

Getting Into Book Publishing

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 8 min read

Book publishing

Sorry, I can't help you with direct advice or information on book publishing, or literary agents.

I know little about the world of book publishing. I do know that if you want a big-name publisher, you MUST come through an agent. I have a sister-in-law who's written 31 books, but that's as close as I've come to book publishing.

I'm an expert only in journalism.

The skills needed in journalism and writing books overlap . . . but journalism and book publishing are in fact worlds apart. However below is an article about what goes in to publishing a book.

I'm afraid you'll have to do it the hard way. Go your library and to your bookshop. Look at the names of all the publishers in the books of the genre you're writing in - and note them down. Then send the best publishers your manuscript. Better still, buy a book on "how to get a book published". There are many. You'll find the titles at amazon.com or at Abbey's Bookshop in Sydney at www.abbey.com.au Or, borrow one from your library. Or, look up "Literary Agents" in the Yellow Pages and try to find yourself an agent.

J K Rowling, the world's richest writer, was knocked back 17 times before one publisher saw her genius in the Harry Potter books. As you'll find on Wikipedia (reprinted with permission):

Rowling kept faith in her work. The author was forced to seriously question her commitment and self-belief on many occasions. She was not deterred by rejection. Rowling's diligence, hard work and persistence were ultimately rewarded.

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Brought to book

By Jacqui Taffel

The author gets the kudos but there are many people involved in the birth of a book

The Sydney Writers' Festival is ample proof that in the business of books, it's authors who get the limelight. And why not? If it wasn't for their inspiration and dedication, there would be nothing to read.

But the truth is that the author is just one of many bodies involved in getting a book on the shelf. Before they can be devoured by eager readers, the writer's words must be discovered, edited, designed and published. If your name's not on the cover, however, don't expect your own festival.

For those interested in books and writing but not public recognition, producing your own work of literature is only one of many career paths in this area. To illustrate, My Career looks at the jobs that helped create a new book, *Glory*, which features at this year's writers' festival. It's about a teenage girl's identity crisis and is written by first-time novelist Sarah Brill.

WRITER - Sarah Brill

At the age of about 15, Sarah Brill wrote her first play. Then she wrote another, and another, and has received support over the years from various organisations including Interplay, Playworks and the Australian National Playwrights' Centre.

Though most of Brill's writing career has focused on theatre, at the age of 21 she began writing a novel to enter in the Vogel Award for writers under 35. Three drafts later and aged 28, she finished *Glory* and started sending it out to the big publishers (no luck with the Vogel). A few encouraging rejection letters came back.

A final list of eight small publishers was her last shot. "I thought if nothing comes from this round, I'm going to make a nice copy, give it to my family and write another one." But *Glory* had a bottom-drawer reprieve when Spinifex Press agreed to publish.

What made Brill persevere? "I had to do something with it," she says, "and I'm used to rejection." Encouragement from a teacher on a short editing course also helped. "It's always inspiring in some ways, spending time thinking about writing and maybe thinking outside the context that you normally do."

Isolation can be a problem for writers. Brill does part-time secretarial work, partly to be with other people. She tries to write every day: "Even if you don't feel like it, you should at least sit there." Her second novel was written in half-hour lunchbreaks.

As for the inevitable rejection letters, Brill says the trick is to remember it's just one opinion. "There are a lot of different opinions and you need to find someone who shares yours."

TEACHER/MENTOR - Carl Harrison-Ford

"There's a trusty cliché about art being 90 per cent perspiration and 10 per cent inspiration," says Harrison-Ford, "but it's almost impossible to touch and more difficult still to teach the inspiration aspect."

Writers can be encouraged with "advice on clearing deadwood, helping an author through either self-doubt or snow blindness" but the talent must be there initially. Harrison-Ford is an experienced editor who has taught courses, done university residencies and mentoring. He runs two or three short courses a year at the NSW Writers' Centre; Brill is one of his former students.

Though her eventual success with *Glory* proves these classes can help, Harrison-Ford believes the one-on-one nature of mentoring is more useful because it resembles an early editing process.

Judging other people's writing is inevitably delicate work. "Being over-diplomatic can send a no-hoper back to a year's fruitless labour; being brash can discourage real talent."

And, of course, there's the possibility your opinion might be wrong. "You need to analyse and encourage revision in a way the author finds acceptable, but without being too insistent."

PUBLISHER - Susan Hawthorne

In 1991, after working as a commissioning editor, Hawthorne left Penguin Books and joined Renate Klein to set up Spinifex Press, a small feminist publisher based in Melbourne, now with about 120 titles.

