

**RICHARD CURTIS**, Literary Agent  
The Curtis Agency

**To what extent can a publishing house cause a bestseller to happen?**

Amusingly, the only time publishers make silk purses out of sows' ears is when they're not trying and a sleeper book surprises everyone. Otherwise, a book has to have a lot of bestselling qualities in order to qualify for bestseller candidacy, such as a great author track record, heavy expenditure on advertising and marketing, a lot of media attention, timeliness, a high concept, and a handsome package. Notice I haven't said the book has to be well written. And that's the pity of the bestseller list.

## WHAT CAUSES A BOOK TO BECOME SUCCESSFUL?

### THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS

**PREVIOUS SUCCESS IS THE KEY INDICATOR OF FUTURE SUCCESS LISTENING TO THE MARKETPLACE**

### THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS

As part of the research for this book, the authors surveyed over 100 editors and agents in mid-2004. Participants in our "Editors and Agents Survey" included editors at major publishing houses, university presses, and small presses, as well as agents from both small and large literary agencies. The survey was conducted by e-mail and fax. Among the questions was: "What are the most important factors in a book's success? Please select the five factors (and only five) that you think are most important and rank them from one (most important) to five (least important)."

### PREVIOUS SUCCESS IS THE KEY INDICATOR OF FUTURE SUCCESS

Looking at the average scores in Figure 3.1, "Factors in a Book's Success," agents and editors are in agreement that the fan base, whether the author's previous book was a bestseller, and the quality of writing are the keys to success. Agents attribute more of the success to the book getting good word-of-mouth promotion than editors do. Editors think

FIGURE 3.1 Factors in a Book's Success

Editors		Agents	
Average Score	Factor	Average Score	Factor
2.3	Timeliness of topic	2.2	Previous book a bestseller
2.4	Quality of writing	2.6	Word of mouth
2.7	Previous book a bestseller	2.8	Reader or fan base
2.8	Reader or fan base	2.9	Quality of writing
3.0	Author's promotional efforts	3.1	Timeliness of topic
3.0	Word of mouth	3.2	Advertising program
3.4	Reviews	3.3	Publicity
3.5	Publicity	3.3	Size of advance
4.1	Advertising program	3.3	Author's promotional efforts
4.3	Size of advance	3.8	Reviews

the timeliness of the topic is more important than agents do, although a significant number of agents (11 percent) also gave that a number-one ranking.

Agents and editors both discounted the importance of reviews to sparking sales of a book, agents ranking it last in importance and editors fourth from the last. This contradicts the advice given to "new" authors that getting their books reviewed is critical. These results could also indicate that as an author becomes more successful, has built a fan base, and has had previous bestsellers, reviews decline in importance.

The lowest score given by either group was by the editors for "size of the advance paid." Those outside the publishing industry often believe that, the higher the advance paid, the more promotional resources the publishing house will put behind the book (to make certain they recoup the advance).

For writers yet to produce a bestseller or establish a significant fan base, comfort can be taken in that both agents and editors rank quality of writing in the top four factors. Great writing wins out. Discomfort can be felt, however, in realizing that no hard and fast criteria exist about what constitutes "great writing." It comes down to subjective judgments made by individuals. We might think of the road to bestsellerdom as this

scripts being fed on the belt at one end and great financial success coming out the other end. Along the winding course, many pairs of hands make decisions about whether to take a manuscript off and toss it in a dark corner along with all the other failed books.

### HEIDE LANGE, Literary Agent

Sanford J. Greenburger Associates, Inc.

#### Do you know when first reading a manuscript that it has bestseller potential?

It's when your own pulse quickens that you know—and hope—that a book will work. It's when you're so excited that you can't stop talking about it, to everyone, first to yourself, then of course to the author, your agency colleagues, and from there on out to editors, foreign scouts, and film scouts. This is what we're looking for. Whether we're agents or readers, we're always looking to be seduced by the next great book, whether it comes from a current client or a new writer.

### LISTENING TO THE MARKETPLACE

The pairs of hands that really matter are those browsing the shelves of the bookstores, pulling out new titles and reading the back covers or even sampling the first few paragraphs to get a feel for the author's style. Think of how many books the average shopper looks at before making a selection. Then think about the vast choice from which they can select. Each time someone decides to buy your book, they are conferring an honor on you.

