

Ordering to the net, or ...

written by Holly

December 1, 2006

By Holly Lisle

How to kill a career in three easy books

Added 12/14/2006:

The following post is about corporate bookstores' inventory control and automatic replenishment systems and their effect on writers—a process that is centralized from a corporate headquarters, entirely computer-driven across all stores within the corporate chain, and that, unless bypassed by a human being, operates on algorithms that destroy many, many midlist careers in three books. The post is about humans (writers) vs. the machine (a few computer programs), and about a bunch of squashed-flat Davids versus a Goliath who at the moment is winning. The post references independent booksellers, because with indies, each bookstore reports its own numbers and does its own reordering with human intervention, and the actions of individual booksellers can have a large effect on the numbers the store posts. This post does not reference chain booksellers, because the economies of scale across hundreds of stores erase the efforts of the most dedicated chain booksellers to handsell books, unless they handsell the same group of titles across the entire chain.

Just about everyone got this. A very few who didn't, however, managed to find offense where none existed. If you're not familiar with publishing terminology, a short glossary has been added below.

Noel Figart asked:

Were you trying to imply that Tayln hasn't hit the chains? I saw two copies in Borders.

Bought one.

Thank you for buying one. And no, I was certainly not implying anything like that. *Talyn* landed in the chain here (on a bottom shelf on the back of the row) and two copies mysteriously found their way to the front top shelf of Fantasy New Releases. It will, for a little while, at least, be in chains around the country.

What I was talking about was the way that chain stores kill books and writers' careers. They do this by **ordering to the net**.

To understand why chain bookstores are the Villians of Bookselling, first you have to understand how books are sold right. So we'll look at the Heroes of Bookselling, independent (or indie) bookstore owners and booksellers.

In an indie bookstore, a human being will notice that five copies of *Midlist Writer's New Novel* sold out of six ordered. Indie Owner will say, "Wow. That's excellent." Indie Owner will reorder, say, three or four or more copies, and he or one of his booksellers might read the book, may suggest it to people who he knows to like that sort of thing, and when supplies run out, will reorder it again so that copies stay on the shelves. Ad infinitum, as long as the book keeps selling from the shelves. He may even keep a copy or two on the shelves once general interest dies down.

When *Midlist Writer's Next Novel* comes out, he'll order maybe ten copies as a starter (three more than the time before, giving the book a bigger space on the shelves and a better chance of succeeding), and he'll order a couple more copies of

the first book, especially if it's a series, and he'll keep an eye on sales because this second novel might do well for him, too. When the third book, *Midlist Writer's Best Novel EVER* comes out, the indie owner or the knowledgeable bookseller will get the news out to the store's clients, and will order extra books, and will handsell the series to new customers. And so Indie Owner will build the writer's career. Book by book, recommendation by recommendation, and reader by reader.

Every writer publishing today should LOVE indie bookstore owners and booksellers. Once upon a time, all bookstores were indie bookstores, and many Midlist Writers had real careers and could feed their families on their writing.

Then came the chains, which began slaughtering midlisters' careers left and right, hundreds at a time. (And slaughtering indie bookstores, too, but that's a rant for another time.)

Here's how chains kill books and careers. When chains order, Corporate Buyer orders a number of copies of *Midlist Writer's New Novel* for the entire chain, and these are distributed per a computerized formula to the various stores. They are shelved. Frequently, chains will only get one or two copies which will be spined out, dooming them to invisibility. Even if they are not, though—even if Local Chain receives seven copies and sells six, Local Chain **WILL NOT REORDER THE BOOK** unless it sells above a set number chain-wide. Most midlist novels are ordered in quantities too small to ever reach this number, and unless a miracle happens, are essentially stillborn. **From the day the first copy of the first novel ships, these series have no chance (barring the aforementioned miracle) of selling more than their initial order.** From that first day, their authors are Dead Writers Walking, but won't know it for three books. When the last copy of the initial order sells, (or is stripped and destroyed for being that lonely spined-out invisible copy on the shelves), you'll never see it in that bookstore again. Not even if it's the first book of a series.

So, in this desperate new world of corporate bookselling, how do miracles happen?

