

# Fear by the Numbers

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I've been pinging about MIDNIGHT RAIN. About how it's doing, you know? I have no way of finding out how it's doing, nobody to ask, and I'm also a little afraid to know the truth. But more afraid not to know.

See, the viability of a writer's career is based upon sell-through of print run. Sell-through – that is, the percentage of copies printed that actually sell – is vitally important. In the industry 60%-70% is considered pretty good overall, and I have almost always done better than that. My average sell-through has always been between 80%-95%.

Looks impressive, huh?

Unfortunately, this has been on an average copies printed of 20,000-30,000, which is utterly, inescapably, irrevocably midlist. Publisher sees your sell-through, goes, "Oh, wow," then sees your copies printed and revises that to just, "Oh."

I had, before MIDNIGHT RAIN, about half a million books in print floating around out there, and figure the majority of them went to people who like my work and who therefore have (or had, before trading in) more than one book by me. Others of my books would have sold to people who, having read that one, have said, "Never doing that again." (Wow. Pausing for moment to look out window at beautiful sunrise.) Some have been read by folks who don't notice author names. I figure, best case, I probably have an actual readership of about 20,000-25,000 people who might see my name on the cover of a book and pick it up just because of the name.

Okay. So.

MIDNIGHT RAIN came out with a first printing of 175,000 copies. This is a good thing. Gives me a chance to reach a LOT of new readers, to find new people who like my work. It is the first shot I've ever had at having a breakthrough book.

Downside, though – and this is where I'm getting the heebie-jeebies – is that it gives me an absolutely spectacular opportunity to fall flat on my face. Here's why.

The absolute make-or-break sell-through is right at 50%. You sell less than half the copies of the books the publisher prints, you're looking for either a new job or a new name. 50%.

Okay. 50% of 175,000 copies is 87,500 copies.

Which means if I expand my readership by a mind-boggling 300% – to 60,000 readers – my sell-through will be 34%. A dismal, nightmarish flop.

If I expand my readership by 400% – to 80,000 readers – my sell-through will be 46%. Thanks, ooooh, so close, nice knowing you.

To do well – to have the publisher's accountants really WANT me back – I need to sell-through at better than 60%. This means I need to sell 105,000 copies of MIDNIGHT RAIN or better.

A 525% increase in readership.

So. Anybody up for standing around in bookstores going, "Oh, man, you just **have** to read MIDNIGHT RAIN?"

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