

Advice for Writers and/or Prospective Publishers

From Colleen Dunn Bates, Prospect Park Books

Every week—sometimes every day—I am asked to meet or talk with someone to pass along advice. Someone has written a children’s book and wants to know how to get it published. Someone is writing a self-help book and wants to know the best way to self-publish. Someone wants to work in publishing but doesn’t know much about it. Someone wants help finding an agent. And so forth.

I used to do my very best to help these advice seekers. Usually the request would come from a friend, or a friend of a family member, or my dentist’s husband’s cousin. As those of you who know me know, I have a *lot* of people in my world. And half of them seem to have written a book, or want to write a book, or want to go into publishing. Or have a kid/cousin/friend/client who does.

I can no longer take time out of my extremely busy life to provide free advice for people, even friends and family. I want to help, but honestly, if I met everyone for coffee who invites me out “to ask a few questions,” I’d go out of business within weeks.

So I’ve prepared the following resource list and FAQs. These are the most common questions I’m asked, so you may get all you need here, especially if you do your homework with the resources provided.

If you need more help/time, I’m happy to help as a consultant. I’m setting aside no more than four hours a month, and my rate is \$150 an hour, whether it’s phone, e-mail or in person.

Thank you for understanding, and I hope this is helpful.

Who We Are

Prospect Park Books

2359 Lincoln Ave., Altadena, CA 91001

626.793.9796, www.prospectparkbooks.com

Distributed by Consortium, a division of Ingram

Current staff: Colleen Dunn Bates, Dorie Bailey, Caitlin Ek, Kaitlyn Keating, many key freelancers, and various interns

Our bestselling and award-winning books include: *Helen of Pasadena*, *Addicted to Americana*, *Washing the Dead*, *L.A. Mexicano*, *The Good Byline*, *Little Flower Baking*, *Daditude*, *Marry, Kiss Kill*, *After Abel & Other Stories*, the Crush mysteries, *100 Not So Famous Views of L.A.*, the Mas Arai mysteries, *Mark Twain’s Guide*, *Hometown Pasadena*, the *Paperback L.A.* anthology series, *Struck*, and *Doorways of Paris*. Our authors include Naomi Hirahara, Lian Dolan, Charles Phoenix, Michelle Brafman, Phoef Sutton, Jennifer Worick, Christine Moore, Rachel Harper, Alan Hruska, Mark Dawidziak, Christopher Noxon, Chris Erskine, and many more.

Our future bestsellers include: *The Urban Forager*, *Dead Extra*, *Saint Everywhere*, *Water: California Idealism*, *Insta L.A.*, *Holiday Jubilee*, and *Iced in Paradise*. Authors we’ll be publishing in 2019 and 2020 include Gar Anthony Haywood, Kenton Nelson, Sean Carswell, Elisa Callow, Katie Orphan, and Mary Lea Carroll, as well as new titles from Jill Orr, Naomi Hirahara, Charles Phoenix, and Alan Hruska.

We are currently closed to submissions.

Resources

- **ASJA, the American Society of Journalists and Authors.** Many author resources, and a place to find writers if you need a professional co-author.
- **The Business of Books.** One of our wonderful authors, Jennifer Worick, runs The Business of Books with her business partner, Kerry Colburn. Their blog is a solid resource, and they run great workshops, too. bizofbooks.wordpress.com
- ***The Fine Print of Self-Publishing, and Dan Poynter's Self-Publishing Manual.*** These are the bibles for self-publishers. Both contain a wealth of information.
- **IBPA, The Independent Book Publishers Association.** This large and active group is open to self-publishers and first-time publishers. If you're serious about being a successful self-publisher, consider joining this group, attending a conference, and reading its newsletter religiously. I started out by attending an IBPA (then called PMA) conference, and it's very helpful.
- **SCBWI, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.** If you're writing a children's book, start here. Support, meetings, education and conferences. Children's books are their own world, and here's how to learn about that world.
- **LA-area writers: IWOSC, Independent Writers of Southern California,** iwosc.org. Events and advice for writers; other cities have similar groups.
- **Writer's Market.** If you're a writer who's looking for a small press, you must get this book. If you're looking for an agent, get the latest edition of the annual *Guide to Literary Agents*; if you're writing a children's book, get the *Children's Writers & Illustrator's Market*. They're all from the same publisher and are updated annually. You can also get the same Writer's Market information (for a fee) on **WritersMarket.com**.
- Finally, here's a good story in the **New York Times** about self-publishing, and it lists the main resources for self-publishers.
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/16/technology/personaltech/ins-and-outs-of-publishing-your-book-via-the-web.html?_r=1&utm_source=Publishers+Weekly%27s+PW+Daily&utm_campaign=6a90a35c43-UA-15906914-1&utm_medium=email

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I self-publish or try to find a publisher?

