

Book Publishing: The State of the Industry 1 9 9 8

It's a brave new world of superstores, shrinking midlists and electronic opportunities. Challenges and doom-sayers notwithstanding, you *can* get published—although it'll take ingenuity as well as talent. Here's a recap of what's hot and what's not in book publishing.

By Mitchell Bard

Publishing is a whole new ball game. And the old rules definitely do not apply.

"Superstores"—the behemoth bookstores operated by such chains as Barnes & Noble and Borders—have become major players. And while that's good news for readers, top editors say the rise of the superstore isn't good news for new authors. Then there's the "blockbuster mentality"; as publishers put more resources into getting the next huge seller, more and more midlist authors are forced out of the business. Although roughly 60,000 new books are published every year, the prospects for building a career writing books may be bleaker than ever.

Still, the forecast isn't all bad news. Good writing is still good writing, and there *are* opportunities for writers to break in—you just have to know where to look. Other good news includes the growth of online bookstores and the marketing opportunities afforded by the Internet. These electronic opportunities may present aspiring authors and frustrated midlist writers new avenues to pursue their dreams.

Understanding the Gloomy Predictions

It's easy to see that publishing has become more and more like Hollywood—both industries now invest huge sums in properties that producers and editors feel have blockbuster potential. "There is a long, honorable tradition to overpay for good literary writing," says Allen Peacock, senior editor at Henry Holt, "but now writers are getting insane advances for nonbooks such as quickie biographies. It's like a gambling addiction, upping the ante on books without merit."

But that means less money is available to buy and promote the work of newer writers. Also, as in Hollywood, publishers usually have no idea what the public will buy. According to one editor who preferred to remain anonymous, "Big publishers now guess what will sell rather than rely on editorial judgment."

The blockbuster mentality is self-perpetuating as the bar is raised with each new success. "Publishers are in an untenable position," says Adrian Zackheim, publisher of HarperCollins' business division.

"To stay solvent, they must compete for the most popular writers at prices they can't afford." The extraordinary success of titles by Tom Clancy, Stephen King and Danielle Steel has raised all standards. "We printed 300,000 copies of *Cold Mountain* [by Charles Frazier] in hardcover," reveals Morgan Entrekin, publisher of Grove/Atlantic. "Ten years ago we never would have done that for a first novel." He notes that books anointed by Oprah Winfrey's "book club" are selling more than one million copies. "We're reaching sales levels never imagined," he says.

This dependence on blockbusters adversely affects midlist authors. Writers who fail to sell more than 15,000 copies or to increase sales with succeeding books are likely to find themselves banished from the game. "It's always been the case that if second and third books don't succeed, you'd be in trouble," says Michael Seidman, mystery editor at Walker & Co. "You gotta perform or you're out."

Publishers need that performance because of the short shelf life of books in the superstores. One editor who didn't want his name used for fear of angering the retailers said, "If a book doesn't meet a preconceived level of performance, it will be returned as early as three weeks after arriving in the store. The reviews dribble in, but the books may not be in the stores. We're like manufacturers of wallpaper. They can and do tear it down whenever they want."

Shannon Ravenel, editorial director of Algonquin Books, said her small company is used to working with smaller, independent bookstores and is just learning to deal with the superstores. "The chains thought they could influence what would sell by buying in volume, but they've had lots of returns because they overestimated readers' interests. The orders inflated publishers' expectations, so they overprinted. Stores had to learn they were overoptimistic and publishers needed to learn all books wouldn't sail out the door."

Getting your book into the store isn't enough to generate sales. "Which books sell," asks Zackheim, "those in the front of the store or those in the back with their spines out?" It costs money to get your book into the front of the store. The "obvious shelfage" is for sale and smaller publishers, especially, can't afford to buy the space to get their books noticed.

Martha Levin, publisher of Anchor Books,

is more sympathetic than most publishers to the superstores. "The chains work hard and want to sell books. It's hard to understand what books lingering on shelves accomplish with 60,000 new books a year. Retailers have to sell books to pay the rent." Levin finds the idea that the stores are the enemy upsetting. "We all have the common goal of selling books."

Seidman is even more blunt. "People said the A&P would put the corner grocer out of business, but they still exist. It's the same in publishing. Small stores keep working because they serve a need." For example, he says the chains don't represent mysteries as well as independents. Seidman disagrees with the charge that returns are the stores' fault. "Chains order so much because publishers push them. They don't want to return books."

