

The Agent and the Literary Market

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IN THE BEGINNING are the words: fifty thousand, seventy-five thousand, a hundred thousand or more. They comprise the book manuscripts that arrive at my agency's offices each day in sturdy gray canvas mail sacks or piled on the United Parcel Service man's creaking dolly. A few weeks ago, the day's batch was assigned to our readers for preliminary evaluation. Our readers are a congenial group of highly intelligent men and women who have all worked at publishing houses and are voracious consumers of literature, the kind who, after reading manuscripts all day for a living, love nothing more than to settle down with a good book at the end of the day. These people have excellent taste and well-honed commercial instincts, and they take great joy in discovering new talent, a joy made keener by the generous bonus I offer for any manuscript they recommend that goes on to get sold.

They have completed their appraisals of the manuscripts that came in two weeks ago, and written their reports and recommendations. If a recommendation was favorable, or even ambivalent, the manuscript was then routed to one of my associates or to me. Now, at 10 A.M., after filling our mugs from the coffee machine in our kitchen, my staff and I have sat down to talk about the manuscripts before us. As you are an agent-in-training, I would like to invite you to attend today's conference so you can be privy to the process by which the fate of those manuscripts is determined. And as you are also an author, and your own manuscript may be among those discussed this morning, I know you'll want to be there. How do you take your coffee?

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You will hear a great deal of talk, because, like just about everyone else in the publishing industry, we are nothing if not articulate. After all, our livelihoods, and our firm's reputation and credibility, depend on how accurately we express our feelings about what we read. Nevertheless, the essence of all that talk talk talk can be summarized in a brutally blunt three-word question: *Is it salable?* Cookbook, western, how-to, inspirational, thriller, juvenile—it doesn't matter what kind of book it is, the question is always the same. The issue is *not* how well the book is written, for the quality of the writing is only one factor in the decision-making process, and not always the key one. A well-written book may be just as unsalable as a poorly written one; it just breaks your heart a little more to return it to the author.

Precisely what are the factors that go into the decision-making process? What criteria do agents apply when they review manuscripts? What do agents know, or think they know, that you don't know about the publishing market? Well, after more than two decades in the publishing field as both agent and writer, I've concluded, not without a great deal of sadness, that the decision to publish almost invariably boils down to a question of economics.

Someday, somebody a lot smarter than I will write a book showing how, throughout history, literature has been shaped by the prices of books. And I will tell everyone I know to go and buy that book. For I am convinced that inspiration, craftsmanship, creativity, and other authorly qualities are less important in determining what writers write and what publishers publish than such factors as lumberjacks' wages, the cost of a typesetter's home mortgage, the prime rate, and New York City's real-estate taxes. Irrelevant though these may seem at first, they constitute some of the economic forces that influence book pricing, and the price of books is *the* dominant factor in editorial decision-making today, the unseen but dictatorial chairman of every publishing board.

This may be a painful pill for would-be Faulkners and Austens to swallow, and my last desire is to denigrate the miraculous processes by which raw inspiration is transmuted into literature. But I have to declare in all candor that no one interested in being published in our time can afford to be so naive as to believe that a book will make it merely because it's good.

Although inflation has driven the cost of everything up, it has particularly affected the way people dispose of discretionary income, and trade books (books of general interest, as opposed to text, professional, and other books for specialized markets) are definitely discretionary purchases. Book buyers who didn't hesitate to buy a hardcover

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novel in a bookstore for \$9.95 a few years ago are now passing up comparable books at \$14.95. Airline passengers who used to purchase three paperbacks at once for \$1.75 each now carefully examine the racks and ultimately choose only one, selling for \$3.95.