Miracles happen when readers handsell the book to other readers, and people go into chains or indies and request the book and take the time to special-order it, and beat booksellers over the head with how much they loved it and how much the bookstore needs to keep it on the shelves (which works for indies but is essentially wasted effort with chains). Miracles happen for midlist writers about as often as they happen for anyone else—in other words, not so much. Maybe a dozen novels a year, marked for failure, will rise naturally out of the midlist, saved by reader word-of-mouth, and force corporate beancounters to take notice. Forces of nature like Oprah can make that happen for another dozen or so novels. Everyone else continues the slow march toward doom.

And if the miracle doesn't happen for Midlist Writer? Then the computerized sales returns will note that of the 1000 copies of *Midlist Writer's New Novel* ordered, only 900 sold. 90% is a fantastic, walk-on-water sell-through, indicating a strong market for the book that should encourage a buyer to order MORE than 1000 copies next time, but never mind that. The computer spits out the fact that *Midlist Writer's New Novel* sold 900 copies, so Corporate Buyer, who almost certainly hasn't read the book, hasn't talked to a single reader about the book, and looks at the book as no different than Cans of Tuna, Brand A, will order 900 copies of *Midlist Writer's Next Novel*. More chains will receive one copy or no copies, more books will be spined out, a higher percentage, unseen, will be destroyed, and by the time the third book, *Midlist Writer's Best Novel EVER*, comes out, Corporate Buyer will order his computerized magic number of 500 copies, of which perhaps half will sell, because no store got more than one copy, many stores got none, the book was universally spined out, the other two books in the series are long gone, and so the book is invisible and the series is dead.

Unless indies have handsold the books in mad numbers, Midlist Writer's editor will look at the Midlist Writer Death Spiral, with the first book shipping many copies and having a high sell-through, the second book shipping fewer copies and having a poorer sell-through, and the third book shipping pitifully few copies and a bad sell-through, and the editor will say (after all these years and all those books, I can do this one by heart):

The books did not sell as well as we would have liked. We aren't interested in any more books in this series.

If Midlist Writer is lucky, Editor will then say:

We would like to see something from you in a different setting, or of a different sort (or under a different name).

End result, the series is dead, but the writer may go on.

If Midlist Writer is unlucky, Editor will say:

We won't be picking up your option.

Midlist Writer will then have to go out into the world to find a new publisher, and every potential new publisher will look at Midlist Writer's last numbers and say, "No, thanks."

End result, Midlist Writer's career is dead unless Midlist Writer is willing to write something in a radically different style, about different subject matter, in a different genre, or under a different name.

And most of the time that promising career will be dead even then.

The Glossary (simple enough even a lawyer can understand it)

Bookstore—A business, either brick-and-mortar or online, that

consists of inventory (books), and inventory management systems (computers, sales logs, ordering and returning software).

Chain bookstore—(also corporate store, chain store) One of a series of bookstores that operate via a centrally controlled inventory management system, where automatic replenishment (computer reordering) and inventory control (the ordering of new books by known authors) are run by computerized algorithms. These algorithms run unchecked for the vast majority of books in any chain store, though **booksellers** are able to override them for special cases.

Bookseller—an employee of a **bookstore**. A human being. Not a building or a website. The word bookseller is no more a synonym of the word bookstore than the word lawyer is a synonym of the words law office. You can walk inside a bookstore (or click its links). You cannot walk inside a bookseller, and booksellers have no links to click. (A nasty attack on me and my career brought on by this article came from one lawyer's inability to understand this fact, so I want to be really clear here.) I do not ever use the terms bookstore and bookseller interchangeably.

Chain bookseller—An employee of a **chain bookstore**. Also a human being. Not a building or a website. Never mentioned in the article above, because unless chain booksellers across the entire chain are all handselling the same books, by sheer math, the effects of their handselling will almost always be swallowed by the sales numbers from all the stores where the books weren't handsold. Exceptions exist, where the chain booksellers from one store managed to sell so many copies (hundreds or thousands) that their efforts actually showed up in the computer. These exceptions are so rare they qualify as miracles.

All articles in this series, in order:

- The Tonk need a rescue
- Selling to the net
- Bookseller furor
- Hughart, Rasmussen, and little guys versus the juggernaut
- DearAuthor.com Behaving Badly

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved