



Rob McGibbon, synopsis in hand, goes in search of a deal at the London Book Fair

The write stuff

Do you fancy writing a book? Have you ever gazed longingly at *The Sunday Times* bestsellers list and drifted into a delightful fantasy where your name appears there for months while you tap out the next hit at a Tuscan retreat, quietly enjoying fame and a bumper royalty cheque?

Come on, let's be honest. Have you? Have I? Of course I bloody have. And I defy any journalist to say he hasn't. In fact, I challenge anyone to deny it.

Just about everyone I meet — bankers, estate agents, lawyers, taxi drivers, you name it — they're all writing a book that will turn them into the next John Grisham or JK Rowling. And, of course, there are swathes of journalists hankering for a similar dream, but at least they already earn a living by writing.

Much of this book talk has little substance beyond a vague idea conceived on a beach one summer, yet everyone seems united by the assumption that books are an open-to-all fast track to stardom and riches. Scribble 350 pages, collect cash and awards, do signing sessions.

Publishing PRs perpetuate the hype that books equal

“In fact, nearly everything needed in a book's life is here, except the pulp dealers. But I guess that would be like inviting an undertaker to the christening”

wonga because it's the only story they can regularly top-spin into the nationals: “Nobody from nowhere gets six-figure advance”. Read with caution; the following is more likely: “After years of unpaid work writer gets wages spread over three payments. May get more later. Don't bank on it.”

After 14 years and 12 celebrity books, I have learnt to consider the stories and the bestsellers list with a cooler head and a lighter shade of green. Some great ups and many fist-clenching downs have taught me to get real before draining precious energy in pursuit of a place in the top 10.

The London Book Fair, held over three days at Olympia every March, is the perfect eye-opener. I've been many times and it is as helpful as it is demoralising to get a sense of what you are up against. The stats this year: 669 stands, 1,787 exhibitors from 42 countries, 1,400 publishers, several thousand booksellers, hundreds of printers, binders, shippers, remainder merchants. In fact, nearly everything needed in a book's life is here, except the pulp dealers. But I guess that would be like inviting an undertaker to the christening.

Then there is, er, me, with a seven-page synopsis for a biography. It's based on a diary written in 1914 by a girl called Olive Higgins, who died tragically in Paris when she was 16. It has a contemporary thread, but this is no easy pitch, especially in a celebrity-hungry market.

After three years' work without approaching anyone in the business, I am ready to meet the publishers. Some advice given to me days ago helps: without writers and their ideas this would be an empty hall. Authors are the industry's lifeblood and their studios faces and weighty names are proudly displayed all around on giant photos and jumbo book jackets. Rowling, Sharpe, King, de Bernières... Michael Owen... Jordan.

The LBF is a trade-only show and is as much about networking and PR to announce new releases as it is about hardcore business. Deals are progressed here, not necessarily sealed, but the clear message is that books are booming.

In ball-park figures, 120,000 new titles are published every year in the UK. A vast number are academic books, manuals and guides, but there are roughly 10,000 novels and 50,000 non-fiction titles. Only a few dozen