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Make Them Grovel For Your Novel: A Guide to Publishing and Being an Author

by Sarah Rochford

(English 1102)

I never realized I was alive until one book pointed it out to me. I will never forget it; the book was *Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury and it changed my life. I sat in my room reading what was, at the time, just an ordinary book. My eyes focused on a page where the main character rambles on about how he is alive, and the first thought that came into my head was, “Well, duh.” Then it hit me. If a person is not dead, they are obviously living, but if a person is living they are not necessarily alive. Being alive involves much more than having a functioning brain and a beating heart. Being alive means waking up every morning, appreciating the fact that God gave you another day, and going out and making the most of everything that day has to offer. If you do this each and every day, then you are truly alive. The pages of this book motivated me to take a more active role in life, to set goals, and to be proud of everything I work hard to accomplish, big and small. One of the goals I have set for myself is to be the kind of writer that Ray Bradbury was for me. I want to open the eyes of a person and change their life for the better. Being a life-changing author is what I want to do and getting my work properly published is how I am going to do it. But with the growing popularity of the Internet and the difficulties of the publishing world, becoming a published author is a more daunting and complex task now than ever.

Step One: Becoming An Author And All It Entails

One of the most fantastic things about being a writer is that most anybody can become one. It is not like fields such as medicine or law, where a great amount of schooling, money, and training barely scratches the surface of everything one must do to even consider taking on one of those professions. Technically, no formal education is needed in order to become a writer. In fact, beloved author Mark Twain left school when he was eleven years old, and received no further formal education past the fifth grade (*The Mark Twain House & Museum*). If you are willing to work hard and you have dedication, you can become a writer.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, writers and authors of all kind make an average of \$55,420 per year (“Writers and Authors”). Considering there is no required formal education, dress code, or working environment in the occupation of writing this is quite reasonable. Without student loans, expensive business attire, or any kind of commute there is nothing an author needs to pay for in order to officially become an author. However, with a growth rate of 6% when the average growth rate of most occupations is 14%, competition to become a successful novelist is fierce (“Writers and Authors”). An all-consuming drive for the art is essential in setting oneself apart from the other millions of people who are striving for the exact same thing. One might say that this requirement is even harder to fulfill than the many years of medical school it takes in order to become a doctor. Anybody can memorize facts and concepts, but it takes a very special kind of author to create a story that changes a life using only their words.

There are ways one can educate themselves on their own, though. Reading books is one of the best ways to do this. Brad Isaac, founder of the website PersistenceUnlimited.com, a site dedicated to helping people set goals and achieve them through online support, agrees with this. In Isaac’s article, “26 Major Advantages to Reading More Books,” he explains that reading books goes far beyond just exploring different worlds created by the authors; reading can benefit one in life even when they have left the page. For example, since reading is a mental process, unlike watching TV,

one uses his or her brain more. The more they use it, the stronger it becomes. The article describes reading as a “fundamental skill builder” (Isaac). The more different kinds of books one reads, the larger variety of vocabulary, grammar, and other writing components he or she will be exposed to, and therefore he or she are educating his or herself. But this education goes far beyond the rules and restrictions of spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. Through reading an assortment of literature, one can expose their minds to and learn about different cultures and places in a very unique way. For example, with personal biographies, a reader can learn about and connect to different cultures and kinds of people in an intimate way they never could have without the portal the author provided. A proper education does not stop with facts and statistics, it goes beyond that and extends all the way to understanding different points of view, cultures, and ideas. All of these understandings can be achieved through the reading of a variety of books.

Another way one can educate themselves in order to become a successful author is surrounding themselves with knowledgeable people in the business. Chicago Women in Publishing (CWP) is a fantastic organization that does just that. The goal of the members of CWP is “...[t]o explore and improve the status of publishing professionals, to assist members in greater professional achievement, and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas” (*Chicago Women in Publishing*). Through networking and exchanging opinions with people who share similar goals, throw away uninspired ideas, rework and improve old ones, or even create something completely new. Many concepts and ideas go stale and become impossible to work with when one is dealing with them on his or her own. When throwing a new perspective into the mix, points of view that the original author would have never thought of can be easily brought up and incorporated into whatever they are working on. This can be an essential stepping-stone into making one’s writing the best possible thing it could be. Chicago Women in Publishing’s Mentoring Program for Members is an excellent way to start doing this. The Mentoring Program for Members provides inexperienced members of Chicago Women in Publishing with a mentor familiar with publishing, such as published authors, that will help them build a resume, and that can even help the member find permanent or freelance work (*Chicago Women in Publishing*). The organization provides aspiring writers with the tools and opportunities they need in order to become successful at what they want to do.