Because high prices have made book buyers extremely picky (I'm not even sure I'd pay \$14.95 for my *own* novel in a store!), the publishing market has become very best-seller oriented, and the industry dominated by the blockbuster mentality that seeks guaranteed profits through tried-and-true big-name authors writing in tried-and-true formulas. The pressures created by that mentality are exerted on writers, forcing them to write books of a certain kind or a certain length or a certain style, and in many cases forcing them out of the writing profession entirely. So I don't think it's far-fetched at all to imagine that a hike in lumber-jacks' wages, which will in turn affect the cost of paper, might influence a publishing decision to raise book prices, leading in turn to a phone call from an editor to an author along the lines of, "Listen, Mr. Tolstoy, if we're going to hold the price of your book below \$19.95, you'll have to do some judicious pruning in the 'Peace' section and get right into the 'War' stuff. Maybe you could trim that ballroom scene, edit some of Sonya's business, chop the prebattle chitchat, and for God's sake get rid of that peasant and his dog...."

These cynical observations won't win me many friends and I certainly don't endorse the blockbuster mentality (unless the blockbuster happens to be by one of my clients), but I have to be completely frank with authors who seek publication in the general market: Whatever else your book may be, it must be profitable. And books that have little else to recommend them beyond being good are all too often marginally profitable, or not profitable at all.

There are four broad categories of books with commercial potential: backlist, frontlist, midlist, and genre. As we shall see, it's well-nigh impossible to define these categories narrowly, and they have a tendency to run into each other and blur at the edges. A frontlist best seller may become a backlist classic that sells for decades; a genre western may be so extraordinary as to sell outside its traditional market and even make the best-seller list. A midlist author may at last write a book that hits the best-seller list, and discover publishers frenziedly bidding for the right to reissue his old, out-of-print genre books, to his embarrassment or amusement. Let's look at these categories more closely.

Backlist books. Backlist books are books that sell over a long term. Their appeal for publishers is steady performance, predictability of market, and easy maintenance. Although it wouldn't be accurate to say

backlist books sell themselves, they certainly don't require the special treatment demanded by books vying for a place on the best-seller list. As long as the overhead—printing, warehousing, servicing of orders, and so forth—doesn't get too high, the backlist can provide a publisher with his basic income and carry the firm over the roller-coaster ups and downs that attend the publishing of new books. Professional books, textbooks, cookbooks and other how-to's, classics, and juveniles fall into the category of backlist books. *Lost Horizons*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and *Exodus* are examples of best sellers that continue to sell briskly year in and year out after dropping off the list. Other books, such as *The Oxford Book of English Verse* or Paul Samuelson's textbook *Economics*, may never have hit the best-seller list, but move in enormous quantities over the long haul, and indeed over the long haul may outsell the blockbuster that struts and frets its hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. The Bible, of course, is always held up as the epitome of backlist books.

Unfortunately, the backlist has become harder and harder to maintain over the last few decades. The cost of printing and warehousing books that move too slowly, the cost of servicing and bookkeeping on single-copy orders, the cutbacks in library funding, the paperback revolution, the rise of the bookstore chains with their emphasis on fast turnover of merchandise, all these and other factors militate against profitability in backlist publishing. More and more, publishers want to get in with books, get out with the profit, and the hell with posterity. So, like so much else in modern life, books have become more and more disposable—literally as well as literarily. They fall apart after a few years, or even after a few readings.

Frontlist books. The frontlist is a publisher's new releases, the books on which he pins his hopes for this season's success. Although not every book is expected or even intended to go on the best-seller list, it can safely be said that publishers do expect every new book at least to earn a profit; to hit a best-seller list, to become a solid backlist item, or just to burn brightly for a few months in the bookstores before being remaindered.

The apotheosis of the successful frontlist book is the best seller, the book that appears on recognized lists such as those in *The New York Times Book Review* or *Publishers' Weekly*. Other than that qualification, however, it's impossible to find many common denominators on any given list, short-term trends notwithstanding. The *Publishers' Weekly* list before me as I write (November 27, 1981) features dead cats, rabid dogs, rich rabbits, Moscow murders, indecent obsessions, pineap-

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ple diets, Cinderella complexes, Rubik's Cubes, a book of lights, a light in the attic, cardinal's sins and deadly sins, poured wine and bread upon waters, Abby, Liz, Elvis, Rebecca, Fletch, Andy Rooney, and a confederacy of dunces.

