

Beat Odds Sell Manuscript to New York Publisher

How to Beat the Odds and Sell Your Manuscript to a Big New York Publisher

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BAM

How to beat the Odds
And
Sell your manuscript
To a Big
New York Publisher

BY
CYN MOBLEY

***BAM How to Beat the Odds and Sell Your Manuscript
to a Big New York Publisher***

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Intro: Reality Check

Are you sure this is what you want?

Here's the first of many questions: why? Why do you want to be published by a big New York house? It sounds like a silly question, but it's really not, because different writers have different reasons for wanting to see their words in print.

Here are a few thoughts and options.

I want to see my words in print.

Tons of options. You don't need a big New York publisher.

I want to change the world.

Start changing the world. THEN write your book. Follow Al Gore's plan: get elected VP and invent something important, like the Internet. I'm serious. For nonfiction books, which these sorts often are, you need a platform first. You need fans, followed and perhaps your own cult FIRST. Then you need a book.

I want to be rich and famous.

Go to law school. The average income for a freelance writer is around \$5,000. Royalties on books range from 5%-15% of cover price. Average print runs in SF, for instance, run 2000-5000. For hard covers, the first print run may be as low as 1000 copies. It will take a year or two for your book to make it to the bookstores.

Here's what you need to know about big publishers and royalties and advances. Read this carefully, run the numbers, and then decide if this is really what you want.

What you'll make

Assuming you get an agent—and just for fun, let's assume your agent sells everything she reps—you're in for a rude awakening when the royalty statements start coming in.

Here are fairly standard royalty rates. You should know these.

Hardcover and trade paperback (that's what you might think of as a big paperback)

First 5,000 copies	10%
Second 5,000 copies	12.5%
More than 10,000 copies	15%

Mass market (that's the pocket-sized paperback)

First 100,000 copies	4-8%
More than 100,000	6-10%

Now, before you start multiplying your theoretical print run by your hypothetical royalty rate and coming up with answers that have you buying a summer home in Palm Beach, there are a few more things you need to know about royalties.

- Sell-through: what percent of your print run actually sells. Fifty percent is golden.
- The booksellers have up to one year to return unsold copies to the publisher for full credit, so you won't know for at least a year how many books were actually sold.
- When the publishing company calculates royalties, it will take the number shipped, multiply it by a theoretical sell through, then HOLD BACK a significant percentage of that as an allowance against returns. That allowance will be gradually released over the life of the book.

Don't multiply yet. We need to talk about more of that depressing reality stuff.

But what about my big advance?

What, you think they just shoot darts at a board to figure out what your advance will be? No, not at all. You need to know those royalty percentages and one other factor to calculate your probable advance. In fact, once you know what they're offering, you can reverse-engineer the whole thing to figure out what your first print run is.

Here's how it works: most publishers, and certainly the big New York ones, have "The List". The List is composed of the titles they're publishing in a particular season, and the titles are ranked. There's an A title, a B title, and then the rest of the titles. There may even be a "Super A" or there may be several B releases—the exact configuration will change.

The A and B titles get more of a push than the other midlist titles do. The publisher most probably has space in the racks at major non-bookstore outlets, such as Walmart and grocery stores, and the A and B list titles get those slots. Same thing with endcap positions. Same thing with promotions to bookstores and sales material provided to the commissioned sales force. The point is, whatever they call it, you want to be high on the list.

You would very much *like* to be an A release.

Your editor, working with your publisher, has a pretty good idea of how the pre-sales orders will be for the A release, the B-release and each midlist book. Hey, they do this for a living. They know how their buyers are going to react to titles, or at least they think they do.

From here on out, there are several factors that, taken together, will determine what you're offered as an advance. First, preorders. That's how many books the major chains and distributors and independents will order when the sales force presents the list.

Second, the print run. The first print run is normally a multiple of the preorders, and the number varies from publisher to publisher. It can be a very small multiple of the preorders—say, 1.1 times preorders—or it can be somewhat larger, perhaps almost two times preorders. That's the ballpark of values.

Third, sell-through. That's what percentage of the first print run will actually sell. Remember, the booksellers have up to one year to return the books for full credit.

In the case of a hard cover, the numbers might look like this:

Expected pre-orders: 500
First print run: 750 (multiplier is 1.5)
Sell-through: 50%, or 375 books
Cover price: \$22
Total Royalties: $\$22 \times 10\% \times 375 = \825

As you can see, the big questions are print run and preorders. So what are typical print runs?

The answers are all over the ballpark. I know of science fiction imprints that do two to three thousand copies. Some mass market paperbacks start at 400,000-500,000. Hardcover – it depends on the genre.

My early books, the first hardcover run was usually around six thousand and the publisher was quick to go back to press for another 750 or so as needed. ***Rites of War*** was around

500,000 copies in mass market on the first print run, if I'm recalling correctly.

One other thing you need to know: the size of the first print run can instantly make you a bestseller before a single book even hits the shelves. Very few of the bestseller lists are based on actual sales (although this is changing). They're based on perceptions and print runs.

And there's another fact you need to know about bestseller lists. Some of them are based on a pre-selected list of books that's sent to a standard sample of select bookstores and distributors. Each store or distributor is asked to write down how many copies it has sold of each listed book. There's also a space on the form for the entity to write in its own top sellers, but (according to what I've been told) few ever exercise that option.

So guess what? If you're NOT on the list that gets sent around, you're NOT going to be a bestseller. Period. No way.

How do the books get on that list? Print run and history play into it, but the exact decision process is way beyond the ken of mere mortals like you and me.

The good news is that you can influence many of these factors, but you've got to start long before your manuscript hits your agent's desk. You need to prove that you've got a market. That you can sell books. That you should be the A-release, that you're going to be way to the right on the standard distribution curve.

