

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (FOR A NEW PUBLISHED AUTHOR)

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OK, so got your first book contract—not with a vanity publisher, but with a real one, whether they be large or small, who is taking your work to market. Now what? Is it time to sit back and wait for those Royalty checks to start rolling in?

NEWSFLASH FOR THE NEWLY PUBLISHED AUTHOR: Getting your first book accepted by a publisher isn't the end of your work. It is just the beginning.

To be clear, there is no one prescribed process for how an aspiring writer makes the transformation to published author. For a handful of new authors, they already bring an established audience to the table: a famous personality, celebrity, politician, infamous criminal (all of the above?). In cases such as these, the author themselves may be newsworthy, and writing a book therefore becomes news in and of itself, and inevitably makes a huge market splash. For these people, generating interest in their work is not that great a leap for the book buying public. This is not the group we're talking about here.

No, this paper is dedicated to the multitudes of non-household names out there who would like to change that fact—simple storytellers of fiction, with little to no guarantee of success. More and more these days, the largest of publishing houses, with the greatest of resources and the widest distribution, prefer to only publish works from writers described in the previous paragraph, not this one.

However, it does happen on rare occasion that a veritable “nobody” submits a work to an editor at a large publishing house, who takes a fancy to it and decides to give this unknown a chance. I can say that from first-hand experience, as my own very first novel was purchased by Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books, one of the largest New York publishing houses, and released as a paperback original with a very large advance. It was a lead title no less. After it was released, my book could be found in bookstores all over the country. I even got off a plane once at the Dallas/Ft. Worth Airport and saw my book on the “New Releases” rack of the news kiosk. That was a great feeling.

Yet after about 30 days, I couldn't find my book anywhere anymore. I was told there were no copies available in the warehouses. I assumed that meant it was sold out. I thought that was great news, until I learned that unless there were a multitude of backorders for it, it wouldn't be reprinted. As I said, it was a paperback original. That is, people buy them, enjoy them, then toss them aside and look for what's new the next time they're at the bookstore. There was no pent-up demand for this particular book, due to the fact that no one had ever heard of me prior to the book's debut. However, I did receive a lot nice fan mail from readers who had thoroughly enjoyed it. But that wasn't the point.

Now let me tell you what *didn't* happen in my experience with Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books. Yes, my book was listed in the distributor catalogues that goes to over 20,000 bookstores—quite prominently, actually—since it was the lead title in women's fiction that month. But as far as marketing and promotion went, that was about it. And that's really the message of this paper.

It doesn't really matter if your book is published by the largest of publishers or the smallest. You simply can't rely on the publisher, the distributors, nor even the retailers to lift a finger in the arena of “demand creation” for your book. The primary contribution of publishers, distributors and retailers is to facilitate “availability.” Publishers cause your work to become a tangible product. They make it exist; and then distributors and retailers make it available to the public—on the off-chance someone might actually want to buy it. In a perfect world, publishers, wholesalers and retailers would participate proactively in the sales

and marketing of your book, but... well, we don't live in a perfect world. Now do we? In a seemingly illogical paradox, the lion's share of marketing dollars are spent by the largest publishing houses on their most popular authors, not the least popular, who obviously need it most.

Some publishers do help promote their authors and their works—the better ones do (regardless of their size). But for the brand new, unknown author, one truth is universal: your publisher has a finite amount of marketing funds, and those funds will be used to help the publisher get the best return on the investment of those funds—which may or may not have anything to do with you and your book. In the large publishing houses, millions may be spent on marketing campaigns for the authors who probably need it the least—i.e. for their top names. And that's how a lot of top names stay at the top and their publishers maintain the “brand value” of those names. Even at the small- to medium-sized publishers, where marketing dollars are even more scarce, again, the lion's share goes to the authors whose books they believe have the best chance of succeeding, and therefore making the best return on investment for the publisher.

