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# **First Aid for Dying Books**

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## Introduction

“To everything there is a time, and season and a place under heaven... a time to live, a time to die...” This ancient Eastern philosophy unfortunately also applies to the life cycle of a book. If you find yourself holding a book that’s gasping its last breaths in your helpless hands, this handy little e-book may be the answer to your fervent prayers.

The good news is, a book of any age can usually be resurrected. Maybe not to best seller status (although there are the occasional surprises) but certainly to admirable sales.

Worst case, if you’re a self-published author or a starry-eyed zealot who bought remainder stock from the publisher when they reverted your rights, this e-book will help you make a lot of extra room in your storage shed or garage.

**YES!** You can turn your book inventory into money! Even if your publisher, whom you doubtless long ago deemed lackadaisical about helping sell your book, has all your inventory, there’s **STILL** hope. In fact, until the last copy is mulched and turned into McDonald’s cups, you have a chance of profiting from your book.

It is my hope that this e-book will help you accomplish your goal. In order to understand the many-veiled face of traditional publishing, you need to learn a little bit of history. Authors imagine that publishers make their livings by selling books. This is preposterous! I’ve been an agent for more than fifteen years now, and I assure you that selling books is not the primary value a publisher provides the world. There are ten stages of a book’s life:

1. Concept Development
2. Development of a sales tool for the concept (proposal, etc.)
3. Sale of the project’s license
4. Development of project
5. Editing
6. Printing

7. Distribution
8. Promotion
9. Sale
10. Remaindering

Here's the symbiotic reality: the publisher cannot develop on its own as many books as it needs to create enough revenue to stay in business. Therefore, as the author you provide a needed service. You provide the raw material, the fodder that feeds the enormous multi-million dollar publishing industry. In theory, as the author you either hire someone or actually write the book yourself, thus fulfilling steps 1-4.

Chances are good that by the time you finish your book, you will have completely lost your wits. Therefore, it is best to leave Editing, Step Five, to others who can look at your material with an unvarnished eye. Let's assume for argument's sake that you will allow someone better qualified than you to do the "line edit" (grammar, punctuation, etc) and the "macro edit" (Does the concept develop logically? What's missing?).

The publisher will perform these tasks within reason. At some point thereafter, they perform the easiest task of all: Step Six, printing. It costs almost nothing and takes little effort to print a book. A huge conglomerate like Random House can get a basic cut-size paperback for under a dollar per unit. As a self-published author, you can get the same still for less than \$3 in most cases. Simple. Pay the money and someone will slap your words on paper and glue them together.

But now, the author is confronted with the crux of the entire matter. Point Six: Distribution. This means getting the books into stores. Lots of stores. If the book isn't in stores, people can't order it. And don't tell me this "Well, people can get it off Amazon." You can't browse the different genre titles very easily at Amazon. You CAN get a book you know you want, or one whose title is keyed into your search word, but not a general impulse buy.

To make matters worse, your publisher can get it into chain stores – Barnes & Noble, Borders, etc. You probably cannot. In fact, if this Magnum Opus is your one and only, you pretty much can count on NOT getting it into the chains. If it's not in the chains, you can rationalize, "Well, people can ORDER it at the chains." News flash: American Booksellers Association research indicates that 79% of books ordered in stores are NEVER picked up. The people bought it elsewhere, forgot why they wanted it or moved on to another topic of interest.

If that's true, and it is, then there are some harsh truths that may account for your less-than-stellar book sales. These truths include that your publisher or your self-published

***"...Research indicates that 79% of books ordered in stores are NEVER picked up."***

book may not have gotten good enough distribution, so that those poor folk out there who DID want it couldn't easily get it. The next truth: Distribution is NOT the same as warehousing.

When books are printed by a real publisher, they typically go to Ingram, the big distributor for books in the USA. This is the Central Clearinghouse for books. From their warehouses, books are shipped to other distribution centers for the chain stores themselves, for smaller clearinghouses or even to the independent bookstores themselves. (An independent bookstore is every bookstore that is NOT part of a chain.)

***\*\*\*This shipping from A to B to Consumer is why the "publication date" and available date for most books is at least two weeks apart\*\*\****

Distribution is frankly best left to publishers. There are independent distributors of high repute: Baker & Taylor, Greenleaf, Publishers Group West, and others, but these have clout commensurate with the power of the authors/titles they are currently representing. Some only handle multi-title real bona fide new publishers, not one-book self-published authors. And some of these represent so many books for distribution that their catalog is sort of watered down with junk. Differentiating the quality of your book amongst the muck is a bit of a challenge.

So one valid excuse you can use to determine WHY your book is dying in your loving arms could be “Poor Distribution.” That’s a very, very likely cause of premature aging and death. Let me tell you what’s normal, and then you can determine if your book got a “Fair Shot” or not. (P.S. – Less than a third of the +167,000 books published each year in the USA get a “fair shot.” Them’s the breaks.)

### **Normal Distribution**

Normally, a big house (Random, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster) prints a “lay-down” of X thousand copies of a book. This number is determined by “pre-sales” – which is how many copies the reps (sales representatives who visit the chains and some influential independent bookstores) were able to get orders for BEFORE the book was printed.

For an average nonfiction book, this number will likely be between 2,500 and 10,000 copies. I don’t know what’s normal for fiction because I don’t handle fiction. (There’s not much money in it at all, unless you represent a blockbuster talent and they aren’t that common!)

