Rebel Tales: My War For The Midlist

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What used to be assets

It wasn't that long ago that science fiction and fantasy were genres supporting a lot of midlist careers. And if you say "What's the midlist?" you're not alone.

The midlist was where writers who'd never had a New York Times bestseller, but who created great stories regularly, lived. They weren't household names. But they **were** full-time writers, they sold a lot of books, their backlist (their old books) stayed in print and earned them royalties twice a year, and their frontlist—their NEW books—brought them new readers who then found all the old stuff they'd written and bought that, too.

Backlist was the keystone upon which you built your career. Your older books kept making you money year after year after year, while you wrote new books and gained new readers and built a following. Your older books were your assets, and they paid off just as any good investment pays of.

And when I first got into the field, this was still what writers thought would happen.

Only publishers don't keep backlist in print anymore.

So there are no midlist writers anymore, because if you don't have big numbers on your first book, and bigger numbers on your second book, you don't have a career.

Now frontlist is all that matters, backlist dies, and writing fiction for a living has become not building a career but playing the lottery.

There are a lot of reasons why this happens, I have gone into them at great (and contentious) length elsewhere, and WHY has ceased to be my issue. I have discovered that I cannot fix the problem from the inside.

So I'm attacking it from the outside.

What readers need

We know what readers need. Great stories. That's a given. So to head off a lot of "but what about readers" arguments in response to this post, let me say right now that what I'm doing only works if there are great stories to put into print. I'm not on any mercy mission here, Princess. (Yes, a Darth Vader misquote.)

There will be no pity publishing, no "but I need to sell something because we're broke" sales. If you're a writer, work your ass off and turn yourself into a good writer. If your stories suck, I'm not going to buy them, because the people who pay you when you're a writer are **readers**, and I'm not going to screw over readers. Period. Haven't done it with my work, and I'm SURE not going to do it with yours.

With that said, however, we are not here to talk about readers. We are here to talk about writers, and the brutal state of publishing. The question NOBODY has asked (ever, as far as I can tell) is "What do writers need?"

What writers need

Now I'm writing from the perspective neither of a reader nor of a publisher, but from that of a writer—one who has written a helluva lot of novels, who has a huge backlist of good

books—novels that have won rave reviews from reviewers and readers alike…and who has watched as the damn backlist I was supposed to have been able to build a career around has gone out of print one book at a time.

There are no every-six-month royalty checks to pay me while I write the next book. There is no buffer from closing on 20 years of professional work as a novelist. There is a treadmill of "write a book, write another book, watch the previous book go out of print, live on the the advance from the next book, and never gain any traction."

The midlist is gone.

You want to know what writers need? Writers need a way to get paid every month for their backlist while they're creating their newest book. They need to be able to build careers where the readers who find what they've written most recently can find everything they wrote before, still in print. They need to stop being publishing's redshirts—replaceable, disposable, forgettable.

What writers need is someone to bring the midlist back—to bring back the place where you can gradually work your way to bestsellerdom (if that's in you) by building an audience of loyal readers who look for and can find everything you wrote…and where, if you're too offbeat to become a bestseller, you can still do what you love and get paid enough to live on while doing it.

Writers need someone who will print, distribute and promote their frontlist while keeping their backlist in print—and who will pay them regularly and reliably for every sale of every item they have in print—and not AFTER figuring profits, either.

You don't need to have a publisher sit for six months on a book that has been finished, turned in, and accepted, while your payment works its way through accounting and your credit

rating goes down the drain because you have no money. (Yes, I'm talking about myself. I have a deep, personal, bloody-mindedly determined stake in making Rebel Tales happen BECAUSE of that publisher, that six-month-delayed check, and the havoc it wreaked on my life.)

I found a way to keep my head above water by teaching other people how to write. It's fun, I love it.

But there aren't all that many other writers out there who have published more than 30 novels, who know the ropes, who have analyzed their own mistakes and success over the past 25 years, and who know how to teach what they've learned from that.

So what I've done isn't a model that's particularly repeatable for other writers.

Besides, if you want to write fiction for a living, there should be some way other than winning the **Twilight** lottery (horrible book) to make a living doing it.

What a writer who wants to do this for a living needs is:

- A publisher dedicated to keeping his backlist in print, and to buying new frontlist from him, and to actively building his career…(and here's where it gets tricky) a publisher who figures profits AFTER everyone has been paid on gross sales, not net, so that the writer starts seeing money the first month his work sells, and then gets paid again every month in which he has sales thereafter.

