

Alternative Presses

Or: Why am I lying here with a tulip sticking out of my ass?

By Patrick LoBrutto

I'LL EXPLAIN ABOUT THE TULIP, I PROMISE.

The wide world is getting tougher by the minute. If you're a writer-- especially if you're a writer... and *especially* if you're an unpublished writer-- you don't want to see it get any worse.

I don't think anyone could look you straight in the eye and tell you that it's getting easier than ever before to get your novel published...by a big New York publisher: Indeed, for the new or budding writers it's harder, I think, than ever before. Publishing companies, like predators gone amok, have gobbled each other up. Where there used to be a great many publishers of all shapes and sizes and specialties on the New York scene, there are now a few publishers each with a number of imprints.

You could say that there are really only seven major publishers... Well, okay, give or take a few; but I like the sound of the seven secret masters. Now, of course, the major houses have many imprints, but you can bet your padooki that the overall number of titles is down-- most publishers are trying to cut their lists. And, I predict that the number of titles overall is going to fall even further in the future.

Plus, current marketing dictates dictate that-- just like the movies and TV-- you give the customer more of what he liked before (I'm waiting for Hollywood to remake the first Rocky movie so they can call it Rocky I II). You can hear the jaws of Catch-22 snapping shut here: If you haven't been published before, how can you get published in the first damn place? Good question.

In addition, many major publishers won't accept unsolicited manuscripts, meaning manuscripts not directed to a specific editor; or requested by someone in the house. That means you have to get an agent before you can even submit to a major publisher: And *that* means that you have to go through *two* long, involved and difficult submission processes. At least.

Well, given the above, you're a dope to try, even. Publishers and editors and agents have writers they've been working with, writers with proven track records. They'll go to those writers when a project comes along or when they need books. For Pete's sake! Why would they want *you*? Even if you could get them to read your manuscript.

Ahhh. But there *is* hope for the wretched.

Everything that has been published has been written by *somebody*.

You just aren't looking at the right publishers.

I know, I know, the previous two lines sound suspiciously like Zen.

But consider, just for a moment, that you haven't been looking at this in the right way. You're seeing best-sellers, you're seeing hype, you're seeing books distributed by *mass market* publishers. Look behind that screen of major and blockbuster titles, behind the big-name-author books and the books that have been lucky enough to get the

marketing attention. If you make the effort, you'll see a huge number of books from regional, university and small presses (like this small press that has published my workshop. Hey! I'm getting published!). Some of these presses do scholarly or academic material, some specialize in one or two areas, some are generalists.

Okay, having gotten this far, thus far, I should tell you two things: Keep the day job. And quality control is important.

Money. Well this *is* America and we all want to get paid. But. But writing is a most difficult and insecure profession. If you like your three squares and a roof, you'll stay a wage slave. Even writers who are regularly published by major publishers are hard-pressed to make a living from their scribbling. And, believe me, small publishers do not generally pay well. What you want is to have your ideas and dreams and tales out there, eagerly devoured by legions of hungry fans. Yeah, but if money is the major factor, you'd better have stupendous talent, exceptional luck, unfailing persistence, and a damn good agent.

Ninety-nine percent of us have to contend with the fact that it is virtually impossible to make a living by our writing alone. Get used to the idea. So *caveat author*, or something like that. I'm not even going to think about telling anybody how to make a living from writing. Your reward has to come from what you write and how you write it. (Well, not you, I can tell by how you're reading this that you're the exception and *you* will make millions.)

And, actually; that's what's known as quality control. Here, you're on your own. In this most lonely of professions, that's as it should be. You have to get it out there often enough and well enough to give you a shot at a career. You must always bring the best you can to the table. That means you must constantly learn your profession in every way you can. You must be persistent.

There was a recent article in the *New York Times* about senior citizens-- unpublished senior citizens-- attending critique groups and practicing their craft. My favorite was a woman who came to New York City when she was 19; she had grand dreams of becoming a writer. That was 75 years and three unpublished novels ago. She has *just* gotten an agent. *That's* persistence. I hope, gentle reader, that we all are like her-- too stupid or too dreamy to know what's impossible. We'll find out, won't we?

And don't pay anybody to have your work published. That is... unless, of course, you have a sound business plan, a surefire and well-crafted book and a realistic distribution channel. And about \$20,000 to gamble with-- I *don't* mean the rent, grocery or college money; either.

Okay. You live in East G-string township, far, far from the make-believe, *tres chic* world of big-time publishing. You don't know anybody; or anybody who knows anybody, who can help you. All you've got is a pretty fair book. You don't even know where the publishers are. What do you do?

You do your homework is what. You hike your fanny to the bookstore and look for books that are roughly in the same category as yours. This will be easier, I know, if we're talking about nonfiction (like a cheese repair manual, or how to hunt the mighty snark) or even if your book falls into one of the recognizable fiction categories-- like science fiction, mysteries, westerns, romances, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. If wurst comes to wurst (as they say in the deli business) you look under General Fiction. You'll see, generally, all the secret masters-- a lot from them, too. Look harder and you'll see a

bunch of publishers you don't recognize. And for Pete's sake, don't just take 15 minutes or a half hour to do this-- take two or three hours. Because if you study this you'll find the regional, university and small publishers. There'll be more than you'd realized.

Of course, you should always submit your manuscript to the big New York publishers, but if that fails you should always (*I said always*) do the whole list. You should give everybody a chance to say no... or yes.

And yes, you might actually be better served by one of the little guys. A small publisher will have a smaller list than your average secret master and might well take more time and effort to market your book. A small publisher might consider you a bigger deal-- maybe even a *big deal*-- where a big publisher might ignore the book, even if it is on their list.

See what I'm getting at?

Okay. You've done the bookstore thing. Now you go to the library and get the very latest edition of the *LMP*-- the *Literary Market Place*. This is a nice thick tome that lists agents, printers, editorial services, foreign trade associations, book clubs, artists' representatives, paper merchants and mills, reference books and like that. Oh, and Book Publishers. Xerox the entire Book Publishers section. Have a bunch of change handy. This will give you telephone numbers, fax numbers, addresses, number of books in print, and all sorts of useful information like that. In one swell foop, you can come by your plan of attack. And don't think you won't need an oil tanker's worth of patience, because you most certainly will. This is a long-term project. Then, what you do is call the publishers that might work for you. Get a catalog-- pay for it if you have to.

Get lots of postage. Start submitting. Don't get discouraged. I could regale you with oodles of stories about great and successful books that collected a veritable slew of rejections before finally being accepted. Don't make me do that. Take my word for it.

Once you get it *there*, it's up to you to razzle-dazzle 'em with your skill. Choose your words, compare your work to the competition. Work *hard*; revise as often as necessary. Always look for ways to improve. You are on a training course in a kind of surreal triathlon... and there's no real finish line.

Oh, yeah, I lied about the tulip. I just did that to get your attention... unless you consider that, when you write, you *expose* yourself. You can fail, and fail over and over again. In point of fact, in order to write well you must expose your skill and imagination and intellect and knowledge in a very public way. You have to have something to say. And, although you have to say it in your own way... it must *connect* somehow with other people.

Now, run along. Go and be wonderful.

Patrick LoBrutto has been senior editor for Random House Value Publishing, Inc. and Zebra Books (New York). A veteran of both Ace Books' and Doubleday's science fiction programs, Patrick won the 1986 World Fantasy Award. At Ace Books, he worked on gothics and romances as well as SF. In 1987 he co-founded the Foundation line of hard/soft books.

Patrick is now a freelance writer; copywriter; and editor for a number of houses. As to being a freelancer, he says, "You would think that I would know better!"