Reviving Serious Nonfiction

The gloomy picture publishers see when looking at superstores' returns doesn't mean they're packing it in. One area of growth is serious nonfiction, although the late summer sale of Basic Books by HarperCollins fueled the conventional wisdom that "the bloom was off the rose of public policy/politics books," says Peter Bernstein, publisher of Times Books. "I don't entirely agree. There has been and will continue to be interest in well-written, well-reported nonfiction."

The problem, observes Entrekin, is that "serious biographies, current affairs, history, investigative books are time-intensive. It's harder and harder to sell the number publishers need to break even."

Peter Osnos, publisher of PublicAffairs, a new publishing company that's part of the Perseus Publishing Group (which bought Basic Books), agrees that the decline of serious nonfiction is overstated. "The equation under which books are published has to be changed. The gap between what authors want and publishers can afford to pay has grown too wide. The number of books hasn't gone down, the costs have gone up."

Osnos's solution to the problem lies in finding a way to control costs, focus distribution and support writers. Osnos said huge advances don't make sense for the types of books he plans to publish, but thinks it's possible to pay authors through partnerships with foundations and other entities. He plans 25-30 books a year on public affairs, which he broadly defines as books about life—history,

Stores had to learn they were over-optimistic and publishers needed to learn all books wouldn't sail out the door.

Shannon Ravenel
Algonquin Books

The Seven Basic Costs of Book Publishing

(based on an average-length \$25 hardcover)



Source: *The New Yorker*

biography, politics. "NPR was invented 27 years ago. At the time, no one thought people would listen to 'good radio.' Now it's become indispensable," says Osnos. "Good books always find an audience."

One trend in nonfiction has been the decline in popularity of books by politically conservative authors. In the mid to late '80s, a large number of policy wonks wrote successful books on public affairs and began to command major league advances. Now, says Paula Barker Duffy, publisher of *The Free Press*, we've entered "an age of personal sovereignty in which ideological lines have blurred. Issues determine interest," she says, "not ideology."

Less controversial is the business book. "People buy books about business and personal finance out of a perceived need," says Zackheim. Because reading them is not a leisure activity, he adds, the genre remains stable. (For more on business books, see page 26.) Zackheim publishes only 20-25 books per year, however, and the authors are usually experts in their fields. One growth area he sees is in business humor, in large part because of the success of the Dilbert books, but Zackheim thinks the author, Scott Adams, "is a phenomenal talent who took the country by storm" and will be difficult to replicate.

Bernstein agrees that a strong interest remains in "news you can use—personal finance, health, parenting. There's a growing interest in technology, industries and trends, which is typified by magazines like *Wired*. I'd like to publish more in that area." He also observes that sales of consumer information and popular reference books "of all shapes and forms" is increasing. Bernstein says he's looking to expand his list and is always looking for strong writers of politics, biography and current affairs. "There's nothing we like more than to grow a young—or old—writer."

While most editors were lamenting the current state of affairs, Jonathan Galassi, the vice president and executive editor of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, says, "It's a good time for a

house like ours because we aren't swayed by public trends." FSG is interested in broadening its list, but Galassi admits that public policy and foreign affairs books are difficult to publish because of the public's indifference to unpleasant news, especially on international topics such as Bosnia. "We're looking for new talent, the [two-time Pulitzer Prize winner] Tom Friedman of tomorrow." Like all editors, Galassi looks for quality prose and suggests writers take the advice of Ezra Pound: "Make it new for me."

A growing alternative for many writers of serious nonfiction is the scholarly publishers such as Greenwood, Westview and the university presses. "The university presses are picking up the slack created by the trade houses," says Peter Kracht, executive editor at the Greenwood Publishing Group and publisher of the Praeger imprint. You don't have to be a professor to approach these presses; in fact, Kracht likes individual scholars "because they have a fresh outlook and break the mold." These publishers are also publishing more trade books. Kracht cautions that you must "know what you're doing," especially when approaching the university presses, because the manuscripts usually go through a rigorous peer review process.

One benefit to this market is that you don't need an agent. Most of these publishers encourage unsolicited queries. The downside is the low pay. "Only the top of the scholarly list gets in Barnes & Noble, and only an occasional title makes lots of money," says Kracht, who is looking for serious, quasi-scholarly social science books.

