

**On Publishing:  
Throwing Spaghetti at a Wall  
(or Stumbling Your Way to a Best-Seller)**

**By Garrett Peck**

Publishing your first book can be a long, laborious, lonely task that can take years, even decades, before you finally see your work in print. Publishing has become a difficult and frustrating task, as publishers are becoming increasingly selective. But publishing can also be like throwing spaghetti at a wall: keep at it long enough and eventually something will stick. I learned many lessons in publishing *The Prohibition Hangover*, and want to share these with first-time authors as you bring your own book to market.

First off, here's a hard lesson you need to understand: In a free market economy, art is only viable if it's commercial. You may have the best idea in the world, but if no one will buy it – if it won't sell – then why should you bother writing it? Michael Larsen wrote in *How to Get a Literary Agent* (2006), "You are free to write whatever you wish. But to be a successful author, you have to write what people want to read."

The sad fact is that Americans are reading fewer books. We have so many more options now: the Internet, magazines, movies, hundreds of cable television channels, and video games. People have so little time that it's difficult to get anyone to sit down to read 300 pages of text. Why do you think magazine articles are getting shorter? Extensive exposés like you see in the *New Yorker* are rare. Readers just don't have the time for lengthy content.

Yet good books that interest the reader and have a targeted audience keep selling. Who says books don't matter? A book can still set the world on fire! Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) changed our awareness of how Americans are eating – and fast food restaurants have responded by offering healthier choices. Elaine Pagels of Princeton University has contributed immensely to Biblical scholarship, making the early Christian church and its many gospels accessible to general readers with *The Origin of Satan* and *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) gave moral and intellectual strength to the budding urban renaissance movement, which in turn blocked Robert Moses from building an elevated expressway through the heart of Manhattan's West Village. Greenwich Village is a vibrant urban neighborhood to this day because it was preserved.

So yes, books are absolutely still relevant.

## How to Publish

There are four ways to bring your book to market:

1. Large publishers, approached through a literary agent
2. University and independent (small) presses
3. Self-publishing
4. Subsidy publishing

### *Large Publishers and Literary Agents*

If your book is targeted at a national audience, and you want a publisher that will throw some marketing muscle behind it, you'll need a large publisher – and an agent. The Six Sisters who dominate commercial publishing (Hachette, HarperCollins, Holtzbrinck, Penguin, Random House and Simon & Schuster – and their hundreds of imprints) *only* work with literary agents.

There are several thousand literary agents in the U.S. The agent's role is to be your salesperson to the major publishers. You sign a contract, and the agent then uses their contacts with editors to sell the book. Agents are filters: they weed out books that have no market potential, and bring those that do to the industry's attention. Most agents reject 98–99% of what comes in over the transom.

For their work, an agent will take a 15% commission on your book advance and subsequent royalties (and 20% for foreign rights), and any other publications he or she negotiates on your behalf, such as placing a book excerpt with a magazine. When you get paid by the publisher, the publisher mails the check to the agent, who deducts their 15% (minus expenses), then forwards the rest to you. By the way, major publishing houses tend to pay royalties twice per year.

Fifteen percent might sound like a lot, but the agent is incented to get the best deal for both of you. Remember, *they won't earn a penny unless they sell the book*. They know what a book is worth and will fight to get the best possible terms. It's in their financial interest – and it's in yours as well, since the agent can negotiate a better deal than you can on your own. Trust me. After all, what's 15% of zero? That's right – zero.

Agents know the publishers and editors, and who is most likely to buy a manuscript. We writers haven't a clue – we're not sales people. A first-time writer has no chance – *none* – to get in with a major publishing house. They only work with agents. Period.

How do you find a literary agent? You'll want an agent registered with the Association of Authors' Representatives. The AAR is a very reputable listing of agents who agree to a set of guidelines, such as not charging writers a reading fee (if anyone tries to solicit funds for reading your work, run – *do not walk* – for the door). A complete listing of AAR agents can be found at [www.aar-online.org](http://www.aar-online.org).

Always start off your query with a one-page query letter or e-mail. If they respond positively, you will need a formal proposal. This consists of:

- Summary of the book
- Chapter outline and description
- An essay on competing books, and how your book is different
- Marketing plan – the more detail the better
- Author bio (your qualifications for the book)
- Sample chapter from the book

In fact, you will need a proposal regardless of the type of publisher you approach.

Literary agents often prefer working with people they already know, which is why referrals are so important. Many agents I contacted simply responded, “Sorry, we’re not taking new clients at this time.” They want to work with people that have already been successful: it increases the likelihood of your book selling. But how can you be successful without an agent? It’s a catch–22.

Here’s a helpful hint: If you’re a first-time writer, look beyond New York City for an agent. Unless you’re a major public figure, you will have a difficult time attracting attention from anyone in the hyper-competitive New York publishing world – they go after the big fish (to wit: one New York agent liked my work, but rejected me because I didn’t write the wine column for a major U.S. newspaper). Agents outside of NYC are more likely to consider your potential.

Having an agent dramatically improves your odds of being published, but it’s still no guarantee. Remember Miles in *Sideways*? He was an author who drank from the spit bucket at a winery right after his agent told him that a publisher had rejected his novel. Miles realized he wasn’t going to be published.

