

THE PLIGHT OF THE LITERARY ORPHAN

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Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

In life, when childless parents seek to adopt an orphan child, most of them tend to search for a newborn infant, a child to raise from scratch, who will grow up with only the memories and experience of its new parents. For this very reason it is usually more difficult to find homes for older children. Metaphorically speaking, when it comes to the relationship between authors and their publishers, the exact opposite is true. You see, there is a specific phenomenon that goes on in the publishing world, far more than anyone would dare admit, something that new authors are rarely, if ever, told about before becoming the victims of it: Literary Orphans.

A Literary Orphan is an author who has gone through the unbridled joy and euphoric excitement of finally having a manuscript accepted for publication by a real publisher, being assigned an editor, working with and developing a relationship with that editor, and getting some idea of when their book will finally debut for the world to see and appreciate. But somewhere in that vast, interminable epoch of time between the issuance of the publishing contract and the book's pub date, something terrible happens: the author's editor either gets a better job offer from a different publisher, or simply quits.

The common result of an editor leaving a publishing house is that all the projects they were currently working on tend to become "orphans." That is, in many publishing houses, it is the editors that are involved in the acquisition process to some degree, if not exclusively, and they take a sense of personal ownership in seeing their projects come to life, treating each one like their own "baby." They don't necessarily feel that way about their colleagues' projects, or projects that get summarily dumped on their already overburdened plate because one of their colleagues just got a better job offer elsewhere making more money than they do. It's also not uncommon for orphaned projects to go into an indefinite "limbo" state until an editor can be found with the available bandwidth to take on the new orphaned project.

Of course, the publisher may hire a new editor to replace the departed one, and give that new editor all the backlog of projects the prior editor was working on; but again, this new editor has no vested emotional capital in these projects, might not even like some of them, and therefore may opt to take the attitude of blowing them through the system as quickly as possible, with the minimum of effort invested, in order to get to the personally hand-picked projects that they really *do* want to work on. For the author who wrote an orphaned project, all of the above is bad news.

Being orphaned as an author can take many forms. It doesn't necessarily happen during the production of a first book. It can happen anytime in an author's career. Most authors tend to stick with the same publisher, as long as the relationship is mutually beneficial, and usually with the same editor within the publishing house, who knows their work best, appreciates it, and is actively involved over time in getting subsequent works contracted for publication. So when that editor leaves, the author's contractual relationship is with the publishing house, not one its former employees. The book contract(s) don't follow the editor to their new place of employment.

So in a very real sense, with the editor gone, no one else at the publishing house may have any interest in the orphaned author's work or career. And that can bring things to an abrupt halt in a hurry. There isn't much practical difference between being a Literary Orphan and having your publisher go out of business and close its doors, i.e. if no one at the publishing house knows you or has any ongoing interest in your work.

Safety in Numbers

Now it's true that if the orphaned author is well-established, has published many titles which have sold well, and therefore there exists a quantifiable audience out there for their work, this is a relative non-issue for that author. In fact, in that particular case, the publishing house is one who may suddenly have to worry and quickly check existing contracts to see how "locked up" that author is, and if they are in danger of having the author submit any subsequent works to their old editor—who they may have a wonderful long-term relationship with—at their new place of employment. But this isn't always the case. It's not unheard of for an author to have published a dozen books or more, then become orphaned at their current publisher, only to be told that none of the other editors at the house have any interest in more of their work—and their old editor, working at the new house, is now assigned to a different genre, or the new publisher doesn't carry the author's genre, or simply isn't very interested in the author's work, etc. Bottom line: they're an orphan.

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This is why becoming an orphan earlier in the author's writing career is much worse than having it happen later. If it happens before the author has had a chance to establish any kind of sales track record, it's not unheard of for this to be a career-ending blow—or at a minimum, putting that author back into the mode of "starting from scratch" in their search for publication.

You may be reading this and thinking: "Oh my God, I worried for so long about ever becoming published, and now you're saying that even after I've 'arrived' I can still lose it all in a heartbeat." And to that, I say, yes, you can. And that's really the main point here. Until you get to the point in your career where you've developed a strong, vibrant, and loyal book buying audience for your writing, and work tirelessly to nurture and maintain that audience, all your ambitions for succeeding as a professional writer can be dashed in an instant.