As unclassifiably diverse as these topics are, there is one element running through almost all books on this or any other given best-seller list: At least 75 percent are by authors with previous best-seller track records. This fact cannot be overemphasized; with so many book buyers reluctant to pay high prices for books, the only way to lure them is with familiar, proven big-name authors. You will be more inclined to pay \$19.95 for a book by the man who brought you *Shogun*, or \$15.50 for one by the many who brought you *The World According to Garp*, than you will be to pay the same money for a book by someone who brought you three articles in the *Boston Globe*, a short story in *Redbook*, and a poem in the *Sewanee Review*. Oh, you might buy his book if his publishers package and promote it as if it *were* by James Clavell ("All the heart-stopping adventure of *Shogun*!") or John Irving ("As deeply moving as *The World According to Garp*!"), but such exceptions only underscore the rule, as is illustrated by a conversation I had with a paperback editor not long ago when I asked her how she intended to "position" a book I'd sold her.

"Well," she said, "I don't think it's strong enough to be our number-one leader for May, or even our second or third leader, but it might make a good fourth or fifth leader." ("Leaders" are a paperback publisher's big books for any given month.)

"Wait a minute," I said. "It sounds as if *all* the books you publish every month are called leaders."

"They are!" she exclaimed. "We have to publish every book as if it were a bestseller. If we don't feel a book has leader potential, we don't buy it."

The capital invested in acquiring, merchandising, advertising, and promoting books by brand-name authors is capital taken away from books by new authors, meaning that many a promising talent is frozen out of publishing at the entry level. It simply takes too long, and too many money-losing books, for most publishers to subsidize authors until their commercial potential is at last realized. Oh, a certain number of books by such authors do find their way every year onto publishers' lists. Why? The reasons range from the deplorable—a publisher needs something, anything, to fill a slot—to the inspiring—a house establishes a policy of reinvesting its profits into the work of new writers,

even if their books lose money. The publishing industry has a term to describe such work: "midlist."

Midlist books. These books are so called because they occupy the middle of a publisher's list between the blockbusters at one end of the spectrum and the backlist and genre books (mysteries, westerns, romances, and so forth) at the other. Midlist books are often *sui generis*, and possess neither the "legs" to become best sellers nor the longevity to move steadily on a backlist.

If "midlist" sounds as if it has an opprobrious connotation—well, it does. The writing of midlist books, to quote a line Finley Peter Dunne used in another context, "isn't a crime exactly. Ye can't be sint to jail f'r it, but it's kind've a disgrace." Midlist authors are authors who have published *and* perished. They are easily identified at publishing parties, if they've been invited at all, as the people embarrassedly listing the titles of their books for listeners politely pretending to have heard of those books. Midlist authors are not failures, but they are not successes either. They are probably the most interesting type of writer, for they are generally intelligent, cultured, articulate, highly skilled craftsmen and craftswomen who care passionately about writing (their own and others') and bitterly resent the economic forces that have made publishing a branch of the entertainment industry and books the software of a word-processing medium. Nevertheless, many of them feel like losers, and, in the eyes of people who publish books, they may well *be* losers.

Which is why they don't stay midlist for long. Some drop out entirely; others shift to genre writing; and others gird their loins, apply themselves mightily, and produce the book that breaks them out of the midlist and vaults them to fame and fortune. Midlist authors who have "broken out" are easily identified at publishing parties, too. They're the guests of honor.

Genre books. Genre books come last in the publishing spectrum, but certainly not least, not in *this* agent's value system, anyway. Genre books are popular books that fall into certain traditional categories: westerns, science fiction, mysteries, romances, male adventure, medical novels, occult thrillers, spy thrillers, and the like. Although the story lines of such books frequently follow formulas—the "tip sheets" (guidelines) issued by some romance publishers are intimidatingly elaborate, for example—the tendency among readers, publishers, critics and reviewers, and even writers themselves to oversimplify genre writing has created much confusion and not a little hypocrisy. Confusion because it is all but impossible to define what is and what is not a formula book; hypocrisy because the people who look down their noses at genre

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writing are often the same ones who profit from writing and publishing it, or secretly get a kick out of reading it.

