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Opening Extract from...

Writing a Marketable Book

Written by Charlie Wilson

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Part 1

Before You Write: Thinking and Planning

1. Have You Got What It Takes?

Before you even think about writing a marketable book, be sure you've got what it takes. Being honest at this point saves disappointment further down the road. Many authors who fail to get published, or who self-publish and get poor reviews and/or sales, would have been wise to choose not to write a book in the first place. Make sure that's not you: use this chapter to check you have the necessary attributes and attitudes to write a great book.

Writing Talent

At the risk of stating the obvious, if you're going to write a marketable book, you need to be able to write!

Can you write? *Really* write? Has anyone in your life ever told you that you write well?

- No: Never? This is a bit of a worry. Before you get too carried away with dreams of creating a marketable book, I advise you to sit down and do some writing, and then ask people you trust and respect for their opinion.
- Yes: Great, that's good news. Just to check, though, we are talking about people who know their stuff here, yes? If the only person who's ever commended your writing is your mum, and all she reads is cereal packets, she's perhaps not the best judge of writing ability.

When considering writing talent, the nature versus nurture debate emerges. To what degree can you learn to be a good writer, and to what degree do you just instinctively know how to write well?

Any creative skill can be nurtured. Painting classes, music lessons, singing tuition, drama workshops – they all help students to develop. Is every student going to be the next Picasso or Jools Holland or Katherine Jenkins or Dame Judi Dench? No. Some are good; some are mediocre; some are dreadful.

You can be a successful author who's good, but not exceptional. You can be a moderately successful author who's just mediocre. But you won't make it as an author if writing doesn't come naturally to you. By all means write if you enjoy writing, but be realistic about your potential.

Writing Experience

Experience in writing is useful. How used to writing are you? Do you write in your day job? Have you written anything before that's been published – a short story, a report, a website?

If you like the *idea* of writing, but you don't actually write, I recommend you devote some time to writing now. Keeping a diary or blogging is a great way to get into a regular writing habit.

A Desire to Write a Book for a Market

Recently, I was talking to a group of authors.

'What are you writing at the moment?' one wanted to know.

'A book about writing a book,' I replied.

'Sounds interesting. What's the angle?'

'Well, it's about writing a book that's marketable – so you think about the marketability of your book before and while writing it.'

'Gah! Sounds horrendous,' was the diplomatic response. 'I write for *me*. I write the stuff I want to read. I can't bear the idea of deliberately writing to please a publisher or reader. Surely you end up with trashy books pedalled out to a formula? Where's the authenticity and creativity in that? Writing is an art, not a business venture.'

'Thanks for your input,' I said with as warm a smile as I could muster. 'I meant to ask you, how are you getting on with your book?'

'Well, I've sent it out to seventy agents and publishers now. No joy yet.'

'Oh dear. Well, good luck with it!'

Every book you write is for yourself, of course. Otherwise there would be no point writing it. You have to connect to the book and believe in its worth. You have to enjoy writing it and feel passionate about every word. But if you want your book to *sell*, you also have to consider the marketability of your book before, and as, you write. Otherwise you can quite easily write an unmarketable book whose only reader will be yourself. And perhaps your Aunt Ethel.

The author who was having kittens about writing a marketable book had made an assumption: that a marketable

book is formulaic, and therefore writing one stymies creativity and individuality.

Some marketable books are written very deliberately to mirror existing published books that have done well. They're either following a tried-and-tested formula, such as a Mills & Boon romance, or they're slotting into a current fad in publishing (see the section 'Chasing a Trend' in Chapter 3). But such books make up only a small proportion of marketable books.

Remember: A marketable book is fresh and original, but it's based on a clear understanding of what publishers/readers want and like.

A Good Understanding of Publishing

If you want to write a marketable book, you can't write in a vacuum. You need to know your market, and you need to know about the business of publishing.

Don't worry; I don't expect you to be an expert on the publishing industry. But the more you know, the better. So you need to be prepared to put some effort into learning. Chapter 2 gives you a good grounding in the basics of marketability and publishing.

Commitment to All Stages of the Process

Writing a book takes a great deal of commitment. Your novel

or non-fiction title will take many hours to write.

But beyond sitting at a computer typing away or scratching out words in a notebook, there's a whole lot more to writing a marketable book. Before you have a complete manuscript, you've got to:

- Read widely in the genre.
- Come up with, and develop, a great idea.
- Research the book.
- Plan the book.
- Write the book.
- Revise the book – over and over.
- Proofread the book.

That gets you to the point of having a finished manuscript. But the fun's only just begun. If you're submitting to agents and publishers, and you get published, you've all these jobs:

- Write good submission materials.
- Send out the book over and over.
- Revise the book according to the agent's suggestions.
- Revise the book according to the publisher's suggestions.
- Work with the publisher's editor.
- Proofread the book, again.
- Help to market the book (a massive, time-consuming task).

If you're self-publishing the book, you've all these jobs:

- Commission a cover designer.
- Commission a typesetter.
- Handle the self-publishing company, or handle the publishing process yourself.

- Proofread the book, again.
- Write the blurb.
- Market the book extensively (a massive, time-consuming task).

Many authors I come across run out of steam somewhat during the long journey from deciding to write a book through to readers buying it in droves. They rather enjoy the writing side, especially as this involves being lost in a world of their own. But taking the product (their book) to market and selling it – that's another matter entirely.

If you're serious about writing a marketable book, you've got to commit to every part of the process. It's a hell of a lot of work, but as a midwife pointed out to me while I was in labour with my son, 'the best things in life don't come easy'.