So, dear author, you may have thought that after waiting so long in obscurity, sitting on that pile of rejection letters, elated at finally having someone put your book into print, that you've arrived. Yet you may soon discover that the experience may not go much further than where you are right now, with a book in print, but still mired in obscurity. For many unpublished authors, you may feel like, “I just want to see my book in print. I don't care if it's a bestseller or not!” To that notion I say, this is not the attitude of a professional author. The vast majority of professional authors have never written a “bestseller,” but still seek to make their living, or at least some steady supplemental income, from their writing. To the wannabe who just wants to see their name on the cover of a book, there are many vanity presses out there. Go find one; that's what they exist to do. But if you really want to participate in the book business on a regular basis, and genuinely call yourself a novelist, there's much more at stake here—and much more required of you.

You see, one of the dirty little secrets of publishing is the fact that much of the success/fail formula of book acquisition and production, specifically with regard to new names, is little more than “trial and error.” It is for that reason that so many of the larger houses have all but stopped giving new voices a chance, and focusing exclusively on books from established names with fairly predictable sell-through rates. For those lucky few who are given a chance, it is just that—a chance. Your book will be printed in some quantity, large or small, sent into the marketplace where the wholesalers and retailers will have never heard of you. They'll give you roughly thirty days of retail shelf life in the stores to see if anything happens sales-wise. If your book takes off, wonderful. If it doesn't, the booksellers don't care. Your book just gets returned for credit, and the next month's allotment of new titles takes its place on the shelf. Or even if your book sells out, if it was primarily an impulse buy and no one was necessarily asking for it by name, then when it's gone, there are typically no backorders for it—because no one is asking for it.

Availability Does Not Equal Demand Creation

One of the biggest causes of confusion and frustration among new authors stems from the misconception between the concept of “Availability” and “Demand Creation.” Many believe these concepts are synonymous. They are not. The erroneous expectation is that if a publisher publishes your book then you can walk into any bookstore in the world and there your book will be in a huge featured display. Don't hold your breath waiting for that. Instead, I encourage you to learn the psychology and tactics of how books are sold, and more importantly, how Demand Creation is facilitated, if you want your books to sell in sufficient quantities to be considered successful.

First of all, recognize that there are basically two kinds of book buyers: 1) Seekers and 2) Browsers. Seekers go to a bookstore or a discount retailer specifically looking for a particular title or author. Browsers on the other hand go to the bookstore looking for something new, with minds open to new authors and

new stories that appeal to them. Bookstores know this distinction and organize their stores to service this dynamic accordingly.

Seekers know what they want, even if it's just to see if their favorite author has released anything new. And if their favorite author doesn't have anything in the New Releases section, they head for the "Stacks," i.e. the aisles of bookshelves organized alphabetically by author, title, or by genre, or any combination thereof, with the books displayed **spines out**, with only the title and author's name showing. All the information a Seeker needs is on the spine.

On the other hand, the New Releases are always nearest to the door. These books are prominently displayed **face out**, with the knowledge that the cover is what will entice a Browser to pick it up and check it out. And that's important because contrary to the admonishment of the old cliché, people *do* judge books by their covers. It's what gets a Browser to pick it up, inspect the description or blurbs on the back, perhaps read the flaps of a hardcover, and make their decision—which according to studies all happens in about eight to thirty seconds.

Unfortunately, the established authors' works hit the New Releases section before being filed in the Stacks, leaving very little room, if any, for brand new debut authors. And for paperback originals, it's even worse, unless it's a lead title from a major publisher. No, in many cases, mid-list books from the large houses, and virtually all the books from small to medium sized publishers, get put in the stacks right away where only a Seeker is likely to ever find them—that is, someone who walked into the store specifically looking for that particular book or works by that author. And that's why most bookstores only have a few copies of new titles from unknown authors, if any at all, i.e. just to be able to sell a few on the off chance someone actually wants one. They're NOT pushing it.

By now you're probably thinking, "Well then, if I'm not a lead title from a major house, or even if I do make it onto the New Releases rack, then I only have a thirty day window of exposure to the Browsers, who are only going to give it a shot if they like the cover and look at it for less than thirty seconds. Otherwise, no one is going to find my book hidden back in the stacks by accident!" And to those who put all their hopes on availability alone to generate sales, you'd be 100% correct on that point. And therein lies the misconception. Just by having your book in stock, i.e. its availability, has nothing to do with causing people to want it.

