

# Practical Publishing Handbook



*Publishing Explained Staff*

Ocaso Press 2009

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by Publishing Explained Staff

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# 1. WHAT YOU FACE

Perhaps those rejection slips are trying to tell you something, or you're thinking of giving PoD or electronic books a go. How much can you expect to earn through traditional and electronic publishing, and how can you most effectively market your work? To these and a host of similar questions, this carefully researched handbook will give you the answers.

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

Publishing isn't easy money. Before sending off your masterpiece, or even thinking about your next article, you might bear in mind:

- publishing is a strange if not mad world that combines superb professionalism with laughable incompetence.
- **over half** of books bought aren't read.
- the odd best-seller aside, **no one** today makes serious money at publishing, either authors or publishers.
- because many publishers are **struggling to survive**, the last thing they want is another manuscript from an unproved author.
- if they're sensible, authors write to communicate, for a love of their subject, and (just possibly) some status.
- anyone can publish a book today at modest expense, but even recouping the outlay needs effort and much inside knowledge.
- electronic publishing and the internet are important developments, but bring their own needs: just creating an e-book and setting up a marketing website will not work.

Some talent is needed, but equally important is an understanding of the publishing business, persistence and a grasp of the opportunities.

## 1.2. PUBLISHING: AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Most writers earn far more from reviewing, teaching, adjudicating competitions, giving talks, running workshops, and/or appearing on radio

than from royalties on their publications. {1} Twenty odd years ago, some 70,000 new books were published each year in Britain, of which 6,000 were novels. Twenty percent of these had some claim to literary respectability. {2} There were big-earners, multimillionaires even, but only 300 full-time novelists made over £8,000 p.a., with another 300 supplementing income from journalism, and another 900 supplementing income from some other literary activity. Figures from other countries were equally depressing (e.g. 1250, 750 and 1750 respectively for the States), {3} and these will not have improved recently. Rebecca Brandywyne spoke for many when she remarked: 'the hard reality is that the vast majority of authors cannot earn even a comfortable—much less a luxurious—living from their writing careers, and, unless they have access to other sources of funding (such as a working spouse, investments and dividends, or an inheritance), are frequently compelled to take other jobs as their primary means of financial support.' She provided a worked example. Consider a mass-market paperback book of 25,000 copies printed, an average return rate of 50%, an average \$6.50 cover price, and an average 6% royalty rate. Royalties would amount to \$4,875, less agent fees of \$731.25, leaving the author a before-tax profit of \$4,143.75. {4}

How long it takes to write a decent novel depends on the genre, the quality, and what you call writing. Kerouac's *On the Road* was dashed off in three weeks, but Joyce's *Ulysses* took sixteen years {5}. The actual typing may only require a few months, but the ideas generally take years to gestate, and that first draft will need extensive rewriting and sometimes a whole new storyline. Many novels never come good, and have to be abandoned—providing valuable experience but not, as Bernard Shaw remarked, worth quite what we've had to pay for it. Most novelists report a year or two of actual writing. Best-selling novelists can afford a more leisurely pace, turning out a blockbuster every three or four years. Some novels are written in weeks, either under inspiration or by relentless application, but that rate can't be maintained for long. The respected UK Society of Authors found half their members earned less than the minimum wage {6}, and successful authors urge newcomers to look before leaping into full-time writing. {7}{8}

Any large UK publisher will receive 2000 unsolicited novel manuscripts in a year, and publish 20. The average serious first novel receives half a dozen reviews and perhaps sells 1000 copies over two years. With royalties

around 10% at best, writers must learn to mechanically turn out a commercial product or starve. Seventy-five per cent of serious writers in the States earn no money at all from their work, ever. {3}

Don't believe this? Use [titez](#), [ranktracer](#) and [rankforest](#) to check sales on [Amazon](#), or just glance at the sales ranking. A respectable ranking of 10,000 indicates sales of 100 books per month, perhaps earning their proud authors \$1 a sale. {9} Read an insider's view of the publishing trade by [Michael Allen](#), or look at matters from an [enterprising publisher's](#) point of view. Consider the work that internationally known poets put on their sites (we're not naming names), and ask not why it's so indifferent but how they ever got round to writing the pieces in the first place, given the unending schedule of talks, signings, representation on various societies, weekly column, and contributions to late-night shows where they must say something kindly about the books of colleagues they haven't read and don't intend to.

