



Getting Published; What No One Tells You.

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WE ARE SITTING AT LUNCH celebrating my two-book publishing deal. The nice publisher who loved my novel and pushed for his company to buy it, makes a pyramid in the air with his hands. He points to the bottom of the pyramid. ‘Here,’ he says, ‘are the vast majority of books — the ones that never get published.’ Then he points to the upper middle of the pyramid: ‘Here are the few books that *do* get published.’ Lastly, he points to the very top of the triangle: ‘Up here are the tiny number of books that are *successful*’.

I should have heeded his warning. He was just about to leave that company and after his departure the publishing house was swallowed by another publisher and nearly half the staff were made redundant. The new publishers did reluctantly publish my novel. But they did so in the dead zone of February, eight months after they had sent out the press releases and review copies. No more marketing was forthcoming, and the book naturally died.

‘You were unlucky,’ said my agent. But I don’t think I was — publishing is full of such stories. And it has always been quite a rough business. Laurie Lee complained that ‘publishers are bastards and they want you to write lots and then die young.’ And his books came out in the fifties, before the end of the net book agreement, and before the Neilson lists made writers’s sales publicly available so that any prospective publisher or agent could find out just how few books you’d sold.



Today, with the exception of some very big names and some airport novels, there is simply no money in books. This has corroded pretty much every professional publishing relationship: that of writer to agent, and agent to publisher, and publisher to writer and bookseller. Thus, if you get a room full of novelists (let's not even mention poets...) they will all talk about agents who don't answer emails, of crass editors, and horrible covers, and marketing departments run by twenty-something-year-olds who never answer the phone and will bury your book under a stone. Meanwhile literary agents, who are one step up from the writers in the feeding chain, often feel aggrieved too. Publishers keep them dangling and they are oppressed by that vast slush pile and their aggrieved, needy authors who don't understand the vagaries of the market and want someone else to feel their pain. And as for publishers, they too are bombarded. How on earth do you make a living when nobody buys books and there are hardly any bookshops?

Of course, there are almost no bookshops because there are almost no readers. A few years ago I was nominated for a children's prize in Hull and I visited a series of big comprehensives in the city. I was giving talks to Year Sevens and Eights — so children just coming into their teens. These were big schools with committed teachers and hundreds of children in each year group. After the talks the teachers, in the hushed tone of pet owners showing off their favourite frilled lizard, would take me aside and introduce me to their 'readers.' This was usually a group of only about half a dozen children, nearly all girls.

And what about everybody else? Today young people are of course mostly 'gamers' and 'watchers.' My own son, brought up in a book where every room is stuffed with novels and poetry and history, etcetera, falls into this category. 'Books?', he says with a grimace, 'they're just slow television.'