While we’re on the subject of publishing, let me explain the “advance” system. An advance is a pre-payment on your future royalties. This is the publisher’s swag on how many books they think you’ll sell. You won’t get another royalty check until you exceed the sales forecasted in the advance. For many authors, the advance is the only money they’ll ever see, as most books fail.

Read that again: *most books fail*.

For first-time writers, your advance will be small – low five-figure – unless you are a major public figure. Bill Clinton got \$10 million for *My Life*. His wife Hillary was paid \$8 million for *Living History*. Alan Greenspan got \$8.5 million for *The Age of Turbulence*. Senator Ted Kennedy received \$8 million. Tony Blair, former prime minister of Great Britain, got \$9 million to pen his memoirs. How’d their agents get the advances so high? They sold the books via an auction until one bidder finally emerged as the winner. But unless you’ve been the head of state, you won’t see an advance anywhere near what these people made.

The major publishers throw immense resources at books they hope will be blockbusters. *The Wall Street Journal* reported, “With such high stakes and money tied up in a few big projects in the pipeline, the need to score big with a next project becomes more pressing, and the process repeats itself. The result is a spiral of ever-increasing bets on the most promising concepts, creating a ‘blockbuster trap.’” (Anita Elberse, “Blockbuster or Bust,” *WSJ*, January 3–4, 2009). Publishing, like major league sports, has become a winner-take-all game, where a few authors get much of the publisher’s attention (and marketing dollars), while the vast majority of books are simply distributed with little fanfare or support.

Journalist and literary critic H.L. Mencken didn’t think too highly of the advance system, and he was a man who wrote some thirty books. He wrote in his memoirs:

I have always refused to take advances on my books, and I have urged Knopf to cease giving them to other authors. More than once, sitting at the board table of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., I have heard him report substantial payments to frauds who have made off without producing anything printable – payments that have swelled unpleasantly the profit-and-loss account of the company. He insists, however, that he must follow the trade practice, or lose good books. As for me, I’d rather lose them than pay tribute to a gang of swindlers. Very few really competent and worthwhile writers, I am convinced, would go away if advances were suspended – and the money now wasted upon them might be used to increase the royalties of men and women who produce profit for the house. But the publishing business, like every other American business, is burdened with many evil precedents and traditions, and such vain expenditures are among them.

H.L. Mencken, *My Life as Author and Editor*, 326.

Mencken had a way with words, didn’t he? A “gang of swindlers”... that’s us writers!

Publishers for years have been talking about reforming the advance system, and advance payments are getting smaller for rank-and-file writers. Yet they haven’t been able to make a clean break from this system: whenever a big name author throws a book into the ring, the major publishers all bid on it, sending the advance price higher and higher.

Books often get published in increments of 5,000 copies. Books are expensive to produce, and publishers don’t want to be left with a warehouse full of unsold books that they later have to discount or shred, so they print books just-in-time to meet the demand from their booksellers and distributors. It keeps inventory low.

When I was researching *The Prohibition Hangover*, I looked into Mireille Guiliano’s *French Women Don’t Get Fat*, published in January 2005. The copy I checked out at the library was the 13th printing from May 2005. Do the math: thirteen printings in four months! This was clearly a hit (diet books sell well to women), but even then, the publisher was using sound business practices by only printing books to meet demand.

The standard royalty rate for both large and small publishers is 10% for the first 5,000 books, 12.5% for the second 5,000 books, and 15% thereafter. Your agent will negotiate this for you. However, some publishers are looking at tweaking the model towards profit sharing (and by sharing, that means you get half of the profits). If you think you can sell many books, this might be a better route for you.

### ***University and Independent Presses***

If your book is a niche work rather than targeted at a national audience, you can go directly to an independent publisher or a university press, such as Harvard or Oxford University Press. You don't need an agent, and many universities have acquisitions departments for trade publications. Find the publisher's website, look up Authors, Acquisitions, or the Contact Us feature, and there you'll find instructions on how to submit your book proposal (usually called "Submission Guidelines"). Unlike large publishers, independents are very accessible to you and me.

University presses fill a large niche in the publishing market: academically-oriented books that seek a wider audience. They're aren't exclusively academic – in fact, many of them have turned towards more lucrative trade publishing. This is a business-side of a university, and they need to sell books in order to keep publishing.

My favorite novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, is published by Louisiana State University Press. And I have often wondered, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's direct hit on New Orleans, why Hollywood hasn't made this into a movie. (Wouldn't Sarah Silverman make a fabulous Myrna Minkoff?) I asked the press's director about this, and she told me that Paramount optioned the book the years ago, but still hasn't turned it into a movie.

The downside of university presses is that they tend to be slow – you may wait two or three months to hear back from them. Many presses only publish a few dozen titles a year, so your book's topic really has to fit in with their publishing program. Many university presses focus on particular areas, so be sure to research this carefully.

On the upside, small presses are more likely to give you attention throughout the publication process, as well as publicity support. They publish fewer books, and never bid on blockbusters, so they have more time to focus on your book. You'll have an editor who will actually edit your work, a sales team who may spend more time getting your book onto shelves, and a publicity team that is actively involved in helping your promotional efforts. You don't have to compete with the big blockbuster that commands all of a publisher's attention.

