

From a New Author's Perspective

By Shirley Damsgaard

Step one--you've just written your first book. You should take pride in your accomplishment. It's something many people (including your Aunt Mary) talk about doing, but never quite get around to really writing anything.

Step two--you found an agent who's agreed to represent your manuscript. Another major achievement and you've done it against great odds. It's not uncommon for an agency to receive 400 queries a week! But lucky you, your query got your foot in the door, and your manuscript managed to swing that door wide open!

Step three--and it's time to pop the champagne--your agent has found a publisher. Now you can sit back and let the royalties pour in. Right?

Wrong. You're still fighting some pretty tough odds. According to one article I read, over 2,000 new mysteries are published every year. That means your 300 page novel is going to be competing with 1,999 other novels for the readers' attention. And how are the readers ever going to find your little novel among all those other mysteries?

In two words--independent booksellers. I've found as a new author, they're one of your most important allies in the book business. And it is a business. Your book might be the best your publisher has ever read, but if the readers can't find it, and if the sales don't show it, your publishing house can't afford to keep you around.

That's where the independent booksellers help you. They know their customers, they know who might enjoy reading your novel, and through their wonderful hand-selling, they'll steer the readers your way. And one happy reader will tell another reader who tells another reader who, well, you get the picture. And it all starts with the independent bookseller.

How do you find these stores? The internet is a good resource. I visited Booksense's web site. Many independents belong to that organization, and through their web site, you can get a listing, state by state, of all the members. Another good source is the Independent Mystery Bookseller Association

(www.mysterybooksellers.com). A list of their members, and the contact information for each store, is supplied on their web site.

Now you have your list, your next task is to pick up the phone, call the independent bookstore, and ask a complete stranger to invest *their* time and money to sponsor an event in *their* store to promote *your* novel. Sounds pretty brazen, doesn't it? In a way it is, but here's what I learned--independent booksellers not only like books, they like authors, too! If you're polite, if you offer to send them an advanced reading copy, most booksellers will agree to at least take a look at your novel. Follow up the first phone call with a second one a few weeks later to ensure the store received your advanced reading copy. If they've enjoyed your novel, most likely they'll be willing to schedule an event for you at that time.

A couple of tips when you make the first call--remember the bookseller is a busy person, at the time of your call, they may have ten customers lined up at the counter, and it may not be convenient for them to take a phone call. Ask them first if they have a moment to speak with you. You also need to be prepared to give them the ISBN number and the name of your publisher. Why? They're going to check with the distributors to make sure, if, heaven forbid, your book doesn't sell, the store can return unsold copies. As a business, they can't afford to waste space on books that are gathering dust on the shelves. They're taking a risk by tying up their operating capital to stock your book, when they could be using the money to order books they *know* will sell.

Now you're set, they loved your book and they're going to sponsor an event. Do your part to help make the event a success--send the proverbial bookmarks, flyers, anything that you, or the bookseller can think of, to promote your appearance.

Finally, the day has arrived and you go to the bookstore to eagerly meet the lines of adoring readers. Not! Oh, you'll be excited, but unless your name is Evanovich or Connelly, don't count on any lines. On my first tour, the attendance at events ranged from one person to twenty people. But thanks to several tips on

J. A. Konrath's web site, I had just as much fun at the event with one person as I did when twenty people showed up. I went to the signings with no expectations and with the attitude that as long as the bookseller was happy with the results, so was I.

What best sums up how an independent bookseller can help a new author is a true story—Pat and Gary at Once Upon a Crime very kindly sponsored a signing for my first book. Pat enjoyed WITCH WAY TO MURDER and did everything she could to, as she calls it, 'chat it up.' There weren't any lines the day of the signing, and I think we sold maybe five books. But, and this is a huge 'but', Pat had sold several prior to the signing and, even better, continues to sell copies of my book. In fact, they've sold one case and are working on their second! That's over 90 readers who, hopefully, have enjoyed the book and told their friends. There's no amount of money that can buy results like that. And it all started with one independent bookseller who liked my book!

So get out there, get to know the independent booksellers. They're a great bunch of people and their support is priceless. In return, do what you can to support them—as a small business, they have a tough job.

And while you're at it, take a deep breath and have fun, regardless of how many people attend your events. No matter where your career as an author takes you, never again will you experience the thrill of your very first book hitting the stores! Enjoy the ride.