

The Art of the Book Deal



What NOT To Do To Snag a Book Deal:

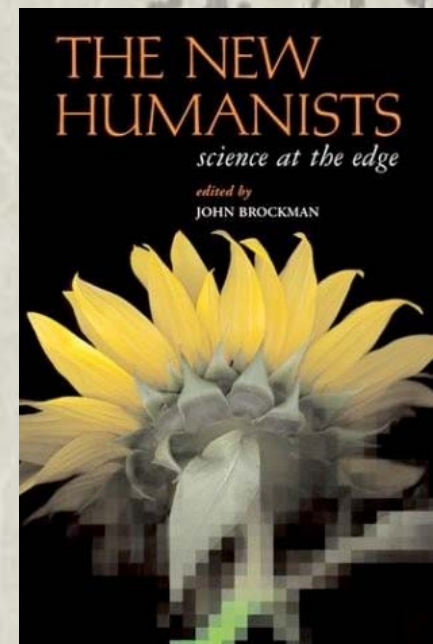
- * Deal with publishers directly (no agent).

Take it from Ali G.: It's even worse if you try to snow them by pretending to have other offers.

- * Post YouTube videos reading excerpts from your book (unless you're TRYING to be funny)

Words of wisdom from the EDGE:

“Get a good agent. Seriously.”
-- John Brockman, literary agent



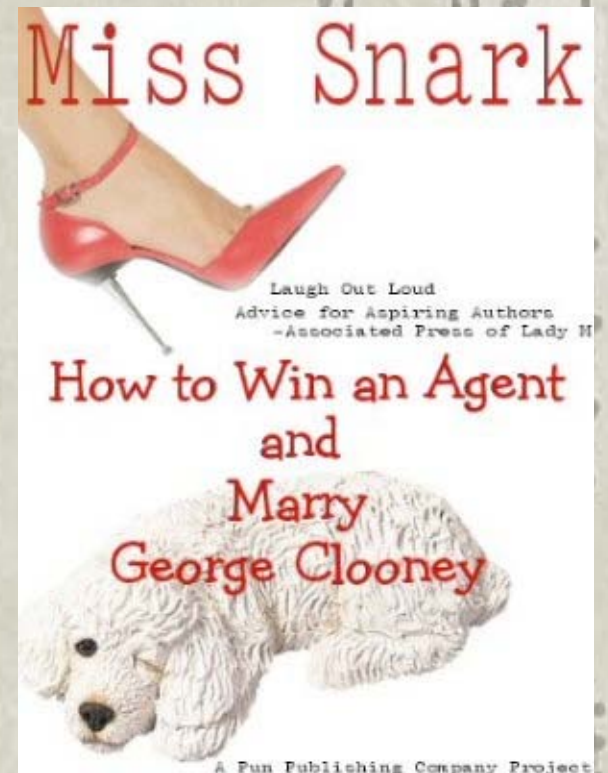
All agents are NOT created equal. Find one who has experience with the particular type of book you plan to write, I.e., popular physics/science books.

There are online resources, EG The Writer's Net

Browse Miss Snark's blog archives:

“Wherein Miss Snark vented her wrath on the hapless world of writers and crushed them to sand beneath her T.rexual heels of stiletto snark.”

But a personal referral is your best bet at finding a good match.



Also make sure an agency is legit! More of a problem in the fiction arena, but one should still be careful.

List of the [20 Worst Agents](#); there are as many as 400!

A FEW WARNING SIGNS:

- *Charging fees

- *Paid editing or publishing referrals

- *Nonstandard author/agent contract terms

EG, perpetual agency clauses, claiming commissions on future works even if agency had no role in selling them, billing clients for normal business overhead (travel, entertainment)

- *No or minimal track records

Have they sold anything to a commercial publisher?

Now that you've got an agent, you need a book idea!



NEXT STEP: THE BOOK PROPOSAL!