So the publisher gets orders for 2,500 books from the stores. This means someone somewhere is going to stock or inventory 2,500 copies of the book. They will print perhaps 3,000 to fill this order and hope for a miracle.

These copies are printed and shipped. Out of 3,000, about 1,500 will go to the chain’s distribution centers. The other thousand will go to Ingram to await sprinkling into the

Independents (of which there are fewer each year). The final 500 will sit in crates in the publisher's warehouse for a little while, awaiting the happy day when either they can unload them on a bookstore or you buy the remainder copy.

This would make you happy if you knew the publisher was doing this. If you're a typical author, you'd be thinking, "Heck, once Oprah calls me back, they'll have to RUSH back to press to print another 100,000 copies!" Crusty publishing cynics like me just smile knowingly and look at our shoes. It's hope that drives authors. God Bless Hopeful Authors!

These books are now yanked out of their boxes and slung up on the shelves two or three at a time by minimum wage bookstore employees who dream of being authors, poets, musicians or electrical engineers.

Here's the MOST IMPORTANT FACT you'll ever learn about publishing: **Your books are there on consignment!**

***YOUR BOOKS ARE DISTRIBUTED ON CONSIGNMENT!***

***(Unless you're a famous author already)***

Barnes and Noble AND Ed's New & Used Bookshop have about 120 days to PAY for the books they have on the shelves right now. Fascinating! Guess what Ed and Mr. B&N will do on day 119 if the book hasn't sold?

Ssssh! Are you sure you want to know?

They slip them back into a box and ---→ ship them back to wherever they got them ←---  
In some cases, postage paid!!!

## **This is NOT GOOD for authors!**

Too bad. Too late. By the time most authors figure out what's going on and get over the rush of thinking Oprah really is about to return their call (Hint: She's not) their whole 119 days are OVER. The new books are coming in, the old ones are getting reduced and piled on the back shelf which is cheaper than returning them, or they are getting returned and prepared for their life as recycled paper bags at grocery stores.

There's your life work. The book that it took you four years to conceive and write. You had 119 days to be impressive. Now, your publisher barely remembers your name, your publisher's sales team forgot you ever existed, the bookstores have you in their archives, and your agent hopes you won't call to whine about how publishing works.

I'm an agent. I know.

Sobering, isn't it?

And you paid \$20 for this e-book hoping I was going to lie to you, didn't you?

So WHY is it like this? You won't believe the truth. The first time I heard it, I was incredulous. I checked it out with people older and wiser than me in the business, they verified it, and I'm sharing it with you here.

## **O Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?**

Back in the Depression, book publishers had a big problem. People couldn't afford life's critical necessities like food, clothing and books. Since this was before Mr. Barnes or Mr. Noble started their behemoth chain, books were only sold through independents. And the number of independents was going down fast. Businesses were closing right and left. No one was buying books.

Left with the stark prospect of their own bankruptcy because they had nowhere to sell their books, innovative publishers came up with a solution: let the bookstores have the



books on consignment, give them a long time to sell them (120 days) and let them return what they didn't sell for cash or credit.

That was in the 1920s. This is now. Things haven't changed much. Now, there are lots more books published each year – like 167,000 or so. About half of those are self-published.

These challenges to any one title's success mean that it's time for you to consider the **Single Most Important Part** of your role as author. Point Number Seven: PROMOTION.

Promotion is when you, the author, get on a TV show or a radio program, when you write an article or create some sort of media or public interest in your book. Some things are more effective than others, and we'll examine those, but overall, PROMOTION is the secret to making sure YOUR book doesn't/didn't get returned or marked for discount after those brief 119 days!

### **As your book stands at the fork in the road...**

Or rather, as it sits trembling with anticipation on the bookstore shelf, it has two directions to go. Back in the box or to the discount table OR out the door with a new owner.

Think of your book as the puppies in the box outside the supermarket, looking for a "good home." A \$14.95 cover price for the sum total of your knowledge on this topic is sort of like "Free to a Good Home." Imagine that each book in the bookstore, like each puppy in the box, will ideally go somewhere where it is cherished, admired, loved and perhaps even read and benefited from. (Few books bought actually get read, especially not all the way through. Think about your own bookshelf.)

In order to make your book the one that all the nice people want to take home, you need to make sure they know your book is there and most importantly, know how your book solves their problem or improves their life.

In order to achieve that, you have to sprinkle awareness about your book to the greatest number of qualified consumers possible.

This creates the most important term in the entire publishing industry, the phrase of jargon that determines every other aspect, the one Goal that every author, publisher and the 40-60 people in between your idea and the consumer buying a book have to hope for to make their entire lives work. The term is **sell-through**.

**Sell-through** means books that leave the stores with happy new owners. Or even miserable new owners, as long as they paid. You want to sell-through the stores as many copies of your book as you can. This determines whether or not you make money, whether the publisher makes money and whether or not you get a shot at writing another book someday, assuming you want to do so.

Sell-through helps your book NOT get remaindered. It helps your book not go back in that dark box and become fast food wrappers.

Assuming you are ready to SAVE a book that's dying, or RESURRECT a book that's long dead, self-published, under-published, over-printed, or just plain dull, read on! We're about to roll up our sleeves and begin the fun part!

Revive the sales of your under promoted book no matter how long it has been on the market.

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