Literature does not bring fame. Its standard-bearers were the English departments in schools and universities, but these have been taken over by critical theory, which often lacks humanity and the honesty of clear exposition. {10} Work in the small presses is very mixed, and few have a circulation above the low hundreds. Even the habit of close attention soon wears off, as 58% of US high school students and 42% of college students never open a book after finishing their education. {11}

Print on Demand companies estimate that one million manuscripts are looking for a publisher in the States alone, of which only one per cent will be successful.

## References

1. Peter Finch's *The Poetry Business* (1994).
2. D.J. Taylor's *A Vain Conceit: British Fiction in the 1980's* (1989).
3. George Greenfield's *Scribblers for Bread* (1989).
4. Brandywyne, Rebecca, [Advances and Royalties: How Authors are Paid](#).
5. Mya Bell's [Web Log](#). July 2004.
6. An *Independent* (UK) newspaper article of 4th March 2006 quoted a 2005 Society of Authors study, which found 50% of UK authors earned less than the minimum wage, and 75% less than £20,000/year.
7. Sendbuehler, Fran. [First Novel Policy and The Bestseller](#). Feb. 1996.
8. Weinberg, Robert. [Writing Full Time—A User's Guide](#) 2003.

9. A very approximate figure for sales worldwide of a book written in English can be calculated with this formula: annual sales = 10 million times the Amazon Sales Rank to the power of minus 0.75.

10. Chapter 3 of Bernard Bergonzi's *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (1990), Chapter 2 of Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* (1990), and Chapters 1 and 9 of George Watson's *The Literary Critics* (1986).

11. Poynter, Dan. *Statistics* 2004.

### 1.3. THE PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Dan Poynter {1} quotes a publisher's survey of 1988, where the average fiction book took 475 hours to write, publisher's average annual sales were \$420,000, and staff worked 50 hours a week. Putting that together, we find the average small publisher produced 4.7 books/year, for an average revenue per book of \$89,400. Even if royalties were 10% and there were no book returns, and rewriting was only done once—all rather unlikely—the author would have written at 295 words an hour to turn out two books yearly and earn royalties of \$18,000 a year.

Such examples come from popular or mass-market fiction, which accounts for 53.3% of book sales. Literary fiction, together with poetry and art books, accounts for only 3.3% of book sales. {2} Given that the average first novel, favourably reviewed in leading newspapers, will sell a few thousand copies over two years, {3} it is obvious why publishers don't rush to fill their lists with new names, and indeed look after only that small percentage of writers that pay their salaries. {4}

Much more dismal are the earnings from poetry publishing. A few specialist publishers (e.g. Anvil, Carcanet, Bloodaxe) do turn in respectable figures, but in general poetry is not handled at all (the great majority, e.g. Corgi, HarperCollins, Hodder and Stoughton), is subsidized by sales elsewhere (e.g. Faber and Faber, Peter Owen, OUP) or supported by regional grants (e.g. Peterloo). {5}

But what about academia, where talent is rewarded and protected? Here is a breakdown of sales by Cambridge University Press in 1998: {6}

Number of titles offered: 13,500.

Annual Revenues: \$60 million.

Titles selling less than 100 copies/year: 8,000.

Titles selling less than 10 copies/year: 2,000.

Average number of copies sold/title: 32.

Number of new titles: 1,500

Number of titles discontinued: 1,300

When you're considering writing up that specialist interest, you might remember these figures, do some research on Amazon, and recall that academic books are often subsidized anyway—a subject of anguished debate in academic sites and blogs. {7}{8}{9}{10}

You might also consider the PoD model, which is indeed what the Cambridge University Press has done. Slow-moving titles have been converted into digital form, and the CUP figures for 2006 were: {6}

Total number of titles offered: 29,000.

Annual Revenues: \$75 million.

PoD titles: 7,000.

In short, the efficiencies introduced by taking the PoD route have allowed CUP to expand their listings.

