Publishing Your Book

Introduction

Successful writers are also avid readers. Reading work by other writers is essential to developing your craft and helping you learn where to submit your work. Gauging the kinds of books that different publishing companies focus on can give you a sense of which publishers might be interested in your writing and will ultimately publish your book. Reading the works of other writers can also help you find agents interested in work similar to yours, discover current literary trends, and determine how other writers craft successful manuscripts.

Small Presses vs. Large Publishers

In general, major publishing houses do not accept unsolicited poetry manuscripts and rarely look at unagented or unsolicited fiction or creative nonfiction. Editors at major publishing companies are more interested in writers who have already published a book or those whose work has already appeared in large-circulation trade magazines such as the New Yorker [8] or Harper’s Magazine [9].

We suggest you begin your search for a book publisher by looking at small presses and university presses, which are often open to the work of new authors and do not always require writers to contact them through an agent. Although they do not have the resources of larger publishing houses and offer smaller advances, they are usually more willing to help you develop as an author even if your books aren’t immediately profitable, and they are open to a wider range of writing. For information on hundreds of small presses, please visit our Small Presses database [2].

Chapbooks

Chapbooks are slender booklets, usually twenty-five pages or less, published by small presses or writers—generally poets—themselves. A chapbook can serve not only as a platform for publishing but also as a poet’s calling card or
networking tool—or as a way to earn money, as some writers charge a modest fee for their chapbooks. Many poets assemble chapbooks on their own, with the use of a computer, a software program for designing pages, a photocopier, and a stapler. Some companies design, print, and collate chapbooks for a fee.

To learn more about making chapbooks yourself, take a look at our videos and slideshows of how to coptic bind a chapbook [10] and how to make a pocket-size book. [11]

Submission Guidelines

Before you submit a manuscript to a publisher, be sure to request the publisher’s submission guidelines, which will include whether it accepts unsolicited manuscripts or prefers manuscripts to be submitted via an agent and whether the editors want a full manuscript or a sample of the work, a query letter, a synopsis, or a book proposal. With any written correspondence sent via postal mail, always include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) if you want your submission returned. You can learn more about the submission process from Writer’s Market or other directories of small presses, and from The Art of the Book Proposal [12](Tarcher, 2004) by Eric Maisel, Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write [13] (Perigee, 2002) by Elizabeth Lyon, and How to Get Happily Published [14] (Quill, 1998) by Judith Appelbaum.

What to Expect From Your Publisher

Publishers of poetry books, mainly small presses, are generally more open to the work of unknown writers, and accept unsolicited submissions. Many small presses hold annual poetry contests in which the winning manuscript is published. Along with publication, the winner may receive a small cash prize, usually not more than $1,000. These contests are great opportunities for the beginning writer. Many small presses that offer writing contests publicize the contest and the winning manuscript; many of these are listed in our Writing Contests, Grants & Awards database [15].[16] Small presses typically don’t have the resources to offer large advances, so it’s best to keep your expectations in check. They typically don’t have large sales and/or book promotion departments. Most small presses will provide distribution for your book, and some will help you arrange publicity (scheduling reading tours and sending review copies to book reviewers). But you’ll most likely have to pitch in to help generate interest in, and sales of, your book.

Commercial publishers of fiction will offer you a contract that will stipulate, among other things, your advance amount, deadlines, and word length. Depending on the terms of the contract, the publisher might then pay you a signing amount,
which is a portion of your advance. Once you complete a final draft of your manuscript and turn it in, the editor will read it, and he or she might request broad or specific changes. The editor might then either work closely with you as you revise or wait in the wings until you submit a revised version. When the editor accepts the manuscript as a final version, the publisher will probably—again, depending on the terms of the contract—pay you another portion of your advance amount. Then the publisher will begin the process of production: copyediting the manuscript, designing the book, choosing a book cover, writing cover copy, and coordinating the many steps that must occur in order for a printed book to hit the shelves. While all this is going on, the publisher’s sales department will work on promoting your book to booksellers, and the marketing department may work on a strategy for publicizing the book. It can be a long process, and sometimes months might pass between conversations with your publisher, but once your manuscript is in the publisher’s hands, things are under way.