Title Page

Table of Contents [of the proposal, not the book]

About the Book:*

-- Lays out over-arching themes or central argument, why you want to write this book, and why it's needed.

-- Provides a snappy synopsis of the actual contents of the book, with a few teasing details.

-- Makes a compelling case for why you are the best person to write this book.

FOR EXAMPLE:

“*Songs in the Key of C* is an anecdotal history of carbon, and accordingly the story of how humans mastered the fundamentals of their own creation. The narrative arcs from the birth of elements inside stars more than 10 billion years ago, to the coal-fueled industrial revolution; to Lance Armstrong’s bicycle and the breakthrough carbon strings currently working their way into consumer electronics and medicine.”

The author goes on to answer the question, “Why carbon? Why now?”

The Competition:*

- Describe your target audience. Who will want to read your book? Why? How will it benefit the reader (eg, reference tool, or “water cooler” fodder)?
- Include potential size of target audience, eg NASCAR has 60 million fans.
- Check out Amazon for books on similar topics so you can make the case for why your book is different. Publishers now do this routinely when considering book proposals.

FOR EXAMPLE:

“*Songs in the Key of C* will have much less in common with scientific works about the elements, such as *Hydrogen* and *Oxygen*, than with commercially successful nonfiction books that fulfill readers’ hunger for easily digestible and entertaining answers to the world’s toughest questions. *Songs* will have the curiosity and charm of Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, which has reached its second anniversary on prominent bookshelves and bestseller lists.”

“In *Napoleon’s Buttons*, Penny Le Couteur and Jay Burreson tie several commonly recognized chemicals to history, but without the carbon-cycle *Uber*-narrative.”

Chapter Outline*:

Demonstrates to publisher how the book will be structured and what the actual contents will be.

Also helps the author crystallize own thoughts on the subject, and provides a “roadmap” for the actual writing of the book.

Each chapter heading should have at least a paragraph or two describing the content of each chapter.

HINT: Use specific information, anecdotes, examples and so forth that illustrates the overall tone of the book.

Publishing Details:

How long will the book be? (Standard: 60K to 80K words)

How long will it take you to complete the manuscript? (Varies by author and/or book, but usually 6 months to 1 year.)

What photographs or illustrations will be included?

About the Author

A much more substantive bio or full C.V. State your experience not only as a writer but also as a specialist in the field about which you are writing. List any relevant publishing credentials.

Sample Chapter:*

Why you need this: It provides the publisher not only with an example of author's writing style, but also demonstrates the tone and content of the book.

A STRONG PROPOSAL + COMPELLING SAMPLE CHAPTER = A BIGGER ADVANCE

Appendix:

Any supporting material, newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, even blog posts, that will help in marketing the proposal.

LINKS TO OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES:

Mary Embree, [Seven Vital Elements of a Successful Nonfiction Book Proposal](#).

Jenna Glatzer, [Sample Nonfiction Book Proposal](#)

Michael S. Hyatt, [Writing a Winning Book Proposal \(PDF\)](#)

Shepard Agency, [Writing Proposals](#).

What are editors looking for? **STORIES!**

Caroline White, former editor, Penguin Group:

“Writing popular science isn’t just explaining tricky things in an accessible way, but doing it with an engaging narrative. A book needs a strong over-arching concept and a narrative spine. It should tell us a story and at the same time show us a new way of looking at something -- or show us something we may not have seen before.”

Stephen Morrow, editor, Dutton:

“In the proposal, I look for the ability to interview key people on the subject, to evoke time and place, to deliver elucidating metaphor, to render character, and to set up over-arching questions and then answer them in a satisfying way.”

More from Dutton's Stephen Morrow:

* *“Deeply felt commitment to the book project impresses publishers. A well-written proposal can demonstrate that.”*

* The fit of the book to the author's experience

* Whether the author can *“speak eloquently about the subject”*

* Compelling argument as to why this book would be a significant contribution

* *“I often ask authors, ‘What do you want to get out of writing and publishing this book?’ If the answer is interesting, I tend to think the book will be.”*

An editor may love you and your proposed book idea.
But the Marketing Department has the last word.

