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Publishing Regardless Of How Impossible It Is

In my childhood dream of being a writer, I'm wearing a green chiffon dress, joking with my adoring agent, signing autographs and jetting off to Paris to read in a narrow bookstore that spills out to an outdoor cafe where I will soon drink hot chocolate. I'm grinning like a fool, thrilled to be the chosen one, the writer who made it despite all the adults in my life who said it wasn't practical to be a poet.

Ever since I meandered toward getting my poetry published in the early 1980s, people have warned me, "Publishing is worse than ever." I don't mean to minimize the truth of this, particularly in recent years when the dominos of publishing have fallen with great aplomb.

I found my way despite and because of wrong turns and dead ends, publishing with presses that wouldn't answer my calls, or waiting years for rejection letters. I hit bottom when I saw a Fedex truck bringing me back a rejected manuscript get stuck in my yard. From the porch, where I watched in my pajamas, tissue in one hand (of course this happened when I had the flu) and cell phone in the other, I yelled to the driver, "Wait! I'll call someone with a tractor to pull you out." He kept gunning the engine, carving deep ruts into my yard that would take six months to fade.

"There's my writing career," I thought at the time, my little heart breaking. So I did the most sensible thing I could think of: I went to counseling with my writing career.

A few weeks later, in my therapist's Southwest-appointed office, I said, "I'm

mourning not being chosen as a writer.”

“What if the most powerful way of being chosen is to choose yourself?” she replied, and something started shaking loose.

After months of stripping away the layers of desire for approval, acceptance and other a-words, I found I wanted most to get published to share my gifts with readers.

Get Yourself Ready

Many writers think they're ready to publish long before they are. The best poetry and our soundest motives need time to ripen. Here's some considerations:

- **Know Your Motives:** Are you writing to be loved or to prove you're good enough? This is absolutely the path of heartbreak because each rejection will feel like a lover stabbing you with a rusty ice pick. Unearth and look honestly at your motives, and separate out the ones that are tied to self-redemption so that you can see clearly your motives.
- **Listen to the Poems:** During the publishing process, your darlings -- the lines you slaved over and are especially attached to -- will be shot or shipped to the Northwest Territories because they don't fit the highest wisdom of the book: what this book wants to be versus what you thought it was. Put your ego on a shelf, and listen to the poems, individually and collectively.
- **Know Your Audience:** Who would find their lives enlarged and uplifted by

hearing and reading your poetry? It's fine if the audience is family and friends, but if you want a larger audience, imagine and identify them, then consider how best to reach them with this poetry.

- **Know What You Want From A Publisher:** What can and can't you live with when it comes to putting years of your life between two covers? What do you have to have from your publisher in terms of book design and production, book distribution (getting your book to distributors who will get it to stores and catalogues), and book marketing (getting word on your book out there, and specifically, publishing readings and events wherever you go)?
- **Plan On This Taking Time And Money:** A young writer recently showed me his poetry and then asked where he could get it published quickly because he needed money. I've lost count of how many reality checks I had to issue. Even when there are royalties involved, they're slim, and you need to pay for postage, proofreading, and other incidentals. Books take time too -- at least six months and more like 12-24 months from the time of acceptance to publication. Be ready, and if the time is shorter and money is larger than expected, celebrate!

Publishing Options

Getting your book, especially a collection of poetry or short stories, published by a major press is probably harder than winning the lottery, but as the room at the top

tightens, publishing opens up for the rest of us. With print-on-demand publishing (a way of printing precisely the number of copies needed instead of doing a large press run), the marketing you can do on websites and through social networking, and computer technology to do basic design on our laptops, the costs of publishing has dropped dramatically. Publishing is actually far more democratic now than it was in the fabled good old days of big publishers supporting writers. Particularly with poetry, where the big money isn't for about 99.97% of us, looking locally is the way forward since there are many fine presses fueled by volunteer energy, small staffs and a collaborative spirit.

- **Small and Regional Presses:** Look at the books of other poets in your region.

What press is involved? You'll start to notice regional presses. You can also research presses through the many thick books in libraries and bookstores listing publishers, but chances are that the local and small presses will have the greatest interest in you. Once you find some presses that seem to fit, research how to query them, and then do.

- **Publishing Cooperatives:** One emerging trend in recent years is a group of writers forming a publishing cooperative. Because of the huge amount of work to produce and sell a book, it's a great option to gather a group who each have a collection ready to roll, and are all committed and reliable, and then take turns. Put out Lucy's book of poetry the first year, Roberto's the second, Sookie's the third, divvying up the final editing, typesetting, design, cover art, securing an ISBN number, organizing readings, distributing the book to stores, and marketing.

