

Chapter

1

So Why Write?

In This Chapter

- ◆ The best reasons to write
- ◆ The future of books
- ◆ The big business of book business
- ◆ Getting published can be like getting on a game show
- ◆ 100,000 chances to win

Congratulations, you've taken a big, big step. You've gone out and bought yourself a book on getting published. And that is exactly what you will learn in the following pages: how to get published.

Just imagine the glory and hosannas that await you as a published author: fat royalty checks, impressive literary awards, newspaper articles, speaking engagements, applause, and public recognition. Ah, life will be grand!

Well, life might be grand—or there's a very good chance that getting published won't change your life at all. In many ways this book hopes to serve as both a cheerleader (you *can* do it!) and a reality check (that's *reality*, not *royalty* check). Take it from a couple women who know: Writing is very hard work. Getting published is very hard work. Selling books is very hard work.

But before we usher you onto the path toward a career as an author, let's step back to ask a critical question: Just why do *you* want to write a book? Writing an entire book is a whole lot of work and effort. What's in it for you?

What's Your Reason?

There are as many reasons to write as there are books on a library shelf. Is yours on the list?

- ◆ I'm compelled to write.
- ◆ I want the personal satisfaction of being published.



Bookmarks

An **author** is one who writes a book or books. The word usually implies a published writer. The **royalty** is the percentage of book sales that the publisher pays the author for each copy of a book sold.

- ◆ I hope to advance my cause.
- ◆ I want to share my knowledge.
- ◆ I'd like to advance my career.
- ◆ I'd like to achieve fame.
- ◆ I'd like to earn a fortune.
- ◆ All of the above.

I'm Compelled to Write

Some folks sit down and write because they are consumed with an inner need to write. These people must write—they can't not write. They wake up in the middle of the night with the urge to jot down a few lines or even write entire pages. For these folks, writing comes naturally; it just feels right.

Have you ever heard a novelist say that “the characters are writing the book, and I'm just holding the pen”? Or “I've got to get these ideas on paper!” If either sounds like you, then you're someone who's *compelled* to write. Getting published may very well be your primary goal; making money would be nice, but it could be of secondary importance.

I Want the Personal Satisfaction of Being Published

Putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) can be very fulfilling. And once your writing project is finished, you will have accomplished something very real. Instead of talking endlessly about how you plan to write a book someday, you will have done it!

Not only is the process of writing satisfying, but there are also psychological rewards to be gained from being published. The pride and satisfaction that can come from writing a book are unsurpassed. Imagine the day when you can stand in a bookstore aisle and see your name on a book. Or better yet, imagine the first time someone asks for your autograph!

I'd Like to Advance My Cause

Have you got a message you want to share with the world (or at least with anyone smart enough to buy your book)? You want to share your beliefs—political, philosophical, religious, or whatever—to advance a cause. A great example of this is John Robbins, who turned his back on his family's ice cream fortune (you've heard of Baskin-Robbins, haven't you?) in order to write and lecture about the dangers of the typical American diet. His book, *The New American Diet* is now a classic, and was his way of advancing his cause.

I Want to Share My Knowledge

You might know how to build a better mousetrap, and you think the world needs to know, too. This is not quite the same thing as writing to advance a cause, but it's a mission to help people do something—or do something better. Perhaps you've spent 20 years lying underneath cars and believe you can tell car owners a better way to care for and maintain their automobiles.

The market for how-to information seems endless, and writers with useful knowledge to share can sometimes hit the big time. "Find a need and fill it" is an old business axiom that still holds true in today's book market.

I Hope to Advance My Career

Publishing a book in your field can be a very powerful way to supercharge your career. Why languish in obscurity when you can gain recognition as an expert in your field? Who knows, you could build a second career as a consultant or a speaker.

David Bach was a stockbroker like thousands of others in the San Francisco Bay Area when he decided to write a book called *Smart Women Grow Rich*, inspired by his own grandmother's investment savvy. His first book became a best-seller and spawned a series. He is now a well-paid New York-based writer and speaker, no longer an ordinary stockbroker.

There are almost as many marketing consultants in the nation as there are stockbrokers, but only one of those marketing consultants has written a book about marketing

to the group with the biggest purchasing power—moms. Maria Bailey wrote the book *Marketing to Moms: Getting Your Share of the Trillion Dollar Market* and used it as a handy springboard to increase her professional reputation. Maria is now regularly quoted in the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and is the acknowledged “go to” expert in this field.