Small or independent publishers can also be quite useful, and they are very approachable. There are thousands of these presses across the country. While most aren't as well known as the Six Sisters, you can find many of them simply by reading book reviews in your newspaper. Start noting the names of the publishers, and you'll see a lot of them are small

presses. Counterpoint is a great example for a nonfiction trade press.

Independents and university presses tend to be skimpy on advances (often only four-figures), but if you write a book that appeals to many readers, you can make up for this with royalties from book sales. The royalty rate is the same as for large publishers mentioned above, but in this case, you'll probably have no agent, so be sure to negotiate it. Again, the standard royalty rate is 10% for the first 5,000 books, 12.5% for the second 5,000 books, and 15% thereafter. Profit sharing may be a viable alternative if you think you can sell many copies.

Just be aware that small publishers tend to only pay royalties once per year, usually in the first quarter of the following year. If your book comes out in winter or spring, you won't be paid for the better part of a year. It may be a challenge to keep yourself afloat financially if you have to wait so long to get paid. And given the shrinking size of advances, it's getting tougher to make a go of it as a full-time writer. So don't quit your day job.

### ***Self-Publishing***

Self-publishing is for books that fill a small niche and often aren't commercially viable (like a collection of family photographs or poetry), yet the author has a passion and drive to produce something. Walt Whitman self-published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. The band Radiohead released its 2007 album *In Rainbows* independently, offering fans to pay-what-you-wish to download it. They bypassed the record labels, and in-effect, self-published.

The cost of self-published books has fallen dramatically thanks to the Internet: firms like AuthorHouse, Blurb, CreateSpace from Amazon.com, iUniverse, and Lulu allow individual copies to be printed and shipped. This is called print-on-demand. Self-publishing can also be a steppingstone to finding a publisher – when they see your dedication and success, they'll realize your book actually does have market value, and will be more willing to publish it. I used Lulu to test market my book among alcohol industry trade representatives, giving me valuable feedback about what to improve.

Enlist your friends to help design your book and edit your text. Think of a compelling title. Design a beautiful cover. No one wants to buy a “tombstone” (a blank white cover with just the title). You can download inexpensive images to use on your cover on iStockPhoto.com, Shutterstock.com, Corbis, and Getty Images.

On the downside, self-published titles usually don't make it into public libraries, and they're never reviewed by newspapers. Only publisher-published books make it into the *New York Time's* Book Review section – and reviews are a significant way to raise awareness of your book. Because of the proliferation of print-on-demand books and lack of marketing, most of these books sell few copies – often just to the authors, their friends, and families.

Finally, self-published books will always face the inevitable question from readers, “Weren’t you good enough to get a real publisher?”

### ***Subsidy Publishing***

Also known as “vanity publishing,” think of this as a last resort. You pay a fee or subsidy to the publisher, such as Dorrance Publishing, and they publish your book professionally. The advantage is that they can get your book into the distribution system; on the downside, you front the capital costs. This can be tens of thousands of dollars, and you may have nothing left over to promote the book (some subsidy presses like BookPros offer a promotion plan, but most don’t). And forget about asking for an advance – you pay them, rather than they pay you.

If you’re a starving artist or a student, don’t even think about subsidy publishing. You need some serious coin to entertain this idea. At least with a traditional publisher, they share the risk with you by fronting the publishing costs, while you do the heavy lifting for the marketing and promotion. Subsidy publishing, on the other hand, puts the entire financial burden on you, the author.

So seriously think thrice before jumping in bed with a subsidy publisher. You could be putting your financial health at risk. You’re probably better off self-publishing, which costs a whole lot less.

### **Building Your Platform**

Certainly everyone is entitled to an opinion, and many lay people know a lot about a particular area, such as through a hobby. But it takes more than that. You need a platform – that which qualifies you authoritatively to speak and write on a topic. Bill Clinton had a heckuva platform – the Presidency – that qualified him to write *My Life*. As the retired Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Alan Greenspan had a great platform as well.

Without a platform, you can’t get published. A book is at least a \$100,000 investment for a publisher (paying your advance, editing, printing, distribution, marketing, plus they have rent, salaries and benefits to pay – publishing ain’t cheap!). They’ll only publish your work if you can demonstrate unqualified authority in a marketable topic, and that they’ll recoup their investment through book sales. This is a business decision.

You build your platform through the media. It doesn’t mean you have to appear on *Larry King Live*, *Diane Rehm*, or *Charlie Rose* – you may not get that unless you are a public figure – but there are endless ways of utilizing the media. Write letters to the editor. Give talks, tours, and lectures. Find out what trade magazines are published in your field of interest. Pitch a story idea to the editor, let them know that you’re open to assignments, and then build a relationship with them.

An article pitch, by the way, should be short and to the point – it should hook the editor immediately. You’ll know they’re interested when they write back 30 minutes after e-mailing it to them.