Publishing industry executives have the daunting task of determining what the consumer in Biloxi, Des Moines, or San Jose really wants to read.

**JENNIFER ENDERLIN**, Publisher  
St. Martin's Press

**How does an editor get a feel for what will work in the marketplace and what will not?**

I see an editor's job as being a universal reader. What I try to do is envision myself in the place of the consumer. I ask myself, "Would I plunk down my money for this book?" You don't buy a book because you say, well, I don't like this book, but I think it will sell. As an editor, you buy it because you personally connect with the book; you can envision yourself going into a store and spending your hard-earned money on it.

**What makes certain authors and certain books resonate with readers?**

It all begins with a strong voice. Voice is the one thing that can't be taught. It's the author's own fingerprint, their unique storytelling style. Writers with a strong voice are the ones that emerge from the pack. Then you must have memorable characters. When people recommend their books to their friends, they talk about the characters first and foremost. They don't realize they are responding to the voice, too.

**NEIL NYREN**, Senior Vice President, Publisher, and Editor-in-Chief  
G. P. Putnam & Sons

**How does an editor get a feel for what books will work in the marketplace and what won't?**

It's experience. If you've been in this field for a while, you know what people are reading, or you think you know what people are reading. I cast myself as a typical reader, and I buy to my own tastes, so if something works for me, I think it will work for other readers.

I try to read as much as possible. I don't read everything on the best-seller list, but I try and keep pace with what's working out there and what isn't.

**What qualities do you look for in a book that you think is going to do very well?**

If it's fiction, you look for a vision that's fresh; the book should be compelling and fully realized. You want it to give you something new, or something old but incredibly well done.

Nonfiction has to be based on an idea that is solid and new. The execution has to be well done. The combination of those things with the credentials of the author—then you begin to have something.

**Have you ever gotten a manuscript from an unknown author that you were sure was going to be very successful?**

Absolutely. There is no such thing as an absolute sure thing any more in this business. But there have certainly been lots of times when you see something and say, "Now this, this is commercial, this ought to work." Obviously, Doubleday thought that when they signed up John Grisham.

We're all very happy when our big authors continue to do well, and we work hard to find ways to make them do even better, but most of us got into the publishing business originally for the thrill of discovery. You never know when the next submission that crosses your desk is going to be something special. And it happens. Many years ago, when I read the first *Prey* manuscript by John Sandford, I knew instantly that this guy had it. The book was thoroughly commercial but also extremely well written, with a great central character. There was absolutely no reason why this writer couldn't become a bestseller. The first book made the list in paperback; a couple books later, he started hitting the hardcover list as well, and now he's a number-one bestseller.

There are some writers who just have it. Many, many years ago, in a galaxy far, far away, when I was a younger editor for a different publisher, I read a manuscript called *Storm Island*. It was a World War II thriller, and it, too, just had a sure command to it. There was something about it. We wanted a more distinctive title and changed it to *Eye of the Needle* (Ken Follett), and there you are. That's what you're always looking for, what you're always hoping for.

Every editor in my position has had those experiences. And also those experiences when we were sure of it—and—it didn't work.

All literary success starts the same way, with one individual in a position of power in the publishing industry—agent, editor—reacting in an

unusually positive way to a manuscript. Success may seem too much a matter of sheer luck, dependent on an author's work finding its way to just the right person who makes the very subjective judgment that it is marketable, but that's the way the industry works. Of course, when starting out, the new author has no idea who this special person might be that can turn their manuscript into a marketplace success. Somehow, the writers who achieve bestseller status manage to find them.

An unpleasant corollary to consider is the number of wonderful manuscripts that are gathering dust on closet shelves and in garages because their authors never found that impassioned advocate in the marketplace.

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#### MARGRET MCBRIDE, Literary Agent

McBride Literary Agency

**When you get a potential new client and you see the book proposal or the manuscript, how can you tell whether it has bestseller potential or not?**

Sometimes I get chills down my spine and my stomach does these flip-flop things, or it makes me get up and walk around. It gets me excited. Sometimes I feel like singing, crying, and laughing all at the same time. It's a very visceral reaction. Thank goodness for the people who work at the agency with me, because I do most of my reading at home. And when I hear my colleagues yelp or laugh out loud—and everyone else leaps up—that says, "I think we have a winner!" It's very exciting finding a fabulous book.