Don’t get the idea that only business people can advance their careers with a book. Doctors see a huge boost in patients when the medical books they’ve written become popular. It worked for Drs. Andrew Weil, Pamela Peeke, and Christiane Northrup. Almost any other type of career can be built up this way, including careers as motivational speakers, beauticians, massage therapists, and childcare providers. Could writing a book be your ticket to the top?

I'd Like to Achieve Fame

Similar to writers who hope to advance their careers, some writers hope that getting published will make them famous, if only in their own neighborhoods, towns, states, or among their colleagues. The world is a celebrity-conscious place, and who wouldn’t want the things that come with fame: the best table in a restaurant, a complimentary bottle of wine, your picture in *People* magazine, admiring fans, and maybe a spot on the couch with Katie Couric on the *Today* show some morning.



Hot Off the Press

Perfectly ordinary folks with perfectly ordinary lives sometimes become famous authors. Danielle Steel was a high school teacher, John Grisham was a lawyer, Ernest Hemingway was a newspaper reporter, and Wallace Stevens sold insurance. Richard Paul Evans of *The Christmas Box* fame was in the advertising business until he hit it big with his self-published book. He later sold it to Simon & Schuster for \$4.2 million. So why not you?

Do you long to be recognized as you walk down the street? A published book might get you that. Fame is not always linked directly to fortune, however. And getting your book published may make its title, but not your face (and sometimes not even your name) familiar to many. Quick, who wrote *Robert’s Rules of Order*?*

I'd Like to Earn a Fortune

It’s by no means guaranteed, but writing a book (or writing several books) is a possible route to fortune. Just ask Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield, the creators of

*Major Henry M. Robert compiled the *Rules* in 1876.

the best-selling *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. When giving inspirational talks to writers, these two authors delight in showing overhead slides of their seven-figure royalty checks. “And we get these a couple of times a year!” they chuckle.

Making big bucks by writing books is a big goal that, quite frankly, isn’t achieved by many. But if this is what drives you, then give it all you’ve got. Begin by making sure that your book idea has mass appeal. The smaller and more specialized the potential audience for your book, the dimmer the chances that you will make lots of money from it.

Just as fame does not always follow fortune, fortune is not always linked to fame. You might have recognized Mark Hansen and Jack Canfield’s names, but there are many authors whose names you’d never recognize who have nevertheless earned lots of money writing books. The unsung authors of popular textbooks and other homely books that sell year after year without ever showing up on *best-seller* lists might be unrecognized on the street, but they are very well known at the bank.

All of the Above

Few writers have one single reason for writing. Most of us combine an emotional need to write with a secret desire for fame and a not-so-secret desire for fortune.

Why should you stop to examine the reasons that you write? Because if you understand why you want to write, you can do a much better job of planning how to get published.

Is a need for inner satisfaction the only thing driving you? Then you might be happy seeing your work published in a small literary journal. Do you have grand plans to advance your career and raise your professional profile? That calls for a specific plan of attack. Is making a fortune your primary goal? Then you’d better skip ahead to Chapter 3. To avoid disappointment, make sure that your ultimate goal and your book’s sales potential match.



Bookmarks

The term **best-seller** is used loosely in the publishing business. Strictly speaking, it refers to a book that has appeared on a best-seller list somewhere. In reality, publishers and their publicity staffs attach the word to almost any book that they haven’t lost their shirts on!



Experts Say

According to a survey by the Jenkins Group, fully 81 percent of Americans “feel they have a book in them.” Many of those same folks have acted on that feeling, as the Jenkins folks went on to estimate that six million Americans have written actual manuscripts.

Do People Still Buy Books?

“Writing a book will take me the next few years. By the time I finish all bookstores might have disappeared!” It seems like every newspaper and magazine has carried a story with dire predictions: Americans don’t read anymore; the book publishing industry is dead; books as we know them will soon cease to exist. So why bother writing a book?

Our well-informed and professionally stated response to those naysayers: “Not!”

