

On writing books—the pitch

Eric Blair

22 May 2011

As I mentioned last time, I'm trying to turn some of the content I've written over the last several years into a book.

In the last year, I've had 37,500 unique visitors, which is a single slow day for a celebrity blogger, but not bad at all given that this is my seventh post in that period, on a side-scrolling blog that I do absolutely nothing to promote, where some of the content (the RSS-only stuff) is almost impossible to link to. But thanks, Ycombinator¹, for linking to a post I wrote in 2005.

Which is to say that writing books is good for my own irregular temperament, which can put out a solid amount of good stuff given enough time, but which may produce absolutely nothing for a month or, evidently, the better part of a year.

This would actually be my third book, so I'm not exactly a newbie here. [Sorry if my history is hard to find; Eric Blair is certainly a hard-to-Google name. I've been trying to ameliorate this by killing off the other Eric Blairs one by one, but you can imagine that it's slow going.] To the best of my abilities to calculate this, both presses I've worked with are now making a profit on what I wrote for them, although *nonzero* is a more fitting descriptor than *blockbuster*.

I think of writing as the last solitary art form. Film and music are collaborative efforts, and even visual arts like painting or photography require equipment makers who will have a real hand in what the outcome looks like. An author is a storyteller, whose words are entirely untied to any materials, or the added input of kibbitzers and contributors along the way. An author is Hemingway or Kerouak or even Stephen King, alone with a pen or a typewriter. He or she does not need outside help moving the machinery around a good paint supplier, somebody to stretch the canvas or to keep the plaster of Paris for the molds smooth. The word is ephemeral, and in the present day doesn't even need a typesetter, and for an e-book doesn't even need a press.

That too works for my temperament, as a hopelessly antisocial intellectual type who now and then passes on party invitations so he can stay home and do more research.

All of which is a lead-in to discussion of just how very social book publishing is. I got both of the above-mentioned book deals via personal connections, and if you don't have a contact or advocate, it will be a very uphill hike.

It's a simple information aggregation problem: you're an acquiring editor, and you have a slush pile of maybe a hundred query letters or manuscripts. Have a look at the sense of overwhelmed that the McSweeney's submissions page² expresses:

¹<http://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=2367746>

²<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/submit/book.html>

Before you send anything, please make sure you've looked at (and maybe even read) some of our other books. Our interests are fairly wide-ranging, but some manuscripts clearly don't fit, so it's best to have some idea of what we might like. Second... oh, we don't know. Send whatever you want. We'll probably take forever to respond, and personal replies are often impossible. And we can only publish a few each year, and our decisions are idiosyncratic and sometimes inexplicable. We feel bad about all this, and we're continually tinkering with our system, but to some extent it's just inevitable.

[Yes, I have tossed my manuscript on their slush pile, primarily because they seem to have an appreciation for the absurd.]

For a large press, reading all the submissions would literally require several full-time staff, just to determine whether a submission maybe merits further consideration.

The solution: agents. The literary agent hires a full-time staff of people whose sole job is to determine whether a submission merits further consideration. Once the agent has selected a work as worth pursuing, then the acquiring editor at least has the signal that the work has percolated to the top of *somebody's* slush pile. Agents are paid by the writer, not the press, so the press just got the labor-intensive work of getting through the slush pile for free. [Agents consistently claim that they bill the author 15%, but negotiate more than 15% more cash out of the press. I'm not sure how one would evaluate whether this counterfactual is true.]

So the problem of evaluating submission quality jumped the rail from being about quality of submission to being a social issue about what agent the writer knows, who the agent knows in publishing, and how the agent communicates with the acquiring editor. After all, it's easier to gather information socially than personally. If I told you that you have until the end of the day to find the single most interesting or most likely to sell writing on the Internet today, you wouldn't just start reading, but would ask others, either online or off. All of which is not surprising for a medium with *net* in the name. But don't expect a purer process out of the purer medium of book publication.

Why I write, revisited I wrote about the two things people look for in nonfiction entry #025. I still think like this, and it's one of the few early entries that I read now and am not embarrassed by (so do me a favor and don't click around too much with the Next and Previous links if you go to that post).

The first thing people look for in nonfiction is affect. There's a pleasant sense that you get from hanging out at the coffee shop with somebody who interests you, and you should get that from spending time with a book as well. Otherwise, you're stuck with a textbook, where reading is unpleasant work that you do only because expect it will have a utilitarian payoff.

Many agent listings I've seen fall just shy of asking the author for a marketing plan. Look over the pop econ and pop science books—those by Malcom Gladwell spring to mind—and you find books that are as much a cult of personality as real research.

The second thing people look for is information, but here's how I'd phrase the goal of all nonfiction now:

Make the reader feel smarter.

entry #271

For both of these things, we're back to the personal. Here's you, there reader, and me, the author, and we're having a conversation. Talking to paper is rather one-sided, but I think you'll agree that the best books lead the voice in your head to talk back to the author. Some people hate the solitary nature of reading, and will only do significant reading for a class or a book group. But for everybody else, the marketing process has brought the book all the way from having one author in the room to having one author and one reader.

But in between, there's the committee of editors, associate editors, copywriters, agents—the network. Books are not unlike any other commodity, where there is an individual user and a small-scale producer, and then a whole lot of people who help one side find the other, and that passel of people have their techniques for making the link. John Hodgman, a former literary agent³, advises that “novels which feature as characters well-heeled college graduates with no marketable skills who perhaps wanted to be writers once but now are publishing professionals living in New York will always be published. Always. Also: be sure to include a rousing gardening scene”. Y'know, he's not really kidding. A NYT survey of book reviewers asked each to name their favorite novel, and the list of picks⁴ was dominated by books by Updike, Roth, and DeLillo about growing up in the suburbs of New York thirty or forty years ago.

[Before we get all Red State/Blue State about this, my subjective impression is that Christian inspirational is as well-established a market as the people-with-literature-BAs market. Your guess is as good as mine as to whether those editors and agents are themselves readers of inspirational lit, but publishers have a solid theory of mind for a certain type of reader and pick books around that theory of mind.]

Academic books are peer reviewed, by which we mean that the editor will survey academics about the value of the book before publishing. This is necessary because the editor is simply living in a different world, and really, truly thinks differently from the academics who are going to use the book as an input to production of studies and academic papers. For those books you see at Home Depot about how to put up drywall, there's market research you can do to calculate the expected number of people who need that item as an input to production. At which point the book is just another product.

But for less directly goal-oriented books, for fiction or not exactly how-to nonfiction, the agent's and acquiring editors problems become a theory of mind problem: can the editor picture readers who are going to love this book? [I frankly think I'm not too far from the thinking of a New York editor in my own proposals, by the way, so this is not a lament about my own writing.] I can't tell you how many agents and editors I've seen who insist that all nonfiction must have a narrative, which makes sense because if you're a literary type then you come from a world of fiction and text. But it shows us just how much easier it is to get published when writing rousing gardening scenes. I (heart) Klutz Press⁵ for successfully marketing to kinetic learners, which literary editors are not.

The editor has to guess what the reader wants, and the agent has to use his or her social network to convince the editor that there exists a sufficiently large group of

³<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/links/aafpla/agent1.html>

⁴<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/fiction-25-years.html>

⁵http://www.klutz.com/book/Juggling-for-the-Complete-Klutz?merch_location=Our%20Favorite%20Stuff

people who would benefit from the author's writing, all of which is one more means by which a one-to-one interaction between reader and author becomes a tangled social problem.