WHAT MARKETING DEPARTMENTS LIKE TO SEE:

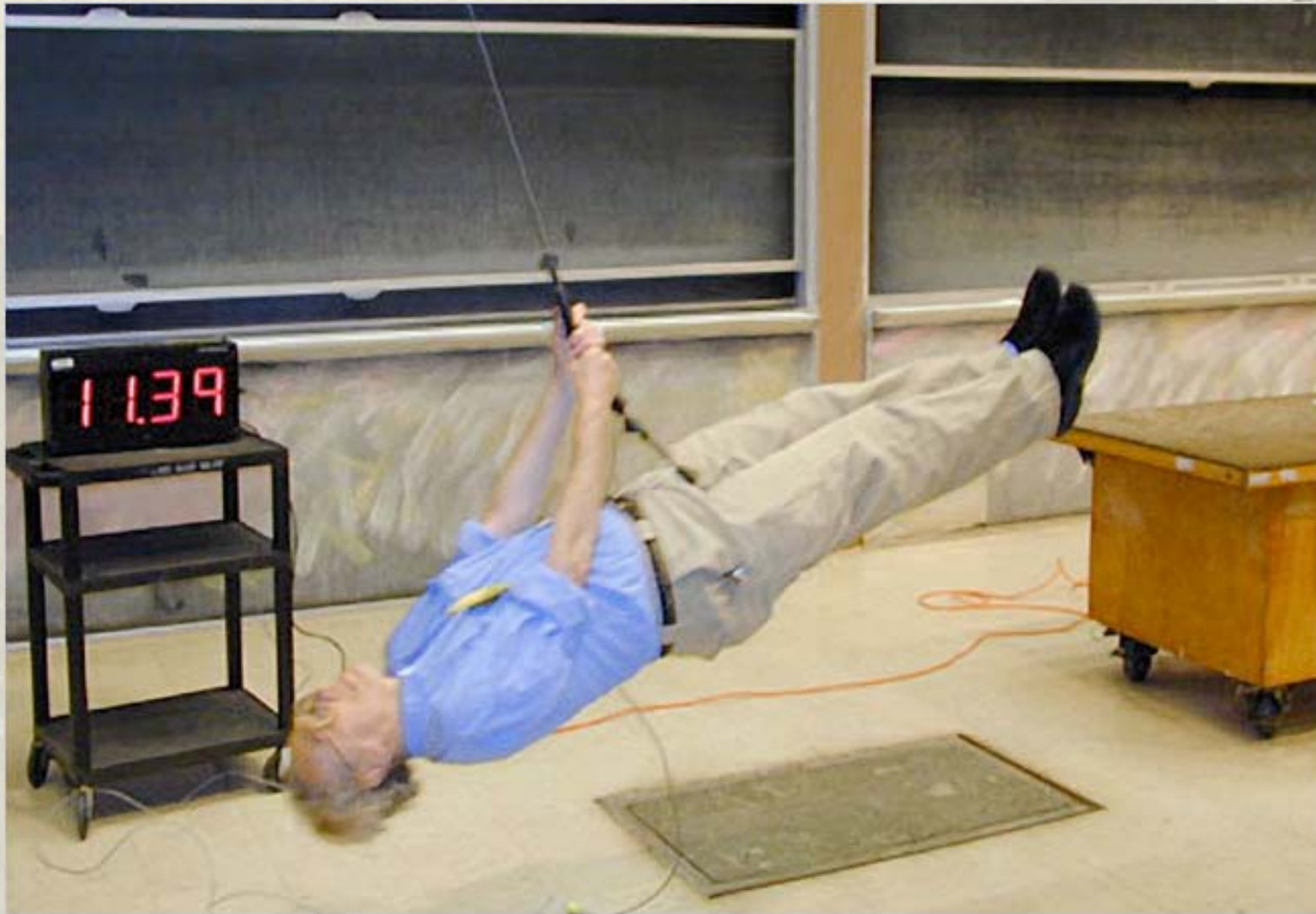
- * Demonstrated expertise
- * Established credentials
- * Solid reputation or renown in one's chosen field