Wanted: Good Fiction

The good news is "people are prospecting the most in fiction," says Zackheim. The bad news is writers don't get many chances to make their mark. "You either hit it big or you don't. It's hard to build," says Liona Nevler, senior vice president and editorial director of Ballantine Books, who nonetheless looks for authors with long-term career potential.

Seidman's forte, mysteries, remain solid, he said, although there's been a "small falling off." Seidman pays no attention to fads. "I don't care how many people want to read about women PIs. I don't like formula fiction. Writers should write what they want and write it better."

He says he's trying to build a list and not worrying about competing with the bigger

houses. "I try to find writers who write for the 12th grade level, not the 8th grade. I don't mind if a writer uses semicolons and words you have to look up. I hear about writers who need editors before sending their manuscripts to an editor. I can't take on the job [of teaching writing]. I publish." At writers' conferences, Seidman will ask participants, "Why do you write? And why should we read yours? What's different?"

Entrekin advises young writers not to be too aggressive. "If the first book fails, you might not get a second chance. Be conservative, have a positive experience. That's the old-fashioned way of building a career." Entrekin says he tries to develop writers over two or three years and that he's particularly interested in works from "the edge of the culture" by Asian, Hispanic and Native American writers. "I'm looking for a distinctive voice and strong storytelling ability."

Finding Stability: The Kids' Market

The children's book lists are also experiencing downsizing pains. Still, says Regina Griffin, vice president and editor in chief of Holiday House, it's a stable market. Picture books "are in good shape, easy-to-reads is growing," and so is the demand for math, science and social studies books. "Fiction is good for 8-12 year olds, but it's very competitive. Series take up a lot of space (largely because of Goosebumps), but a huge volume is sold in that area."

Griffin says she's looking for really good picture and rhythmic books. "These books' text should sound like poetry: Each word has to matter. Less is more in picture book text."

Wendy Lamm, an editor at Bantam Doubleday Dell, agrees that children's fiction is still a strong market, but says she's more cautious about trying new series. We expanded and did a lot of series, but they didn't do so well." Lamm added that "anything humorous is always good."

Evolving Into Small Presses

Greenwood's Kracht sees the publishing industry as a kind of Jurassic Park with lumbering trade dinosaurs dominating the market while small mammals are running around filling niches.

And given the retrenchment by the giants of the industry, Martha Levin, publisher of Anchor Books at giant Bantam Doubleday Dell, says authors may find smaller presses

more congenial. "Many writers might be better served by a small publisher that does fewer titles and can be more hands-on."

Algonquin Books, for example, publishes only about 20 titles a year and devotes enormous time to each title rather than dividing its list into big and little books. "Our *raison d'être*," says editorial director Shannon Ravenel, "is literary fiction and nonfiction. We can't be greedy because it's a small market. We're trying to reach discerning readers and we're thrilled when our books are successful."

Paradoxically, even though Algonquin is much smaller than the New York houses, editors still read everything submitted, agented or not, in the order it arrives. Because of their size, Ravenel doesn't encourage submissions and cautions that they are very selective given their small list of titles. "I encourage people to get our catalog or call to ask if a project is something for us before pitching it."

Holiday House has been an independent publisher since 1935 and that allows it more freedom than the conglomerates. "We publish a lot of new people and we can take risks on new writers. We've seen that the old-fashioned relationships between editors and writers can work," says Griffin.

Though the perception is that the personal attention authors received from editors like the revered Maxwell Perkins is only possible with small publishers, Levin disagrees, maintaining that she and her colleagues are still very interested in their authors and work closely with them. "Nan Talese has been with some authors for 20 years," she notes.

Learn to Be a Team Player

In the current publishing climate, it's more important than ever for authors and editors to work as partners. "We're on the same team—despite the fact that it doesn't always seem that way," Entrekin says. "Don't grieve if they didn't launch your book like Stephen King, because it's not in your control."

