. When Jennifer Stevenson shopped around the working manuscript of *Trash Sex Magic* (Small Beer Press), she incorporated feedback from various editors and workshops, which made the manuscript more marketable. In effect, says Link, Stevenson had to "sand down the things that were most unusual or astonishing about it, to fill in [characters'] motivations." She further observes, "When a work doesn't sell, then what a writer will begin to fear is 'My character's motivations are obscure,' or 'I need to explain the things that are going on a little bit more' so you end up padding a book out sometimes." Before publication, Link worked with Stevenson to restore the novel to its unusual prior state.

The neglect of niche interests has also resulted in quirky anomalies like University of Wisconsin Press, now recognized as one of the best gay and lesbian publishers in the country. Says editor Raphael Kadushin, "To me, that's the point of being a university press. It's not just that you're publishing good scholarship, but that you're publishing good books that otherwise wouldn't get published." Along with academic work, the press now publishes 30% trade titles.

Smaller publishers are also more open to collaboration in other areas. Johnny Temple, publisher of Akashic Books, emphasizes the importance of author input, allowing writers to make the final call not only in editorial disputes, but also for book

tours and cover art. Temple notes, "We don't send a book to the printer until the author loves the cover, whereas routinely authors for big houses are denied approval for the book cover, which to me is ridiculous and offensive." Gore observes, "A small press might actually give you an editor, a thoughtful book design, a little fucking love, you know? Not always, but sometimes."

But against this backdrop of love, smaller presses, often headed by an overworked staff, are plagued with their own limitations, such as fewer resources for marketing and delayed release dates. Originally slated for November 2005, Michael McColly's *The After-Death Room* (Soft Skull Press) was released in October 2006. Small publishers also release fewer titles with lower print runs. Gore points out that a book that sells 10,000 copies would be deemed a failure at HarperCollins. At Soft Skull Press, Small Beer Press, and Akashic Books, the average print run ranges from 2,000 to 5,000 copies.

WORTH THE 15%?

The first agent McColly worked with sent his proposal to 25 major presses without acceptance. "I'm sure what this person did is put together a little cover letter, take my 40 pages and my book proposal, and just ship it out," McColly concludes in retrospect. "What does she have to lose? Someone might pick it up and say 'Oh, this is great' and she's got her 15%." His second agent helped hone his proposal and outline before shopping the book around, this time with two offers.

There are good agents and bad agents. "Think of an agent as a matchmaker," Mosko posits. "It's an agent's job to know the personal tastes and preferences of every editor at every house in their specialty. When an agent gets a manuscript she feels excited enough about to represent, she knows exactly which editor at which house will want it." Which explains why handpicked manuscripts sent in by agents often receive more attention than blind submissions. Soft Skull Press publisher Richard Nash says, "I've got a backlog of manuscripts approaching 400, some of which date back to June 2004." Un-agented manuscripts are generally sent directly to the slush pile. Agents save time and effort, especially at the big houses.

As editors at major publishers are being forced to assume more marketing duties, they have less time for editorial work. "So the agent has sort of taken that slack, which is great, but which also means you have to find an agent whose editorial advice you're going to find useful," Link says. The biggest thing to keep in mind when shopping for an agent is the same thing to keep in mind about publishing houses: Target your work.

THE END GAME

Rejection hurts, but it's by no means a reflection of

the merit of your work. "For writers, life is just hard," laments Grant. "You're looking to find a publisher or an editor who not only likes your book, but also believes that they can publish it, and sell it to their publisher, and sell it to their marketing chain." At the end of the day, most publishers are selecting work based on what they think is going to sell, not necessarily what they think is deserving of the most merit.

In the event that you do get a book deal, don't quit your day job just yet. Gore says, "I have written six books, three of them have been published by major houses (Hyperion, HarperCollins, and Random House) and three by a medium-size house (Seal Press)." Even with that amount of success, she says, "Most years I live under the poverty line. I don't mind it, but I can't lend you any money."

Now get to work.

You're off to a good start, but there's no way one article alone can help you anticipate all the cut-throat wiles of the publishing industry. For a list of additional resources on getting published, visit venuszine.com.

DOING THE MATH

Face it: Your submission is just one of several that publishers receive every day. Here's an idea of what just the smaller publishers receive and filter through. (To get a sense of what a major publisher receives, exponentiate these numbers below by infinity.)

- Akashic Books has published 10 submissions from the slush pile, out of their 110 published works to date. The press publishes 25 books each year.
- Small Beer Press receives at least 50 queries a month and publishes eight books, at most, a year.
- Soft Skull Press receives roughly 20 submissions every day, which means about 600 a month. They publish 40 titles a year, 30% to 40% of which are fiction.
- The University of Wisconsin Press receives roughly 50 submissions each month. The press publishes 70 new books each year, 30% of which are trade titles.