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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Confessions of a First-Time Self-Published Novelist (and a Word to Monograph Authors)

by **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

The voice mail was direct: “I hate to disappoint you, but the ending of your novel is contrived.” The meaning of the words was unmistakable. Three days earlier, my agent (40 years earlier he’d sold a non-fiction book of mine on the **Rockefeller** family to **Simon & Schuster**, so he was “my” agent) had told me that he found the novel, a psychological mystery called *In the Grip*, “haunting” and “wanted to represent me,” meaning that he would try to sell this new book to a publisher. But now he was telling me that he’d changed his mind, even after he and his wife had been editing the manuscript line-by-line.

When we spoke a few minutes later, it was clear that we disagreed not only about whether *In the Grip*’s denouement was contrived, but also about whether the protagonist-narrator’s paranoia was justified and also about the identity of a killer. It didn’t appear to me that my agent was interested in my actually changing such plot points, although when he’d asked me three days earlier if I’d be willing to do any rewriting (after spending ten months getting the novel into final shape through multiple drafts of some sections), I’d said yes. So we talked pleasantly for 20 minutes or so, until he told me that his wife was calling him upstairs. It was five p.m., dinner time for someone in his eighties, I surmised.

I didn’t change the denouement, but I did change the novel’s epilogue, especially the very end, when the narrator faces his future, and I sent the last few pages to my agent. He liked the changes, but didn’t budge in his unwillingness to go further with the book. I wrote back that I’d had the story’s arc in mind from the beginning and believed in it. I didn’t hear from him again.

Now What?

I took stock of my situation. I’d written eight books prior to *In the Grip*. In addition to the **Rockefeller** family book for **Simon & Schuster**, I’d written an engineering monograph that **Wiley** published in the late Sixties. One year in the mid-Seventies, I wrote six paperbacks — three novels and three bios — under several pseudonyms (**Mike Curtis**, **Pat Aldrich**, and **Jim Burke**, if you want to know) for a small New York paperback publisher. Since the 1980s, I’ve published nearly a score of engineering handbooks with **Wiley**, **McGraw-Hill**, and **Elsevier**, many in multiple editions.

Except for the **Rockefeller** book, I hadn’t used an agent. I hadn’t needed to. In the case of the monograph, a **Wiley** traveler had contacted a **Tufts** mechanical engineering professor named **John Sununu** (yes, *that John Sununu*), who knew my boss at the **MIT Instrumentation Lab**, and the three of us agreed to write the monograph. When my two co-authors dropped out of the project, I finished the book myself, and **Wiley** happily published it. As for the firm that published the six paperbacks, my former wife had been an editor there, and we’d co-written a novel (alternating chapters) in a few weeks to finance a European trip. They bought one book from me going solo and then five more until I took a job offer as an acquisitions editor at (no surprise) **Wiley**. My engineering degrees attracted the editors in the handbook department, and they signed me to produce a new *Mechanical Engineers’*

Handbook. Its success opened doors later at **McGraw-Hill** and **Elsevier**. I could write, I could edit/package acceptably. I’d had an easy time getting published — too easy a time, if I would be honest with myself.

Even getting my agent — this was back in the mid-1970s, before the six paperbacks and before I took the job at **Wiley** — had seemed easy. I’d been given his name and sent him a proposal for the **Rockefeller** book that comprised a couple of dozen pages. When he told me he’d gotten bogged down on page three, I’d cut out pages three through nine and re-sent the material. The next thing I heard was: “I think I can sell this.” He did sell *Rockefeller Power* to **Simon & Schuster**. (There was a Spanish language edition, with photographs, and later, when **President Ford** nominated **Nelson Rockefeller** for vice president, a paperback with a picture of Rocky on the cover.) My agent couldn’t sell a second proposal — for an engineering cum environmental book called *Unnatural Disasters*, which I like to think was simply ahead of its time. In any case, the ground rules were different back then. Unlike it is now for the most part, you didn’t need the right credentials to get an agent, much less a publisher, to look at a proposal for a non-fiction book.

On My Own

Unmoored now from my agent, I had no illusions about how difficult it would be for me to find another one to represent *In the Grip*, no matter how good I thought it was. The story takes time to develop and the book is longer

than some mystery publishers are willing to deal with. More importantly, there are gazillions of mystery novels looking for agents and publishers. Nevertheless, I started to contact agents who I could identify on the Internet as interested in mystery fiction — and who would accept queries electronically.

