



# The Secrets

A Service Sheet for Writers

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## WHEN F&DS IMplode...

I've been fortunate enough to have been involved in writing for a long time. This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of my first commercial publication, and by the end of this month my 40<sup>th</sup> novel will hit the stands. In my publishing lifetime I've gotten to watch the publishing industry go through more changes than it had since the Chinese first invented movable type.

Publishing has not weathered these changes at all well. A recent article in the New York Times not only pointed out that publishers utterly lack demographic data on their customers, *they don't want it!* Editors feel the choosing of books should not be a science, but an art. They are prospectors for art, which is an attitude I can respect. Unfortunately, the realities of the publishing business are forcing the choices into a

science—hence this lack of data hurting them *and* the rise of fads.

In our particular area we have two fads. I've already written on the J. K. Rowling/YA fad. This has had publishers scrambling to find books that will appeal to the YA Harry Potter audience. This boils down to giving a green light to any novel that has teens using magic, or promoting books that would have been, previously, unpublishable in New York.

Christopher Paolini's **Eragon** is a case in point. I've read the book. It's not bad, but as genre fiction goes—and there is no disguising it as anything but Minor League epic fantasy—it wouldn't have made the cut for even the most meagerly-tended SF line in publishing. (You can

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all imagine to yourselves which line I might be referring to there.)

Why did the book get picked up by New York? The Paolini family had their own publishing company. They brought Christopher's book out and he mounted a speaking campaign throughout the Mountain West. He appeared at over thirty schools, speaking to classes and selling books. Kids loved the book—and, face it, nothing like face time with an author they like will gild that prose like nothing else—it got

recommended to someone who recommended it to someone who *recognized it as a phenomenon*, and brought it into the fold in New York. The spin machine grinds up a story about a 15 year old wunderkind, and we have a publishing blockbuster.

And, in case my point isn't clear from the above, New York, which eschews demographic data, jumped on the Paolini book because Paolini had gone and collected his own demographic data. We've seen this happen before, where successful self-publishing has created a rags-to-riches story which increases the allure of these books. And, as I said, I've read **Eregon** and have even recommended it to others.

Aside from the "teens and magic" fad we have going on right now, we have the "occult-erotic-adventure" fad. Back in February, on **DragonPage Cover to Cover**, we declared this fad dead. Let me give you the post-mortem on it, based on

similar cases, to explain why it is dead, and what you can do in the future to avoid similar traps, or salvage a career that gets caught in it.

The fad began with the works of Anne Rice, then really caught fire with Laurel K. Hamilton and Jim Butcher. Charlene Harris zipped in there, too, taking a humorous angle on the thing, then anyone who ever saw **Dracula** as a romance started to produce work. The **Underworld** films crested at the right time to add push to the fad and make folks aware that this sort of story was out there.

When Laurel and Jim started selling lots of books, publishers began to notice. The editors started to acquire more of these books, filling their lines with them. After all, if there is an appetite

for these kinds of stories, it makes sense for them to deliver. This is the point where some editors give in to their jaded side: having a book or two in that category each month becomes more important than having a *good* book coming out. *Good Enough* becomes the standard.

If you think back twenty years, this is precisely what happened in both the horror and techno-thriller markets. I'm more familiar with the horror side, but the phenomenon was clear. If writers were producing horror, they got incredible advances for works that were not terribly well written or entertaining. Everyone who could write horror did. I didn't, but I read a bunch to see what the



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heck was going on there. I couldn't get it because the selection of books was uneven, the characters were flat or, at best, juvenile and, despite reading books at midnight, I just wasn't getting scared. Now I'll assume the writers were doing their best, but just because you get a big advance and are writing in a hot genre, it doesn't mean you're a literary genius.

The publishers were operating under a basic assumption: a rising tide lifts all boats.

This assumption is only true given one fact: all the boats have sound hulls and can actually float.

So, right now, with both the Rowling fad and the Monster Mash fad, we have a whole fleet or three of stove boats being positioned on the shore. Publishers are expecting that when that tide continues to rise, those broken boats are going to go with it.

They won't.