And even if you start late, there's hope. If your book starts breaking the rules for its spot on the list, your agent can always go back to the publisher and start negotiations for the next book, citing the excellent preorders on book one as a basis for drastically increasing the next advance. Your next

contract may even specifically apportion part of your advance to the previous book, particularly if you have successfully avoided a basket or joint accounting clause (more on this later).

Now you can go ahead and multiply.

Well. Dismal news. So are there any reasons to prefer a major publisher?

Oh, sure, tons of reasons. I've written for Berkley, St. Martins, Avon, Lyons, Alpha Books and a few others and I've learned a ton from some really excellent editors. Working with a good editor will make any manuscript stronger, and I've been blessed to work with some fine ones: John Talbot, Gary Goldstein, Pete Wolverton, Tom Colgan, to name a few.

Here are some more reasons to work with a major publisher:

- DISTRIBUTION.
- It's easier than the alternatives. You have no responsibilities in terms of cover design and interior design.
- DISTRIBUTION
- You have a team of professionals helping to shape the book: an editor, a copy editor, and perhaps a PR person.
- DISTRIBUTION
- It doesn't cost you anything. Though start up costs in the alternatives are minimal these days, good cover art and interior design still require some up front expenditures.
- You'll have better distribution and availability than most other options. (This is changing

with Lightningsource.com feeding into Ingrams and Booksurge.com hooking up with Amazon.com, but things like front table displays in bookstores, rack space in Walmarts and grocery stores—you need a major publisher for those thing.)

But I don't want you to think that getting published by a major publisher is the pot of gold. Like any good deal, there are restrictions and downsides to it.

- For fiction, you'd better be writing in a recognizable genre. Cross-genre projects, no matter how compelling, will usually pose a problem.
- Nonfiction: unless you're a household name, forget books about your spiritual journey, tough life, personal memoirs or opinion on world affairs.
- Your contract will usually be for a few books, and your editor will expect to have some consultative input on your next ones. The company may have a policy on continuing characters, for instance, and you may be expected to write a second book with them, even if it's not what you had in mind.
- You have no say in the cover design, format or publication date.
- It takes 18-24 months from the time you sign the contract until you see your book in print.
- If your publisher buys hard/soft rights, i.e. the right to do both a hardcover and a paperback, there's no guarantee they'll ever bring the paperback out. They may even sell those rights to another company.
- You're going to have to do the same amount of PR legwork that you'd have to do with a smaller publisher or if you self-published. Seriously. Even a six-figure advance does not get you dedicated PR attention, and I'd be speaking from experience here.

So before you read any further, weigh the pros and cons. Personally, I think getting published by a major New York firm is an excellent start for any writer. It gives you street creds in a way that other options don't. The downside is that you have to play that game by those rules, and that's not a good fit for every book.

There are times when self-publishing is just an exceptionally good idea. But for first novels – normally, not.

Do not talk to me about *Eragon*. His parents were marketers AND it was a good story with TONS of ancillary events. Unless you can replicated that combination, let's shelve self-publishing first novels for now. Later on, when you've built your audience, don't overlook the possibilities.

Brilliance changes all the rules. That's true in any field.

Hard truth: odds are, you're not brilliant.

More truth: there's plenty of room for hardworkers who aren't brilliant.

So—if it's a big New York published that you want, let's talk about a game plan for getting there.

The Plan

Here's a game plan that works and the heart of what I'll be covering in this book. There are three elements to the plan.

- Have a strong manuscript or proposal
- Get an agent
- Get an Editor and Publisher

The problem of producing a strong manuscript or proposal work is beyond the scope of this book. There are tons of books on how to write as well as courses and seminars (not to mention my own books, **BAM: Structure** and **BAM: First Pages**.) All I want to say on that point is that it is not sufficient that your mother likes your manuscript or that everyone tells you that you should write a book.

Brilliance is always the wild card. Every agent and editor and publisher is searching for the next genius. Finding brilliant writers, bringing them onboard, keeping them—on such things are careers in publishing built. If you're brilliant, a lot of this is going to be easy for you.

But what if you're not a brilliant literary genius? Not to worry—there's room for you, too. Hard work will trump lazy brilliance, and that's one thing that almost anyone can do. There is no getting around the need for competence in the tools of your trade. You must have the mechanics down, structure and three act structure, good stories, good proposals, etc.

So let's talk about the plan for a moment. It's important that you understand and remember the elements so you won't let minor failures distract you. Stay focused. Even if you don't sell to a major publisher, you still have tons of options, many of which are more lucrative than playing the big boys game.

So, with the writing and subject matter out of the way, your first question is...

Do I really need an agent?

Yes. Most large publishers won't accept unsolicited and unagented manuscripts.

Yes, yes, I know that some say they will, particularly in SF or fantasy, and I know a number of children's books publishers read unagented manuscripts. But those are the minority and even if they do read unagented manuscripts, it'll take much longer for you to get an answer. Being repped by a good agent puts you ahead of the slush pile, gets you a faster answer and more specific feedback.

Oh, and while we're at it—aside from a few very very big names who do work outside of New York (Sandra Dykstra comes to mind), you want a New York agent.

The only way to get a publisher to notice you is to know someone.

Nonsense. Or at least, partial nonsense. The only person you absolutely must know is an agent, and I'm going to show you how to get one.

What will really catch a publisher's attention is not some big name friend. That might get you a quicker read, but it won't get you a sale. The people you DO need to know, besides your agent, are the people who will want to buy your book. We'll talk more about that later. Let it suffice for now to say that as soon as you sell that first book, you're going to be the "Somebody" that every aspiring writer wants to know.

To summarize: you've thought this out and you need a large publisher and you agree that you need an agent. So let's continue.

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