I learned that I had to concoct a query letter, whose main element is the sort of teaser that appears on the front flap of a hardcover book jacket. (I initially gathered this information from what appeared to me to be an authoritative Website. Trying to find an actual agent who agreed that I was approaching a query letter properly was fruitless.) Then I had to cope with the slightly different submission requirements for each agent. Several warned that if their submission requirements weren’t followed to the letter, forget it. A few agents said they might reply quickly (some of them did), some said it would take a couple of months for them to reply, while others said that if they didn’t reply, it likely meant that they weren’t interested.

I sent queries to three dozen agents, in what I thought would be the first round. Eventually, about half responded, mostly with a form letter that was no help in letting me know why they found the novel wanting — but served their purpose because there was no doubt that it was their last word. One did express interest and asked for the first 50 pages, then responded that although the novel contained good plot points, specific cultural references were dated (I came across one of those references in a current **Ruth Rendell** novel, but never mind). Par for the course, I figured.

Deciding to Self-Publish

I know full well that other authors have endured many more rejections before landing an agent, much less a publisher, but I no longer had the stomach for the process. So it was time, I decided, to give self-publishing a try. I did a bit of research and decided to go with **Amazon CreateSpace**. I have no great love for the leviathan, but this seemed like the easiest and most efficient route to take for several reasons. First, the cost looked manageable — well under \$1,000 dollars, by my first estimate — far, far less than a traditional vanity publisher would charge. Second, I could order only as many copies as I wanted or needed. A vanity publisher would fill my garage with boxes of books. Third, it was easy to make the novel available worldwide as both a print-on-demand paperback and an eBook. Fourth, it looked like I would be able to set appropriate prices for both versions.

Based on the **CreateSpace** menu for turning a manuscript into a print-on-demand paperback and a Kindle-ready eBook (which

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seem to be roughly in line with prices from other Internet-based companies offering the same services), I decided to supply them with a PDF that I wanted them to tweak with headers and page numbers in ways I couldn't do myself. Based on my erstwhile agent's instructions, I'd already formatted the manuscript to look like it came out of a typewriter. It was easy to set the pages up for a PDF that looked like an actual 6 x 9 book. (CreateSpace specified gutter and margin requirements based on page count.) For the cover, my son-in-law and daughter did a photo shoot in woods near their home in Providence that yielded a picture with sufficient depth and mystery. (He photographed her from the back in a dress and high heels, we photoshopped her hair blonde, and then rendered the color photo in sepia.) I uploaded the photo and copy that could be used for the cover, which they put into final form.

All told, I spent about \$600 to make the novel ready for sale both in print and electronically. I was limited as to how many changes I could make to the book's interior or exterior without making Amazon's cash register ring again, but there seemed to be no limit to the number of times personnel in their North Charleston, SC office would come to the phone. Of course, I was dealing with the simplest kind of book — straight text, with equal line spacing. A monograph with illustrations, footnotes, etc., might present such complexity that additional services would be required. In addition, I have enough line-by-line editing experience for a novel (and it was aided by my erstwhile agent's editing). I recognize that I'm not competent to copyedit my technical books. A monograph author might have to purchase such service. So it might cost somewhat more than \$600 to make a monograph print-ready, but not that much more, it seems to me.

Marketing and Distribution

When it comes to marketing and distribution — key factors in making a book succeed financially — traditional publishers have bigger muscles than an individual author, although there are tales about how self-published authors have achieved astonishing results with unorthodox methods. Normally, the power a traditional publisher can wield derives from its imprimatur, although, I'm told, logos are losing some of their luster. Perhaps most importantly, publishers can get their books into brick-and-mortar bookstores, which isn't something that a self-published author can easily match. Your local independent bookstore might take three copies, say, on consignment at a 40% discount, but it will likely be shelved in a "local authors" ghetto. Some owners will treat you well and even allow you to put up a poster. I did run into one store that required a \$25 stocking fee, and I was told in no uncertain terms that my novel's shelf time would be limited.

Publishers can get their books into the offices of leading review services — *Kirkus*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, and *Choice* — and of publications and other

media outlets that cover and review books. Self-published authors can purchase reviews in *Kirkus* and *PW*.