- The hook – an opening sentence or question that commands attention
- The outline for the article in a couple sentences and total word count
- Resources you’ll need to complete it (people you’ll interview, time, due date)
- Your qualifications to write the article

## **My Story**

So let me tell you the story of how I published *The Prohibition Hangover*. It’s a humorous and often frustrating tale of Keystone Cop bumbling, rejection, and dogged perseverance. I even had a moment like Miles in *Sideways*. Sometime I felt like Ahab pursuing his white whale. But in the end, the whale was my prize.

Typically, a nonfiction idea is first sold to a publisher as a proposal, and then the author writes the book, using their advance to pay their bills while they write. I learned the publishing industry backwards, like the movie *Memento*: I wrote the book first, then built my platform later. I don’t advise going that route.

I had this idea to explore how American drinking habits had shifted since the U.S. repealed Prohibition in 1933. But what made me qualified to write about it (besides five years of research and hundreds of interviews I spent on the topic)? I ended up writing many magazine and newspaper articles and leading a local “Temperance Tour” in Washington, DC to build up my platform, and during the course of which I made thousands of new media contacts, honed my craft, and built a much sounder marketing plan. The delay was a blessing.

All told, the publishing process took nearly six years – more time than most of us spend at college. If you’re a young person, you’ll think that amount of time is endless. If you’re older, you realize that’s not so long, and it’s better to bring a quality product to market rather than rush into something half-baked. Remember that it took Truman Capote five years to research and write his masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*.

For those of you with a spiritual bent, you should realize the value of waiting. Waiting is a spiritual exercise. It reminds that you are not in control of the universe. Waiting is very difficult in our hectic culture – we all know people who will text you again if you haven’t responded to their text within two minutes! You have to realize that a book is going to take as long as it takes.

In yoga, the most difficult position is *Savasana*, or the Corpse Pose that ends most sessions. Just try laying absolutely still for 5–10 minutes without your mind wandering through its constant CNN-commentary and daily to-do lists! It’s tough when your mind is screaming, “Don’t just lay there – think of something!”

## ***Learning Through Rejection***

If you're a writer, you're used to hearing the word NO. I heard it countless times before I finally heard that magical YES. But every NO taught something crucial that led me to improve my craft and my book, and propelled the book forward.

I wanted to find a New York-based agent, as my original hope was to find a big New York publisher that would throw serious marketing dollars into the book. Boy, did I misjudge. My rejection e-mails piled up with things like:

- The book was way too long. I'm embarrassed to say this, but the book at one point was 200,000 words. No, that's not a misprint. In today's book market, shoot for 100,000 words – that's about 250 pages. Or even shorter, if you can. Americans have unbelievably short attention spans.
- I had no platform, though that improved with time as I got published in magazines and newspapers and made radio appearances.
- Another worried that the subject was too broad. I was trying for something like *Fast Food Nation*, covering every facet of alcohol in society. Indeed, this may seem ambitious, but no one had ever tried a comprehensive approach in writing about Americans and alcohol.
- One agent told me that my proposal sounded too much like a pro-alcohol polemic, when the book itself was much more balanced. He was right. I immediately rewrote the proposal.
- Another felt the book was too academic.
- Many seriously doubted that a major publisher would find the book commercially viable – and I was advised to look outside NYC for an agent.
- On the upside, people really liked the concept. They thought the story was compelling, and they liked my writing style. Everyone agreed it was an idea worth telling. That gave me hope to keep going and refining my work.

Remember, reading is subjective. People have their own tastes. One person may thoroughly dislike how you write, while another person may love it. Your style is your style. I'm a journalist, but some people are turned off by magazine-style writing. Whaddya gonna do? You can't please everyone.

Finding an agent and a publisher is like dating. You are trying to find a reasonably good match. As they say, you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince. Same thing for publishing. Don't take it personally when people say no. It's just not a right fit for them – or you.

If someone gives you constructive feedback, be thankful. Here's an example of constructive criticism: "I really like your book concept, but I don't see it as a fit for my agency. You might want to think about shortening the chapters and easing up on the academic writing to make it more accessible to readers." Even with that rejection, you know your book is on sound footing, and it gives you a sense of what you need to address. It gives you a path to follow.

On the other hand, if someone writes back, "There's no market for this book, and I think you should rethink your premise," then they're probably right.

### ***Test Marketing***

I nearly signed on with a West Coast agent. He coached me to improve my marketing plan, and got me to do a test market for the book. That was a terrific suggestion, by the way, and I utilized Lulu to distribute about fifty printed copies of my book. This was very affordable: the entire test market cost about \$600.

I targeted heavy-hitters in the alcohol industry. Influencers with wide-ranging social and professional networks who would quickly get the word out once the book was published. Test marketing was a way of getting them on my side in advance so they would look forward to seeing themselves in print. I wanted to solicit their advice on ways to improve the book, and to get quotes ("praise") for the back cover.

The first review I got back was fairly critical. He didn't like the thematic organization (like *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, I organized the book around themes, rather than chronology). He felt it lacked enough analysis, and too much of my own opinion. Fair enough.

There is, by the way, a generational difference in how we write. People born before World War II were raised on the idea that you should never use the first person ("I") in writing. Truman Capote never once mentioned himself in *In Cold Blood* except as an oblique reference to a journalist on practically the last page. That ethic has certainly changed. Using the first person is now considered acceptable, as long as it doesn't come across as being narcissistic, self-centered, or self-serving.