Mergers and Chains

Ever since Gutenberg invented his printing press, the publishing industry has been evolving. Many working in publishing today like to reminisce about the bygone days of yore in which literary editors and their beloved authors could while away the afternoon with a pitcher of martinis and a discussion of the finer points of writing. Large publishing companies are seldom run by men with martini pitchers in their offices these days but rather are headed by business folks with a strong sense of the bottom line. Even the number of large publishing houses is shrinking—these companies are being bought up and combined into “super houses” with 10 or 20 different imprints. One editor at a major New York house likes to joke that although she’s had only two different jobs, as a result of mergers she’s actually worked for seven different companies. But small and medium-size publishers all over the country are willing to take risks with topics and authors that other houses might avoid. They might also have the time to linger over a glass in the afternoon, too ...

And while publishing companies are merging, more bookstores are opening across the country. The decision-making power has quickly become concentrated in the hands of two or three large retail chains, and this, too, has affected the publishing business—as has the rise in book sales in nontraditional nonbook outlets such as Target and Wal-Mart. The brunt of this change has been borne by locally owned bookstores; sadly, many small, *independent booksellers* are disappearing. But the good news for writers is, no matter where they buy, Americans are still buying books, and that is what keeps the industry going.



Hot Off the Press

Publishing businesses are still anachronistically known as “publishing houses” after the days when most companies operated out of brownstones or townhouses that were formerly single-family dwellings.

Online Book Sales

As further proof of the health and vibrancy of the ancient art of publishing, we need only point to the newest development of all: the Internet and the arrival of e-commerce. One of the most remarkable things about the last few years is that one of the most frequently purchased items online is also one of the most old-fashioned—books. Amazon.com continues to be far and above one of the highest-profile e-commerce companies. And beyond book sales, there is a continuing interest (at least on the part of the media) in electronic publishing, or as e-books. Despite the flurry of investment in this idea and the enormous publicity that Stephen King's foray into e-book publishing garnered, actual sales for e-books are estimated at just $\frac{1}{10}$ of 1 percent of the total book market, but right now let's just add it to the plus column for the future of books.



Bookmarks

An **independent bookseller** is a locally owned bookstore. Before the rise of national chains such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, most towns were served by independents. Sadly, many of these stores have been unable to compete and have closed their doors. Fans of independent booksellers believe the staffs there were more knowledgeable and better able to promote little-known and local authors.



Hot Off the Press

Unlike other retail businesses, books are 100 percent returnable in the bookselling business. If a dress shop has trouble selling a dress, it marks the price down until the dress gets bought. But if a bookseller can't sell a book, she puts it in a box and returns it to the publisher for full credit. According to industry figures from Open Book Publishing, the average bookstore sends back to the publisher 20 percent of its books. Publishers have tried unsuccessfully in the past to wean bookstores off the returnable model, with no success. (After all, they've got a good thing going; why change it?)

Leaner and Meaner

The days when publishing was a genteel pursuit for the wealthy are gone. The book business is catching up to the rest of the world and is streamlining its processes. After a few rocky years of high book returns, book publishing as an industry has emerged stronger and healthier, and is ready to compete in the fast-paced entertainment-driven world we now occupy. So should you put a part of your life on hold and devote yourself to writing that book you dream of? We say, "Go for it!"

Open for Business

Now that we have convinced you that the book business is a healthy one, here's your first insider's tip for success. If you learn only one thing from this book, let it be the following: *The book business is a business.* Seems simple, doesn't it? But so few authors who want to be published approach it as a business.

Product Is King

Let's forget about writing books for a moment and pretend that you have an idea for a coffee company that you've long dreamed of opening. What would your first step be? You'd plunge headfirst into learning everything you could about how the coffee world operates, wouldn't you? You'd spend hours sitting in Starbucks trying to figure out where their success comes from, sipping cup after cup in order to develop a better sense of what kind of roasted bean seems to be the most popular. You might even do a bit of travel and visit coffee plantations to see how the front part of the business operates. And when you've learned everything possible, then and only then you would start to draw up the plans for your own coffee company. Now, if you decide to write a book, do you take all those same steps to achieve success? Sadly, far too few authors do. But they should!

The book publishing industry is a business just like the coffee industry, the breakfast cereal business, or the auto industry. Product is king, and you need to learn how to approach the industry with your product. The more businesslike you are, the greater your chances for success.



Experts Say

"I stay in touch with the publishing world by reading *Publishers Weekly (PW)*. At around \$150 a year, it is expensive but worth every darn penny," says Lynne Rominger, a full-time teacher and part-time author. To subscribe to *PW*, call 1-800-278-2991. You might also find *PW* in your local public library or on the magazine rack at a big bookstore.

Research, Research, Research!