Another potential advantage some traditional publishers offer is the wherewithal to deploy substantial publicity and advertising resources. Outfits like CreateSpace do offer press-release services, but that's something you can do yourself, it seems to me. Or you can buy such services elsewhere. My wife has been able to get articles about my novel written by reporters for small local weeklies in both our upstate New York hometown and on the South Carolina island where we spend winters. We haven't had much luck with the larger dailies or local TV stations, although I have been on a call-in program on our local listener-supported radio station to talk about self-publishing.

A publisher can have a substantial Web presence, which might do more for monograph sales to visitors looking for books in particular subjects than for fiction, say. And in recent years, of course, publishers have been talking about and using social media to promote books. Their authors have Websites and are encouraged to use social media and otherwise publicize their books on their own.

Authors of monographs should be able to reach a core market. In the first place, monographs appeal to well-defined communities of students, researchers, and practitioners, who need information in their daily work. Most authors of monographs have address books with names of colleagues (in addition to family members, friends, and classmates, of course). You can find more people who might be interested in your book on social media or with straightforward Internet searches. It's not overly burdensome to send a marketing letter together with a table of contents, or even a sample chapter, to hundreds of email addresses. I know. I've done that.

With all the handbooks I've put together over the years, I have a substantial address book. LinkedIn has proved invaluable, much more so than Facebook, in helping me find people I've encountered during my professional and even personal life. But when it comes to address books and social media, a novel isn't like a monograph. As far as I can tell, reading my novel won't help anyone I know make more money or improve his or her performance at work. One thing I have learned though is, Try everyone. People you most expect are dying to read your novel may not even buy it — no matter that the eBook price is only \$2.99 — while people you least expect to read it may do so and leave a review on Amazon, to boot. In any case, there have been enough *In the Grip* buyers that I've passed a self-imposed milestone.

Getting Reviewed

Beyond Amazon and Goodreads, there are review sites for mystery novels on the Internet. But they can be hard to crack. Unlike a scholarly monograph, a novel is but a pea in a massive kettle of soup made up of the mind-numbing amount of fiction currently available and ever-increasing. The problem is making someone want to dip a spoon in

the kettle, find the pea, give it a taste — and then tell everyone what that was like. If your novel has been brought out by a publisher, so reviewers know it's been vetted by multiple gatekeepers, the pea is floating on the surface. Otherwise, unless a novel is written to appeal to a dedicated fan base, it's a pea that's somewhere beneath the surface. You can spoon it up yourself and present it to a review site, and I've done that, but there haven't been any takers. Is it that they're not interested in novels of sexual obsession? I don't know.

Final Advice

If there's a bottom line here, it's this: I have to admit that I would be leery of advising any author — of a novel or a monograph — to do as I did, break off a search for a publisher, and leap headlong into the brave new world of self-publishing, even though I was fully aware when I made the decision that, at least for the time being, the ability to put books in physical stores and libraries and get them reviewed and talked about in the media are all vital in making sales and acquiring readers. I understand that while publishers' logos aren't as attractive as they once were, they still must mean *something* to booksellers and librarians, and to reviewers and the media, as well. (When I visited my local library to speak with the person who worked with book clubs, she offered no help. She did ask whether I wanted to donate a copy of the novel or sell it to the library. I took the tax-deduction option. It would have been rude to have asked for the \$15 cover price.)

The silver lining nowadays is that if you can't find an agent or a publisher who believes in your book and thinks it's salable, you're not left out in the cold. Of course, you could always spend a lot of money with an old-fashioned vanity press. But now, for a reasonable price, you can self-publish, generate your own publicity, find readers on the Internet, and garner reviews on Amazon and Goodreads.

But no matter how nice those reviews are, they can't compare to the over-the-top quotes from other writers and academics that publishers put on dust jackets and covers and, for the fortunate few books, feature in prominent ads in print publications, whose pages pretty much belong to traditional publishers. (Big-name authors who have abandoned traditional publishers may be an exception.) Let's face it, there's nothing like an interview on NPR or a review in *The New York Times*.

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful not only to all of *In the Grip*'s reviewers, but also to everyone who's read the novel. I even have warm feelings for the fellow who told me that he found the book "a hard read" but still liked the way I brought everything together in the last fifty pages. "Unlike most of the books I read," he said, "I won't forget this one." I was thrilled.

Still, even after all the books I've published, I miss seeing over-the-top quotes in an ad for *In the Grip* in some major publication. Just half a page in *The New York Times Book Review*. That's all I'd ask for. I know I ought to be satisfied with what I've achieved with this novel. But I have to confess that — before reality set in — I'd hoped for more. 🐷