Other valuable feedback I got was that the book was slightly long and bogged down in some of the pro and con sections. I responded by summarizing more of the arguments to slim it down. The second half was noticeably more enjoyable to read, so I rejiggered the chapter order to make it fun throughout and to create more of a story arc. I concluded it with my most controversial chapter: the recommendation to lower the drinking age to 18.

The test market also validated that I'm a good writer, that the theme was relevant and compelling, and that I was fair to everyone – even those whom I personally disagree with.

As a writer, you have to be willing to play Medea and kill your own children. Yes, it's brutal, but you've got to do it. If someone says something is boring, or they just couldn't turn another page, you've got to delete those sections. I don't care how important it is to you: if it puts people to sleep, it's got to be axed.

Here's what I do: I write what I want, and then *edit, edit, edit*. I keep a file called "Deleted Sections" that I can cut-and-paste eliminated material. You can always recycle it for a magazine article or put it on your website. That's how I ended up posting an article on winemaking in ancient Israel.

You should certainly listen for constructive criticism – you'll gain valuable feedback, and you might even correct some serious mistakes. But ultimately you have to know what is right for you. Opinion is subjective. The ultimate gauge – the only one that matters – is the market. Critics may not like your book, but if you sell 100,000 copies, you can discount them. You must have done something right.

A final word about the test market. After working with that West Coast agent for two months (he hadn't signed me on as a client), he wrote me, "You will sell the book and it will succeed, but I don't think we're the agency you need." I'm still puzzled over this pass. It felt like I was back at square one, though the test market was a valuable learning experience.

NOTE: "took a pass" means they passed up the opportunity to buy the book. Hollywood has a similar but funny phrase: "send you to Pasadena."

### ***The University Press Route***

After a New York agent said my book felt too academic, I had an idea. *Why not go after an academic press?* I targeted Harvard and Oxford University Press, two of the best known, trade-publishing university presses.

The result was more rejection. In fact, I spent months pitching my proposal to about a dozen universities, and was universally rejected. The one that gave me the biggest chuckle was a Midwestern university that publishes extensively on alcohol issues: the editor e-mailed me 24 hours after receiving the proposal. "We have given the project careful consideration but concluded that it would not fit well on our list," her rejection e-mail read. Mmmm-hmmmm.

A common criticism I got from university presses was that it wasn't *academic* enough, or that they really just existed to publish their professors. This is bogus, of course, as many of them publish trade books – they are far more lucrative than true academic publishing. They were just using this as an excuse to say no.

## Back to Square One

Albert Einstein remarked that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting the results to change. So don't just keep doing the same thing. Learn from your mistakes and from advice people give, and continually adapt your story. It's like throwing spaghetti at a wall: keep at it long enough, and something will stick.

A year after I started looking for an agent – an eventful year of building my platform, contacting (and being rejected by) dozens of agents, pitching my book unsuccessfully to university presses, test marketing, honing my craft and building a solid marketing plan – I decided to try the agent route once again. I was convinced more than ever that my book had a national audience, and somewhere there was a publisher who was excited about my work.

The next agent on my list was in the Midwest. I e-mailed him a query letter. He immediately wrote back, asking for the proposal. I sent this to him. He liked it and offered me representation. I signed on with him. Start to finish: four days.

He sent a first-look to an editor who was looking for something like this, but she declined. She liked my writing and marketing plan, but thought my platform wasn't strong enough in light of potentially competing books. Even a good idea with a strong marketing plan can be turned down because publishers are looking for an excuse to say no.

Again, the platform became an issue. While I had been writing for years in the alcoholic beverage industry, still some questioned that my name wasn't big enough (like you have to be a household name to get published, even though most of the nearly 480,000 books published in 2008 in the U.S. aren't by such people).

We ran into an unexpected issue: publishers were saying no because they expected a crowded field of books around the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Repeal on December 5, 2008. I had been using this date as a hook, but my agent told me to tone it down: "They aren't buying it because everyone has a book coming out next year – many from big names – so we have to use a different angle." He added, "They either think it's a book about wine or that it's going to be one of those books that dies right after the celebration, and it's neither." We tried repositioning it as a business book, and tied it in with the longevity of *Fast Food Nation*, pointing out that this would be a relevant book for years to come.

A little while later my agent wrote me, "I keep letting editors know it's available but they keep telling me that they are filled up with wine books. Then I say, 'But this isn't just a wine book, it's about Prohibition,' and they say, 'We already have plenty of those too.'"

## **My *Sideways* Moment**

Four months after my agent took me on as a client, he sent me a sad note.

I hate to say this but I think I've pretty well exhausted those publishers who might be interested in something like your book. It's a shame. We might have gotten into this a little late as what I'm hearing from a number of editors is that there are some big hitters coming out with books that coincides with the 75th anniversary celebration and you just don't have enough celebrity to compete. So that's pretty much it, it seems. It's difficult for me to say this as you are a great guy and a wonderful client, but I don't think it's going to happen for us.

This was my *Sideways* moment – the moment when we realized we weren't going to get a major publisher. But I didn't drink from the spit bucket...yuck.