And readers, who come to the shore and find it clogged with broken boats, will give up looking for the good ones. They'll feel betrayed by authors and refuse to buy future work from them (at least under that name). Publishers, who have this fantasy that they have some sort of branding going on as concerns their imprints, will ignore the fact that the publisher's name means nothing to readers. If it did, a Bantam Book's sales would depend on the fortune of Bantam, not the author. Imprints only impress other publishers and critics. If that were not true, the horror and techno-thriller implosions would have long since scuttled publishing brands.

The assumption above that writers were doing their best is an optimistic view, rather



than a realistic one. Even so, it does not insulate writers from two problems. First, if you are writing in a hot genre, there's very little challenge to you as a writer. Instead of needing to make your books stand out from

the crowd, you benefit from having them run with the pack. If you deliver exactly what the readers want, without making them work too hard, you've done your job.

Unfortunately, this makes your work unremarkable; which means that your career will die when the fad does. The only branding we get in this field is our name. If you don't do something that inspires the readers to remember your name, you've burned a bridge that would have carried you out of obscurity.

The second problem of writing in a hot genre, and finding yourself trapped with the golden handcuffs of being paid a lot to do the same-old-same-old, is that there is no impetus to grow as a writer. If you don't have that drive within you—and someone choosing to write in a hot genre because they want to make money may not—you will be mired in mediocrity. Publishers will pigeonhole you as "that vampire-slayer" guy; and they won't let you escape from that box. If you can't grow as a writer, if you don't force yourself to do more and different things, you'll just doom yourself to burn-out that much faster.

If all you want to do is make money, and are content with scoring fast and getting out, good luck to you. Chances are that you've never gotten into publishing far enough to be given the chance to

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hop into a fad before the glut and implosion; so you won't score big and get out.

Success in a writing career is an endurance race, not a sprint.

There is another aspect of writing in a fad that's very much like riding a tiger—you hang on tight or you get eaten. While the vast majority of the books in a fad will be, at best, mediocre; the folks at the forefront find a different pressure. They have to escalate what they are doing, providing more of the parts they're told readers love.

The problem with that is simple: those who are telling them what the parts are that they love are a vocal minority or, worse, publishers who, we already know, not only do not have demographic data on reader tastes, but don't want it. That vocal minority also tends to be jaded, so they want to see more things that are more extreme.

The need to escalate, or provide more and more exciting things, is a pressure we all feel. Even so, we have to remember that *more* is not synonymous with new, novel or different. This is a subtle difference which is incredibly important and easy to miss when others are advising you on what you should do and how you should do it.

A rule I run by: folks can tell me *what* they think I should be doing and must explain *why*. They cannot tell me *how* to do it. If they can explain why, then I can figure out *if* and *how* that sort of thing should be handled. After all, if they tell me what and how, I'm just a typist. That ain't going to fly.

Let me use a couple of examples to make the above point. Let's start off with the difference between romantic erotica and pornography. Pornography is just a lot of tab-A into slot-B stuff, or worrying about plumbing. While this sort of explicit stuff can be, um, diverting, it works best when it leaves something to the imagination. When you're trying to write *more*, you seldom leave something to the imagination.

In other words, done poorly it gets old fast. Very fast.

Romantic erotica, on the other hand, is pure storytelling gold. The flirtation, the burgeoning feelings, the furtive glances, flashes of jealousy, the uncertainty, all of it, all the elements that go into a growing romance are endlessly fascinating. Readers can fret about whether or not characters will get together. They can

fret over whether or not they are right for each other. They can worry about a new romantic interest, and you can keep introducing folks, killing them, revealing their true selves and even dropping them into bed with each other endlessly.

The key point there is simple: it is easier to insert emotional content into a story and have readers connect with it than it is to put pornographic material into a book and have them connect. Pandering to the extremists who want to see how far you'll go means you actually risk offending a huge part of your audience, and that can help trigger the implosion.



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Combat and action become another area where *more* is mistaken for *different* or *novel*. There is no doubt that constantly facing characters with challenges is important. Just because a warrior kills one enemy in Chapter 2 doesn't mean that he has to kill two in Chapter 4; or four in Chapter 8. Challenges, while they might be violent in nature, should test more than a character's skill at arms. You can test his resolve, his intelligence, his courage, his endurance, his will to live. The list can go on and on.

