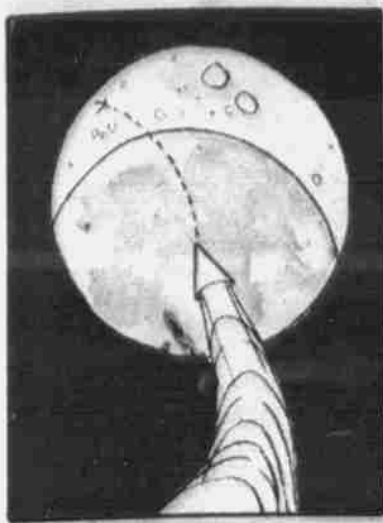


# Writing is only the beginning of getting published



"I'm a writer."

Poet Charles Bukowski wrote that these three words, as an introduction, were the quickest way "to get laid". In a more sober mood he also said that those same three words were some of the toughest and emotionally rending words in the English language.

Writers tend to *live* the Great American Novel rather than write it. Most of the greats seemed to have their moments of eccentricity and anxiety. It might be surmised that the multitudes of unpublished and frustrated writers of the world have their moments too. Still they seem to plug onward, writing in every spare moment, and spending a fortune on postage, sending out their works, sometimes getting them back, sometimes never seeing them again.

Several forests had to die to create the paper that goes out in rejection slips. F. Scott Fitzgerald papered his wall with them. Steinbeck received thousands of them, as did Hemmingway, Sandoz and many people you'll probably never hear of.

At this point the novice writer can roll his eyes heavenward and ask, "OK, what does it take?"

Chuck Colding, who has been writing professionally in one capacity or another for nine years will grab eye contact when you're talking with him and answer you directly.

"You've got to believe you've got something to say, otherwise you have no business doing it. You're asking the world to sit down and pay attention to you. You've got to want to write."

What this means in time, is that you are committing a sizeable portion of your life to it. In other circles this is what is meant by the word "discipline." Colding put it simply, "it means you write every day."

He'll be the first to tell you that writing fiction isn't easy. He'll also tell you that to some extent, writing is a learned ability and not an inborn gift and determination is half the battle. "If you're easily put off, don't do it," he said.

The rewards to the successful are alluring. A book might net you 20 to 30,000 dollars and a short story *might* get you \$2500. But the market is very limited. A first novel is seldom — if ever salable. Short stories are drifting toward extinction. Few magazines still even print them.

In part, this is one reason Bernice Slote, editor of *Prairie Schooner Magazine* continues to run them.

*The Schooner* is a respected literary quarterly which has been based in Lincoln since 1927. It publishes poetry, fiction and articles and generally runs 96-100 pages in length—hardly a large volume considering the 5 to 6,000 pieces of work that Slote says will be submitted from all over the world this year.

Working with a small staff, Slote says that each piece is read at least twice. She says that in a sense, at least you learn to be a little callous and critical.

"You see so many people who all want the same thing. Each one thinks he is the only one, when in reality there are hundreds."

Because of the nature and size of the magazine, often the best stories are not always printed and rejection does not always mean the work is poor. There are other factors. Length and subject matter for instance are taken into consideration.

"If we have two stories in the file about a man dying, we don't need a third," she said. "We don't like to discourage people. Because you get a story back it doesn't mean it is bad, just that we can't use it at the time," she added.

Both Colding and Slote are wary of agents.

When you talk to Colding, words like "hucksters" and "pimps" are likely to crop up. In the same breath he'll admit that they are essential.

Slote is somewhat more reserved. Her words tend along the line of "untruthful". "Young writers are often in awe of an agent," Colding said. "Agents complain about reading sixty manuscripts in one week, but all they need is one to give them an income for three years."

Although many publishers only deal with people represented by an agent, Slote is quick to say that having an agent does not influence her choices at all.

It goes without saying that the agent is out to turn a buck. It's his job.



Photo by Bob Pearson

Bernice Slote



Photo by Bob Pearson

Chuck Colding

A representative for the Scott Meredith Agency in New York City guaranteed me that the agency will read everything submitted — for a consultation fee. That starts at about \$200.

The agency rep answered succinctly and quickly to most questions. Notable among the answers however was an indication that unsolicited manuscripts aren't always welcomed with open arms. The company deals with several thousand manuscripts a year. How many a month? In his words: "Figure it out."

A side note here. One of the Scott Meredith agency's bigger coup's this year was the negotiation for the rights to Gary Gilmore's story.

Although you are likely to hear that agents are the "scum of the earth," you are also more than likely to hear that they are indispensable.

A little light was shed on the subject by associate professor of English Roger Welsch. "A publisher friend has told me that major firms seldom deal with unrepresented clients," he said.

Welsch is currently teaching a mini course on "writing for publication" for the UNL Learning center.

Welsch has managed to publish five books without being represented. His books are in a scholarly area though, and he's been lucky. His first manuscript on Nebraska Folklore, was snapped up immediately. "I came away thinking how easy this business was going to be," he said.

Still, the question of agents has crossed his mind. His conclusion in this area is that in his position at least, it would be "crazy." "It just wouldn't pay."

For the limited sales (a few thousand in his case) the royalties aren't going to be worth his (the agent's) while." And finally: "It depends on the individual case."

In other areas Welsch indicates that the going for the new writer isn't very promising. He says that poetry for instance is hard to place. Non-fiction and "how to" books seem to be about the easiest to place. Novels are virtually impossible. He said that with the volume of work that most publishers get, including the small press, it is safe to say that not all manuscripts get read.

The desperate to be published writer will sometimes turn to what is called a vanity press and print his or her own work.

Horror stories about naive people being taken in by this sort of enterprise are legion. Even that once crystal clear evil area is blurring. Welsch says things are happening to blur the distinction between vanity and the "legitimate" press. Subsidiary publishing, for instance—forefeiting the royalties on the first thousand copies as a term of publication, are prevalent.

Many things about publication remain unclear. One thing that is clear though, is that is harder to be printed now than it was ten years ago. If you can deal with that reality and still want to write, you've crossed the first of a million barriers.



Roger Welsch

Photo by Steve Boerner