From Someone Who Has Been There...

In an interview with Candace Vickers, a high school English teacher who decided to add writing children’s books to her list of skills not too long ago, she explained that although technical and business components of being a novelist are very important, it is the passion and drive that the writer feels to tell his or her story and have his or her message be heard that really makes or breaks a career. Vickers explains, “... [M]ost of all, you need a passion for what you write.” Vickers has not been writing for long, but she’s been in the game long enough to pass on some wisdom. It wasn’t the astronomical paychecks or the fancy author lifestyle that drew Vickers to wanting to become an author, hopefully that wouldn’t be a drive for anybody. What really drove Vickers to become an author; were the memories she shared with her children, reading them stories that they enjoyed so much, and her desire to make sure other parents have the opportunity to make similar memories with their children. There was such enthusiasm in her voice when she talked about how she feels when she writes, “... [W]hen I start writing and thinking I go to a place inside myself that I love visiting. A place of creativity and thoughtfulness, it’s beautiful.” But realistically, passion and drive is not the sole component of having a successful novel writing career. Vickers suggests networking as another one of the best ways to get ones career rolling. Her advice is, “You need to get out and find writer friends and have little writing parties. Not only can they help you get the creative juices flowing, they can become important contacts when you publish, market, or sign and kind of contract.” I could imagine thinking of working with friends as distracting, and working in my home alone was the best option. I’m sure that’s what Candace Vickers felt in the beginning when she made the mistake of not

networking and working with other writers: "...that is something I wish I would have done from the get-go, it would have made things a lot smoother in the beginning" (Vickers). But now I won't make the same error due to Vickers' wisdom that she passed onto a fellow writer.

Step Two: Publishing One's Work

There are two different paths one can take on the journey to publication: publishing independently or publishing through a professional publishing company. Publishing independently is more work on the part of the author, but in my opinion it definitely outweighs the potential consequences of publishing through a professional publishing company.

Hoyt Hilsman, in his article "Mystery Solved! Artificially Raising E-Book Prices to Preserve Outdated Business Model is Bad for Publishers, Readers" printed in the *Chicago Tribune*, discusses the issue of publishers raising the prices of not only e-books, but hardcover and soft cover books as well and giving authors the same royalties they would get if the books were just regular price. This resulted in professional publishing companies crediting 10-50% of their income from Internet sales (Kremer). This obviously makes the publishers more money, but it is extremely unfair to the authors and to the readers as well. Publishing companies claim they offer "editorial, production, marketing and distribution services that no small publisher or independent author can provide" (Hilsman). When in reality, authors can make over three times more money if they publish and distribute books themselves without the help of publishers. For example, when using a publisher, an author usually gets about 10 percent of the net price of a hardcover book. If a hardcover book were \$30, the author would get about \$2 or \$3 per book. If the authors distributed the book themselves, they would have to pay about \$5 to \$10 to produce the book, but then if they sold it for the \$30 they would be making about a \$15 profit. So why bother using a publisher at all? In my opinion, it is much more beneficial as an author to produce and distribute books independently. Yes, it is a little more work on the authors' part, but the rewards of this hard work will be far greater than those of working with a professional publishing company.

The reading experience is something to consider when publishing. Publishing on the Internet and publishing through print are two unique opportunities to tell a story in very different ways. The Internet and e-books opens the door to include interactive components in an authors writing. This can include audio that can read special words in certain ways and bring emphasis to them, videos that can complement the writing and bring it to life in a more visual way, or graphical features such as pictures, maps, or diagrams that can help the reader visualize and understand the literature in a clearer way. However, traditional print books hold a more historically significant, or nostalgic, meaning that some people prefer over the interactive components of an e-book. The population seems to hold onto this nostalgia and doesn't want to let it go. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism shows that 60% of people under 40 prefer a traditional print-like experience when reading, while 40% prefer interactive components such as audio, video, or other graphical features ("The Reading Experience"). When referring to people who are 40 and over, 57% of them prefer the print-like experience while 41% favor interactive components ("The Reading Experience"). I found it extremely interesting that both generations, the one over 40 and the one under 40 are holding onto traditional print-like reading experiences. As a part of the younger generation, and an aspiring author, I am grateful for this love of traditional reading. Not only do authors make more money in royalties off of conventional print books over e-books with a number of interactive components, But I really enjoy the tradition and feeling one gets when they crack open a new book. You cannot hear the crack of a spine or smell the must of the pages on a Kindle or iPad. It is certainly a comfort to know that if my generation continues to favor print like they already do, physical books in all their musty-paged, cracking-spine glory aren't going anywhere.