In the X-wing novels, number escalation would have been easy—but also unrealistic. I set my pilots with challenges that tested them as pilots, not just combat pilots. Sure, they had to fight new and different enemy ships from time to time, but the missions were different, the skills sets required were different, and the reader could face the unknown with the pilot. Because, let's face it, if a pilot has killed two enemy in combat, and you toss four at him, the moment he knocks off the first two, you know he's got the others and suspense ends. After that, the writing becomes predictable and bored readers yawn their way through the rest of the book.

A third problem with writing in a hot genre is that very few writers take sufficient time to plan out what is going to happen. Entering a hot genre presumes a series, simply because editors will want more adventures if the first one is a success. If you

fail to plan ahead, assuming you'll be writing 3-5 novels in the series, you won't build any depth into the books. Depth invites reader participation. It rewards reader loyalty. While you may have to remind folks about a thread you're picking up in book 3 or 4; readers who remember it from book 1 will

be proud of themselves. They'll think of themselves as being on your team, and they'll wonder where all those other loose ends will lead.

All this having been said, and the end being evident within the next eighteen months for both of the fads I've been talking about, how do you avoid being caught in that trap?

The best way to avoid it is not to write in a fad. I've mentioned before that there are fads and there are *evergreen* areas in most genres. Epic Fantasy is an evergreen area, for example, in the

SF field. How do you tell the difference between an evergreen area and a fad? An evergreen area is one where books have been being published for more than five years *and* have started or sustained careers of writers who also write in other areas of the field. It's a good place to sink your roots as a writer because there is a lot of material to work with, and it has an audience that appreciates it.

Second, go back over the flaws I've identified: lack of planning, mediocrity and extremism and avoid them. If you plan your books well, you'll make them deep. Deep books and a well-developed world and cast give you multiple



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options to choose from when you want something to be new and novel. Depth also forces you to be more than mediocre because mediocre writers just can't handle depth. As you develop things and learn to hold back a bit, you involve readers.

For example, two characters meet and one says, "Long time. Where've you been?"

The other replies, "Dude, busy, fighting extradition." They laugh.

The reader wants to know if the answer is true or not. And if that same character gives someone else a different answer; now they have to pick and choose. Once you get them wondering what's really going on, you have them.

Just because you, the writer, know everything, it doesn't mean you have to spill it immediately. This is an interesting exercise: start writing a story and make a note that a character has a secret he doesn't want anyone else to know about. Let the story and the writing of it define that secret and work out the circumstances of its revelation. In subsequent drafts you'll refine things, of course, but going in without knowing can be very exciting and challenging—and we all need challenges.

So, what do you do if you're sitting on three books in a Hamiltonesque series just waiting to head out to a publisher. Well, one, get the first book out there. The fad is going to go bust, but you might get out before it completely crashes. If you are lucky and you have good books there, you could survive the crash.

What if you're just planning such a series, or have just started it? If I were in that situation and the story just had to come out, I'd write it. But I'd make sure it was different and unique, somehow. I'd also think about alternatives to the New York publishing model. Self-publishing is one option. Podcasting is another. Adapting it into a

web-comic is a third. These options, however, have to be recognized as something that won't make you much, if any, money. They can, however, raise your profile and get you a following which, like Christopher Paolini, will make you more attractive to prospective readers.

And, just to make it clear, people will get hurt in this crash. Careers will end. Readers will walk away and never pick up another book. Look at the horror crash. King, Straub and Koontz survived; Anne Rice, too; but there were hundreds of others who sank into obscurity and were never published again. Ditto techno-thrillers.

Publishers deliver what they think their audience wants, but they remain willfully ignorant of data that could tell them exactly what their audience wants. I believe what the audience wants is very clear: interesting stories about interesting characters which entertain us, allow us to explore, play and escape. The stories should be well written, should adhere to the meta-rules of the genre they're in; yet can expand and change those rules provided there is a good reason to do so. Readers want stories that are the full package: they must have action, romance, humor, suspense, mystery, character growth, a world to explore and themes that resonate with readers.

Oddly enough, this is true for *all* entertainment, and yet is ignored by most entertainment providers. If you're willing to deliver all of the above, while picking and choosing evergreen areas in which to write, you will have a career. It will have ups and downs but, more importantly, it will give you a platform from which you can launch yourself into the future. You can produce the work that establishes the next fad, and ride the subsequent wave to a place those who follow you will never reach.