- **Self-Publishing?:** “No self-respecting writer would look down on self-publishing these days,” a writer-friend of mine with nine bestsellers said to me. True, and yet I'm of two minds because as the poet laureate of my state, I frequently hear from people who self-publish or want to, and haven't fully developed their poetry yet. There's nothing wrong with self-publishing collections for family and friends that you don't intend to push into the market place, but poetry for general consumption should be the highest quality you can create. On the other hand, if your collection is ready, and you haven't been able to find a press or publishing cooperative, self-publishing is a good choice. Some caveats: we are all blind to what we're blind to, so get some poets you respect to read your work carefully and make suggestions, and then hire a professional proofreader. If you're not a professional graphic designer, either go through a print-on-demand site, which often have good design templates you can use, or hire or barter with a designer. If the thought of marketing your own work is akin to having forks jabbed into your arms, hire or barter with someone to do this for you.
- **Raising Funds:** Need start-up money? You can invite friends and family, people who like your work and/or believe in you, to pre-purchase books. Why not have a help-me-publish-and-market-my-poetry party, charging \$10-\$50 at the door? Why not ask ten people to pony up \$100 each to be your patrons?
- **Barter For Art:** Often you can have a say in the cover art, and since there's seldom much of a budget for production, consider bartering with a favorite artist,

photographer, painter, or printer.

Marketing Without Losing Your Mind

No matter how big or small your press is, plan to devote a solid year of your life to marketing, including driving long distances, sleeping on friends' couches, and dreaming up new ways to reach potential readers. The same creativity that got you into your impulse to create something with words is precisely what you need to draw on to put your writing out there.

- **Get A Website:** If you don't have a website, build one. You can use free website building sites, such as www.wordpress.com or www.redroom.com. Choose a format that you can easily update yourself. Create a home page with content changing regularly to garner interest; a bio page on you that includes a picture of you; a press page with links to media coverage and press kit (reviews, articles, a bio page, and blurbs about the book); and a page on events, readings and appearances.
- **Do Social Networking:** A book publicist on an airplane once told me the single most effective and free way to market a book is through making a facebook page for it, and then asking everyone you know to “like” it. You can also used Linkedin.com, Twitter and other social networking tools to announce readings, share reviews, etc.

- **Collaborate on Readings:** Do joint readings with friends and acquaintances locally and wherever you travel, and split the publicity footwork between you.
- **Target Audiences:** If you're writing about birds, how about readings for the local Audubon Society and other ecological groups? If your poems relate to breast cancer, organize readings for cancer support groups and events, and groups of women over 35. Read at bookstores, but also community and health centers, museums, festivals, conferences, and events.
- **Give Free Samples:** Donate signed copies of your book to silent auctions and other fundraisers. You might also make postcards or bookmarks of one poem and distribute them widely, enticing people to buy your book.
- **Do A Blog Tour:** Save gas money and hours on the road by doing a blog tour. One of the best resources I found for this was www.women-on-writing.com which, for a small fee, will set you up to write 12-15 blogs on high-traffic blogs.
- **Send Out Review Copies:** For most of us publishing with small presses, getting our books reviewed requires some research, ingenuity and footwork. First research what publications make the most sense as places to send review copies. Aim for local and regional newspapers (at least ones with arts editors) and websites, and then regional literary journals. Then think outside the box: if your book is about women's health, are there health publications and websites that might do a book review. If your collection concerns spirituality, send review copies to spiritual centers, churches, synagogues, and other religious-based

organizations that have a newsletter, magazine or website that occasionally highlights books. See if your publisher will send as many review copies out as possible, and if not, perhaps your publisher will give you a pile of books to send out yourself. Enclose a personal note, saying something about how this books relates to who you're sending it to, and offering to do an interview or reading.

- **Get Reviewers:** By being a review yourself, you can better get yourself reviewers. It's common for poets to write reviews of other poets' books. Simply contact literary journals, publications, blogs or websites that do reviews -- or friends, or friends of friends who write reviews -- and offer your reviewing services. Most media outlets are looking for people who can write strong reviews as needed, and once you write a bunch over a number of years, you'll find it quite easy to then find other writer-reviewers to review your book.

Most of all, publishing requires an imaginative, courageous and persevering spirit. You can grow these qualities by acting as if you already have had them. Once I used my own imagination, courage and perseverance to choose myself, I aimed my unpublished bioregional memoir about breast cancer toward a small press in Iowa, which published *The Sky Begins At Your Feet* in 2009 to great reviews, and I asked a small local press to publish my fourth book of poetry, *Landed*. Then I sent myself on tour, filling my own gas tank but supported mightily by small publishers who sent out hundreds of emails and made lots of phone calls for me. When I was least expecting it, I became the Poet

Laureate of Kansas, which lifted my little star higher and brought me to many communities to help others write and also to read my own words aloud in reading after reading that felt much more like a deep conversation than a performance.

It's not the childhood dream I'm living: it's better.