- An editor who loves his work, is actively working to help him build a long-term career with that house, and who is not going to be told by the accounting department that she cannot buy his stories anymore because his first couple of stories sold slowly. Careers GROW slowly. If you plant an acorn and expect shade from your

oak tree in one year, you're an idiot. Writers are acorns, and the current state of publishing is idiotic.

- A publishing platform that will allow the writer to connect with fans, other writers, and his editor, to promote his work, to gain visibility and credibility as he builds backlist while his publisher, editor, and fans ALSO promote his work…and that will allow him to get paid every freakin' month out of gross sales (NOT NET) for every single sale of every single title.

And that's where I come in

In one of my **How To Think Sideways** lessons, I tell my students when dealing with editors, agents, publishers, and the publishing industry as a whole to think before they pick a fight. To ask themselves, "Is this the hill I want to die on?"

Up to now, I've only gone to war once, and that was in the publication of **Hawkspar**. I took that hill, I didn't die on it, and I figured that was it. I'd won my battle and considering how long I'd been writing before I hit that one, I figured I'd never need to fight another.

I was wrong.

Rebel Tales, and what it can mean to writers if I can make it work, is the hill I'm willing to die on—and considering the current unknown state of my health, I can't pretend that's entirely a metaphor. I don't **know** how I am.

But even the possibility that I'm running out of time faster than I'd hope has forced to examine my priorities, and to decide where to put my time. To paraphrase Sun Tzu, I can't plan based my future based on what life MAY do to me—I have to plan based on what it CAN. That means accepting the worst-case

scenario as my start point and working from there.

If I only get one last battle, it's going to be this one—to create a publishing house and a working model for other publishers that values writers and helps them build careers as part of its goal—and I'm starting the push to get it done now. I acknowledge there are no guarantees I can make it work.

But I've always been pretty good at picking my battles. I'll only fight in self-defense, and mostly my philosophy is that the battle avoided is the battle won…but creating a publishing house designed to build rather than destroy careers is worth the fight.

I've been fighting behind the scenes for a while—this is not a "someday" fantasy for me.

Since I first made the announcement about **Rebel Tales** and bought the domain, I have invested thousands of dollars of my own money in developing the software that will ALLOW me to pay writers (and editors) monthly out of gross sales on every sale. As software goes, it's a complicated bitch, and when you're working with other people's money, you want to be damn sure you get it right. So Margaret is being careful, and I am giving her the time she has to have to make the software perfect. **This matters.**

I'll invest more to finish the software, more to integrate it into the publishing platform, more to make the website both pretty and functional (you will have noticed that right now it looks like crap) and a lot more once I start paying people.

NOTE FOR OTHER CAPITALISTS: If you want to invest thousands of dollars of your own money into something, and you don't have thousands of dollars lying around, you have to invest a little at a time as you go—and the process takes longer. If what you're investing in is complex, it can take a LOT longer. Whether you make the investment or not comes down in the end to how much what you're doing matters to you, and why you're doing it—and how much you have to maintain control in order to make sure your goal doesn't get subverted by partners or shareholders who would dilute what you're doing.

I don’t anticipate seeing a profit from **Rebel Tales** for years, though I will get there (or my heirs will). I have bigger reasons than personal profit for doing this, though, and the biggest is to fix what’s broken in a field I love.

If I could pick my legacy, leaving behind a whole lot of writers who had built careers and were making a comfortable, reliable living writing fiction because of what I’d done would be it. Every nonfiction work I’ve done has been headed in that direction. This is simply the last critical piece of a very big puzzle.

To that end, I’m ready to start sifting through applications to find the people who want to fight this battle alongside me.

I’m starting by taking on editors

I’m looking for several really special people, and I’m asking for a lot out of the ones I’ll hire. You need to be as dedicated to the WHY of all this as I am. This isn’t going to be just any editing job, and you’re going to have to show me what you can do to get it.

When I’ve found people who make my inital cut, I’ll open up the query section of Rebel Tales (it’s already set up and waiting), and writers can start submitting queries to prospective editors.

But editors first.

NOTE:ALL PROSPECTIVE EDITOR POSITIONS HAVE BEEN FILLED.

> ***We’re getting ready at this point to start accepting queries.***

If you’re a prospective reader, writer, editor, site designer, artist, or someone else interested in getting involved in

Rebel Tales, sign up for the Rebel Tales priority notification list. You'll find the sign-up form in the righthand column on the site.

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