It depends on your goals. If you have done your market research and feel that your book is at a professional-enough level to compete in the retail marketplace, and you have the time and know-how to help a publisher market the book, then try to find a publisher. Be prepared for a long and possibly difficult journey. If you are more interested in seeing your book in print (or on a Kindle) and know in your heart that it's mostly for family and friends, or a small niche you can sell to directly, then self-publish.

If I self-publish on Amazon, I can make so much more money than I'd get from a royalty from a publisher. So why should I bother getting a publisher?

The market is sinking under the weight of self-published books—now estimated at more than a million a year. The vast majority will never sell more than a couple of hundred to friends and family. There are exceptions, but there's a reason they make news—they are rare. Self-published books are typically poorly designed and even more poorly edited. Bookstores don't want to carry them, and it's very difficult to get press/reviews/attention. If you are serious about a writing career and selling as many books as possible, you need the editing, design, packaging, marketing, publicity, and most of all distribution that a publisher brings to the table. You can do it seriously and successfully on your own, but it takes tremendous drive, time, research, and skill.

Do you need an agent to get a publisher?

No, but it helps. You need an agent to get in the door at the big-name publishers. But many small to mid-size publishing houses are open to authors who do not have agents, as long as the work is a perfect fit and is presented in a professional manner.

So it is not necessary, but it is often advisable. A good agent knows how to find the right fit for your work, knows the right people in the field, and knows how to get you the best possible deal. They also often help quite a bit with crafting your proposal (nonfiction) or manuscript (fiction) to increase its chance of being sold. We are generally closed to submissions from authors with agents, unless we know them personally.

How can I get an agent?

First, pick up the *Guide to Literary Agents* (see Resources), unless you have personal connections to agents. Carefully read and research to find ones that deal with books like yours. (If they say they don't represent, say, romance, they mean it.) Go to their websites and learn as much as you can. Come up with a list of 6 to 10 who seem like a perfect fit and follow the guidelines in the book. Write a short, very clear cover letter and send your proposal or manuscript to each agent. Make sure everything is meticulously edited and as good as it can be. Then take up fly fishing or start writing another book, because you'll have a lot of waiting to do. It can take months for your first response to come in. If you get rejections from all of them, pay attention to any notes you got in the rejection process and attend to them, then send to a second batch.

Will you refer me to an agent you know?

I'm sorry, but probably not, unless I already know your work and know the right agent. We have to be very careful with our professional relationships.

How about a publisher friend of yours?

See previous answer.

Will you consider publishing my book?

Unfortunately (or, fortunately, from our perspective), we have books scheduled for publishing well into 2020. We are currently closed to submissions, so please don't send us any—we truly don't have the time or staff to read all the material we get.

However, if ever we do re-open submissions, we might consider publishing your book under the following circumstances:

1. It is a novel (literary, commercial, and/or mystery only), a humor book, a regional (LA/SoCal) title, or a cookbook with strong regional appeal. That's all we do.
2. You submit the standard way (cover letter + 1st 50 pages if it's a novel, or cover letter + professionally written proposal if it's nonfiction).
3. You don't invite me out to lunch to pitch your book (unless we've already published one of your books, in which case I'll buy lunch).
4. You don't call the office to tell us about your book. That's an immediate deal-killer for ANY publisher.
5. You have demonstrated ways to reach an audience: a popular TV show, lots of community connections, lots of BFFs in the media, the ability and willingness to do events, public speaking, media campaigns, whatever it takes.
6. You're fun to work with.

I haven't been able to get an agent or a publisher, so I'm going to self-publish anyway. How can I make it successful?