As stated above, many small presses do not have sales or marketing departments. Writers publishing with small presses will generally shoulder the responsibility of book promotion. University presses may have larger budgets than most small presses; they may actually have marketing budgets and strategies in place for getting your book sold. Ask potential publishers up front what they will do for you.

**What to Expect From a Standard Book Contract**

The point of any legal contract is to specify the arrangement between the parties. A standard book contract protects both author and publisher by stipulating such things as when a manuscript is due, what its length will be, what its publication date and cover price will be, how much of an advance against royalties an author will receive, what the author’s royalty rate will be, and what kinds of electronic and territorial rights the publisher will be granted.

Often, industry standards dictate the specifics: For example, a standard royalty rate for a book bought by a major publisher is 10 percent of the retail price of the book on the first five thousand copies sold, 12.5 percent of the retail price on the next five thousand copies sold, and 15 percent of the retail price on all copies sold thereafter.

With small presses, royalty rates are likely to vary. If you have an experienced literary agent [17], he or she should be able to help you navigate your way through the contract and may be able to negotiate more favorable terms for you. Either way, before signing a contract, you should be sure you understand what the clauses mean and how the terms might affect you. Good resources for finding out more about contracts are the Authors Guild [18] website and the **National**
Book Promotion, Marketing, and Distribution

In general, major publishing companies have much larger budgets for book promotion and distribution than small presses do, but the amount of time, effort, and money that any publisher puts toward launching a book depends on a variety of factors, including the available resources, the projected success of the book, the size of the book’s print run, and the advance paid to the author.

Because of waning media attention for books and an increased focus on profits among many publishers, competition is fierce. Publicists simply do not have time to do a great PR job on every book. For most books, publishers will at the very least send out advance reading copies or galleys—copies of the book in a preliminary bound stage—so that booksellers and critics can read the book before it’s published and decide how much attention they want to pay to it. For some books, publishers will run print or radio ads, sponsor book tours, arrange for readings and book signings, and try to interest journalists in profiling or interviewing the author.

Books that aren’t slated to receive significant book promotion efforts from major publishing companies, and books that are being published by small presses that lack the resources, need other kinds of marketing. Writers can learn to do some publicizing of their own or try to hire an outside PR firm. The Poets & Writers Guide to Publicity and Promotion [20], which was edited by the staff of Poets & Writers Magazine, contains a number of essays that outline strategies and ideas for promoting one’s own book.

For more information, visit our Book Promotion & Publicity page [21].

Vanity and Subsidy Publishing

Some companies charge writers a fee to edit, design, and print their work, then retain the rights to that work. These are vanity or subsidy presses. Sometimes they require writers to buy a copy of an anthology in which their work appears. In general these types of companies should be avoided. When a writer pays to have a book published, the writer should retain the rights to the book. On the whole, keep in mind that publishing with vanity presses that charge you a fee usually won’t advance your career, and that traditional publishing companies and legitimate agents don’t charge writers a fee to be published.

A legitimate contest may charge writers an entry fee, usually $10 to $20, to cover the costs of running the contest, prize money, and payment to outside judges. If
you are asked to pay for anything else—typesetting, printing, design, or publication in an anthology—the organization sponsoring the contest could be a scam.

Recognizing Scams

If the publisher asks for money—or for the writer to “co-invest” in the publishing venture, be wary. If the publisher is evasive, if there is a lack of information on the website, if they do not have a telephone number, or if the listed number yields only a tape-recorded message, and your phone (or e-mail) queries go unanswered, be cautious. If the publisher makes promises that seem too good to be true, they probably are. Research all potential publishers before submitting your work.

Other Resources

Along with essays on the literary life, every issue of Poets & Writers Magazine includes articles with practical applications for both emerging and established writers. Also, take a look at The Poets & Writers Guide to the Book Deal [1] for an overview of how books are acquired, edited, and published.

Your local librarian or bookseller can help you find books that list markets for writing, including Writer’s Market, Poet’s Market, Novel & Short Story Writer’s Market, and Writer’s Market Companion, all from Writer’s Digest Books [22]; The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses (Dustbooks [23], 2009); CLMP [24]’s Literary Press and Magazine Directory (Red Hen Press [25] [26], 2009); and Literary Market Place (Book-mart Press [27], 2009). If you are looking for a translator, visit the American Literary Translators Association [28] website. If you need a ghostwriter, contact the American Society of Journalists and Authors [29].

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