Anyone attempting to define a genre too strictly will quickly find himself in deep trouble, for the best genre fiction, paradoxically, is not genre fiction at all. Is *The Ox-Bow Incident* a formula western? Yes and no. Is *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* a formula spy thriller? Yes and no. Is *Murder on the Orient Express* a formula mystery novel? Yes and no. Did the Brontës, Robert Louis Stevenson, Balzac, H.G. Wells, Henry James, write formula fiction? They certainly did! They most assuredly did not!

On the best-seller list before me are represented such genres as mystery (*Gorky Park* by Martin Cruz Smith), occult thriller (*Cujo* by Stephen King), adventure (*Noble House* by James Clavell), romance (*Remembrance* by Danielle Steel), and family saga (*The Legacy* by Howard Fast). Some of these books, and certainly parts of all of them, follow formulas. In fact, many of these and other best-selling authors got their start writing formula fiction at sweatshop rates.

Like a metallurgist sorting out rare metals from their baser kin, the agent weighs story line, characterization, and writing skill in each manuscript that comes before him, to determine whether a book fits into a very narrow category, or has the potential to break out of its category, as the above-named best sellers have done. Indeed, many agents literally weigh their manuscripts. By merely hefting one and doing a rough word count, a good agent can often tell if a book is long enough to have big-book potential, for, with few exceptions, genre books of 50,000-60,000 words cannot attain the complexity and dimension necessary to make a nice juicy read.

Because it is so hard to define genre fiction, and because genre writing is the breeding ground for many best-selling if not classic authors, and because genre books pay the rents of all mass-market publishers, let those who do not profit from genre books cast the first stone. The terms *hack*, to describe genre writers, and *trash*, to describe the product of their labors, are not only offensive but inaccurate. If there are hack writers, there are also hack publishers and, for that matter, hack readers. No one in the publishing industry who knows what's involved in writing and publishing genre books calls them trash. Even the most formulaic of romances calls for highly developed skills, and while genre books are far and away the best means for aspiring writers to break into the book field, anyone believing he'll simply dash off a quickie paperback to raise a few thousand easy bucks is in for a rude surprise.

From year to year, genres go in and out of fashion. In the early 1970s, gothic novels were all the rage, then they suddenly fell from grace and were replaced by historical romances and family sagas. Then historical romances faded and were supplanted by contemporary romances, which are the *dernier cri* in women's fiction at this writing. Male genres such as westerns and adventure, quiescent for much of the seventies, have come back strong in the early eighties in the form of adult (ultra-sexy, ultraviolent) western series, war and soldier-of-fortune series, spy thrillers, and the like. Science fiction, which peaked after the *Star Wars* phenomenon, has settled down; movie tie-ins, which may also have peaked after the *Star Wars* phenomenon, are at present moribund; occult fiction, whose demise has been predicted annually ever since *The Exorcist*, continues to be as healthy as ever; mysteries, whose revival has been predicted annually for even longer, continue to flounder.

Whatever the current trend may be, genres will always be with us, and genre writers will be the lifeblood of the publishing industry and, if I may be so bold, of literature itself. So here's my last word on genre writers. If I had room on my client list for only one more writer, and had to choose between one who's had a dozen solid but unspectacular genre paperback originals published and one whose first novel was a best seller, I would be all but paralyzed with indecision, having seen so many of the former kind soar to wealth and glory, and so many of the latter fall ignominiously on their rear ends.

Well, our meeting is over and the decisions have been made. The manuscripts have been sorted and we're ready to go into action. The rejected manuscripts are in this pile, the genre stuff in this, the books with midlist and backlist potential in that pile over there, and here, sitting on my desk like missiles poised on their launching pads, are the few we think can go all the way. Which pile is yours in?

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