ADDITIONAL ASSETS:

- * A regular publishing gig: columns, OpEds, articles
- * A popular blog [EG: Chad Orzel of Uncertain Principles]
- * Fun lectures on YouTube or iTunes

EG: MIT physicist Walter Lewin, #1 on most downloaded list at iTunes U for his online physics lectures and demonstrations

Get profiled by *The New York Times*, and you're a shoo-in for snagging a book deal!



In other words: some sort of public persona on which they can “build a brand.”

PER CAROLINE WHITE:

“Publishers want authors who are to some degree already established so they don’t have to start from scratch. It’s not just laziness. It gives them more fodder for selling the books to the stores and the media.”



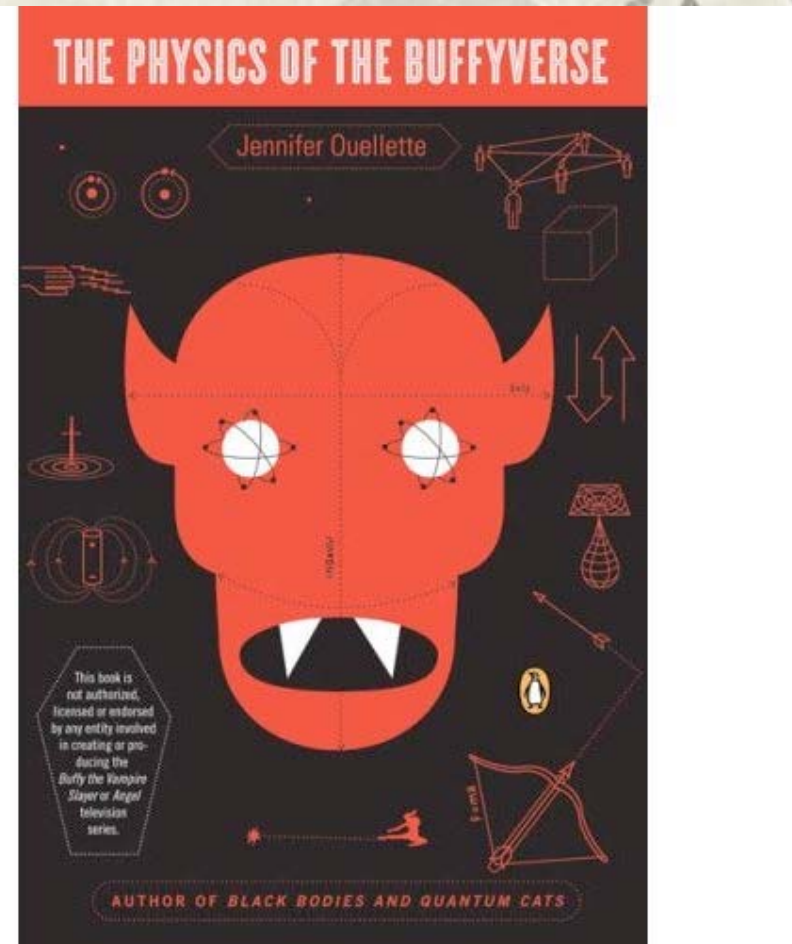
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL BOOK PROPOSALS

- * “High concept”
- * Popular cult TV series
- * Established, loyal fan base
- * Other books in this genre have done well in the marketplace, eg, *The Physics of Star Trek*.

But offers a different twist on other books in the genre.