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#### MATT BIALER, Literary Agent

Sanford J. Greenburger & Associates

**When you start reading a manuscript, can you tell it may have bestseller qualities?**

I don't know if I sit there and say, "This is a bestseller." I may think to myself that this book has enormous potential. I've never gotten a book sent to me, particularly over the transom, and thought it was ready to go

tion especially does, because there are a lot of different kinds of people writing commercial fiction, and they don't usually come out of writing schools or university programs. They are writing in a bit of a vacuum. Which is great, I like that, because they are coming to their writing career with a set of life experiences most of us haven't seen before. That vacuum they have been working in can be a very positive thing. It often means, though, there is raw talent and the book needs shaping.

I am thinking, then, this author has the potential to be a bestseller, not necessarily that book.

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#### KAREN KOSZTOLNYIK, Senior Editor

Warner Books

**When you get that wonderful manuscript from a new author that really excites you, what about the work stands out?**

It really comes down to the voice. If an author has a really strong voice, even if they are telling a story that has been told a million times before, it can draw me in to that story. The voice is so fresh, new, original, I feel like I'm reading the story for the first time, even if it's a classic story line.

It can also come down to a high concept. The *hook*. When you are pitching to the editorial committee and sales force, you want to have your book stand out. If I can pitch the story in one or two sentences and capture their imagination immediately, that's high concept. They have so many books coming at them all the time.

A book can grab you from the first page. Karen Rose's amazing opening for her first book, *Don't Tell*, got me immediately. A woman is in a hospital bed, injured, and hears her husband talking to a nurse. He tells the nurse he has to speak to his wife. When he gets to her bedside he says how sorry he is, that he can't believe this happened to her. Then he leans in closer and says, "Next time I'll finish the job."

Karen Rose captured your interest right away. You get the hook immediately. *Bridges of Madison County* and *The Notebook* were two of our biggest bestsellers. It came down to concept and voice working together. Even with these strong elements, you can't be sure that something is an "absolutely guaranteed bestseller." You just have to trust your gut that this is something that is going to work in the marketplace.

### DR. SPENCER JOHNSON, Author

Dr. Johnson is the author or coauthor of many *New York Times* best-sellers, including three number-one titles: *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and Life*; *The One-Minute Manager*, the world's most popular management method, coauthored with Kenneth Blanchard; and, most recently, *The Present: The Gift That Makes You Happier and More Successful, Today!* Dr. Johnson's books are available in more than 40 languages. *Who Moved My Cheese* was a true word-of-mouth sensation, its simple story of how to deal with change resonated with millions of people dealing with the stresses and uncertainty of corporate downsizing. It remained a *New York Times* bestseller for over two years—and Dr. Johnson has remained a bestselling author for over two decades.

#### Why do certain books succeed in the marketplace while others don't?

I believe there are three reasons a book succeeds: the book, the book, and the book. It's not because of a marketing program, which typically lasts at most 90 days, or reviews, or agents, or all the other things young writers think is important.

I remember being at Doubleday and being told a forthcoming book would be a number-one bestseller. When I asked how they knew in advance what would happen, they said because almost everybody in the publishing house who read the manuscript loved it so much that they asked for additional manuscript copies to give to their friends to read because they didn't want to wait until it was published. That's when you know a book is going to be big.

If you write a great book, one that readers think is so good they can't wait to share it with their friends, it will eventually lead to commercial success. It may not be considered a literary giant, but if it touches people so much that they either buy copies for their friends or pick up the phone and tell their friends about it, the book will succeed. That book is going to make the bestseller list more often than a book that publishers think is great, and they spend \$250,000 on advertising and printing huge number of copies, but it doesn't ever catch on.

### HARLAN COBEN, Author

Mystery/thriller writer Harlan Coben is an international bestselling author who has won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award, the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award, and the Anthony award—he's the first author to win all three. His first novels were about the exploits of sports agent Myron Bolitar. His latest novels are "suburban thrillers" about everyday people in extraordinary circumstances. His recent novels include *Just One Look*, *No Second Chance*, *Tell No One*, and *Gone for Good*. Harlan has a large international audience for his books. *Just One Look* reached both the *New York Times* and *Sunday London Times* bestseller lists. Readers applauded the fast-paced suspense, great storytelling, and wonderful sense of humor in his writing.