Professionalism

The very fact that you're reading this book tells me you've at least some business acumen. Great; you're going to need it.

This is the unprofessional approach that some authors expect they can take:

> *You write a book. You don't think about anyone but yourself as you write. It's all for you. You hand the finished manuscript over to a publisher, who publishes the book exactly as you wrote it. You have nothing more to do with the book – the publisher takes care of everything. Straight away, locked in your writing room, you get stuck into the next book. You write and write, and surface*

now and again to read an email that tells you that your book is selling phenomenally well.

Alternatively:

You write a book. You don't think about anyone but yourself as you write. It's all for you. You self-publish the finished manuscript. You don't bother with marketing; that's too scary or too complicated or too business-sounding or too time-consuming or simply beneath you. Straight away, locked in your writing room, you get stuck into the next book. You write and write, and surface now and again to check your Amazon sales figures. Another 10,000 copies sold.

This is the reality if you follow the unprofessional approach:

You write a book. You don't think about anyone but yourself as you write. It's all for you. You hand the finished manuscript over to a publisher. The publisher says, 'Thanks, but no thanks.'

Alternatively:

You write a book. You don't think about anyone but yourself as you write. It's all for you. You self-publish the finished manuscript. You don't bother with marketing; that's too scary or too complicated or too business-sounding or too time-consuming or simply beneath you. Straight away, locked in your writing room, you get stuck into the next book. You write and write, and surface now and again to check your Amazon sales figures. One copy sold. Oh, and the buyer's written a stinking review.

This, on the other hand, is the professional approach – the one that sells books:

> *You write a book. You think carefully about marketability before, while and after you write it. You submit the finished manuscript to a publisher, along with a great synopsis and covering letter that shows the book has a market and you've some good ideas for marketing. The publisher revises the book with you, to improve marketability. You spend the following months, even years, working closely with the publisher, helping the marketing team and doing lots of marketing activities yourself – book tours, literary festivals, blogging, tweeting, local radio interviews. You try to squeeze in writing the next book when you can, thinking carefully about marketability before, while and after you write it.*

Alternatively:

> *You write a book. You think carefully about marketability before, while and after you write it. You self-publish, taking care that the book is of a professional standard to compete with traditionally published books. You devise a well-thought-out marketing strategy and you spend the following months, even years, doing lots of marketing activities – book tours, literary festivals, blogging, tweeting, local radio interviews. You try to squeeze in writing the next book when you can, thinking carefully about marketability before, while and after you write it.*

The published authors I know who've done well have one thing in common: professionalism.

Writing is a creative pursuit. Publishing is a business. Separate the two in your mind and you'll do well.

Books are products. The same as shaving foam and sofas and saucepans. Books are things that a manufacturer (the publisher) creates to sell to a retailer (the bookshop) to sell to a consumer (the reader). If you want a book to sell well, therefore, you have to apply all the same business and marketing knowledge to book creation as you would to creating and selling any other product.

Try This: If you're not au fait with the business world, watch an episode of *The Apprentice*. It's a terrifying, and in many ways overblown, representation of how business works because the contestants are so aggressive, but it does get you thinking about the whole point of creating products to sell.

Remember: Publishers and agents love professional authors, because they know they're hardworking, sensible and good to work with. They don't love airy-fairy, precious authors who float about without a clue how the business world works. Life's just too short to spend it trying to rein in a prima donna or off-the-planet, thesp-type author.

UMB examples: The unprofessional approach

- In your covering letter you tell an agent/publisher that you've

written 'the next *Harry Potter*'.
- You fully expect to buy a castle in Scotland with the profits from your book.
- You can't take constructive criticism.
- You can't or won't set aside lots of time for your book.
- You're unwilling to be involved in marketing.
- You think the following sentence is great writing: *It was a big adventure what I liked specially the bit with the gynormous very big rat thing but then i realised it was all just a dream… I mean I dreamed the hole story, can you belief it?*

Realistic Expectations

Once upon a time, the writer was a frightfully creative, impoverished *artiste* scribbling away in a drafty garret, reconciled to the fact that he wrote because he loved to, not because it made him a decent income. Fast-forward to recent years, and the cult of the celebrity and the phenomenal success of a handful of authors has led to people dreaming of being a published author because they think it will *make them rich and famous*. Time for a reality check.

Traditional publishing:
- The vast majority of authors who submit a book to agents/publishers don't get published.
- Of those who do get published, the vast majority don't make enough money from their book(s) to be a professional (full-time) author.
- Of those who are professional authors, the vast majority

don't make enough money to have a luxurious lifestyle.
- The verdict: Only a very tiny proportion of published authors are rich and famous.

Self-publishing:
- The vast majority of authors who self-publish don't sell a huge number of books.
- Of those who do sell a decent number of books, the vast majority don't make enough money from their book(s) to be a professional (full-time) author.
- Of those who are professional authors, the vast majority don't make enough money to have a luxurious lifestyle.
- The verdict: Only a very tiny proportion of published authors are rich and famous.

Some rich and famous authors are rich and famous because they're amazingly talented. Some rich and famous authors are rich and famous despite the fact they're *not* amazingly talented. And for every rich and famous author that exists, there's another out there who's fabulously talented but isn't catching a break.

So many factors affect whether an author does well; it's not just about the writing. Luck, timing, public reaction and need at a point in time – all these play a part. No one can quite pin down why exactly *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* have become international sensations. Millionaire self-published author Amanda Hocking has some suggestions for why her books have sold so well – popular genre, decent covers, low price, recommendations from bloggers – but she has no definitive recipe for success.