

# So You Wanna Be an Author?

Don't  
call  
me.  
Just  
read  
this.

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Photo illustration  
by Rob Hill



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twisted sense of  
duty.

WHEN MY TELEPHONE RINGS, I almost always check the caller ID before I answer. If the number and name look unfamiliar, I assume the caller is:

1. A prison inmate or
2. An MU graduate seeking advice about publishing a book.

Why that odd pairing? Well, as an investigative reporter, I write frequently about malfunctions of the criminal justice system. Having gained a reputation among convicts as a journalist who might look into claims of innocence, I receive numerous calls from desperate people. Most inmates are grateful if I do nothing more than listen carefully. Wannabe authors, on the other hand, expect a great deal and are rarely grateful when I offer candid advice. All in all, I would rather hear from serial killers.

It seems that half of MU alumni are working on book manuscripts in their spare time. The other half are thinking about writing books. It is no exaggeration to say that I receive calls and, increasingly, e-mails from wannabe authors almost every week, month after month, year after year. They call me because I am the author of six nonfiction books — two from regional publishers, one from the University of Missouri Press and three from national trade publishers.

Apparently, to amateurs with big dreams, writing a book seems easy. It is just putting words on paper, after all. Why not try it? A large percentage are writing their memoirs. Surely their fascinating lives will appeal to a vast audience. Others are writing books about their academic specialties (dueling, medical care during long-ago wars, the metaphor of domestic needlework in period novels); their hobbies (tying fishing flies, carving wildlife critters from bars of soap); their amateur's passion for jazz or baseball or Cajun cooking or collecting matchbooks from around the world. I am not making this up.

They come to me from all directions. Some are School of Journalism graduates. Others are guided to me by helpful — too helpful, in my opinion — staff members who answer the J-School's main number. Still other referrals come from Ellis Library, the English department, professors in various disciplines who know me, friends of friends, acquaintances of acquaintances. I accept every call out of some twisted sense of duty. I try to answer politely, although I fear that sometimes I am curt — especially when I, as a free-lance writer, am trying to complete a magazine story on deadline or experiencing a good day at the keyboard with one of my own manuscripts.

The questions are almost always the same. As a public service, and perhaps to cut down on the number of calls I receive, here they are, along with condensed versions of my answers:

Q: Will you read my manuscript and give me feedback?

A: (Most expect that service for free. I wonder why they think I am independently wealthy. Some offer to pay, but I feel bad taking money from MU alumni.)

I might read your manuscript, if you are prepared for a candid assessment. The trouble is, almost no wannabe author will graciously accept negative or even lukewarm opinions. By the time they call me, most have already decided they are on the way to writing a great book.

Q: Do I need a literary agent? If so, how do I find one?

A: The only reason to seek a literary agent before completing the manuscript is if you need a significant amount of money

upfront (say \$25,000 or more) to

finish the book. Publishers call such money an advance. Regional publishers, publishers that specialize by topic and university presses rarely require an author to retain an agent. National trade publishers such as Random House and Simon & Schuster prefer to deal with agents. The best ways of finding agents are to go on recommendations from authors or to study the acknowledgments of books related to yours.

Q: Which publishers would be interested in my book?

A: Study the world of publishing at bookstores, libraries and online. Determine which publishers distribute similar books, and approach them first. The lines are more blurred than ever before. For example, national trade publishers are less and less interested in books that will not become financial blockbusters. Smaller national publishers (such as Algonquin in Chapel Hill, N.C., or Prometheus in Buffalo, N.Y.), regional publishers and entrepreneurial university presses are now signing books that Random House would have signed a few decades ago.

Q: How much money will I make from writing books?

A: Forget about making money. Almost all books lose money. If you actually finish your manuscript, if it is any good, if you find an agent, if a publisher offers you a contract, if you deliver, if your book reaches market — only then start thinking about an income stream. And if you actually come out ahead financially, congratulations. You have accomplished something that so far has eluded me. ❁

*About the author: Steve Weinberg is on leave from the faculty while completing two books — a centennial history of the School of Journalism and a biography of Ida Tarbell, which is under contract to a major New York publisher.*

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