## References

1. Poynter, Dan. *Statistics* 2004
2. Poynter, Dan. *The Self-Publishing Manual* (Para Publishing, Santa Barbara, CA), 224.
3. George Greenfield's *Scribblers for Bread* (1989).
4. Diamond, Nina, L., *The Untouchables How You Fit Into the Publishing Caste System*. February 2007.
5. Gordon Wells's *The Book Writer's Handbook* (1995).
6. CUP Increases Revenues by Using PoD [VISTA Publishing Perspectives](#).
7. University Presses, Libraries, Monographs and Ultimate yellow brick roads? [Colin Steele](#). 2007.
8. Library Statistics & Measures. [Joe Ryan](#).
9. Association of American University Presses: [Quick Facts](#).
10. Imaginary Journal of Poetic Economics. [Heather Morrison's blog](#).

Two matters concern publishers: the reputation of their publishing house, and whether they can at least cover expenses.

Suppose you approach a publisher with your collection of poems and stories based on your home town and its characters. Of course you'll include a media kit and stress that you're well known on the local poetry-reading, radio and book-signing circuit, more than capable of making the publication sell. Here's what the publisher does:

1. Checks the credentials: that you are indeed who you say you are, your previous books exist and have been successful. A few telephone calls will establish these.

2. Estimates likely sales figures. He learns that your home town has a population of 50,000, and its local newspaper enjoys a circulation of 15,000 (calls to friends, local library, Bowkers). Experience has told him that only a few per cent of newspaper readers will buy poetry, say 500. Allowing 10% loss in spoilage and review copies, he has 450 copies to sell. Figures in US\$:

publishing costs @ \$3.50/copy	-	(\$1750)
ancillaries (distribution, warehousing)	-	(\$350)
gross sales @ \$6.95/copy	\$3127	-
bookstore commissions @ 40%	-	(\$1112)
marketing expenses	-	(\$500)
totals	\$3127	(\$3712)
net profit	-	(\$585)

Hardly enticing. A loss, even though no royalty is paid, and he hasn't costed his own time. Supposing every copy is sold, eventually.

3. But perhaps he's a would-be poet himself, or feels that your prestige will enhance the firm's standing in the community, or the price can be increased to \$8.95. He asks for the MS, reading it carefully and getting opinions from the local writers circle and a retired English professor. Everyone likes the work. The publisher therefore invites you in for a meeting and is sufficiently impressed by your confidence to offer a co-publishing contract. A **print-run** of 500 copies, no royalties, and you put up \$1000 of the publishing costs. Yes, you. He has \$2100 at risk; you can bear the other \$1000.

Serious poetry is never a best-seller, but novels can be. In this second example you have managed to interest a large publishing house in your

manuscript. Everything looks promising. You're personable and articulate, ideal for a TV chat show or late-night arts programme. You have a good thirty years of writing in you. What you produce now is phenomenally good. The publishing house does its sums. These are the 'back of the envelope' figures, all in units of 1000. The book retails for \$12.95, royalties are 8%, and bookstore commissions average 40%:

no. sold	receipts	costs	profit	no. sold	receipts	costs
-	-	printing & distribution	royalties	-	-	printing & distribution
1	13	6	1	1	13	6
2	26	8	2	2	26	8
10	129	21	10	10	129	21
100	1,295	135	104	100	1,295	135
1,000	12,950	1,250	1,036	1,000	12,950	1,250

Everything depends on the book proving a best-seller. This is how the publishing house calculates the odds: figures again in thousands:

no. sold	% odds	profit	what you're worth to them (odds x profit)
1	30	(2)	-0.6
2	50	3	1.5
10	17	41	7.0
100	2.9	526	15.25
1,000	0.1	5,459	5.46
total	100		28.88

The figures are notional, but suggest the publishing house has a 98% chance of making less than \$7,500. That's barely worth the effort, but they're banking on the future, your second or tenth novel.

You have a 80% chance of earning no more than \$2,000 in royalties. For many months or years of effort, that does not amount to a working wage. But of course you sign the contract: self-publishing won't be easier, and you'll not get better terms elsewhere.

Both author and publisher are clearly chasing a dream, but that is the nature of fiction publishing, and explains why publishers (and agents) need textbooks, self-help, cookery and gardening titles to survive.