VERDICT:

Sold well, but mostly a “mid-lister”

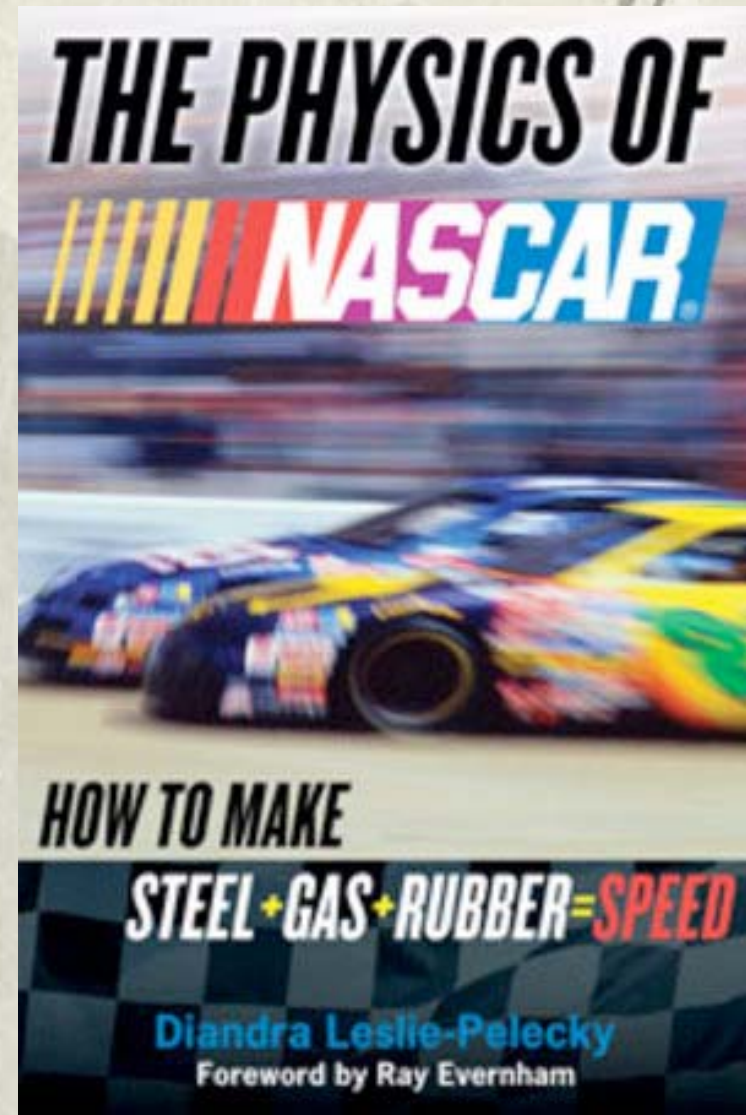


ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLE:

- * Also “high concept”
- * HUGE loyal fan base!
- * Author has credentials galore (physics PhD, professorship, long involvement in education, outreach, and communicating science)
- * Written in narrative “behind the scenes” style for broadest appeal

MY PREDICTION:

This will be one of the top-selling popular science books of 2008.



