

“Hoops, Hurdles and Hooks – How to Make a Publisher Say Yes” by Nicola Morgan

These handouts were written by Nicola Morgan for the purposes of her seminar, “Hoops, Hurdles and Hooks – how to make a publisher say yes” at **Turning the Page – Next Steps for Scotland’s Creative Writing Postgraduates** and should be seen in that context but they will undoubtedly also be helpful to those who didn’t attend her talk.

Turning the Page was held at Sandeman House, Edinburgh on Saturday 5 December 2009 and was hosted by literaturetraining in partnership with Scottish Book Trust and Cultural Enterprise Office with funding from the Scottish Arts Council.

About the author

Nicola Morgan is an award-winning and popular author, choosing to write mainly for teenagers. She has written around 90 books including novels and non-fiction about the brain, and hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. Notable works include her famously gruesome novel *Fleshmarket*; the Aventis short-listed *Blame My Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed*; and her latest thriller, *Deathwatch*, featuring a girl being stalked by an obsessive insect-collector. Her books are widely translated.

Nicola is a regular speaker about books, reading, the brain and teenagers (often simultaneously) and about how to get published and stay published. She blogs energetically and acerbically about publishing and writing at www.helpIneedapublisher.blogspot.com and has just launched the writers' consultancy Pen2Publication www.pen2publication.co.uk to help other writers understand how to become published.

After recently stepping down as Chair of the Society of Authors in Scotland, Nicola now hopes to devote more time to her writing and speaking career and occasionally her family. www.nicolamorgan.co.uk

Handout 1 – topics covered in each section of seminar

Section 1: How do publishers / agents make decisions?

Commercial reality vs artistic passion and integrity • What do publishers / agents think about when deciding? • Process of acceptance within publishing company • Acquisitions meetings / role of sales & marketing / budgets • Differences between agents and publishers • Knowledge of industry is key to success and confidence

Section 2: Putting that knowledge into practice - lowering the hurdles

Know and think of your readers – does this mean selling out? • Know your book – what is its place in the market? Where will it sit in a shop? • Gaps in market – good or bad? • Hooks – get one! • Get objective opinion of your book if poss • Improve your book – common mistakes and reasons why books are rejected • Something about non-fic • Aspire to your competition: read like a writer

Section 3: Approaching agents/publishers

Following submission guidelines • common questions and mistakes; conflicting advice • is there such a thing as a perfect submission? • should I try to be different / quirky? • my three rules • to be agented or not to be agented?

Section 4: Improving publishability while waiting for feedback

Platforms and profile-building • Networking – blogging / Twitter • Groups and support • Writing your next book – essential and improving • Summary of advice

Handout 2 - Essential resources for good advice

Books

The Writer's Handbook or The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook

From Pitch to Publication by Carole Blake

Blogs

Help! I Need a Publisher! - www.helpineedapublisher.blogspot.com

***How Publishing Really Works - www.howpublishingreallyworks.blogspot.com**

Editorial Ass – www.editorialass.blogspot.com

Editorial Anonymous – www.editorialanonymous.blogspot.com

Rachelle Gardener's blog – www.cba-ramblings.blogspot.com

***Writer Beware – www.accrispin.blogspot.com**

(*both essential reading if you want to keep yourself safe from scammers...)

Society of Authors - trade union for published authors but has info available for non-members. The SoA produces a range of Quick Guides for every aspect of becoming and staying published. Visit www.societyofauthors.org and click on "Guides and Articles". Some are free downloads; others are worth paying for.

Handout 3 - Why publishers/agents most often say no

Reasons may be “publisher-related” or “book-related”. We will discuss differences between agents/publishers. These are simplified points, to be seen in the context of the seminar. Most are not written in stone and there can be exceptions – but do you want to risk it?

Publisher/agent-related reasons:

1. The book doesn't suit the list or they don't have room for it – could be that they've just taken a similar one, or they don't do that sort of book. (Research!)
2. It's a book which would require too much investment in order to do justice to it. Publishers have to budget and some books/projects require more money than others. Revenue comes much later.
3. Commissioning editor hasn't personally fallen in love with it – but someone else might. Books are, remember, about personal response. It's not a science.

Book/author-related reasons:

1. Writing not technically good enough - e.g. structure, voice, pace, technical aspects.
2. It doesn't have a strong concept or hook so will be too hard to sell.
3. It's over-written – I've blogged about this (and many other common problems).
4. It doesn't fit a market/genre; booksellers won't know where to put it.
5. Too similar to something else; or too different from everything!
6. The author has blotted copybook in some important way – let's discuss! . The submission has faults that have hidden the book's merits.

Remember: publishers may make mistakes but it's their money, their risk. Agents earn a % of your eventual earnings - they need to see a career. You must learn to see your book through your readers' eyes, and your submission through an agent/publisher's eyes.

Handout 4 – Top tips for submitting your work

While there are different ways to write an ideal submission, and brilliance may shine through errors, there are ways to give yourself the best chance. Remember: your work may arrive when the recipient is in a foul mood... First impressions count and you have invisible competition.

Don't be impatient to submit work: take time away from it, then return and re-appraise it.

Follow submission guidelines if they exist – usually on website.

If no guidelines, use snail mail rather than email. (But make replying easy and free). Never phone an independent agent at the weekend/evening; never intrude. Make it easy for them.

While it's usually fine to submit to several at once (discuss?), each submission should be individually tailored. Use the name; say why you chose them.

Although your brilliance may shine through errors, aim for perfection.

Sell your book briefly and inspirationally. Give genre, word count, hook, blurb.

Your sample should always be the FIRST chapters, not random ones.

Personality is fine – wackiness is horribly risky. Be professional.

Never boast. Never say that your kids/friends/granny/local school-kids loved your book.

If you make comparisons with another book/author, do so carefully and aptly.

Show knowledge of and passion for your intended market.

Don't criticise anyone, whether by name or not; show respect for everyone.

But don't be sycophantic.

Try to keep your covering letter to one side only (but not by squashing the font).

Always type your letter and lay it out properly – this is for neatness, not rule-following.

Never, ever, ever, say that you have written a “fiction novel”.

Handout 5 – Checklist for publication (in no particular order)

Do you have a clear sense of the market for your book?

Have you prepared a “hook”? Can you describe your book in 15 seconds? How do people’s faces react when you do?!

Have you researched the publishers and/or agents who handle this type of book?

Have you revised your book so often that you can say that every word has earned its place?

What is your favourite paragraph? What would you feel if I told you that a) it probably will not be someone else’s favourite paragraph because b) it is probably over-written and that therefore c) you should consider cutting it down. Or out...

Are you ready to start writing or planning your next book the moment you put this one in the letter-box? If not, why not?

Good luck! Remember that you only need two of these: talent, luck and perseverance. However, I recommend aiming for all three. And if you add a fourth – knowledge about publishing – your path *will* be easier and your career stronger and more satisfying. You will be more in control.

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December 2009

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