## 1.4. FUTURE OF PUBLISHING

Publishing is changing. As mainstream publishing concentrates on profitable lines—celebrity memoirs, textbooks, self-help, cooking, gardening, travel—works of a specialist nature (which includes academic works, translations, poetry and literary novels) have increasingly to fend for themselves. Profit margins are too slim for agents, publishing houses, distributors and booksellers to make more than a token effort here.

With return on capital around 5%, even the larger publishing houses are struggling to survive. Raw information is available on the internet, and that information will only grow in range and quality. Books are the product of a long historical process, and today lie at the end of a vast chain of specialist skills and services. The work has to be researched and written, proofed, typeset, a cover designed, printed, reviewed, warehoused, distributed and sold through booksellers throughout the country or abroad. Costs pile up, and what's left over for authors can be very modest—10% of retail price at best. Contracts are becoming more onerous to writers even as their share of the proceeds decreases. Books are tailored to particular markets, and are therefore restricted to safe themes and obvious treatments. Manuscripts must be delivered on time, year in and year out, and writers make themselves available for tours, chat-shows, book-signings and the like. Problems with copyright and libel are becoming exclusively the author's responsibility, as agreements allow the publisher to sidestep these issues.

In this internet-connected age, these specialist skills and services are not only unnecessary, but are becoming a barrier between writer and reader. Costs restrict what is publishable. Editing doesn't improve the reading because that editing tends to be perfunctory, little more than proofing for obvious typos or grammar slips. The cover, so necessary for bookshop sales, is forgotten once the purchaser sits down to read. Reviewers are middlemen, who do their honest best with the deluge of books crossing their desk every week, but don't have the time to read in depth, or often the background knowledge to assess fairly. Some books are a source of pride to the publishing house, and an enduring pleasure to readers, but the too many would be better slimmed to a fraction of their bulk, or perhaps not written at all.

Only the smallest percentage of manuscripts will make money for a publisher, and he's naturally skilled at spotting that odd exception. Or he should be. In fact, some 70% of books published do not pay back their advances or make money for the publisher. The internet, e-books, podcasts and blogs have given authors a royal road to their readers, though the clamour is still for traditional publishing, with the work coming out under a prestigious name, and glowing reviews to follow. No one wants to shatter illusions, but reviews (to put the matter charitably) are **unreliable**, and the prestige of the publisher speaks only money. Before pestering a publisher, you'll need to research the market and prove to his and your satisfaction that a proper demand exists for your manuscript. Equally, before traditional or self-publishing, you may want to make your work available in electronic form, carefully watching the response, and then building on its indications. How you do that is one of the themes of this handbook.

Vanity publishers and some PoD companies consult only the bottom line, but even reputable publishers are not patrons of literature, and place responsibilities to staff and shareholders well before the needs and wishes of their authors, particularly of new and untested ones.

## 1.5. USING THE HANDBOOK

As the name suggests, this is a handbook: a handy reference work that covers the whole field of publishing and self-publishing. You'll find it:

- thorough. We cover the whole field, compactly in 65,000 words and 1590 resources.
- realistic. We don't pretend that publishing is easy, or success lies in some magic formula. We give you comprehensive notes, analyses, lists and resource listings so you can make properly informed decisions.
- honest. We tell it as it is, with internet surveys that summarize current thinking. We also list all those other books and sites on publishing, where you can judge for yourself, and make further notes as necessary.
- frank. Not all writing will make money: we show you the realities of the publishing world.

- plainly written. The text is simple and condensed, but the references will take you to sites where the topic is explained at greater length and/or from another standpoint.
- helpful at all levels. We write with the beginning publisher in mind, but also cover aspects that the advanced publisher will need, some of which are not covered elsewhere, either in books or on the internet.
- independent. All 1590 resources have been hand-picked on their merits: i.e. not for commissions or advertising sales.

If you really want to get that book or article published, then this reference work may well make all the difference. You have a map to the entire world of publishing, traditional and contemporary, and can choose the route best suited to your time, talents and pocket.

We've designed the handbook for comfortable onscreen viewing with a PC or laptop, but you can also print it in neat paper form: section 6.2.2 will tell you more.