



ask. Wise what advice he has for journalists wanting the title of author.

He says: "It all comes down to a great, original idea, but you must also have something special about you and your writing that could be promotable. You may have to be exceptional and different. There are always a few unexpected hits, like Truss's book, and that is when everyone pretends there's a great science behind publishing, but there isn't really — you are constantly surprised. The publishers who are succeeding are the ones who feel passionately about their books. Doing this cynically does not work in the long run."

It is a crucial point. If you are only chasing money, you may be disappointed. Wise believes you want to do it because you believe in your work. Truss wrote *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* for a modest advance (my guess, £10,000), but her royalties should be on the up side of £150,000 and more if it takes off in the US, where it is published this month.

When Wise hears about *Oliver's Diary*, he uses words such as "amazing" and "special". It is encouraging, although he instantly caveats his enthusiasm with a phrase you always hear in these circles — "it is all in the writing". Still, I allow myself to enjoy the imagined rustle of cypress trees.

Next, I bump into an agent I know and pitch to him in the main thoroughfare. He thinks the book is "really quite intriguing" and takes the synopsis. I then have a positive meeting with the managing director of a small imprint who actively wants the book and then I talk to an editor from elsewhere who is also guardedly excited. Ahh, I breathe in the bouquet of Brunello di Montalcino.

I even meet Oscar winning film director Anthony Minghella, who is in my fantasy top 10 to make a movie of the book. (Really: I fancy like a sap of a fan while he does a signing session for the *Cold Mountain* screenplay.) For fun, I get him to sign my synopsis and we laugh when he says, "Does this mean I have blessed it?" I hope so, Tony-baby. For the hell of it I give him a copy, too, and sign it: "QUICK — film rights still available!"

LATER, I AM standing idly by the Faber and Faber stand when I get chatted to by someone whose next appointment is late. He is a senior editor and before he can answer my question "Do you believe in heaven-sent synchronicity?", he is in an unscheduled meeting with me. I give him a five-minute spiel and he happily slides the synopsis into his briefcase, just as the tardy person arrives.

Experience has taught me one golden rule: if the advance is small, make sure the royalty structure is big. Think of it as insurance; the brokers are generally agents. Their territory at the book fair is upstairs in the International Rights Centre. If the Grand Hall is the book, then the IRC is the poker room.

Behind its own security checkpoints, the IRC is a stark level of 401 small round tables, numbered by colour-coded flags and poles. They are a cacophony of nervous chatter as agents and publishers hammer out rights deals.

This is where I find Caroline Dawday, a doyenne among agents who has been in the business for 27 years. She counts Nick Hornby among her clients and has some simple wisdom for journoes.

"If you are not a journalist, you are not a runner at a marathon than it does for a sprint," she says. "That is the difference between books and writing articles for newspapers or magazines."

"My best suggestion for someone wanting to write a non-fiction book is to ask yourself three questions:

1) What is it about? 2) Why does it need a book, not a section of a magazine? 3) Why are you the person to write it? That should narrow it down. And don't worry about the market too much — that is for other people to decide."

After three days at the fair, I managed to put my book before some important people. If they bite, then I will deliver a taster of the manuscript, which is ready to go. Who knows what will happen then — it could be six figures or two fingers, but at least the business aspect is finally in motion.

Publishing is as wonderful as it is unpredictable and frustrating. It is fine to be driven by dreams to write a book, but be wide awake if you are entering the publishing casino. Be prepared to stake a pocket full of time and heartache — and know the odds.

If all that sounds too risky, then just pick up the book and read it. Close your eyes and in a heartbeat you'll be in Tuscany. □

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10 TIPS FOR GETTING BETWEEN THE COVERS



I am the first to admit that my contribution to literature to date is entirely modest and has never troubled even the extra-long, long lists for any worthy book prize.

Whatever your views on the merits of *Westlife — Our Story*, I can tell you that my book is friggin' hard and the route to publication is filled with as much pain as it is with pleasure.

Since 1990, I've had great ups, such as reaching number 10 on *The New York Times* bestsellers, and I've had miserable downs, like every key publisher telling me to bog off when I said a bloke called Eminem would be big news one day. Muthafucker!

My 12 showbiz biographies (four co-written with my father, journalist and author Rob McGibbon) have sold well in many countries. I have had priceless experience in self-publishing, and I have enough algebraic royalty statements to know that the figures can look like. To a degree, I've been there, got the jackets to prove it.

