

Getting to Publication, the Contract and the First Year

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These are some of the lessons that I learned en route from querying to publication.

If you want to be a career writer, you're going into business for yourself. Your book is your product and you are its salesperson. Make it the best it can be.

Writing

Turn off your editorial critic while you write. Writing is about getting everything out on paper. You'll clean it up and make it pretty when you edit. One friend was making slow progress on her novel because she kept revising as she went. I told her to turn off the monitor until she learned how to keep going ahead, not back.

Writing is baking. The first few drafts are your time to taste, play, experiment. You're cooking with love. Baking is the book chilling out in your desk drawer while you savor your accomplishment and let go. You frost the cake when you edit. Cutting off the burned or crumbly bits, making everything smooth and lovely, adding roses, shaping what was raw dough into a work of art.

Understand story structure. Plot, POV, pacing, characterization, setting, voice. "The Writer's Journey" by Christopher Vogler, helped me tremendously. You have to know the rules to understand when and why to break them.

Trust your instincts. Don't surrender your unique voice just to satisfy someone else's vision of what they think your book should be.

Editing. As in writing, be fearless. Keep a cut file of all your trimmings if you simply can't bear to delete them. Make every word count. Every sentence must advance the story.

Rule of Three: Do at least three people all comment on the same thing?

Detach from criticism. If it really stings, examine the wound. If the critique hits close to home, absorb it, analyse it and use it. Don't shoot the messenger.

You will get your feelings hurt. You'll get bent out of shape. It's good practice for facing public reviews. Detach.

Don't quit your day job. Unless you get really lucky, money comes slowly.
(Nice deal, 3 payments over two years. No royalties yet.)

A page a day is a novel a year.

Become a zen master of patience. Learn to wait, wait and wait some more. Publishing is a slow business.

Develop an online presence. Blog, keep it short and do it often. Make it easy for people to contact you. Register your name as a domain. Comment on other blogs. Be polite. Don't complain or badmouth your coworkers in publishing. If you have grievances, handle them in private.

You gotta have a hook. Boil it down to one sentence and wield it like a sword.

After the Book

No one loves your baby as much as you. Just remember that.

Learn how to sell yourself and your book. Take a course in PR, or work with a reliable business source who understands how to write a compelling press release.

Understand your public persona. If you enjoy being in front of a crowd, you'll probably be fine. If you're a shrinking violet type, it may help to take a class in public speaking, to practice doing readings in front of friends, or to create an "alternate you." If you only write Victorian historical fiction, you can dress like Sherlock Homes. If you write dark urban fantasy, you can summon your Goth teenage years. Who do you want to be?

Establish a marketing budget. If you can afford it, hire an independent PR agency to market your book. If that's beyond you, there are many things you can do for free. Guest blogging, web chats, contact conventions, churches, libraries etc.

Determine how much effort you'll put into marketing. Admin stuff sucks up your writing time. You can easily get overwhelmed by it if you don't set limits. Set aside an hour everyday, or one day a week, to focus on spreading the word.

Celebrate! Throw yourself a book release party. Invite the public. Serve themed food & drinks. Have a raffle or contest.

Create content. Media sources are looking for news and people with interesting stories to tell. That your book is published is not news. That your book solves an unsolved local murder is news. It helps to brainstorm the different aspects of your book you can use for spin. Tailor your approach to match the media source. Keep it fresh. News has a shelf life of 24 hours to six weeks.

Request reviews. Lots of book lovers maintain book review blogs. Choose those that have been around a while, update regularly and have a good number of dedicated followers. Send your pitch and offer a free book. Follow up.

Don't waste time pitching to the wrong market. An agent who only represents romance is unlikely to snatch up your tech thriller simply because its brilliant. They're passing because they don't have contacts in that market, and don't think they can sell it to those they do have. Send a review copy of your book about geriatric sexuality to a parenting magazine and it'll end up in the giveaway box. Don't bet on the odds.

Guerilla marketing. Book trailers, YouTube clips of readings or funny songs. Great aunts going into every bookstore in town to gush about your book to the staff. Friends in other cities who will turn your book face out of the shelves.

Network your tush off. Use Moo cards, business cards, etc. Attend events related to your topic. Let everyone know that your book just hit the shelves and that you are available to speak at functions, visit their book club, special interest group etc.

Which leads me to: Work for free. When you are a big shot, you can ask for a five-figure appearance fee. For now, just getting your name and face out there is enough.

Say yes. Accept reasonable, doable opportunities.

Ask for what you want. You'll be surprised how many people will say yes.

Finally, this is business. Be professional. No matter how much you want to let your freak flag fly, remember that no one wants to work with an author who is flaky, demanding, unreliable, needy, whiny or grumpy. Always present your best self.

Good luck!