My agent had done everything he could to sell the book, but it just wouldn't sell. Editors liked the idea, but they kept saying bigger players were publishing books about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Repeal, and I wasn't as known as them. That's why they all took a pass. My agent sent me a termination letter, ending our legal relationship, and freeing me to pursue other options.

By the way, my agent was nothing but wonderful. We're still friends. He tried his hardest for four months and explored every angle, but the book just wouldn't sell. It also shows that, just because you have an agent, there's no guarantee a book will be published.

Now here's the shocker.

Screenwriter William Goldman famously wrote about Hollywood, "Nobody knows anything." So just where were these other books about alcohol and the anniversary of Repeal? *They were a complete fiction – they didn't exist.* All of these publishers had rejected my book in the mistaken premise that someone else was going to publish about Repeal – and it turns out that no one had written about the topic. No one but me.

## **Sold – At Last!**

Knowing that my agent couldn't sell the book to a large publisher, and that any agent would now treat this project as anathema, I turned to small publishers. Agents usually don't deal with these, as they generally don't pay well.

I sent out about a dozen queries. I made a long list of additional publishers to target if all these said no. Most of them eventually wrote back, saying they weren't interested.

But then came a happy ending to our story.

One day I read a book review in *The Washington Post*, and saw that Rutgers University Press had published it. I don't know how this had escaped me before: Rutgers has one of the most significant alcohol study programs in the world, so it was a natural fit. I printed out a proposal and mailed it in, and just a couple days later, I received a phone call from Doreen Valentine, one of the press's editors. This was March 25, 2008. She liked the book and wanted in!

But Doreen also told me that it was impossible to make the December 5 anniversary of Repeal – the best they could do would be to publish the book in 2009, more than a year later (in fact, we released the book on September 1, 2009). The only way to make the anniversary would be to self-publish.

So there was my choice. Do I self-publish the book in order to tie in with the Repeal Day 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, or do I miss the deadline, but probably put a much better and professionally edited product out to market? I asked Doreen for a week to decide.

It didn't take that long to make up my mind. When I weighed timing the market versus publishing a quality product, I came up with a big, long list that heavily weighted the latter. What really made the difference for me was:

- Doreen offered to become my editor. I tell you, in all my years of writing, every project I've worked on has been made better because I had a good editor. Editing is absolutely crucial. Many publishers aren't really editing their author's works anymore: it's time consuming and expensive. So the idea of actually having an editor assigned to help polish the book was really compelling for me.
- Having a publisher meant they fronted the capital costs for the book. If I self-published, I would have to do all the work and shoulder the expense myself.
- A publisher also knows how to package and design the book. They gave it a new cover and created interesting graphics that were far beyond my skill set.
- The opportunity to utilize their publicist for free was huge. *Huge!*

After a couple days, I called Doreen back. I told her I was in. She immediately started the peer review process for the manuscript. University presses use peer review to ensure that the works that they publish are an actual scholarly contribution, and that the work has been well researched and argued. The peer reviewer will poke holes in your research so you can shore it up. It's basically a quality-control process for the academic community, but it works well in other areas as well.

An academic – an anonymous person who knew a lot about the history of alcohol in America – was my peer reviewer. To this unknown person I am forever grateful. The process took about six weeks, and I got back seven pages of detailed notes of things to address, along with a positive word that the book was worth publishing. Getting through peer review was a major hurdle.

I soon boarded an Amtrak train and visited Rutgers to meet my editor Doreen, the sales and marketing director, publicist, and web designer. They were a great team. It was invaluable in establishing a good relationship with the people I'd be working intimately with for several years. I signed my contract with them that day.

Doreen had me buy a copy of Lloyd Jassin and Steven Schechter's *The Copyright Permission and Libel Handbook*. While I wasn't so concerned about libel – I treated everyone fairly in the book, and bad-mouthed no one – I did learn a lot about copyright. I learned how to request permission to publish copyrighted materials (such as Noah S. Sweat, Jr.'s "Whiskey Speech").

Once I turned in the manuscript, Rutgers began the eleven-month process of preparing it for publication. This included copyediting, final manuscript preparation, indexing, proofing, and cover design.

Though I was disappointed that I didn't publish my book in time for Repeal Day in 2008, perhaps the delay was a karmic blessing. The public was caught up in the presidential election and stock market meltdown. It was probably a terrible time to publish a book. The gift of time meant I could continue building my marketing plan while saving money for the book launch in September 2009.

### **Promote, Promote, Promote**

You want to sell lots of books? Just publishing a book and praying for a good review ain't gonna cut it. You – and yes, I mean *you*, the author – have to promote it. The publisher isn't going to do this for you. It's a complaint I often hear from other writers: "My publisher didn't do anything to promote my book." We can stand that question on its head by asking, What did *you*, the author, do to promote your work?

If you want to succeed at publishing – and by that I mean make some income that will pay your bills so you can write your next book – you have to promote your work. You are your book's chief salesperson, not the publisher. The publisher will certainly help you with publicity, but you need to do the heavy lifting.

As Tom Hagen (Robert DuVall) said in *The Godfather*, "This is business!" And your book isn't just a work of art – it's a product that you want customers to buy. Publishing is a business, so start thinking like a businessperson.

