

# The 5 secrets of writing a bestseller

Publisher and writing coach **Kathy Gale** shares the insider insight that has helped her authors write bestsellers



I have worked in the book business for over thirty years and been a director of three leading book publishers. Since then, I have worked closely with writers as a writing coach, with a successful track record in enabling new authors to write to a very high standard and to achieve representation and publication. I am also a psychotherapist and, while I don't suddenly become a therapist with my authors – most of them would head for the hills at the very thought – this way of looking at life has been extraordinarily helpful in my work with writers.

Over the years, authors have consistently asked me for my top tips to becoming a successful writer and so – informed by both areas of my work – here they are:

## 1 Put in the practice

I once watched the comedian Ardal O'Hanlan advising comic writers how to write a successful sketch. He said you should have a great joke at the beginning, a great joke at the end – and great jokes in the middle. He's right, of course, there's no way out of it, if you want to be a writer of any kind you need to write consistently brilliantly. And it goes

without saying that it's never been harder for book authors to get a deal – the days when writers could hone their craft on the job while earning a living are looooooong gone. Books now have to absolutely knock the socks off agents and publishers at the first glance if you are to succeed. So learn the skills and techniques. Really, really thoroughly. There are more of them than we could hope to count – and you need to know and practice them all. It matters not how you learn them – many authors are self-taught and many now get professional help – but learn those multiple skills you must.

## 2 Study the greats

Learn from the great women and men who have gone before you. Scrutinise the bestseller lists and find the most successful recently published books that are closest to your writing style. Do direct, detailed comparisons. Ask yourself what the purpose is of each page of your book and take a similar section of a bestselling book. Is yours as good? If not, why not? I would bet my last fiver that you haven't got as much on the page. Most new authors do FAR less than published authors do. There is a widespread belief that the fewer words the pacier

the book, but in fact the opposite is most often true. Readers need to be drawn into the book, completely absorbed in it. To do that, they need atmosphere; description; and detailed, sophisticated characterisation. That's a lot of words.

By far the most common problem I encounter in the work of new writers is that it is two-dimensional – it can skate over the surface and read thinly. Where that is the case, the reader can't get absorbed and the book becomes a slow and painful effort to read. So, don't move too fast in the mistaken belief that this will improve the pace.

Follow the same method of checking your work against the work of a contemporary bestseller for every single skill or technique. Is my plotting as exciting? Are my characters as clearly delineated? Is this passage as atmospheric as an equivalent passage in a new bestseller? Don't stop until you believe your book is of the same high standard. And if you can see it isn't but can't work out why, seek out someone really good to look at this with you.

## 3 Know the market inside out

Get as much information about



publishers and agents as you can. Really educate yourself about their world. It's incredibly insular and complex, but knowledge is power. The more you know about them, the more effectively you will pitch yourself to them.

Remember that agents are very successful businesspeople. It is a common mistake to think their primary job is to read scripts and send them to editors. Many agents spend most of their lives travelling internationally, making massive deals, negotiating at a very high level. You need to approach them as if you want a director-level post at Microsoft and they are Bill Gates.

And do remember to analyse bestseller lists if you want publication. Ask yourself what kind of writing is working in your field right now? Does yours feel as contemporary? If not, think again. But don't misunderstand me – publishers don't just want you to write to a formula. They want your take in an area they know they can sell. Or they want something totally original and fresh. But they don't want anything that feels out of date.

And yet – there's always an 'and yet'; this is a very complex world – there will always be the sudden nostalgic revivals of an aged genre. For years, publishers wouldn't have looked at a spy thriller, but then suddenly stylish, literary spy thrillers were all the rage. You can never know what the next big thing will be. But do give it some thought. Is what you are doing a stylish homage to something past that is ripe for a revival? Or will no publisher on earth be convinced by that right now?

#### 4 Be emotional

Yep, you read that right. A successful book – fiction or non-fiction – is all about engendering feeling in the reader. Excitement, fear, comfort, amusement: these are the things we want from a book. Human beings connect through empathy – the sharing and understanding of feelings – and we want to feel connected when we read. So focus on what you want your readers to be feeling and make everything you do service that aim. Ask yourselves,

constantly and repeatedly, how is my reader feeling? Is this as scary as I want it to be? Are they really on the edge of their seats? Are they feeling as sad as I want them to be right now? If not, what can I do?

What creates that feeling? The events of the book. The vocabulary. The sentence structure and length. The choices you make in every aspect of your book – large or small – will either support or undermine its emotional impact.

#### 5 Look at your own emotional issues and blocks.

Eek, really? Yep. You can't engender feeling in your reader unless you are feeling yourself. There's a phrase as-yet-unpublished authors often hear from editors – 'it doesn't quite lift off the page'. That happens a lot. And, in my years of experience as an editor and writing coach, that happens when the author is holding something back or holding feelings in. If your writing seems stilted, what are you inhibiting and why? It is my belief that if you are doing anything creative, you have to be emotionally alive – and I've seen authors' work transform when they recognise a flatness on the page and then realise there is something they have been trying not to feel. Often, all it takes is to recognise this – somehow, then, the block dissolves and the writing flourishes.

It is very common for people to feel uneasy about some aspect of themselves. We live in an emotion-phobic society and we label emotions 'good' or 'bad'. That's just nonsense. All our feelings are helpful to us. Anger is brilliant – it tells us when there is something we don't like and when we need to address something or make a change. Without anger we'd stay in situations that don't work for us for ever. Jealousy? Also fab. It tells us what we want and it provides social glue. No, you cannot steal my partner. If I see you flirting with them I will step in. Guilt? Excellent. It encourages us to stop if we have done something out of accordance with our values. But many of us feel bad about these perfectly natural feelings and beat ourselves up when we have them. Then we hide. We

start pretending we are something we are not. Never angry, never jealous, never in the wrong. And that is a great shame. Because there is nothing that communicates better than authenticity combined with a sense of emotional openness and freedom. So, if your book or any passage of your book feels phoney, if it doesn't reflect your own voice, ask yourself if you are hiding; if there is anything you need to own and accept.

This is not to suggest that we should never hold ourselves to account for aspects of our behaviour – of course, we should. But it is behaviour not feelings that can be right or wrong. To feel angry? Absolutely fine. To shout at someone or hit them? Absolutely not. To feel jealous? Perfectly fine. To bitch about someone? Not fine. But when we do act badly, it is worth remembering that this is a piece of behaviour, not the whole of who we are. We can be a generally kind person who sometimes loses it and shouts, and we can regret the shouting without going into total internal character assassination. We can learn to recognise all aspects of ourselves – the good and the not-so-good – and accept the unique mix of attributes and qualities that we have, perhaps with a desire to change some behaviours or patterns, but being fundamentally constructive and supportive to ourselves as we do so. I believe that this process can combine beautifully with creativity – freeing us to express that creativity very powerfully indeed.

#### 6 Don't believe people when they say there are five secrets to writing a bestseller.

Rules like these can only take you so far. Now go and forge your own path – and write the book only you can write.

Kathy Gale recently launched  
Writers' Studio: Coaching Groups for  
Authors and is welcoming submissions now.  
You can contact her on  
[kathy.gale@kgpublishingservices.co.uk](mailto:kathy.gale@kgpublishingservices.co.uk)  
or 07944 137248