#### What factors caused your first big success?

If anyone knew this answer to this question, they'd be a billionaire ten times over. I'm sure you will hear about big promotional pushes or whatever, but the simple fact is, I've never seen a book truly break out without word of mouth. What causes word of mouth? Well, I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's the book itself—enjoying it so much that you tell your friends.

#### How do popular authors contribute to the success of their books, apart from writing the best book they can?

I'm not sure they can. There, I said it. I did the whole dog 'n' pony stuff early in my career, went to conferences, met booksellers, handed out bookmarks. Guess what? So does every other author I know. I'm not sure it works. In the United Kingdom and France, I didn't do any of that—never went to a conference, met a bookseller, etc.—and my books sell (relatively speaking) even better over there. So what does that mean? I don't know.

The only way I've truly seen a new author start to make some serious headway is by the buzz that usually comes with word of mouth.

**LAURELL K. HAMILTON, Author**

Laurell writes fantasy/horror/romance. Her first book, *Guilty Pleasures*, hit the bestseller lists in 1994. She has written nine additional Anita Blake books and, in October 2000, began the *New York Times* bestselling Meredith Gentry series for Ballantine Books. Her fascination with things that go bump in the night was fostered by her grandmother's storytelling.

**What have been the most important factors in your books' success?**

If I could truly answer that question, I'd make millions of dollars advising the publishing industry.

I did everything wrong. If I had set out to write a *New York Times* bestseller, I certainly never would have had mixed genres. When I first started to try and sell *Guilty Pleasures* 11 years ago, it was turned down by everyone. Mystery houses turned it down because it was science fiction. The science fiction houses thought it was horror, the horror publishers turned it down because it wasn't scary enough, because the vampires were out of the closet. The very things that made the series successful later on were the things that made it almost never sell. I was told that mixing genres was the death knell. It was a vampire novel, when vampire novels had peaked. If I had tried to write a *New York Times* bestseller, *Guilty Pleasures* wouldn't have been it.

I believe that you can't sit down and say, "I'm going to write a *New York Times* bestseller." If you have that in mind while you write, the book will read like plastic. You have to write what you want to read; you have to write what moves you. Everyone has their own special vision and voice, and once you find it, then that's what you write. I'm lucky in that what I want to write, a lot of people out there want to read as well.

I studied mystery series. It's much more difficult to find a fantasy series that has gone on much past ten books. It's easier to find a mystery series. What I found was that somewhere between book five and eight, the author usually gets tired, and it begins to show. They got bored, especially if it was a straight mystery series. I thought about what would make me bored, so I gave myself all my favorite toys. I gave myself monsters, guns, a main female character that was as tough as the men or tougher. I gave myself all the things that would keep my interest, and it worked because I'm still having a wonderful time.

I couldn't have foreseen that the *Anita* series or the *Merry* series would be as popular as they are.

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## REVIEWS

*The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*

## THE IMPACT OF REVIEWS

## HOW BOOKS ARE CHOSEN TO BE REVIEWED

## NOW EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

## A LAST LOOK FROM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

## THE IMPACT OF REVIEWS

Book reviews have an impact on book sales, if for no other reason than a review increases a title's visibility. Reviews don't cost the publisher anything except the copy of the book or galley and postage to send it to the reviewer.

Reviews in industry-related publications such as *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *BookList* are directed toward booksellers and librarians.

*Publishers Weekly*, established in 1873, is published every week both in hard copy format and online and is available by subscription. Seventy-five hundred books, audio books, and e-books are reviewed annually. Reviews appear a month or so prior to publication dates. The publication is considered the leader for the publishing industry.

*Kirkus Reviews* began publication in 1933 and is published every two weeks. *Kirkus* receives nearly 200 titles to review each day and selects fewer than 10 percent, or about 5,000 per year, to review. The reviews are published two to three months before the title's publication date and are available in hard copy and online by paid subscription. *Kirkus Reviews* is used by booksellers, librarians, publishers, and agents.