Your Book Not Being in a Bookstore Doesn't Mean It's Unavailable

Do the math. Ingram Book's *Advance Magazine* boasts of going out monthly to over 20,000 bookstores nationwide. Let's use that number for the sake of discussion. If every one of those bookstores were to order five copies of your book, that would necessitate a 100,000 copy print run. Guess what? Unless you already are a major author, your publisher isn't printing 100,000 copies of your book as an initial run. If they printed 10,000 copies, then half the stores would only have access to one copy of it. And if that one copy sold in a given store, it would be gone, and no longer available at that store.

"Availability = Demand Creation" is the biggest myth first time authors need to get out of their minds. Having a 100 copies of your book in every bookstore in the country is extremely unlikely, if not a patently absurd expectation. On the other hand, if 100,000 people suddenly wanted a copy of your book, and it couldn't be found in any bookstores, but it could be ordered online at Amazon.com or Barnesandnoble.com, it could still become a bestseller!

That is, demand stimulates availability and availability services demand—it doesn't create it. The sight of a large pile of books in a bookstore isn't what compels people to run over and buy one. Besides, large piles of books are the result of large publishers printing hundreds of thousands of copies for their top au-

thors with high expectations of selling lots of them, feeling the financial risk of such a huge investment is worth it. You see, true Demand Creation for a new author's works, i.e. an unknown, untested commodity, is a function of "Buzz."

Buzz

Buzz is an exponential viral networking of simple word-of-mouth. It's what happens when even a small group of people read a book, like it, and recommend it to their friends and family, who in turn read it, like it, and tell others who do likewise. Buzz can happen suddenly, when very influential individuals (like Oprah) decide to have you on a national TV show and pushes your book to millions of viewers in one day. This is why getting good reviews and garnering editorial coverage is so important. Many people are intrigued about a new book after they read about it in a magazine or newspaper article. Or Buzz can sometimes be generated artificially on a grand scale when a publisher decides to invest hundreds of thousands, if not a million dollars or more, in a marketing campaign of advertising, press tours, media events and the like to garner attention for the new product. Again, only the largest of publishing houses have these kind of financial resources, and even if they do, rarely expend them on rookies without taking on some substantial business risks.

So what if you're with a small- to medium-sized publisher, or even a big one, who isn't spending big bucks to help you? If that's your situation, then you're at the mercy of grass roots Buzz. Let's be more specific. Let's say you're with a small- to medium-sized publisher, who has printed 5,000 copies of your new hardcover title (of which 3,000 is more typical for a smaller publisher). In our example, your 5,000 copies are split and sent to the two largest book distributors in the US: Ingram Books and Baker & Taylor. Let's say Barnes & Noble sees that there are 2,500 copies in Ingram's warehouse, where they get their books. They order 500 of them to have in their own warehouse. Five copies are then sent to their 100 largest stores to see how it does. Because it's a hardcover, and has an attractive dust-jacket, it gets put on the New Releases rack for thirty days. In several of the stores they sell a few from impulse buys from Browsers. If in those first thirty days the 500 copies sell out, they will look in their computers, and see how many of the original 5,000 are left in Ingram's warehouse. If there are some left, they may reorder. If there are none, they may chose to backorder. If the 500 didn't sell out, they may consider the title not to be very popular, and return what didn't sell to Ingram. If no one else is asking for the title, the books get returned to the publisher or destroyed, and that's the end of that title.

So even when availability was 100% in the retail world, it has nothing to do with creating Buzz and generating sales. On the other hand, if five people a week were walking into every Barnes & Noble in the country asking for a particular title, and they didn't have it in stock, they'd special order it. And when they started seeing hundreds of requests for the same title, they'd want to know how they could get it in stock on a regular basis to prevent those customers from shopping elsewhere. They'd query Ingram. If Ingram didn't have it on hand, they'd go directly to the publisher. And if the publisher was asked by Barnes & Noble if they could place an order for 1,000 books, any small- to medium-sized publisher would do everything within their power to respond to that request as quickly as possible.