Kracht seconds that view: "Authors often miscalculate. You need clear communication with the editor. Problems arise when expectations differ. Authors should ask tough questions about sales expectations, but resist the temptation to believe they can push the publisher in a different direction. If the editor says, 'We can sell 10,000 copies,' the author shouldn't think if he pushes, they'll sell 100,000. The decision is made early on how

Coming in the Side Door

Though the house doesn't accept unagented submissions, Bantam Doubleday Dell's Wendy Lamm says that authors *can* break in through two contests it sponsors:

Delacorte Press Contest for a First Young Adult Novel

PRIZES: book contract
\$1,500 cash award
\$6,000 advance

Marguerite de Angeli Contest

PRIZES: book contract
\$1,500 cash award
\$3,500 advance

Guidelines for both contests are available for SASE:

1540 Broadway
New York City 10036
tel. 212/354-6500

The Growing Power of Agents

Once a trend and now an accepted way of doing business, publishers often do not accept unsolicited material and use agents as screeners.

Entrekin says it's not cost-effective to look at unsolicited material, since so little is worthy of consideration. This isn't a problem for authors, he maintains, because "agents are hungry for material."

Duffy says she "likes agents who know our type of book and steer authors our way." But she also believes the role of an editor is to find authors who are doing interesting work. She and her colleagues at The Free Press solicit manuscripts from people, including many who may not have published trade books before.

Bernstein warns against publishers becoming too dependent on agents. "Publishers need to be more entrepreneurial in looking for writers. There's plenty of ground for publishers and agents to turn over collectively and independently." —M.B.

much to spend on promotion. Pushing the publisher rarely works and sometimes sours relations."

Entrekin believes books tend to find their own level of sales regardless of promotion. "*Cold Mountain* rose to #3 [later #1 on the bestseller list]. It had some money behind it, but nothing like the money for a Patricia Cornwell novel." He also said different factors can trigger increased publisher support for a book. He again pointed to *Cold Mountain*: Sales of paperback rights, international sales and selection as a Book-of-the-Month built that novel's momentum.

Taking Advantage of New Technology

Though CD-ROMs, online novels and other media for writers have not proven—thus far—to be large or profitable markets, most editors view technology as a friend

of the industry that will change it in ways none of them can foresee.

From the author's standpoint, the Internet offers more outlets for writing—although many don't pay. In addition, Seidman says that some writers think they don't need editors anymore, they can just put their material online. "Well, it's abysmal."

A better use of the Internet may be marketing published work. One editor mentioned an author in Eastern Europe who created a buzz for his book through a Web page. "The Internet is going to be the place for book buyers, especially scholars," says Kracht. It's difficult to let people know about specialized books, but the Internet offers the opportunity to get information about any book rapidly. "Publishers can put the table of contents of books, abstracts, even whole chapters on the Web, so consumers can make buying decisions from home. Publishers also don't have to give big discounts. It goes back to the 18th century when the book editor, publisher and seller were the same guy. In a high-tech way, we're going back to that."

Galassi thinks the success of Amazon.com,

the online bookstore, and other electronic channels have opened the market tremendously. "It makes for cleaner sales," adds Seidman, "because they order books when the customers order them." Consequently, Amazon doesn't have the high overhead of retailers that must stock large numbers of books.

Don't Be so Hot for "Hot"

The editors all caution against trying to write for the market. "I have a romantic, old-fashioned view of writing," says Levin. "Write what you want to write. If you set out to write what's popular, or will be popular, you're looking for trouble."

Besides, in the year (or two or three) it would take to write and publish those books, the trend will likely have passed. That's why editors like Peacock don't even try to guess or follow apparent trends. "I've never tried to catch a wave, never learned to surf," he says. "I try to create markets out of nothing."

This attitude may explain the reluctance of editors to talk of specific genres that were either hot or cold. Their consensus was that not much had changed in the last few years. The exception is narrative nonfiction—particularly with an element of adventure—which everyone said was the year's surprise standout. *Into Thin Air*, by Jon Krakauer (Villard), and *The Perfect Storm*, by Sebastian Junger (Norton) were two frequently cited examples. And Duffy sees the trend in publishing memoirs continuing. "People are always interesting."

Other areas that editors expressed an interest in or said were now popular include science and technology and how it affects our lives (Duffy recently promoted an editor specifically to handle manuscripts on the subject), cookbooks, pregnancy and parenting, New Age, religion (in part because of millennial fever), thrillers, mysteries, and romance.

"It's inevitable that the stresses of the industry will be passed on to authors," concludes Zackheim. "Writers need to be ever more ingenious to bring their work to the attention of publishers." **WD**



Mitchell Bard has never been accused of being trendy, but he's promoting his latest book, *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* at <http://members.aol.com/bardbooks/index.htm>.