In October 2006, my friend Stewart Waller entered the annual Miss Adams Morgan Pageant as Miss Tennessee, Bella de Balls (funny, huh? His show was a hilarious homage to Alice from *The Brady Bunch*). It was his first time participating in this event, probably the biggest drag contest in Washington, DC. Stewart had a great stage show, but equally important, he organized his supporters. He took the grand prize and was crowned Miss Adams Morgan. *I learned from this that even a first time participant can be a winner if*

*you offer a great product and turn your customers into advocates.*

Don't hide your light under a bushel. Share your work with a wide audience – and be open to suggestions and honest feedback. Don't be afraid that someone will copy your work. In the U.S., when you write something, it belongs to you. You are protected under our copyright laws.

It's good to build fans, but even more important to build advocates who are excited about your work, and who will share it with others. Nothing beats word-of-mouth. And best of all, it's free.

Do you think J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, started off as a big success? No way! She had a very difficult time getting her first novel published: for one, it was a novel-length book, and publishers didn't think kids would read a book that long. And since it was about a kid, publishers didn't think adults would read a children's book. A classic catch-22. In other words, *Harry Potter* didn't appear to be commercial (we laugh at that now, but you understand what the publishing community was thinking, right?).

What no one understood was that there this undiscovered market: adults who would read the book with their children. *Harry Potter* was finally picked up by a small press, and it wasn't an instant hit. It took time for it to catch on as parents started reading it with their kids, then mentioned it to other parents in their playgroups and PTAs. Word-of-mouth propelled this book into a ginormous bestseller and movie series.

You can be successful at any age, not just in your youth. Edward Hopper was in his mid-forties before he ever had any recognition as a painter. Willa Cather was 38 when she gave up being a very successful career as a magazine editor to become an author. Grandma Moses started painting in her 70s. More recently, we've all seen the YouTube video of Susan Boyle, the ungainly 47-year old Scottish woman on "Britain's Got Talent" whose singing voice was nothing short of angelic. I was 41 when I published *The Prohibition Hangover*.

Age has nothing to do with success. If anything, a little maturity and perspective can help people deal with the pressures of success. One of my favorite all-time movie scenes was from *Basquiat*, where Willem Defoe played an electrician hanging lights for Jean-Michel Basquiat's first art show. Defoe explained he was also a sculptor – an artist with a secular trade – and he was glad that he didn't have success until later in life, as it gave him more time to shape his art. That contrast, of course, with Basquiat's life, a brilliant painter who died of a drug overdose at age 27.

### ***Building a Marketing Plan***

If you want to sell your book, you need a solid marketing plan. This is your detailed plan to connect to readers and sell books. It states how many books you expect to sell, where you will make media appearances, and specific steps you will take to promote it.

Again, we turn to Michael Larsen, author of *How to Get a Literary Agent*: “For nonfiction, your promotion plan will be far more important than the content of your book in determining the editor, publisher, and deal you get.” Marketing is more important than content! That sounds like a bucket of cold water dumped over your head, doesn’t it?

Publishers want to know that you’re serious about selling books, not just in getting published. Build a detailed marketing plan. It’s a living document, so keep updating and adapting it. This is your business plan. If you see something that works, then by all means copy it. Learn from others. Adapt. Grow.

When I first spoke with my agent, he told me that my marketing plan was one of the most complete he had seen. Most authors haven’t a clue about how to promote themselves. I did have an advantage: I worked in marketing for 14 years. It was in the telecom industry, but the skill set is the same. I understood very clearly that marketing is how you connect your product to your customers, and how it brings value to their lives.

So you’re a first-time writer and have no clue where to begin. It’s easier than you think – and the possibilities are endless. Get yourself a pad of paper and pen, and start jotting down ideas, no matter how far-fetched they seem. Promoting your book needn’t cost much money.

- The power of the Internet has entirely changed the game, and best of all, it’s practically free. Develop an online strategy. Start a blog. Form a group on Facebook. Build a website. The website for *The Prohibition Hangover*, [www.prohibitionhangover.com](http://www.prohibitionhangover.com), costs me \$6 a month. Even a penniless student can afford that.
- Learn how to write an effective press release. There are low-cost tools online that you can use, such as e-mail marketing. Check out Constant Contact ([www.constantcontact.com](http://www.constantcontact.com)).
- Keep track of all your contacts. I kept a Word file with every contact I met, interviewed, or read an article about them. It came to more than 4,000 people. On the publication date, we e-mailed these contacts, asking them not only to buy my book, but to encourage their friends and social networks to buy it.
- The power of social networking is exponential. Young people in particular find this second-nature, having grown up with Facebook, MySpace and other social networking websites. LinkedIn is another tool for professionals.

With bottom-up marketing, you to use the power of word-of-mouth to your advantage. People are far more likely to buy something that they heard from a trusted source, rather than an advertisement or book review.

A final point about marketing. It is a common misconception that publishers send authors on book tours. The reality is, they don't. It is *you*, the author, who will send yourself on a book tour, and likewise you who will front the travel costs. Start saving your money.

## **Learning From Lessons**

What are the key lessons I learned from publishing?