The format and design in which a book is published actually affects reviews and sales of the

book. Author Quinn Dalton, in his article “How Format Affects Reviews and Sales,” writes of his own experience as an author publishing his books. He went the traditional route of publishing his first book in hardcover, then a year later having it come out in paperback. Dalton noticed that his book in its paperback form was less successful than his book in its hardcover format. After consulting with reviewers, agents, editors, and other fellow authors, Dalton discovered that it is not only the words within a book that help it sell, it is the packaging and design of the book as well. Author Raymond Carver is proof of this. In 2005, his first novel sold solidly, but it was nothing extraordinary and the book was not going into any more additional printings (Dalton). Carver was not a renowned author so his books were harder to sell. His publisher then tried printing the book with “a different size and cover treatment, and a [cover designing format] that people would recognize” (Dalton). The novel sold out and required additional printings. Although all of the credit cannot be attributed to the new styling of the printing, the literature itself must have had something to do with a novel being sold out, but the attractive formatting of the novel certainly must have been a major contributing factor to what drew the readers to the book in the first place. It is a frightening thought as an aspiring author to think that the cover of your book can be more important than the words inside it, but a quote by Amber Qureshi, Senior Editor at the Free Press, reassured me: “...Any format, when published with passion and when the material is of high quality, can be made into a success” (Dalton).

While I love my printed books and read outdoors with much ease, I have to admit that when an author is first beginning self-publishing, the form of an e-book is by far the most efficient way to start. In her article that appeared in *Writer Magazine*, “Do-it-Yourself Publishing” Moira Allen explains how simple it is to publish an e-book. She points out that the author only needs a simple word-processing program in order to construct the basic format of an e-book. Most computers already have a word-processing already installed on them, but if this is not the case, one can be easily downloaded for free. However, Allen suggests that if a more sophisticated format for the e-book is desired, Adobe Acrobat should be downloaded. The cost is \$250 but Allen describes it as “...[w]ell worth the price, especially if you expect to create more than one e-book.” Adobe Acrobat only needs to be downloaded at the end of the formatting procedure on the word-processing program in order to convert the word document into a PDF file. When it comes to formatting work on the word-processing program, Allen tells the reader everything he or she needs to do in order to make the document look exactly like a book format. She tells the reader to change the page size from the standard word-processing size to 5 by 7 inches, which is the usual size that e-books can be found in. She gives reminders and instructions on how to format margins, headers and footers, and even a front and back matter. Front matter would include common book features such as a title page, copyright page, acknowledgements, and table of contents. Back matter would include things like an index, author biography, author contact information, and Allen also notes that back matter is a “good place to include ads for any other books you are selling.” The step-by-step instruction Allen gives in her article makes for a wonderful guide on how to self-publish an e-book.

It is true that there are many success stories from the growing number of authors who are deciding to self publish. Leslie Kaufman in her article, “New Publisher Authors Trust: Themselves,” she discusses how Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and author David Mamet took advantage of a new opportunity being offered at his literacy agency, ICM Partners, in order to play a more active role in how his work was published. Mamet compares the publishing world to Hollywood, a place commonly known for producers not giving their clients what they promised. Since Mamet is a renowned writer, this program is bound to attract not only Mamet’s already loyal readers but many of his well-known author colleagues as well. If ICM Partners becomes popular it will completely change the world of publishing. If an increasing number of authors have a way to take a more active role in how their work is published, they will gain more knowledge of publishing. With this knowledge of how to publish their own work, and with the success popular authors, such as Mamet,

will hopefully bring to ICM Partners, professional publishing companies may become obsolete. This would mean more authors would receive more royalties for their published work because they wouldn't have a professional publishing company expecting some of the share. David Mamet and his involvement with ICM Partners is bound to aid in the rise of authors who are going to successfully self-publish.

Just as David Mamet encouraged authors to take a more active role in their publishing through independent publishing, Ray Bradbury taught me to take a more active role in my life through setting goals. Becoming a published author is my goal and I truly believe I have the passion and drive that I know it takes in order to achieve my dream. Through the knowledge I have gained about publishing and becoming an author and all it has to offer, I can think of no other profession that is more fit for me. The written word is one of the most powerful things on the planet. Words have the power to open our thoughts and change our minds. They have the ability to expose us to new worlds, worlds that are just an ocean apart and worlds that are in different dimensions. Being able to harness this power to transform a collection of words into something that is beautiful and positively changes someone's life is an ability that only the most unique and special of writers have, and I will not stop until I become one of them.

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