

5 MYTHS THEY TELL YOU ABOUT WRITING

(and how to ignore them and succeed)

Publisher and Writers' Studio founder Kathy Gale shares her inside knowledge

After 30 years in the business of publishing and writing, I am constantly amazed at the extraordinary myths aimed at defenceless new writers. I can't tell you how many times I have wanted to rip an article to shreds or chuck my radio out of the window. 'Stop the world,' I want to shout, 'while I tell everyone who writes that it isn't true!'

So here, for the readers of *Writers' Forum*, are the five worst of those myths – together with some advice on how to circumnavigate them.

1 You can write a great book in 30 days (or 60, 90, 100...)

Noooooooooooo! This is not possible! Not in the vast majority of cases anyway. I've been an editor for decades, in some of the UK's biggest publishing houses, working with highly successful authors. I can testify that even after years of learning everything there is to learn and honing their art through years of writing bestsellers, most authors will take around a year to write their next great book. And many of those authors wrote and wrote and wrote – often for 10 years or more – before they got their first deal.

If you are not yet published, the chances are that you are still learning your craft. You need to see this as the equivalent of learning how to paint or play a musical

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instrument. By all means, write for fun, but if you aspire to be a professional and really want to succeed, you will need years of training and practice. It absolutely will not help you to believe you can write a book artificially fast – you need to know the truth.

'But what about a potboiler?' I have often been asked. 'Surely I can dash one of those off in no time at all. That is hardly an art.' But yes, it is. The definition of a potboiler – or just about any successful mass-market book – is that it is a complete page-turner. To achieve that requires a huge amount of skill.

Does this mean you need years of expensive professional help? Not necessarily. It is possible to train yourself. But the training and practice cannot be skipped.

2 If you keep get rejected you should just keep trying. Someone will discover you eventually.

This myth gets trotted out surprisingly often – and I can understand why. It is true that many published authors got rejected several times

before they found an agent or publisher who liked their work. But if I had to count the number of times an author came to me after sending out their manuscript to practically every agent in town only to hear me say it wasn't nearly ready to show, I would be counting for a very long time.

If you get rejected a few times, STOP! You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

I remember the sinking feeling I got as an editor when an author I'd already rejected tried again. I just couldn't find the energy to read their work, however hard they told me they had been working to transform it. The same is true of agents.

So, in this situation, you need someone else – preferably not a friend or family member – to give you some feedback. You may well need to rethink before you present yourself to more agents.

Why do I say not family or friends? Because you need to know whether your book lifts off the page to someone who doesn't know how your mind works, how you think and how you speak.

Most authors see their own work in glorious three-dimensional technicolour. They see the scene and the characters, hear them speak. And it is very hard for the author to know whether the reader can see and hear those things too. In fact, often – unless they are thoroughly

evoked on the page – the reader cannot.

Friends and family members who know you well will subconsciously imagine what you are imagining because they can see through your eyes. A person who doesn't know you could have a completely different reading experience.

3 Self-publishing is more lucrative than traditional publishing.

Erm, this is sometimes but very rarely the case. The royalties are higher, yes. You might get 90 per cent of the cover price of your book rather than 7.5 per cent – and a lot of authors have been persuaded by that argument.

But publishers have a massive infrastructure (the big ones, anyway, and the small ones have a larger infrastructure than you can create by yourself). They have sales teams and distribution networks at home and abroad; they have trade agreements in place with all the leading book chains, wholesalers and independents; they have rights departments and foreign rights departments who aim to get you audiobook sales, overseas sales and a whole lot more.

Many self-published authors sell no more than 200 copies by themselves after huge effort. With a publisher they could sell multiple thousands. So, you might get 90 per cent of 200 books sold at 99p. Or you might get 7.5 per cent of 20,000



Writing coach and publisher Kathy Gale

copies sold at £7.99, plus other editions, sales overseas, etc. Also, unless you spend a great deal of money or go ebook only, a publisher will create a much more professional edition. Given a choice, I know which I would prefer.

4 Publishers are rubbish because they don't sell enough books, do any marketing, provide a launch party or get you lots of publicity.

Many new authors admit to being disappointed by their publishers' efforts. Why was there no publicity at all? Why did they have to organise their own book launch – otherwise nothing would have been

done? Why didn't the books get to the event? (OK, that last one is really bad.)

But publishers, believe it or not, are very experienced people – they know how to publish well, they know what to focus on and what not to do. It is practically impossible, for example, to get publicity for a first novel, unless it is a particular type of literary fiction or there is some kind of magnificent hook. The publisher will often rightly decide not to place their efforts there. They will often not do small-scale marketing because the financial benefits do not justify the cost.

Do publishers mess up? Oh, yes. All the time? I don't believe so. But their communication

with authors is often poor. Many authors have no idea what the process is when they join a publishing house and their expectations can exceed the reality.

But do respect publishers. It is never a strong position to be scathing without knowing the full picture.

If you're not published and you want to get your book out there in the best way, my advice would be to aim for a great relationship with a professional publisher. If you've had a publisher and they have messed up, don't let it put you off. Come back with a superb next book that no publisher can say no to.

Knock the industry's socks off, because the only power is

bestsellerdom (or strong sales at least). Play the long game.

5 Publishers will only take you on if you are young, a celebrity, have done a Masters in Creative Writing, or have written something entirely original or entirely unoriginal.

Generally speaking, people go into the publishing profession because they love books. (Believe you me, they certainly don't do it for the money.) Yes, they need books that will sell well – publishers are businesses after all – and there are books in particular fields that sell better than others. Right now, a publisher's eyes will light up if you send them a good psychological thriller with an unreliable heroine (we all know why). And who was it that said: 'What's the difference between a thriller and suspense? About \$50,000.'

But it is every editor's dream to find the brilliant book that hasn't been done before. Or the brilliant book that is quite like other brilliant books.

Publishers only care marginally about what you are like or what you have done. They do care about how great your book is. By all means, study the market and don't make it unnecessarily hard for the publisher to take your book on. (I can't tell you the obscure prose poems I have been sent in my time). But do write the book you feel passionate about writing, make it as brilliant as possible, and send it to agents with confidence and hope.

• *Kathy Gale was Editorial Director of Pan Books, Marketing Director of Simon & Schuster and Joint Managing Director of the Women's Press. She is now a psychotherapist, executive coach and writing coach. She has recently launched Writers' Studio: Coaching Groups for Authors and is welcoming submissions now. Contact her at kathy.gale@kgpublishingservices or on 07944 137248*