- Build a platform. What qualifies you to write a book? You've got to be an expert in the field you're covering in order to attract readers (and buyers).
- Look beyond New York City for an agent and a publisher. New York is heavily focused on the big authors and big publishers.
- Sell your work first before you write the whole thing.
- Go independent! If you're a first-time author, it's incredibly difficult to get anyone's attention, be it an agent or major publisher. In hindsight, I would have skipped the agent search and gone straight to independents; it would have saved me a year.
- Throw a lot of spaghetti. It takes many tries to find someone who believes in you – but it only takes one person. That person is out there.
- Learn patience. Waiting is a spiritual exercise. Remind yourself, *It is going to take as long as it takes*. You are not in control.
- This is a business. Publishers need to sell books to survive. Demonstrate your marketing savvy by showing you know your audience, have a strong platform, and have a whole kit full of tools to help you sell books.
- You are your book's chief salesperson. You can expect some help from the publisher, but only you can make the book sell. The publisher has multiple projects besides your own. You've got to be proactive about getting in front of your audience and convincing them to buy your book.
- Bottoms-up! It's especially important for first-time writers to recognize that publishers won't throw many marketing dollars your way. So get creative about building a bottom-up marketing plan that will take advantage of Internet tools and a word-of-mouth campaign. This is the most effective kind of marketing, and best of all, it's practically free.

## Art as Enterprise

As I said at the beginning, the only viable art in a free enterprise system is commercial. You don't have to love this truth, but you do have to accept it. And it's been this way for a good, long while.

In Renaissance Italy, many of the works of art we know best – the Sistine Chapel, the cupola on Florence's Duomo, and the Baptistry Doors – were commissioned. In fact, the wealthy Florentine families sponsored creative competitions for works, offering prizes to the winner. This is how the Duomo's cupola was finally built: architect Filippo Brunelleschi won competition after competition for his overall design, the crane, the wooden and sandstone chains, and so on. He was so good that he usually won.

The fifteenth century German painter Albrecht Dürer had an uncommon ability to grasp the commercial potential of art. While portraits commanded high fees, he realized that the nobles he painted needed multiple sittings, and that it took far too long to finish a project. Prints, on the other hand, were quick to complete. He couldn't charge as much, but Dürer could sell a lot more copies – and this is how he made his money, through volume.

Dürer knew the importance of having a signature sample of his work that would sell other pieces. He painted a very famous self-portrait as Jesus, even boldly painting 1500 AD in the center of the canvas, evoking not just his initials, but also the year (AD is *Anno Domini*, the Year of Our Lord). Kinda ballsy, huh? The painting practically shouts – *I'm so good I can paint myself as Jesus – and just imagine how good you'll look when I paint you*. Dürer knew what he was doing, and he was a consummate promoter of his work.

The Albrecht Dürer of our time was Andy Warhol. That man understood the commercial potential for art. He started as a graphic designer, so he grasped what his clients wanted. When he died in 1987, his estate was valued at more than \$300 million.

Film director Steven Spielberg is, perhaps, the most successful artist in recent history. He's a billionaire. Not many artists reach those lofty heights, and no one can deny that he makes great art.

One of the annoying things about the musical *Rent* was its artistic sense of entitlement. Mark Cohen, a filmmaker-artist in the story, actually had to take a paying job for a TV station, and the poor dear felt like a sellout. Oh, boo-hoo. He was an entitled suburban kid living *la vie bohème* who had to earn a paycheck and didn't get to make the crappy documentaries that he couldn't pay people to watch. How my heart bled for poor Mark! No artist should actually have to earn a living – poverty is so much more dignifying. (By the way, I'm being sarcastic, in case it wasn't obvious.)

Listen, you're not a sellout just because you get paid for your talent. God has given you skills, and you'd be foolish not to use them. And everyone – *everyone!* – needs to pay the rent. Artists included. If you have that much guilt over your success, then give the money away to charity, but don't throw away your calling.

## Final Words of Advice

Be realistic about how many books you'll sell. You probably won't sell a million books, honestly. Americans are reading and buying fewer books, even as the number of book titles proliferates. Only a handful of books become bestsellers – those commercially-viable books that appeal to a very broad audience.

Don't quit your day job! While it would be nice if we could all be full-time writers, it's good to have a regular paycheck. *The Prohibition Hangover* took me five years to research and write, and I had a full-time job at WorldCom (yes, *that* WorldCom) / MCI / Verizon. I wrote it during weekends and evenings – Saturday was my dedicated writing day. And yes, my dating life practically dried up during this time.

Take heart and believe in yourself. Don't be discouraged over rejection – NO just means “not yet.” Keep plugging away at your work. If your craft is good and you are passionate about your subject, eventually you will succeed. If this is where you genuinely feel that God is calling you, then how can you fail?

Just remember that the Israelites wandered forty years in the Wilderness before venturing into the Promised Land. Not all those who wander are lost: your time of wandering will shape and prepare you for your own Promised Land as an author. Likewise, Julia Child and Michael Cunningham each took ten years to publish their first books. You need to go through the process – it's healthy, and it will make you a far better writer. But it requires something in short supply these days: patience and perseverance.

And above all, don't give up. Remember the words of Winston Churchill during the darkest days of World War II: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in.” Writers everywhere, let the bulldog be your mascot.

Garrett Peck  
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