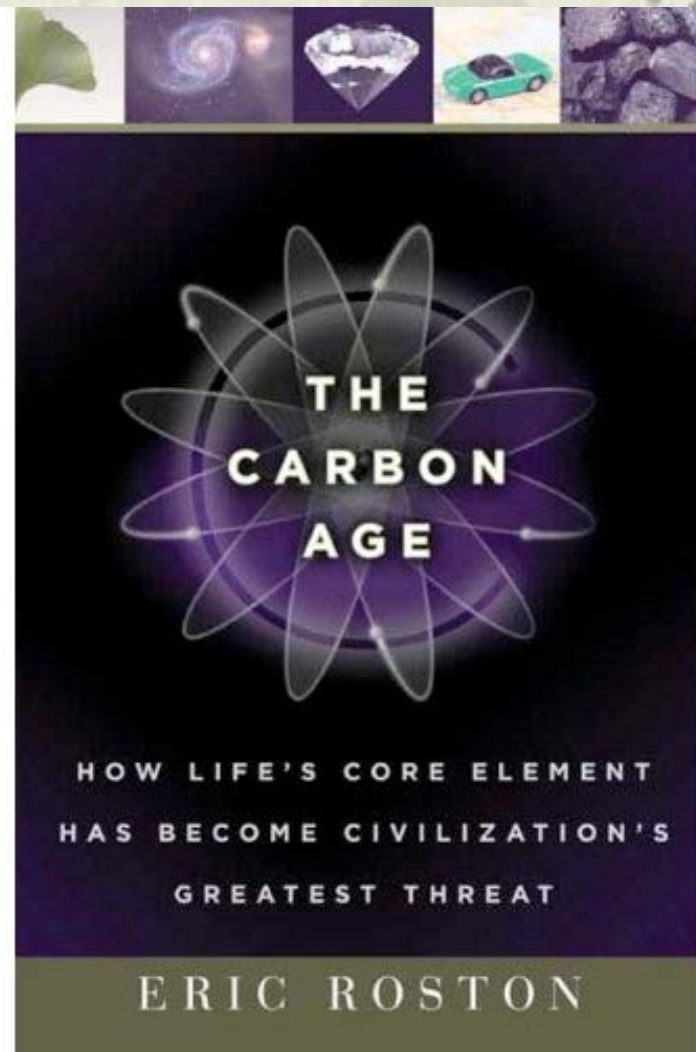
STILL SUCCESSFUL, BUT A HARDER SELL:

- * Established author (TIME)
- * Engaging writing style

BUT:

- * Difficult subject matter
- * Very broad topic: how to narrow the focus to keep the narrative compelling enough to snag a reader?

PUB DATE: June 2008
So the jury is still out on this one.



Be prepared for rejection!

Dear Sam,

Thank you for your recent submission. I have given careful consideration to your material but regret that your Valentine is not suited to my current needs.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity of reading it.

Linda



SUCCESS! You've got an offer! How does your advance compare to the rest of the market?

Publisher's Lunch is a widely read (in the publishing industry) email list, in which various book deals are announced. These announcements employ "polite euphemisms" to indicate the size of advances.

Up to \$100K: "a nice deal"

\$100K - \$250K: "a good deal"

And so on. \$1 million plus = a "major deal"

Your agent probably subscribes, and can tell you where your advance fits into that scale.

Or you can use the “Scalzi Scale”:

\$0 to \$3000: A Sh--ty Deal.

“Possibly the only thing worse is no deal at all.”

\$3000 to \$5000: A Contemptible Deal

\$5000 to \$10,000: A “Meh” Deal

\$10,000 to \$20,000: A Not Bad Deal

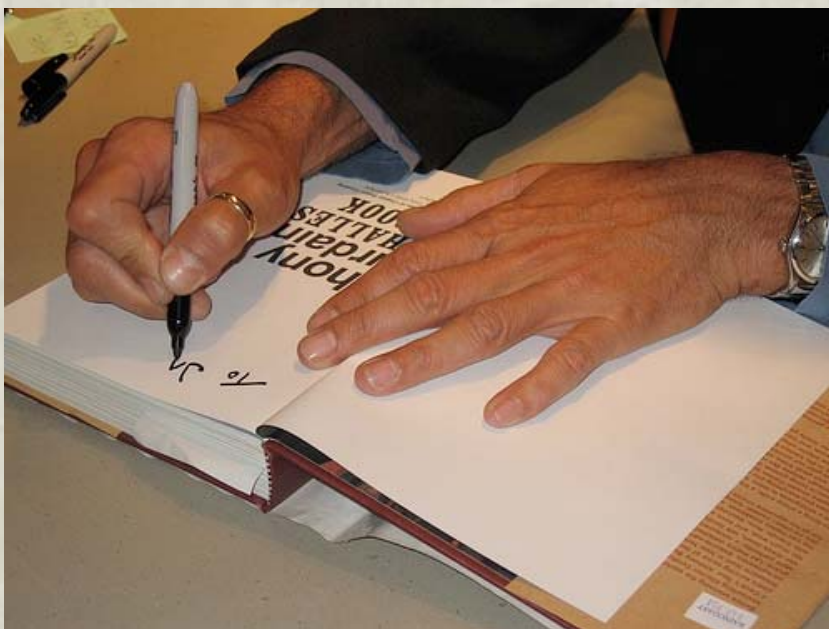
\$20,000 to \$100,000: A “Shut Up!” Deal