Think about your own shopping motivations. Haven't you ever decided to go out and purchase a particular product—could be anything, a book, DVD, CD, etc.—but when you went to the retailer you thought would have it, for some reason they didn't. They either didn't carry it, or were sold out, or were waiting to get it in, whatever. What did you do? Decide you no longer wanted it, or checked elsewhere? If you really wanted it, you probably looked around until you found out how to get it. That's what everyone else does, too, even when it comes to books. Buzz is what triggers that "I gotta get that" impulse in people. It's what can make a book buyer go straight to the Stacks to find your spine-out book if it's there, or make them special order it, or buy it online if it's not.

Furthermore, if demand does exist for a book that exceeds its first print run (which all publishers pray for!), there will be backorders, even for bestsellers. Backorders trigger reprints. That's how the system is set up to work. And because that's how it works, it's perfectly likely that even for a very popular title, you might go into a specific store that already sold the first few copies it had on-hand and they are waiting for a new shipment. This "lack of instant gratification availability" doesn't mean the book isn't available at all, nor that anything is wrong. The buyer will then either special order it and wait, or find it from another channel of distribution, be it at a brick and mortar store or online.

Another newsflash for the new author: in simple mathematical logic, as we've noted, unless your publisher had a print run in the hundreds of thousands, there will be bookstores out there who don't have copies of your book in stock—*ever*—and won't even *think* to order it, unless they, too, get wind of its Buzz.

So where does grass roots Buzz come from, assuming your publisher doesn't have a multi-million dollar marketing budget to spend on you? The answer: Buzz comes from a sustained campaign of hard work and promotional effort, for as long as it takes, even if measured in years, to kindle the flame of interest in a quantifiable audience for your work.

Far too many new authors conveniently forget that even the biggest names and stars are rarely overnight successes. People think of John Grisham and his success with his novel *The Firm*, but forget that his earlier book *A Time to Kill* came out first and wasn't a big hit until after *The Firm*. Dan Brown, the author of bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* had several previous novels in print before this particular one caught on and became a hit. In Stephen King's autobiographical book *On Writing*, he speaks candidly about his stack of rejection letters, collected over many years, before he got his break and found his audience. Yes, there are some "miraculous" exceptions, just like there are lottery winners who become instant millionaires. Instant success does exist, but it isn't something you can exactly plan on, nor count on happening.

The real risk most new authors have in their efforts to generate Buzz for their new book, in the traditional publishing model, is the finite size of the window of opportunity to demonstrate sales traction. As noted, most retailers only give books a limited shelf life—*literally*, a finite period it is allowed to sit on their costly retail space shelves—before pulling copies of any book that isn't moving, and then returning them to the publisher for credit in order to give that space to another title, all in hopes a different book will sell and make them some money. The greatest asset a new author has is a patient publisher who will work with them over a longer period of time to help develop Buzz and thereby build a new audience for that writer. Without that, you are basically at the mercy of sheer "luck" that enough souls will stumble over your book in the window of time that it can first physically be seen, and then buy it in sufficient quantities to convince retailers and distributors to keep ordering it. Yet, for many authors, they feel as if their book isn't sitting on a shelf of a bookstore as the primary means of demand creation (its pretty cover?), it has no chance for success. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Real Demand Creation—the cultivation of Buzz—is direct result of **effective marketing and promotion**, which both author and publisher should conduct together. And if the publisher won't help, then the author needs to take direct responsibility for this process in spite of their publisher. Hint: if your publisher doesn't lift a finger to help you, but you go out and generate a healthy audience on your own, then with a quantifiable audience in hand, you can always find a new publisher who will help you make that audience even bigger on your next book. More on this point to follow.

So far in this paper I've spoken of the publishing world in terms of a lot of broad generalities, and surely there are numerous individual publishers out there who stand as shining exceptions to many of the pitfalls I've noted. I can't speak for any other publisher in great detail other than myself. But as an independent publisher who fights these very battles on a daily basis on behalf of our authors, I can speak from the per-

spective of what we do and what we expect from our authors. We're a traditional publishing house in the sense that we're not a vanity/subsidy press, and see book buyers as our primary customer base. However, we're a very "non-traditional" publisher when it comes to marketing and promoting.

