

FAQs About Going Pro (Legacy Publishing Version)

written by Holly

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How do you set up book signings?

It's fairly easy if you want to set up something locally. You just go into the bookstore dragging copies of some of your titles (don't assume that the folks in the store will stock

your books or recognize your name – I have yet to be recognized by a clerk even when I present my drivers' license. Writers are perennially incognito.) You find the manager or the person in charge of events for the store and say, "Hi, I've written these books and I'd like to see if you'd be interested in scheduling a signing or a reading." Look your best when you go in, try not to do your Quasimodo impression or wave knives around, and they'll probably be happy to work with you.

Important point – you'll have much less success with this if your book is self-published. In fact, in most places you'll have no success at all. Independent bookstores in small towns might give you a break, while the managers of bigger bookstores are likely to smile coldly and say 'no, thanks.'

If you're trying to set up something for a trip you're taking, call directory assistance well in advance of your trip and get the names of area bookstores. You're going to have to cold-call, and if you are not among the shameless self-promoters of the world, you're going to feel awkward. (But don't feel bad. You aren't alone. I die a thousand deaths every time I have to do this). Follow the same steps you would do in person, except this time you don't have to dress up and you can wave knives around if you want.

If your publisher is sending you on tour, you get to go along for the ride, and you don't have to do anything but show up. I haven't done a book tour yet.

How do you get invited to

conventions?

First, you need to have a book contract with a publisher. Contract in hand, you can then call up or e-mail the folks who run the conventions or conferences you'd like to attend and let them know you exist, and that you'd like to be part of their programming. Once you've done some programming, you'll discover (if you were nice to the attendees and didn't make too much of an ass of yourself on the panels), that you'll be invited back, and invited to other conventions in other places. Try to line up convention spots fairly early, so that you can be on the program and so that dealers have time to get copies of your books in.

When is it time to change publishers?

This is a tough one. In an ideal world, you'd get one great publisher and stay with him through the life of your career. He'd pay you better and better money, and you'd write better and better books, and everything would be beautiful. This not being that world, you consider a change when you get an offer too good to miss and your current publisher won't beat it, or when your current publisher stops buying your books, or when your agent says it's time. Maintain cordial relations with your old publisher – if you hit it big with the new one, maybe he'll keep your backlist up, and you can always consider him a market for new books in your old series.

Do you write the book first or get the contract first?

Depends. If it's the first one and it's fiction, you'll write the book first. For non-fiction, the publisher may be willing to go to contract with a newbie for particularly hot topics, if you are a recognized expert in your field or if you have breathtaking connections with some big celebrity. If not, you're going to have to produce the manuscript on spec (which is short for on speculation – meaning you're gambling your own time and money to write the thing).

Once you've published the first one, things change. You may have to write one or two more on spec – if they do well, you may be offered contracts just on an outline and sample chapters, or just on an outline, or just on a very hazy concept discussion with the publisher or editor over lunch in a classy restaurant. You might enjoy working to the deadlines that such contracts impose (I do) or it might drive you nuts and you might discover that you prefer to write all your books on spec and let your agent submit them when they're done. Writers go both ways on this, and even writers like me who get our contracts (and some of our money first) usually have one or two things we're working on that are strictly speculative.

A publisher has offered to publish my book, and has asked me to pay some expenses toward publication? Should I do this?

Run away. Shoot him. Or just say no.

A publisher has offered to buy my book. What do I do now?

Say, "I'm delighted you're interested. I'll have my agent call you back." Hang up.

Sing in the rain. Dance on your rooftop. Drink champagne with your significant other.

Then call up the agent you've queried, the one who showed some interest but wanted some sales first, and say, "Look, the editor of Major Books just called me up and offered to buy my novel. I didn't agree to anything – I said I'd have my agent call back. Would you represent me in negotiating this contract for your usual percentage, and consider taking me on as a client if this deal works out well for both of us?"

You may get an offer from the agent to take you on as a client right then. Since you will have already checked this agent out and you will know that he is legit and someone you want to have representing you, you will say yes. After you hang up you can dance in the rain and drink champagne some more because you are now an agented writer, and that is a cool and happy thing to be.

I'm looking at this contract and I have no idea whether it's a good

one or a terrible one. What do I do now?