By acting like a publisher, not a writer. Make it the best you can by getting professional help. Hire a freelance editor. Hire an experienced book designer, not your friend who's good with Photoshop. Above all, hire an experienced proofreader—a book with a lot of typos is a red flag for amateurism. Don't rush—take your time to do it right. It will cost at least \$1,500. \$1,000 for design, layout and production of a simple novel; \$500 for a proofreader; and more if you hire a manuscript editor. Accept editorial input graciously and be open to making changes.

Next, create a well-thought-out marketing plan. Set about getting as much press and viral word-of-mouth as you can. Get friends/family to write honest reviews on Amazon (most important),

BN.com, and Goodreads. Try to get your local paper or website to do an interview or review. Get any speaking/signing gigs you can. But don't post 1,000 times about your book on Facebook, or your friends will unfriend you.

Where can I get my self-published book printed, or made into an e-book?

If you're just doing an e-book, try Smashwords. It's the most economical and least corporate way to do it, and they can get your book onto Amazon and iBooks. For print books, try Lulu, which offers editing and design; KDP Print, which is Amazon's in-house system; Blurb; and IngramSpark. If you're interested in more of a hybrid model, where a publisher can help with editorial, design, and distribution, watch out for hustlers. Two companies I can recommend are Epigraph and SheWrites Press. The IBPA also has resources for finding reputable hybrid publishers.

I'm self-publishing a book. How do I get it in the stores?

It's extremely difficult. The market has been flooded with self-published books. It's pretty much impossible to get to a buyer at Barnes & Noble or the larger indies, like Vroman's. Smaller bookstores will only consider carrying them in two circumstances:

1. You're a local who can convince them you'll bring in a local audience to buy it there.
2. You've already achieved strong sales online or in some other way, so you can convince them it has potential.

Be warned that they are likely to charge you a fee to have your book stocked.

What is a distributor?

A distributor helps get your books in stores. It typically has contracted/freelance salespeople (who also sell for other distributors and publishers) who present books to buyers. It also handles warehousing, order fulfillment, invoicing, and collecting. Typically, distributors pay their publishers 90 to 120 days after the sales are made. Deducted from that payment will be returns from the previous months, plus such charges as catalog advertising and co-op (shared promotional ventures with bookstores).

Wait—what are returns?

The bane of every publisher's existence. Bookstores and such warehouse stores as Costco will only buy books on a returnable basis. They can return unsold books for a full refund basically forever. This, along with the demise of Borders and the struggles of indie bookstores, is why publishers are all chasing other types of retail outlets, like the gift trade, which buys non-returnable.

Will a distributor take me if I just have one book?

Most will not, but I believe Midpoint will. In general, distributors are only interested in publishers who have a long-term program with long-term financial potential.

What if I just self-publish on Kindle?

Yes, that's a viable plan, and it has worked for some people. The same rules still apply—get your book professionally proofread and get a good cover designed, and market it as best you can. (You can probably get it proofread and a cover designed for \$800 to \$1,000 total.) Price it competitively—people won't pay much for a self-published e-book.

How does the world of children's books work?

It's a separate world, with separate agents and editors and, very often, bookstore buyers. It's also extremely competitive, because half the parents and teachers out there are writing/have written a children's book. I don't want to be a wet blanket, but it's extremely challenging to break into this world. If you have the drive and talent, however, go for it! Start with SCBWI, in my Resources section.

I've written a children's book that everyone loves and I know will be a hit, but I don't know how to find a good illustrator. What do I do?

Nothing. It's bizarre, but mainstream children's publishing companies separate those two crafts. They want to pair an illustrator with a particular title. So just try to sell your writing, and if you do, the publisher will find the illustrator.

If a piece of crap like *50 Shades of Grey* can make millions, I can make a bundle on my much-better book, right?

Rarely does lightning strike like it did with the *50 Shades* empire. Or even with empires built on quality writing, like the *Harry Potter* franchise. Given the number of books published each year, huge successes are incredibly rare. In the real world, it's about slowly building a career so you become a respected writer with a steady income stream. Or it's about publishing a book that will help you brand yourself or bring you business or get you something else you want.

***Helen of Pasadena* was everywhere! You must have made a fortune on that, right? No.**

Again, it's about building a career (in the case of a writer) and a business (in the case of a publisher). That book, and some of our others, have sold very well, but the margins are small in this business, for both the authors and publishers. It takes many books and some years and hard work and a lot of luck to make a lot of money in this business. And it is expensive to run a publishing company, to produce a book, and to market a book, even if you're frugal like me.

