



## Getting Published: What No-one Tells You

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**I** ONCE READ A VERY harsh review of a first novel in a national newspaper; thankfully, not mine. Let's call the author of the book in question John Doe. The headline on the review was, 'Everyone thinks they have a novel in them. Unfortunately, John Doe's got out.'

This sums up nicely the widespread belief that anyone can write a novel. Not true. They're harder than you might think and most people don't have the ability, or the staying power, to write 80,000–100,000 words, let alone make it a coherent, original story that will engage a reader.

The next misconception is that, if the book is good enough, and you persevere enough, it will eventually get published. Also not true. Publishers like to say it to aspiring authors because, well, they're in the business of encouraging writers, aren't they? They want people to write books because that's the product they sell and they need something to fill the pipeline. Don't they?

Wrong. They have enough books already coming in to them from established authors and agents, and they don't need yours. They don't want it, in fact, whatever they say. Many years ago, I met an American writer who had started work after college with a major New York publishing house. He was put in charge of the unsolicited manuscripts sent in by wannabe writers — and you can tell how much those submissions are valued by the term they're given across the whole publishing trade: 'The Slush Pile.'



His instructions were quite clear. On no account was he to read any of the manuscripts. His job was to open the envelopes, rifle through the pages to give the impression that someone had read them, then put the manuscript back in the post to the author. He was also in charge of what was known as ‘The Crazy Line’. This was the phone extension to which the switchboard diverted all the calls from unknown authors and his job was to fob them off and stop them bothering anyone else in the company. At the beginning of my own career – in the 1980s – when I was trying to work out how the publishing business worked, I went to a seminar at a literary festival entitled something like ‘How to Get Your First Novel Published’. Two of the speakers were from Faber and Faber and they did their best to make out that they were entirely open to submissions from new authors. I smelt a rat and at the end I managed to ask a question: how many manuscripts from the slush pile had they published in recent years? The answer, after a long, embarrassed silence and a brief conferral, was, ‘Probably not a single one since William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* in 1954’.

That might reflect how bad the submissions were, of course, but it might also reflect how hard they were looking at them.

So how *do* you get published? You get an agent. But that, of course, is another story.