First of all, we don't "Publish and Pray," i.e. throw books out there and just hope for the best. We proactively seek to stimulate Buzz. From a corporate perspective, all of our titles are advertised to all the booksellers (over 20,000 of them). We send out targeted Press Releases, media kits, announcements, etc. to specific segments of booksellers by genre group. We attend trade events. We send out review and promotional copies of titles. We target editorial coverage in genre related periodicals and the like. Yet all of those efforts are only half the battle. We also equip all of our authors with an Author Promotion Kit.

This Kit (provided at no cost to the author) consists of collaterals and promotional tools to generate attention for their books. We're talking about full color Title Announcement Flyers, Book Signing Posters, Cover Art posters, Post Cards, Book Marks, sample Press Releases for local papers, etc. This Kit was developed for the expressed purpose for authors to get out and promote their books!

We expect our authors to schedule and hold book signings at every bookstore that will permit them to do so. We expect our authors to submit local press releases to their local papers in parallel to our corporate Press Releases to national and international wire services. We expect our authors to attend genre related trade events and conventions, where we work to get them on writing/publishing panels, autograph sessions, etc. to gain more visibility. Obviously, any additional media coverage in print, radio, or TV is welcome. If the authors have the financial means they are welcome to hire professional publicists and Ad agencies. But the common theme here regardless of total investment or scope is a steady professional effort to reach out to more and more people each and every day, seeking to intrigue them with your work.

At some point in this "tipping over the first domino process" one of two things is going to happen: either

- 1) Some critical mass of people are going to be intrigued by your book, buy the book, read the book, like the book, then tell others, and true Buzz starts; or
- 2) Few people are intrigued, few buy the book, few read the book, few like the book, few if any tell anyone else, and there is no Buzz.

In the first scenario, the book goes on to become a success. In the second scenario, it goes out of print and dies.

Of special note, not all publishers have the same degree of patience in waiting to see how long it takes for Buzz to ignite before declaring a title a flop and moving on to the next one. Again, speaking only for my own publishing house, we took this dynamic into account in building our publishing model, which was geared to help new authors find an audience, rather than depending on finding authors who already had one. Doing this required us to take a much longer lifecycle view of a book, i.e. measured in twelve to eighteen months, not a mere thirty-ninety days. We also employed a more graduated model of production and deployment, that is, spending the majority of our resources and time on Buzz creation, not huge initial print runs, to allow demand to dictate availability.

Candidly, this approach has frustrated some of our very own authors who held expectations of seeing their book in every bookstore from the date of its release. That wasn't our model. Our model is to grow to that point as a result of successful marketing over a four to six month period leveraging both online and brick and mortar retail distribution, carefully measuring response rates, and supplying the sales channels with product as our Buzz creation gains traction and takes off. We feel this is the best chance a new au-

thor has of building a career and ultimate success, not being at the mercy of “luck” in a tightly constrained window of retail opportunity.

It’s Not All or Nothing

The second biggest myth for new authors is the expectation of “bestseller or nothing.” Many authors make an adequate living selling a modest amount of books on a regular basis. For example, if it takes you two years to build an audience of 25,000 readers who enjoy your work, and will buy it consistently, that’s great! What that means is that if you’re earning \$2.00 or more in royalties per book, you’re earning a \$50,000 a year income, well above the poverty line. If a bestseller is defined as 50,000 copies or more selling within a short span of time, you might *never* hit that threshold, but still make a fine living nonetheless. And like Dan Brown, perhaps on your fourth or fifth or sixth novel, that special one might break out and become your million copy best selling “hit,” with movie adaptation deals, the works. But keeping your focus on Buzz creation, with a long-term marketing view, not mere day-one availability, is the key.

The third biggest myth of the new author is the expectation of making substantial money—and quickly! In the traditional publishing model, according to most surveys, a new author might get from \$2,000 to \$5,000 as an advance on the sale of that very first book. With small- to medium- sized publishers, it’s less than that, or no advances at all. The traditional accounting model in the publishing industry goes in six month reporting periods. So if your book debuts in January, your publisher will compute sales from January through June of the first reporting period. So the soonest you can expect to see that first royalty check is going to be in July (best case) or August, or later, depending on how promptly they pay, which isn’t something any publishers are renowned for doing.