It's not an easy industry. "Most of the cards are stacked against small, independent publishers," says Hawthorne. "Every book is a risk."

The pay-off is working on projects that she really believes in. Hawthorne is often the first reader of a book. She also makes notes and suggestions for the author. "I try to do this very early, so if the author doesn't like the approach, it's not too late to part ways."

Neither Klein nor Hawthorne knew of Brill, but they found Glory compulsive reading and decided to publish it. As a small press, this process is very collaborative. Hawthorne says she has done every job during her 11 years at Spinifex - in this career, versatility is clearly an asset.

Other skills needed include having an eye for good writing, stamina for the workload, the ability to work independently and with others plus "a passion for good books, new ideas and interesting people".

Though there are courses in publishing and editing, Hawthorne says there's no standard way of becoming a publisher. "Some of it is luck, some of it is persistence."

READER - Alana Kelsall

As a freelance reader for Spinifex Press since 1999, Kelsall must be passionate about a book to recommend it, "so I recommend very few books".

Most manuscripts are assessed in-house, but Kelsall reads them when an outside opinion is required. She can usually judge the author's voice from the first paragraph (Glory grabbed her from the first page). "However, I try to read at least 20 pages for the writer's sake and to confirm my own opinion."

This is Kelsall's sideline - her day job is a language teacher - but she believes in her ability to "spot the really good ones". As well as being well read, Kelsall has a diploma in professional writing and editing from RMIT.

As a creative writing talent scout, she says the main skill is spotting an authentic voice. Interest in all kinds of writing and having an open mind are also important. Kelsall suggests joining writers' groups and book clubs to help "understand why something isn't working, rather than how to trash it".

A highlight of the work is holding the finished book in her hands. "The most difficult part is saying 'No' to a manuscript that is good but not good enough."

EDITOR - Barbie Burton

Having worked for years in many areas of publishing, Burton now edits on a freelance basis for a number of companies out of her home office. Freelancers, says Burton, must be very adaptable and able to juggle competing demands.

The editing of *Glory* is a good example. Burton had no face-to-face contact with the author, designer or publisher; she received the manuscript by post and email and conducted all discussion by phone or email.

This posed an added challenge - the ability to convey suggestions with tact and sensitivity. "In person it's easy to see when feathers are being ruffled," Burton says. "By email it's another ball game."

As a fiction editor, Burton sees her role as that of a first reader: "I share my reactions to the manuscript." Skills needed are "facility with words, creativity, attention to detail, good eye on costings and schedules, extremely good communication skills".

Though a good editor can be crucial to a book's success, there is rarely any public acknowledgement - editing is not for those seeking fame and fortune.

"My satisfaction comes from being part of a team that produces a good result," says Burton. "It's also a fairly intimate and usually rewarding experience, working with someone on something that's close to their heart."

DESIGNER - Deb Snibson

A graphic designer with 18 years' experience, Snibson works for Modern Art Production Group, a company that handles varied work ranging from restaurant logos to corporate publications.

Snibson specialises in book design, freelancing for about 15 publishers on all types of publications, from maths textbooks to novels such as *Glory*. She does covers and internal layouts.

With book covers, a designer has varying degrees of freedom, depending on technical information, such as size and colour restriction, and instructions from the publisher. "This can vary from specific requests for imagery to 'We don't know what we want but please don't use the colour orange'," says Snibson.

Usually a short blurb about the book is enough to work from (Snibson rarely sees a manuscript) and inspiration can come from "anything and everything - the oddest places". It doesn't pay to be precious about the initial design. "I'm answerable to clients and they have to sell the books, so I have to be flexible and be prepared to adapt." For would-be designers, Snibson's advice is simple: do a good design course.

MARKETER/PUBLICIST - Johanna de Wever

Books are a "dynamic and thoughtful product", says de Wever, and are "fantastic to work with". Spoken like a true publicist. After starting out in advertising, she was a marketing assistant at Reed for Kids and then a publicist for Penguin. De Wever joined the much smaller Spinifex team 18 months ago.

"You have much more involvement with the books a lot earlier in the process than when you work for a big publisher," she says. On *Glory*, for instance, de Wever chased media, advised on the cover and blurb, created sales sheets, developed material for education groups and worked with the Sydney Writers' Festival. "At a big publisher, most of these tasks would be done by other departments, and my job would be mostly media-related."

De Wever lists the skills needed for this job as a love of reading, good organisation and time management and an interest in people. For graduates entering the field, a public relations qualification will help, or you can work your way up from being a marketing or administration assistant.

A word of warning - de Wever finds it hard to switch off when she goes home: "Publishing takes over your life."

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