Furthermore, your editor doesn't *have* to quit working for your publisher for you to be orphaned. Just start resting on your laurels, sitting at home waiting for all those royalty checks to start rolling in, and write a subsequent poor quality book and submit it to your editor to satisfy your "next book" option clause, or write one that is essentially a carbon copy repetition of the first one they genuinely liked, and you may suddenly realize you are what the folks in the music business call "a one hit wonder" (with the notion of "hit" only referring to getting a contract, not necessarily any actual market success). The *only* defense an author has against the very real danger of being orphaned is the size and loyalty of your audience—the bigger it is, the more protection you have—and vice versa.

Funnily enough, many authors mistakenly think that “writing great books” is what will ensure their writing career. It won’t. As a professional novelist, you should be doing your absolute best to write great stories, or don’t write. Just keep in mind that many, many perfectly good and commercially viable books never make it into print for a variety of good and bad reasons, chief of which is the simple fact that there is infinitely more material available for publication than there are legitimate publishing slots in the production schedules of real publishers. And if Paris Hilton can have a book on the bestseller list, you have proof positive that bestsellers have nothing to do with the quality of writing.

Your Success is in Your Hands—No One Else’s

Another erroneous new author myth is that it is the primary responsibility of their publisher to turn all of their titles into bestsellers, and their authors into stars. Rest assured, any publisher worth his salt is going to do their level best to market and promote their titles and authors to the best of their ability and to the limits of their resources. But it has never been done, nor will it ever be done, on a “fair” basis, with every project getting the exact same amount of promotional support, and that amount being massive. Some authors and titles get the resources, others don’t. Those are business decisions. It’s not uncommon for publishers to invest a small amount of money on a brand new author and put their first work out there to “see how it does,” in very much a trial-and-error approach. If the book takes off and some buzz stirs up around it, then the publisher may make the decision to push it in a bigger way, put more resources behind it, and so forth. But it isn’t automatic. That’s just how the business works.

A lot of released titles are not expected to become bestsellers. Many are of the “mid-list” variety, which are expected to turn a little profit each, even on a fairly modest sell-through. If there are enough of them for sale at one time, then the cumulative volume generates a very tidy profit for the publisher. Should one of those mid-list “lottery tickets” held by the publisher suddenly strike a chord in the market and catch on, then wonderful, they make even more money, and the author may get a more lucrative contract for a subsequent book and so on. But there’s no guarantee of that. It is for this reason that so many major publishers have opted to take less and less risks on new names and only work with writers who already have an established audience base, or celebrities from other walks of life who bring built-in audiences with them.

Yes, there was a time when publishers, as a group, did a much better job in helping brand new authors develop their audiences from scratch. The ugly truth is: these days, they don’t have to. Marketing and promotion is expensive. Market penetration, advertising campaigns, brand development around a new name and new products is all very expensive. Why spend a lot of money creating market awareness around an unproven name when people with celebrity caliber status, who already command consumer awareness measured in the millions, want to have their books published too? Why work any harder than you have to? Can you really blame the publishing industry for using this line of thinking?

If you have been orphaned as an author, and if you still wish to pursue a professional writing career, you have little choice but to start over in the search of a new publishing house, writing queries and book proposals, and submitting anew in conjunction with your Agent (if you have

one) in search of a new publishing home. If you have some good, legitimate writing credits under your belt, your search won't be as difficult as it was when you first began. That is, the new prospective publisher will at least see that some of their peers have validated your work, and that counts. On that same point, however, when seeking a new publisher—i.e. a real publisher at a reputable firm—do not list writing credits from vanity presses, self-publishing houses, eBooks, or other such places. Credits are designed to be a common reference point for the new publisher to see that you've been validated at organizations similar to the publisher's own. If you don't have any such credits, then don't list any. Having no credits is better than advertising the fact that no real publisher wanted your earlier work.