Ah, but you also have to remember that advance! An advance against royalties is a loan to you against future royalties, or more accurately a non-recoverable draw (i.e. you don’t have give any of it back). So if your royalty rate per book is \$2.00 a copy, and your book sold 2,000 copies in the first six months (which might not be bad for a brand new author in hardcover), you’re still \$1,000 in the hole, and don’t get a royalty check for the first reporting period. If your book sells another 2,000 copies in the second reporting period, the first 500 are needed to cover the rest of your advance, and the other 1,500 generate \$3,000 in royalties, of which your agent takes 15%, or \$450, so you actually see a payment of \$2,550 (of which you’ll need to set aside some of that to pay your taxes). And bear in mind, your book most likely took a year or more after you were given that first advance for its actual release date to arrive. So in terms of actual cash flow, let’s say you received a \$5,000 advance, less 15%, or \$4,250, then waited a year for your book to come out, then waited another year for your book to sell more than your advance, only to see \$2,550 over two years later. That’s not exactly a career income there, is it? Yet in its first year of life, your book sold 4,000 copies, which for a hardcover, isn’t a bad start.

It was for that reason we at ArcheBooks Publishing scrapped the old “traditional” compensation model and went to a new monthly payment system. In our model, we introduce titles in a matter of a few months after contract, and as sales actually happen the authors then get paid on a regular basis. Admittedly, if the author only sells 100 books the first month their new title is out, they may only make \$200, but it’s a start. And their title doesn’t get yanked because it *only* sold 100 books in its first thirty days after emerging from literal obscurity. If it sells 150 copies the following month, the author makes \$300. If a year down the road, as Buzz starts to take off, they’re selling a few thousand books a month, then they’re making several thousands of dollars a month, the kind of money they can live off of. And they will have “arrived” at their goal on the “get rich patiently” plan, i.e. steadily growing their audience base, day after day, week after week, month after month, without the axe hanging over their heads of “instant great performance or forget it”—which is the hallmark traditional publishing model.

Cumulative Success

The next fallacious expectation I believe needs to be challenged is the “one hit wonder” syndrome. That is, it’s OK if your first book just does OK. Your entire career need not depend on the audience reaction to your first endeavor. As was noted, that wasn’t John Grisham’s experience, nor Dan Brown’s. Obviously, if any book takes off in a big way, everybody’s thrilled, whether it’s the first or fifth or tenth. But it’s OK if the goal of your first novel is to get a foothold in the market. If your first book sells 5,000 copies or more in the first twelve to eighteen months that it’s in the market, then chances are, there are 5,000 people out there who just might buy your second book. And most small- to medium-sized publishers, as well as a few big ones, can justify the production investment on a book that they believe has a good chance of selling 5,000 copies or more. But instead of seeking to generate Buzz from an audience of zero, you’re starting on the second one at 5,000 potential known customers, who likely all have friends and family to tell about your new book.

So perhaps on your second title, getting to 5,000 copies in sales doesn’t take 12 months, maybe only three, and new readers help that second title achieve the 10,000 copy level. But what’s even better is that those first 5,000 not only want the new book, but those new 5,000 readers may like your work enough to go back and buy the first one, boosting its sales in its second year—assuming it’s still available and not “Out of Print” due to an impatient publisher letting it die. And therefore, over time, as you’ve diligently built your audience to a larger and larger predictable number, you’ll find you have become one of those “established” authors who justify the larger initial print runs, bigger advances, the bigger marketing budgets, and all that goes with it. If that’s the case, then it wasn’t luck that produced your success; rather, it was something you worked for and built, setting realistic expectations and demonstrating perseverance and dedication with no guarantees of ultimate success (which is how life works in general).

In summary, if your expectation as a newly published author is that now you can sit back and wait for the great big royalty checks to come rolling in right away, counting on sheer availability in bookstores to make you a star, then you are taking an extremely naïve risk, and are neglecting the very *time sensitive* efforts that are required on your part, which are vital to giving your book, and ultimately your opportunity for a career as a writer, a real chance to succeed in the first place.