Call the agent you didn't call when you got the offer, and say, "Help! Can we work out a deal where you will vet this contract for me and negotiate out the odious clauses, and where you will consider taking me on as a client for this and future work?"

Please trust me on this – publishing is not the field for the naive beginner to be negotiating his own contracts. There are some odious clauses floating around out there waiting for poor innocent lambs to wander too close, and if these inobtrusive little clauses latch on to you, you can find that you no longer own your subrights, or your copyright, or your name. Once you start selling, **get an agent.**

My editor wants me to make huge changes in the book. What do I do now?

Take a deep breath.

Now define "huge."

I know of one writer who got peeved that he didn't get to detail the placement of individual words on the page, and quite a few who get seriously bent out of shape over commas. I also know a couple who don't even blink when their editors require complete rewrites, or even when their editors rewrite them without telling them in advance. I'm neither as uptight as the former nor as mellow as the latter. There are things I'll go to bat for – there would be things worth losing the

sale over, too, though I haven't had to face that situation yet. If you've caught your breath and you still feel that the requested changes are excessive, make a list of those you would be willing to make, those that don't fit with your goals for the book, and find out if you have some bargaining room. And before you call your editor back, read this section on Revision Requests.

My first book disappeared from the shelves after fifteen minutes and has never been seen since. What do I do now?

Write another one.

You can spend a lot of time and energy promoting the one that sank, or you can put the same time and energy into writing something new that may sell better. If you write something that sells well, its sales may spur sales of your other work. If, however, you flog your dead horse, it will still be dead when you're done flogging and you will be discouraged

I realize that this information flies in the face of everything you've heard from the determined self-promoters. This is my experience, though, and what seems to be more or less working for me. If your experiences are very different and you feel that vigorous self-promotion has been worth your time, please let me know.

My editor won't return my calls. What do I do now?

Call your agent. See if he knows if something big is going on with her, if there might be a problem she's having in her life, if she took off for the Bahamas for a month of rest and relaxation . . . or if you might be in trouble with your publishing house.

If you find out that you do have a problem, ask yourself whether you might have caused it. Did you call her to tell her that you were running way behind on the novel, and that you needed an extension? Did you trash her the last time you were on the Writers Talk About Writing panel at the state writing conference? (These sorts of things get around.)

Is the problem something you can't help? Did you find out that your novel sold less copies than **Bert's Book of Pretty Okay Recipes for Guys**? Is your publisher cutting its lines. Did your editor change to a different house or a different job?

Take a deep breath. That's what you have an agent for. He'll get you through this, move you to another house if that's what it takes, help you smooth ruffled feathers, keep you from sinking yourself. Don't panic yet.

My agent won't return my calls. What do I do now?

Call a couple of your fellow writers who share the same agent and see if they've heard anything about your agent and anything that might be going on in his life. See if they've had any problems reaching him lately.

Consider, too, that your expectations might be unreasonable. I'm in contact with my agent once every three or four months when nothing big is going on. Sometimes less when nothing small is going on either. While I'm writing a book, if Russ has something to tell me, he calls me because I'd never be in touch otherwise. On the other hand, when we're doing an auction or negotiating a contract or something intense, I sometimes hear from him hourly. If you're not involved in something that requires your agent's immediate and constant attention and you're wanting weekly reports, consider that your problem with your agent might be you.

If it turns out your problem really is with your agent, it's time to make the hard choices. You can call and leave a message on his machine offering to work things out. You can fire him and ask your colleagues for recommendations or referrals, understanding that you might have a long haul to find another agent.

Finally, remember that your agent works for you. As his employer, you have a right to be satisfied with the service you're purchasing. You can handle this. Just don't panic.

My first three books tanked and *no one* will return my calls. What do I do now?

Now you can panic. I would.

Then I'd finish the next book, query a couple of agents recommended by people I trusted, and offer to change my name. You could also quit at this point, of course – a lot of people do. But if you want to write, then write, by God, and you'll

get through this, too. It will make a great convention story a few years down the road when you're sitting on that panel plugging your latest bestseller and wowing the newbies with your rugged determination and fierce courage in the face of hellish setbacks.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community. Learn how writing fiction for a living really works.

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