A small publisher offered me a contract, and I'm excited, but I'm also unsure. It's for all rights in the world, and I have to pay a marketing fee. Should I sign it?

NEVER sign a contract without having a lawyer review it, unless you have an agent, who would never allow you to sign such a contract. There are unscrupulous companies out there preying on people's desperate desire to get published. I can recommend publishing attorneys.

I'm a doctor/therapist/educator/nutritionist and have great material for a book, but I need help with writing. How do I find someone?

First, go to the ASJA (see Resources). You can also read magazines in your field and look at the writers and Google them, then get in touch directly. So if you're a nutritionist who has an amazing program and wants to write a book but needs help, read *Cooking Light* and *Shape* and *Prevention* and look for writers who cover nutrition. You'll have to pay them a not-insignificant sum. Professional writers will not work for promised royalties unless it comes through a serious agented deal, and even then they probably won't do it.

Can I hire you, or another publishing company, to publish my book for me?

Yes. Publishing for hire like that is called custom publishing, and we do that through a separate imprint, Raymond Press. We've produced books for individuals, corporations, and nonprofits, all to the same high standards as our trade books. But note that while we can produce a beautiful book for you, in most cases we cannot get it distributed. If you have more of a narrative book that doesn't need higher-end design and production and you want at least Amazon distribution, I can recommend two hybrid publishers, Epigraph and SheWrites Press.

If you custom publish my book, can you get it in the stores for me?

No, you'll have to do that yourself. Our distribution system does not allow for custom distribution. There are rare instances where a partnership might be possible, but that's mostly on an institutional level.

I'd love to work in publishing, but I don't want to leave L.A. Where can I get a good publishing job?

Oh, this is such a tough one. The L.A. book-publishing scene is growing, but we are all small companies run on shoestrings, usually by the founders/owners, perhaps a few employees, and unpaid interns. Sage (most academic) is the only big one, and it's out in Thousand Oaks. Outside of New York City (the 80,000-pound gorilla for entry-level publishing jobs), the Bay Area, Minneapolis, Seattle/Portland, and Denver/Boulder have more companies with staffs of more than two or three. That said, many of us (PPB, Unnamed Press, Rare Bird, Red Hen, Angel City, Kaya) offer internships, and every now and then it can lead to paying work.

Wow, publishing sounds really hard! Why do you do it?

Because it's one of the most fun and fulfilling businesses out there. There's nothing to compare with working well with a talented creative team to produce and launch a terrific book. And it can be

(modestly) financially rewarding as well, with careful stewardship, hard work, time, investment capital, and tons of luck.

Fun Facts

— Before the e-book revolution, the typical publisher (large and small alike) printed 2,000 to 5,000 copies of a first novel. And 90% never sell out their first printing.

— First printings continue to drop, especially for fiction and text-focused nonfiction, like memoirs and business books. Mainstream fiction now sells about 75% in e-book form and 25% in print, with genre fiction selling more in e-book form. In 2015, ebook sales flattened considerably.

-- Most self-published books sell fewer than 150 copies.

— Literary agents get 15%, compared to Hollywood agents, who get 10%.

— There are two main ways to calculate royalties: on the cover price and on the net. Nowadays it's mostly done on the net. Authors most often are paid 10 to 20 percent of the "net"—meaning the net revenue that comes in from the distributor and any other sales channels. E-book royalties are typically 15 to 25% of net income from e-book sales. Agents are pushing for 50%, but it's not happening yet, if ever. Some progressive publishers are moving to a profit-sharing model, where the publisher and author split the proceeds after all costs for production and marketing are earned back.

-- Large publishers pay an advance on expected royalties; the author does not have to pay them back if the book doesn't "earn out" its royalty. Some smaller publishers pay advances and some don't. We used to not pay them but now we do.

-- Advances have declined dramatically in recent years. I hear reports of novelists getting \$1,500 for their second novel and nonfiction journalists being offered \$10,000 from a Big Five for what will be months of work.

-- The net income to us from a print book and an e-book is about the same, but our authors make more on the e-book. It's a myth that e-books are "bad" for publishers.