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If becoming orphaned hasn't happened to you yet (and hopefully never will), then you need to understand clearly that it can, without warning, and the only thing you can do about it is to make sure that the publisher has more to lose by orphaning you than you do from losing them. And that's only going to happen by the existence and power of thousands of book buying souls who know who you are and love what you write. Nothing else. With this in mind, the professional author should wake up every morning and their first thought be, "What can I do to help grow my audience today?"

Don't Writers Write?

I have had well-meaning literary agents say to me, "The authors can't be out promoting their work all the time. They need to be home writing more great books." Yes, authors need to continue to turn out more great work. But if that's all they do, then they are putting their chances for success solely into other people's hands, who undoubtedly don't care as much about it as the author themselves. The truth is, a professional writer has two main responsibilities, not one: 1) to write great stories, and 2) to continually seek to grow the group of people who enjoy those stories. How the author chooses to balance their time to meet these two responsibilities is up to them. But neglect either one and do it at your own peril. Faithfully attend to both, and you've done all you can to ensure your chances for success.

Is professional success guaranteed if you constantly promote your books like a maniac? Of course not. The consumers do get a vote—the final and deciding vote, in fact. If they like an author's work, that's good. If a lot of people like that author's work, even better. If the word on the street is that the author's work is "Must Have Reading," that's best. But how will the market ever become aware of a new author's work unless someone take the time to bring it to their attention in some way? And just who in the entire equation of players has the most vested interest in making sure that happens? Right, you.

An author being orphaned by their publisher is a professional tragedy. There's no denying that. Best case, it can turn out to be nothing more than an administrative inconvenience for a time, or it can be utterly devastating, or somewhere in between. There's no way to really know what the true impact will be until it happens. Will you be ready if it does? If you should get a call from your publisher one day advising you that your editor no longer works there, who will have more

to lose in that conversation? Will they be telling you who your new editor is, someone more senior perhaps, who is very excited about having an author as renowned and valuable to the publishing house as you are to work with in the future? Or will the call go more along these lines:

“Hello? *Who* is this again? No, I’m sorry, John doesn’t work here any more. Is there something I can help you with? You wrote *what*? No, I don’t have any idea what the status of the project is. If it was one of John’s projects, it will probably be assigned to one of the assistants to get it finished up. No, I have no idea who they’ll give it to, or where it will be moved in the schedule. But don’t worry. I’m sure your book will be just fine.”

Book Signings Forever?

No, not forever. Building an audience is like building a house. The hardest work is at the very beginning: clearing and leveling the land, digging the trenches for water and sewer, pouring the foundation, putting up the walls, etc. When the house is built, there’s still work to do, but it’s more in terms of routine maintenance, taking care of the lawn, and such. Building an audience from nothing isn’t easy. It’s hard work. But as each new soul joins the fan club, they become another advocate to speak to people that they know so you don’t have to do it all yourself, one person at a time.

How big your audience needs to be to support you financially is totally up to you. How much money do you want to make per year, assuming you’d like to work fulltime as a writer? If you want to make \$50,000 a year, and you earn \$2.00 a copy in royalties from sales of your book, then you need 25,000 people to buy one of your books every year. If you want to make \$100,000 a year, then you need 50,000 people to buy one faithfully each year. There really does exist a point—a threshold if you will—where you have created true “brand value” around your name, whereby thousands of people will buy your next book simply because your name is on it, regardless of what the story is about. These are the perennial bestselling authors. It is a lofty goal to aspire to join their ranks. But it’s possible. You just have to work hard to get there, and perhaps have a few lucky breaks come your way during the journey.

On the other hand, there are many authors who are not household name celebrities, as far as the general public is concerned, but who have very faithful and active followings of fans, which are measured in the tens of thousands, whose book buying habits generate tens of thousands of dollars in income to those authors, who thereby enjoy the fruits of their writing as a legitimate fulltime career. So you don’t have to sell a million copies a year to enjoy fulltime career status as a writer. And one other thing is true: writers who sell 25,000, or 50,000, or more books every year, tend not to get orphaned. And if they ever do, there are plenty of publishers waiting in line who would love to give them a new home.