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The Best Kept Secret to Getting a Memoir Published

By Daphne Larkin



Debbie Weingarten (right) shows Daphne Larkin her memoir in progress.

So, you have a memoir to publish and you've decided not to go the self-publishing route. You'll sell your book to a commercial publishing house which will print millions of copies, option your story to Netflix, arrange for an audiobook, and procure foreign print rights. Soon you will be a famous, wealthy author.

I hate to break it to you but this scenario for an unknown writer would be akin to a weekend jogger winning a marathon. Without training to run the marathon's 26 miles, your likelihood of winning it is slim-to-none.

When I share this bleak picture with my memoir writing students, they look dismayed. After all, it feels like they've already run a marathon for they've done the hard work of creating a compelling, well-written story that will keep readers turning the pages. However, the problem is that commercial publishers don't like to take risks with unknown authors so they seek big names that promise to produce best sellers.

THERE IS A SOLUTION

But wait! You don't have to be a celebrity or have thousands of followers to get published!

Consider Brevard memoirist Debbie Weingarten. In 2016, she wrote a long-form article about the previously unreported epidemic of farmer suicides, tying in her own story about the difficulty of owning an organic vegetable farm. The story, which was published in the U.S. section of The Guardian, the London-based newspaper with 82 million "browsers," went viral, and soon ten literary agents reached out to her. She signed with one of them, which eventually led to a book contract with a commercial publisher. Weingarten's memoir-in-essays about farming, motherhood, and the parallels between the exploitation of women and land is forthcoming.

Weingarten's friend, memoirist Stephanie Land, who wrote the 2019 best seller "Maid," had a similar experience. Land published a story that detailed her struggle as a single mother trying to get by on a maid's meager income and public aid in VOX, an online magazine with 20 million visitors. An agent called and asked if she had a book in the works. "I lied and said yes," Land recalled in a 2021 VOX interview. She wrote a couple of chapters and a book proposal. Eleven months later she had a book deal and then a Netflix series.

FIND YOUR SOAPBOX, BUILD A LANE

To write a story that resonates, first nail down what Weingarten calls your "soapbox" or your main theme, and then "build a lane" for yourself. She advises authors to pay attention to current events and, if any intersect with their subject, pitch articles or opinion pieces to newspapers or magazines. A well-written piece for a news outlet or high-profile website such as the Huffington Post, which has 25 million visitors, can sometimes get the attention of agents or editors looking for their next acquisition. So can your love story. According to the editor of The New York Times "Modern Love" column, Daniel Jones, between 2004 and 2017, the column led to 60 book deals.

GET YOUR NAME OUT THERE

A handful of my memoir writing students regularly send out essays and chapters from their memoirs-in-progress to media such as The Sun, a print and online magazine based in Chapel Hill. Another favorite media outlet is Slate, an online magazine with 8 million “browsers.” Former student Molly Devane of Balsam Grove submitted a story about her father, which became Slate’s lead story on Father’s Day.

If you want to know what websites and magazines are planning to publish, check out Duotrope, a database of publishing projects with deadlines. At \$5 a month, it’s an affordable deal for writers-on-the-move.

HANDLING STORY REJECTIONS

In her excellent book titled “Before and After the Book Deal: A Writer’s Guide to Your First Book,” Courtney Maum says, “You must make friends with rejection in order to survive a professional writing life.” You’ll hear “no” more often than “yes,” she notes, but keep at it. It’s a numbers game that you will likely win if you stay the course.

PUBLISHING CONTRACTS

Instead of offering writers First North American Serial Rights that allow them to own their work, which was pro forma in the 1990s when I was a contributing editor and columnist for Parenting Magazine, publishers today often try to own your work in perpetuity, and in formats from books to film options. To avoid this, Weingarten says, “Read your contracts closely and be careful not to sign away your rights to your own story.” She adds be wary of signing indemnity clauses, which would make you financially responsible if the publisher is sued by a third party over your work. Finally, if you’re worried about a contract, get a legal review from a professional organization such as The Authors Guild.

YOUR DREAM REALIZED

Now that you know how to get your memoir published, you are off and running a marathon you can win. You’ll dig your heels in, submit your work to publications, deal with story rejections, and finally hit the jackpot with an essay that goes viral and garners interest from an agent or editor. And then, one day, there you are, holding your newly published book in your hands. And that, my friend, will give you the best – and longest – “runner’s high” you will ever have.

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer. Her next memoir writing class will be held at the Transylvania County Library on Thursdays from 3 to 5 p.m. beginning March 27 through May 22. For more information, contact Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com.