“Not so much that the other writers actively begin to hate you.”

\$100,000 and above: “I’m Getting the Next Round”

Think how much fun Publisher's Lunch would become if the industry used the Scalzi Scale:

“Neil Popular’s A DARK UNIVERSE FULL OF CASH, a tale of a man who wakes up one morning with fame and fortune but then must tolerate being accosted at random intervals by strangers who want to be his best friends and/or have him blurb their own work, to Big Respected Publisher. He’ll get the next round.”



What Can I Expect from a Contract?

This is why you have an agent. S/he will do any haggling over fine points. They will be fine points. Unlike advances, which are negotiable, most book contract provisions are fairly standard.



The book contract:

* Sets terms on royalties. These are largely not negotiable. Only a few (bestselling) authors get slightly higher royalties.

10%: first 5000 copies sold

12.5%: next 5000 copies sold

15%: all copies sold thereafter

REALITY CHECK: authors do not receive royalties until they have “earned back” the amount of the advance. Most books do not earn back their advance. That’s why a strong proposal is so critical!

* Establishes the countries where the book will be published. Selling foreign rights to a US/Canada book is a separate business all its own.

* Establishes contractual deadline for completion of manuscript.

Other provisions might include:

- *Artwork: Author is usually responsible for supplying all graphics and illustrations -- in reproducible format -- and for obtaining permissions to reproduce, if necessary.
- *Author can choose to compile his/her own index, or this can be done in-house.
- *Publisher usually contracts to publish the book within 18 months of official acceptance of completed manuscript.
- *Multimedia terms: audiobooks, e-books, etc.

Author is also responsible for any requested revisions to the manuscript should the editor make them.

REMEMBER: Your prose is not sacred.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'JUST MAKING A FEW EDITS'? YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO CHANGE THE NURSERY RHYME!

I'M TIRED OF ALWAYS BEING THE ONE TO 'TUMBLE AFTER.' BESIDES, WHY WOULD WE BE GOING -UP- THE HILL TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER, ANYWAY?



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THE BIG QUESTION: When do I get my advance?



In general, the publisher pays half upon signing of the contract through author's agent, minus the agent's commission.

The publisher pays the remaining half of the advance upon delivery of the manuscript and publisher's official "acceptance" of the work.

Some contracts specify different percentages for hardcover and trade paperback editions of the book.

In each case, it's a good idea to set aside an amount to cover taxes.

ONE LAST REALITY CHECK:

Even after all that hard work, and the best potential marketing criteria, your book may not live up to expectations, for any number of reasons, EG:

- *The reading public is fickle and unpredictable.
- *Lukewarm critical reception.
- *A previously “hot topic” when deal was made has since cooled off by the time book is published.

“Most books don’t sell. In that context, a ‘successful’ book is one you had fun writing. I had fun with my books, learned a lot, and proud of them. And I bet both of the people who bought them liked them a lot.”

-- Joel Achenbach, *Washington Post* reporter, author of *Captured by Aliens* and *The Grand Idea*.

McHUMOR

by T. McCracken



At the Old Physicists' & Old Writers' Home.

c. McHumor