I am not putting myself up as some all-seeing sage, but here is my 10 Point Plan for getting a book in covers.

1. Getting started

Have faith in your ideas. Screenwriter William Goldman's classic maxim for movies — "nobody knows anything" — applies to publishing. Think, Lynne Truss. But most book ideas are just beer talk — don't be an Ale Author.

2. Research

Journalists have a head start here and the quality of your research is critical in every genre. It is also the best way to sober up after getting a "killer" idea in the pub; it may have already been done.

3. Synopsis

The road map, blue print, recipe, whatever metaphor you fancy. Be aware not to play with a synopsis for too long because all you are doing is hiding from the actual writing. You'll never get a deal on a synopsis.

4. Writing

Break it down. I think of a book as like building a house: foundations, bricks, wiring, etc. The decorations come last. Rewriting is paramount. Treat formulas with suspicion. Comparing yourself with established authors can be self-defeating, but read their introductions for a squirt on the making of the book. John Grisham's note in *A Time To Kill* is a classic for first-time thriller novelists. You'll need feedback on your work, but get it from someone impartial. Reframe brutal honesty as loving kindness!

5. Getting a publisher

Sorry, no short answer here. As a kindergarten starting point, check out the competition. Never send in manuscripts unsolicited. The Slush Pile is deep and dusty, so put the postage money towards something that will actively help you write — like biscuits. Once you are through the publishing door, you will be courted by the sheer passion for books within the business and how an enthusiastic editor can help immeasurably. Publishing is peopled by decent folk.

6. Agents

They work on 10 to 15 per cent and can be worth every penny by negotiating the right deal in a contract. Agents are getting tougher to secure, so a Catch 22 exists. Alternatively, get advice from a media-savvy lawyer — or see below!

7. The advance

This is the up-front payment against potential earnings. It comes in three instalments — on signature, delivery and publication. Royalties usually start at 7.5 per cent, but complicated fractional variations apply. Get a calculator. Better still, a degree in maths.

8. Serialisation

For some non-fiction titles this is an essential bonus. I've heard sob stories from many hacks, so be wise to the industry standard split.

9. Bookshops

Resist sentimental visits to your precious baby — you'll only get depressed when you see it gassing for air among thousands of others.

10. Epilogue

All writing is tough and a book can be tedious agony. Patience and discipline are vital. There are easier ways to earn a living — like sitting behind a long lens in Barbados — but if you feel driven to write, then I believe a book will be uniquely fulfilling and worth every mad-making moment. As with anything else, if it all comes down to one simple question: how much do you really want to do it? If I had to pass on one Post-it note piece of advice from my own MDF HQ, it would be this:

"Write from the heart. Do the deal. Do the deal with your head."

of these have any serious impact on the bestseller lists.

There's something of a casino atmosphere at the LBF. I'd almost like to use the term lightly because the beauty of publishing is a genuine love for creativity, not just units and turnover. Nonetheless, competition is fierce and margins are scarily tight, so everyone is hoping to hit the jackpot.

The high rollers — Random House, HarperCollins, Penguin — occupy sprawling central stands, while medium-size companies pack in around them. The peripheral booths — the slots, if you like — are taken by the smallest players.

If the scale of all this is diminishing your desire somewhat, a sublime *Rocky* story dominates the fair that should pep up every hopeful hack's determination.

A tiny independent publisher, Profile Books, doesn't even have a stand here because it couldn't justify the minimum fee of about £3,000. That was before its boss, Andrew Franklin, took a punt on *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, and Lynne Truss's book about punctuation, which is now a number one sensation with sales of 700,000.

The dream is alive and kicking at the LBF. It is also worth noting that the last two Booker Prize winners have come from small publishers, Faber and Faber with *DK Pierre's Vermin God* and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, which was published by Canongate. Both authors were unknowns with poor track records before these novels.

THE OPENING TRUMPETS of the *Rocky* soundtrack play in my head as I attend my first meeting. It is with Gordon Wise, the publishing director of John Murray, a respected literary imprint founded in 1768 and now under Hodder Headline.

Wise commissioned several of my pop books at MacMillan; without this connection I wouldn't get a look-in. Securing meetings at the fair is tough. It is not a place for authors to go cold calling. Before my pitch, I