Start right now to learn everything you can about the book business. Become a permanent fixture in your local bookstore. Take the manager out to lunch and ask about the business. Read the trade magazine *Publishers Weekly*. Find out what the proper etiquette is when trying to get published. Learn the lingo. (Far from an admission of idiocy, buying this book was a master stroke of genius; you're on your way to learning the ropes!) Your goal is getting published, so be serious about it.

Once again the Internet can be a tremendous help here. Websites geared toward writers abound. One of the best is run by the *Writer's Digest* folks—check

out www.writersdigest.com. To keep abreast of publishing news, take a look at www.thewritenews.com, or visit www.publishersmarketplace.com to read about what kinds of books are being sold and who is buying them.

But I Don't Live in New York!

Although it sometimes seems that way, not all writers live in New York City. One of the great things about becoming a writer is that you can live anywhere in the country—anywhere in the world, even—and still pursue a career writing books. As long as the UPS driver can find your house (or you've got a phone, fax, and modem), you can deal with agents, editors, and publishers.

Co-author Sheree does live in New York City and wouldn't dream of living anywhere else, but co-author Jennifer has managed to build a book publishing career without ever having moved away from her hometown of Sacramento, California—not exactly a well-known publishing metropolis. If you are determined and professional, and if you keep at it, you can get published no matter where you live.

Think of Yourself as a Contestant

Sheree likes to encourage unpublished writers by telling them the story of how she got on the television game show *Wheel of Fortune*. She believes that for many types of books, both publishing and game shows require similar paths to success.

“I decided that I wanted to be on *Wheel of Fortune*, and so I studied everything about the show,” explains Sheree. “I learned how to dress like the contestants I'd seen every night on the show, how to talk the way the contestants talked ('Hi, my name is Sheree and I'm a literary agent'), and in general, how to act like a contestant. So when I walked into the room filled with hundreds of other folks who wanted to be on the show, I stood out as someone who looked, sounded, and acted like a contestant. And it worked! The producers chose me.” And as Jennifer was recently a successful contestant on *The Weakest Link*, there might be something to this theory!

Literary agents, publishers, and editors (especially those involved in popular trade books) are like the producers of a game show. They know just what they are looking for to suit their needs. And it's up to you to show them that you are a contestant.

So you want to be a published author? Then learn how to walk, talk, and think like a published author. Go out of your way to meet other writers and learn what you can from them. Join writer's groups, go on writer's retreats, and buy books on writing and writers. Keep track of what authors are coming to your town to give bookstore talks and sit front and center in the audience, soaking up what they have to say. Seek out other writers online. Ask published writers to tell you how they made it. And don't be

surprised when they tell you! Everyone likes to talk about his or her own success (and maybe even about some of the disappointments). You just have to ask.

100,000 Chances to Win!

When newspapers and magazines aren't trumpeting the approaching downfall of the book publishing industry, they are warning readers against the avalanche of the 100,000 or so books published each year. As writers, it is all too easy to look at that figure and be discouraged. But we say, what a great business this is! With 100,000 books published every year, that's 100,000 chances to win! Why shouldn't yours be among the chosen? Although many (if not most) manuscripts meet with rejection, the odds that one of those books will be yours are much better than the likelihood of Ed McMahon and the Publishers Clearing House team showing up on your doorstep.

Writers Wanted!

Don't ever lose sight of the fact that the book business needs writers so that it can keep publishing books. Agents need authors, publishers need authors, and editors need authors—no matter what they tell you. Don't be intimidated or discouraged by your encounters with these folks because they need you to stay in business. As best-selling author Robert G. Allen of *The One Minute Millionaire* likes to say, "It's a tough business if you don't know what you're doing. But it can be extremely lucrative and very rewarding when you learn the ropes."

If your first efforts meet with rejection, use that as an opportunity to rework and refine your ideas. Perhaps a different approach might work. In our next few chapters, you'll learn more about how to successfully develop an idea for a book and put together a proposal that will help catch an agent (or editor's) eye.

So *why* write? Because you could get published!

The Least You Need to Know

- ◆ Writing can be a very rewarding experience emotionally or financially—or both!
- ◆ Perfectly ordinary folks have become published writers; there's no reason to be intimidated by the idea.
- ◆ Book publishing is a business, and you need to approach it in a businesslike manner.
- ◆ Americans are reading more and buying more books, and the market for books is strong and healthy.