

AgentInsight: When a Series Is Orphaned by Nupur Tustin

Could anything possibly go wrong after you've signed that book contract with a publisher? The answer, unfortunately, is yes. Your publisher could go out of business, as Five Star's mystery line recently did. Or lackluster sales may compel your publisher to decide against renewing your contract.

Either way, you have an orphaned series on your hands.

In this special issue of AgentInsight, four editors join agents Sandy Harding of Spencerhill Associates and Paula Munier of Talcott Notch Literary to give you some perspective on the subject, and to offer advice on how you can rebuild your career.

Please welcome Matt Martz, editorial director of Crooked Lane; Kendel Lynn, managing editor of Henery Press; Martin Biro of Kensington Publishing; and Terri Bischoff of Midnight Ink.

Changing publishers mid-series

If your current publisher decides not to continue your series or closes its doors, can you get another publisher interested in your series?

"It is possible," responds Sandy Harding, but she notes that "it's the exception, not the rule."

Paula Munier concurs. "It's very tough to switch publishers, unless the sales of previous entries in the series are so high that another publisher might be tempted to take it on. But that," she cautions, "rarely happens."

"Certainly if a series is successful and selling well," says Martin Biro, "any publisher would be eager to pick it up."

But even when that happens, Harding continues, you may have to make compromises. "If you were formerly published by a Big Five publisher, a smaller, independent publisher might be the one to offer to continue the series—or an e-publisher might step up to the plate."

Although going with a smaller publisher or self-publishing are both viable options, Harding suggests that authors "think carefully about what's important to them" before making a decision.

Factors to consider, she says, include "the finances of the deal (advance amounts and royalties), the existence of physical books,

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—Kendel Lynn, Henery Press managing editor



distribution channels (can a new publisher get books into B&N or do they primarily serve the library market?), the support houses can offer your series, and your own commitment to the characters and series."

Publishers' perspective

Clearly, publishers are reluctant to pick up a series mid-stream. "There are some practical reasons for this," explains Matt Martz, "and almost all of them have to do with sales. The vast majority of all series start off strong in comparison to the titles that follow the debut."

While debut titles garner considerable attention from reviewers and readers,

"attention normally wanes," Martz continues, "with the second, third, and fourth books in the series, and the sales follow. Other potential publishers can normally estimate the level of sales for the series, and will shy away for the same reasons that the original publisher stopped publishing it."

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A former journalist, Nupur Tustin now spends her time composing music and orchestrating murder in Haydn's Austria. She has worked for Reuters and CNBC, and has published diverse articles, short stories, and academic research. *A Minor Deception* is the first in her Joseph Haydn mystery series. Visit her website at <http://ntustin.com>.

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While robust sales play a major role in the publisher's decision, it's important, Terri Bischoff warns, to make sure sales are comparable.

"For example, if you are moving from a mass market format to trade paper, you can't really compare the sales," she explains. "It's apples and oranges. But going from hard cover to trade paper is comparable."

Although Midnight Ink has picked up books mid-series, ultimately, Bischoff says, the decision does boil down to projected sales figures rather than her personal opinion about the quality of the books.

"I can't take on an author mid-series just because I like the books and the author—our sales department has to determine how much they think we can sell. Picking up a series does mean (hopefully) picking up those readers, but it's certainly not a sure bet."

"From a marketing standpoint," Lynn adds, "it can be difficult to carry the brand from books published by the old publisher to the new books—from the cover art to distribution to pricing structure. However, difficult doesn't mean impossible."

And even in cases where projected sales look good, publishers can never be sure their gamble will pay off. "I have acquired several series that started elsewhere," says Bischoff, "and I have seen mixed success."

The backlist

Sales and marketing, however, are not the only factors that make publishers leery of taking on a series midstream.

"One of the biggest issues in acquiring a series published elsewhere," Bischoff points out, "is the fact that the new publisher doesn't control the backlist. This is important because the overwhelming majority of mystery readers will not read books out of order."

In this case, Martz adds, the "series could have even less potential upside for the new publisher. And the new publisher would still have to reverse the downward trajectory. That is all very difficult."

The deterrent for the publisher, Lynn explains, goes back to Martz's earlier point about the debut title doing the best. Because most readers prefer starting with the first book in the series, "as



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the author and new publisher promote the series, many sales go to the old publisher. Good news for the author and the old publisher, not so much for the new publisher."

Do authors whose rights have reverted back to them have a better shot at getting a new publisher interested, then? Not necessarily.

"The new publisher," Bischoff says, "is very, very unlikely to acquire and republish the backlist. It's simply not cost-effective as the sales of backlist titles are hardly robust." Still, she "strongly suggests getting the e-books listed as soon as possible" if an

author's rights have reverted back to them.

Preparing for closure

Do authors have any time at all to prepare for their publisher closing doors?

"I don't think an author can prepare," says Lynn, "whether they're with a small press or a major corporation." This is because the financial information owners and management use to make their decisions aren't readily available to the rest of us.

"It's like when you see large companies announce major layoffs," she explains. "You have no idea how long they've been planning it behind closed doors."

And, "on the editorial side," Bischoff adds, "we don't necessarily get the 'big picture.' Owners and management might know, but the rest of the company might not."

Next steps

What's an author to do then?

"Ask questions, don't assume anything," advises Lynn. "What will happen to the books already under contract? Will the rights revert and when? What will it take to get the rights returned? Do they have the option to sell the rights or do you have an option to buy them back? If a publishing house is closing its doors and they are not returning the rights, ask who will be calculating and paying royalties? Who will be your new contact, and what's their information? Reach out to other authors in your boat and share information."

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After that, “the best thing you can do,” Munier says, “is to shop a new series.” She, in fact, recommends writing and shopping a new series even if you are happy with your current publisher.

“And to this end: look out for your option clause,” she continues, “which should be restricted to the next work in your current contracted series, so you have the freedom to shop other series as well.”

“It’s definitely a tough situation,”

Biro adds, “but that old adage about a door closing and a window opening applies. The author can launch a new series, try a different genre (or even a different pen name) or find a new publisher.”

Harding agrees. “The end of a series is an opportunity to explore new characters, locations, and hooks—and for many authors, it’s probably going to be easier to sell a fresh new series rather than continue an existing one.”

“Idea generation,” she goes on, “is as much a part of an authors’ job as the actual writing of a manuscript.” She encourages writers to keep a running list of projects they’d like to explore in the future.

A new series or a pseudonym can also create much-needed distance between the author and the “downward trajectory of their previous series,” Martz explains. In addition to this, authors can also, Bischoff suggests, simultaneously self-publish their orphaned series.

“As an exercise,” advises Lynn, “create three proposals: one to extend your series, one to reboot it, and one for a new series.” For the first, she suggests using current sales, reviewers, follow-



find a new publisher.”

—Martin Biro, Kensington Publishing

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ers, fans, and awards to demonstrate how a publisher can benefit from picking up an existing series.

The reboot pitch explores building on an existing fan base, while tweaking your series to make it fresh. This could be as simple as a change in your sleuth’s circumstances. A new publisher, Biro adds, might even suggest such a “soft reboot” for a long-running series, thus creating a bigger publicity push

for the next title.

Book sales, he explains, “are driven by publicity. Any change in the status quo can generate greater attention and coverage.”

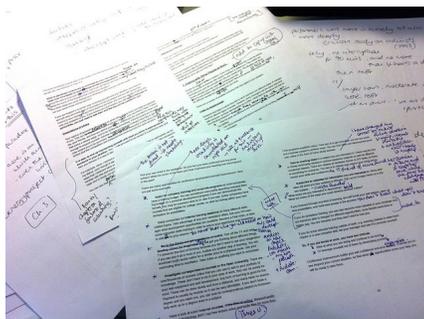
Finally, a pitch for a new series enables you to start with a completely blank page.

All of this is hard work, Martz acknowledges. “But,” he says, “there are some very special writers out there who are brave enough to scrap a manuscript and start over; or brush off a scathing review; or even pick themselves up after their first series ran its course, and set out in a new direction.

“And those are the writers who bring us the stories we love.”

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