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 could be publishable. You have to be exceptional and different. There are always unexpected hits, like Truss’s book, and that is when everyone pretends there’s a great science behind publishing, but there isn’t. I am 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.”

A crucial point. If you are only chasing money, you may be disappointed. Write because you want to and because you believe in your book. Truss wrote *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* for a modest advance (my guess, £100,000), 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 Ollie’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 bust 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. Then I have a positive meeting with the managing director of a small imprint who actually wants the book and then I talk to an editor from elsewhere who is also guardedly excited. Ah, 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. (Reality: I queue 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 chatting to someone whose next appointment is late. He is a senior editor and before he can answer my question “Do you believe in heaven-seen-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 casino, then the IRC is the poker room. Behind its doors, the IRC is a stark level of 66 small round tables, numbered by colour-coded flags on poles. There is a constant hum of serious chatter as agents and publishers hammer out rights deals.

This is where I find Caroline Dawayn, 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 journeys.

“Oh, I am aware that it requires different muscles to run 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 these questions: 1) What is it about? 2) Why does it need a book, not a series of articles? 3) Why are you the one 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 to some important people. If they bite, then I will deliver a taste of the manuscript, which is ready to go. Who knows what will happen then — it could be six figures or a few 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 wise if you are entering the publishing business. Be prepared to stake a part of your time and heartache, and know the odds.

If all that sounds too risky, then just pick up the bestseller list, close your eyes and in a heartbeat you’ll be in Tuscany.

Westlife

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

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 what 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 No 10 Plan for getting a book in covers.

1. Getting started

Have faith in your ideas. Screenwriter William Goldman’s classic mantra 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 is self-defeating, but read their intros for a squid 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 deadly, so give money towards something that will actively help you write — like biscuits. Once you are through the publishing door, you will be heartened 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 best 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. Serialization

For some non-fiction titles this is an essential bonus. I’ve heard sob stories from many hack, 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 gasping for air among the seaweed of others.

10. Epilogue

All writing is tough and a book can be tediously agony. Patience, discipline and vitality 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 maddening moment. As with anything in life, 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: