

## **The Book Black List Pre-Origin Story...**

You're a Professional.

You've put in your 10,000 hours honing your craft. There is no debating the fact that you know how to write...how to turn a sentence, a scene, an entire Story. Even your worst enemy concedes your skill set.

*I don't like that guy all that much, but damn, did you read that piece he wrote for The Virginia Quarterly? I almost cried so many times that by the end, I actually did cry.*

You've got serious chops.

So, you challenge yourself to create a new work that pushes the boundaries of your chosen genre—fiction, narrative non-fiction, prescriptive nonfiction, self-help, biography, memoir, history, cookbook...whatever. You know the rules of your chosen Story terrain, but you also know that always following the rules gets you a one way ticket to mediocre-ville.

Instead, you take a risk and push your work to your genre's borderline and beyond.

After you've spent a year, and then another year, and yet another year constructing, deconstructing, and editing your book, you say a prayer and send it out to a bunch of big shot literary agents in New York.

To your relief, a number of them are interested. They court you and after doing your due diligence, you sign with the agent you feel will best represent your work...the one who has the connections to get your book into the hands of the major decision makers at New York's Big Five publishing conglomerates.

You know that no matter all of the hype about self-publishing platforms and Hugh Howey and E.L. James, the Big Five still dominate book publishing. They are the kingmakers who can write big checks and push writers onto bestseller lists. Quickly... *Once Howey and James hit the big time, they signed with Simon and Schuster and Vintage didn't they?*

You're feeling good. Not overly confident, just good. Like you're taking care of business. You're a writer not an entrepreneur, so you find the best representative to help you achieve your goal...to just make enough money to continue to write. You don't want to work a shadow career just so you can afford to dabble in the light on weekends. You want to keep doing what you're supposed to do. To keep writing long form stories.

Your agent walks you through his suggested submission list. He tells you his strategy for selling your book, who he thinks will respond to it, and how he is going to manage the entire process. Together, you decide on a date to send the book to editors. You work together on the pitch letter.

When you've finished you think it is so good...

**With a lead character reminiscent of the seminal Robert Ludlum protagonists, a conspiratorial high concept that one-ups Ira**

## **Levin, a fascinating and believable Michael Crichton-esque MacGuffin, and a dynamic Thomas Harris-like cast of characters...**

...you want to read the book again yourself.

Your agent then delivers what he's promised. With the pitch letter and phone calls, he's asked the top editors in your genre if they'd been interested in your book. They all respond enthusiastically and are eager to read.

The next day, your baby, the book you've been wrestling with for three years, is finally put into the hands of the big decision makers. Four editors from Penguin/Random House, three Editors from Simon and Schuster, two editors from HarperCollins, three editors from Macmillan, and two editors from Hachette get your novel on a Thursday morning.

Your agent tells you that Thursday morning is a good time to submit. It gives the industrious time to read overnight and get a jump on everyone else. If the editor has real *cojones*, he'll walk into his publisher's office and shake him down for the money to buy it before the weekend. But your agent warns you that scenario doesn't happen all that often these days. Because of the reduced competition between the Big Corporations, there's just not the sense of urgency that there once was.

At the very least, the top editors will dip into the book on Thursday and pass it around to the other forces inside the house that have to approve acquisitions. The heads of publicity, marketing, sales and of course the publisher, will all have to get on board in order for the editor to make an offer. The sooner the discussion starts among the five voters at each of the houses, the better.

By 1:00 p.m. that Thursday, only four hours after the book has hit editorial in-boxes, your agent's phone begins to ring. The calls are not from editors, but from book and movie scouts.

The book and movie scouts are the chattering classes in book publishing, the regal court that hangs around the major media castles. The scouts represent foreign publishers and film studios and production companies. They befriend the big publishers and editors so that they can get a bead on what's "hot." It is their job to monitor the entire publishing industry and find the big books the second they are submitted. The ones that will make great movies, the ones that are surefire bestsellers always find first exposure at the Big Five. So the scouts curry corporate favor in order to keep their clients informed... if they don't have contacts at the big houses, they soon lose their clients.

Your agent calls you and explains what scout recognition means.

The scouts have heard about your book from editors around town and are "registering their interest," which is code for that they've already gotten a copy of the book (it's been leaked) and have skimmed through a chunk and recommended to their clients that they take your book seriously. Scouts provide a shot over the bow to the rest of the world and to Hollywood about big potential properties.

Your agent recommends that he alert his “book to film” subagent about this development. He’ll have his co-agent officially submit your book to the production companies that serve the studios and to studio executives directly as material to option for feature film or television adaptation.

You agree.

What do you have to lose? If Hollywood loves the book, their interest can only help push it over the top and help sell it to one of the Big Five publishing houses, right? If someone makes a movie based on your novel, then the publisher would then be able to sell a fresh edition of your book, the movie tie-in paperback edition. Instead of three editions (hardcover, e-book, and generic paperback), the publisher will get a fourth bite of the apple. A second re-issue edition of the paperback will feature the movie art on its cover when the movie finally comes out and tap another revenue stream. Look what happened for THE GREAT GATSBY, even eighty years after it was published...

By the end of day Thursday, every major player at the studios and independently has your novel with their overnight readers. The biggest producers in Hollywood will have “coverage” by Friday a.m.

But that’s not all, your agent has also heard from his “foreign rights guy,” his subagent who handles the selling of foreign translations of English language novels in the U.S. He’s been hounded with calls about your novel too, so he’s submitting your novel into foreign markets too.

So, after three years of excruciating creative work, in just one day your book has been sent to the biggest book publishing companies in the world and to the biggest Hollywood studios and producers in the world.

Your book agent puts it all in perspective:

“My job is to get your book in front of the decision. The fact that everyone in the world will read your book over the weekend is great, but it’s the equivalent of getting your case in front of the Supreme Court. Who knows how they will rule? We could sell this thing for a million dollars in the U.S., the World, and for Hollywood...3 million total. Or we could get nothing. That’s just the way it works. It’s out of our hands now. It’s a great book. We just have to hope that a huge corporation agrees with us.”

You try and forget about the hullabaloo and go for a walk. But you can’t put it out of your mind. There is no way not to think about what a life changing advance (let alone three million dollars) would do for you and your family. You’ve demanded that they sacrifice for so long...

1. You haven’t taken your wife out to dinner in four years.
2. Your kids are wearing their cousins hand-me downs.
3. Your 1996 Toyota Corolla has maybe three jump-starts left before death.
4. You’ve burned your life savings and your kids’ college funds too on this book.

5. You've got enough money to last for maybe two more months of tuna fish salad casserole dinners before you have to apply for a barista job at Starbucks.

A hundred grand would be enough to get you back to zero. Anything more and your wife will look at you like you were a hero again, secure in the fact that she wasn't crazy like her mother and sisters told her she was for marrying you. What's even better is that she'll feel vindicated too. She's put all her chips on you and your hard work and talent when no one else would. She's sacrificed her ego to boot. How easy can it be to be pitied as *that poor woman who has to support her family, while here deadbeat husband pounds away on a keyboard all day...?*

That's got to be even harder than being seen as an impotent man living in a fantasy world incapable of providing...

You wouldn't be thinking about any of this possible windfall if your agent hadn't sold books for millions of dollars before. But the fact is that they guy has done it over and over again. Every editor in New York looks at books coming from your agent knowing that it's will take their house a serious investment to bring them onto their list.

Didn't your agent tell you from the start that he was either going to sell it for "seven figures or nothing?" and that if you weren't looking to go for the big advance, that he wasn't the right guy to hire?

He did tell you that. But he also said that his batting average on fiction was about .333, meaning that for every three novels he submitted, only one sold. But the one that sold was for huge money.

"That's my business model. Go big or go home."

Man, maybe you were crazy to sign with this guy? A one out of three shot? That means you have a 66% chance of failure. What were you thinking? You head home, bath your kids, read 'em a story, put 'em to bed and then dump all of your anxieties onto your wife.

She tells you to calm down.

First of all, she likes tuna fish casserole and she's as much as a gambler as you are. And just enough is way better than too much. Besides, how many dads are around to bath their kids read to 'em and put 'em to bed? If the book sells...great...we'll eat a little better and get some new jeans. If it doesn't...we'll figure it out. We may have nothing, but that means we have nothing to lose. Try and forget about it. And she helps you do that.

You sleep well, calm in the fact that whatever happens, you're already a rich man.

Friday afternoon eastern standard time, early morning Los Angeles time, your agent calls you and tells you that Paramount, Universal, Warner Brother, Sony, Lion's Gate and Fox are all being pitched your book by six of the most prestigious and successful production companies in Hollywood. They all love your book. They think it could be a huge franchise akin to the Jason Bourne movies. Your agent will share that information with the big publishing houses before end of day and with all of the foreign

publishers too. Your agent is now certain that all fourteen editors will read your book over the weekend. He'll get responses on Monday.

The weekend feels like a year. The up and down rush of dopamine wears you out and by the time Monday morning comes around, you're so frazzled that you can barely think. Your agent calls and tells you that he's checked in with every editor and not one has passed on your book. They're now "sharing it with their colleagues," and have asked if you'd be available to talk about the book and your goals for the future over the phone.

Your agent tells you that this is a crucial step before an editor makes an offer. They just want to be sure that you're not a wacko incapable of having a conversation. And they'll want to run some editorial suggestions by you to make sure that you don't freak out when you get notes. He coaches you on how to behave and generally tells you to just be yourself.

"You've been writing for fifteen years, you know what you're doing. Trust yourself. You'll be great."

You talk to five editors that day and every single conversation goes well. They are all extremely complimentary of your book and their suggestions for changes make a lot of sense. The calls end with "I hope we get to work together..." so you're feeling much better about making your living writing books. Your agent schedules more calls for the next day.

You then ask about the Hollywood and foreign interest from Friday.

"Don't expect to get any offers from Hollywood or foreign publishers until we sell it to one of the Big Five," he tells you. "The studios and producers don't want to buy the movie rights to a book until they can leverage the legitimacy of the book's origins by riding on a publisher's coat tails."

You're still confused. So your agent gives you an analogy.

"Say you're the head of merchandising for NIKE. You've heard about a great quarterback coming out of the University of Alabama. Every single NFL team is interested in signing this guy, but he's unproven in the big leagues. He's far and above one of the top quarterbacks in College, but he plays with abandon and takes a lot of chances. He'll be a perfect endorsement for NIKE and you know that REEBOK, ADIDAS, PUMA and NEW BALANCE want him too.

You could beat the other shoe companies to the punch and sign the guy before he gets drafted. The chances of him not getting drafted are very small, but when you walk the idea up to the CEO, he tells you to wait it out.

*Why risk signing a nobody for a big contract when you can wait and sign him when he's a star?* asks the CEO.

You tell him that if you don't sign him now, you will be competing with the other four shoe companies and could lose that battle?

*That's okay; if we have to pay more money for him because everyone wants him then we'll make up for the extra cash in publicity.*

The CEO makes a lot of sense, so you tell the agent for the Alabama quarterback that you'll be ready to go as soon as he signs with a big NFL Club.

Now you understand. But you can't help remembering that Joe Namath, an Alabama quarterback in the 60s, never signed with an NFL team and he became one of the biggest sports celebrities of all time. And then you remember he signed with the rival American Football League. But there is no equivalent of the AFL in book publishing.

You finish your calls the next day, Tuesday, but still not one of the big publishers has made an offer for your book.

Your agent follows up. He doesn't sound like he did just the day before.

"I've gotten a few passes." He confesses. "A few of the publishers have taken a gut check amongst the marketing, publicity, and editorial reads and they are divided. There was major enthusiasm for the book, but not critical mass. When it came right down to it, they felt that you pushed the envelope too far. And as we've gotten so much interest, they decided to bow out before the money started to flow."

And then he drops another bomb. "Anyway, Hollywood still loves the book, but they have told our guy in LA that they are not going to bid until the book has been sold. So, I think we need to press the big publishers and get them to make a decision. If we let this drag on too long, then the book will lose its heat and we'll not only lose Hollywood, but we could lose New York too. There are nine publishing houses still in this. So I think we should set up an auction date that gives them enough time to run their numbers, but not too much time to nitpick the book to death in committee meetings."

Together you decide to close the book the following Wednesday. All editors will have to bid or bow out by noon. Your agent sets the date with the nine publishers and his L.A. sub-agent spreads the word in Hollywood.

Most of the editors you spoke with are still in the running, so you feel that at least two or three of them will push the decision forward and offer. You just want this whole process to be over by this point. Your blood pressure is off the charts.

And then rejections begin coming in from foreign markets. Your agent tells you not to worry. These are passes from houses that are affiliated with the first five U.S. passes, so their declines make sense.

The next day and day after, more rejections.

"While we think the writing here is far above the standards of the genre, and the research and plotting ingenious and surprising, at the end of the day, we just couldn't come to a meeting of the minds of how best to position and sell the book. So we're going to bow out and wish you the best of fortune on Wednesday."

It's now the Tuesday morning before the auction on Wednesday. There are four houses still in contention for your book. Your agent keeps telling you "it only takes one..." and you've had a follow up call with a wonderful editor who hasn't flagged in her enthusiasm.

But by the end of workday on Tuesday, there is only one house left, the woman you felt really got the book.

You repeat the mantra "It only takes one.... it only takes one..."

But Wednesday morning, just an hour left before bids are due, the final house sheepishly emails your agent to say that:

"After a heart-wrenching amount of deliberation, I'm afraid, we won't be offering."

As expected, after hearing that your novel has not sold to one of the Big Five, Hollywood's interest disintegrates. Foreign interest evaporates too.

It took you three years to write your novel. You're broke. It's gut check time. You can barely make sounds, but your wife stands behind you.

The two of you have a conference call with your agent who sounds even more devastated than you are. You find yourself trying to make him feel better. After an appropriate amount of time howling at the moon, you ask your agent, "What am I going to do now?"

Your agent tells you that you shouldn't give up on the book. You took it all the way to the one yard line, got incredible feedback and encouragement from the most critical readers in the world. There is just no way that your novel won't appeal to a large readership. People who read are desperate for something unique and fresh, something that takes big risks. Your agent tells you that you should consider publishing the book by yourself. He tells you that there is not a stigma about self-publishing like there used to be. That major bestselling writers publish books themselves today.

"Wait a minute," you say. "Why can't we set up a few phone calls with the most enthusiastic editors and asked them to give us their notes? I can then go back and revise the book and we can re-submit...?"

Silence on the other end of the line. At last your agent responds...

"It doesn't work like that anymore. You only get one chance to submit. Editors get so many manuscripts that they just don't have time to develop books anymore. Yeah, it took F. Scott Fitzgerald five revisions at Scribner with Maxwell Perkins to get THIS SIDE OF PARADISE accepted, but those days are long gone. Books today have to be almost ready to print by the time a publisher will consider them. Once they pass, it's over. Unless you write a completely new book."

"Tell us about self-publishing..." your wife asks. You are numb, incapable of digesting the fact that you've blown every chance at the Big Five.

"What would we have to do?"

Your agent tells you the first thing you need to do is create your own website. Then you have to begin blogging, writing professional level articles. But you can't charge people to read them. You have to give them away for free. But because you are such a great writer, your agent assures you, it will only be a matter of time before people start coming to your site and reading your work.

After a few thousand come to read your stuff regularly, you'll then have to begin an email list of people who really enjoy your work. These big fans will subscribe to your site, which will require you to create even more material to give this fan base. Again for free.

Once you've hit about 10,000 subscribers to your email newsletter, then you can start thinking about how to offer them the opportunity to buy your novel...the one that has just be turned down by the Big Five. You'll have to price it low, like \$2.99, in order to get people to try it. And you'll have to pay for a professional looking cover, not to mention the costs of keeping your website up to date and relevant. But once you do all of those things, you've got a good chance that 10% of those 10,000 subscribers will actually buy your book.

And once you have 1,000 copies of your book sold, you've hit a point where word of mouth can start working seriously in your favor. One hundred of those thousand people will definitely love your book enough to recommend it to their friends. They've studied this stuff. The friends of those 100 huge fans will then come to your site and check you out. And then they will sign up for your email newsletter and many of them will eventually buy your novel.

As your agent is explaining all of this, you fall into an emotional abyss.

You want to write books, not a website.

"How long will it take to get 10,000 subscribers?" You ask him.

I have a few clients who have done this very thing. Depending upon how aggressive you want to be, if you work the website full time, it could take as little as a year. If you do it as a hobby, but with seriousness and diligence, probably five years.

FIVE YEARS?

And after five years, if you do everything right, you might be able to sell 1000 copies at \$2.99 for a whopping total of \$3,000 of income?

If you weren't ready to jump off a bridge before the phone call, you most certainly are now.

You tell your agent that you have nothing but respect for the writers who have done this work. They deserve every penny and every accolade imaginable. But you have a family you have to take care of and you just can't afford to do the same thing.

"Well then, what **are** you going to do?" asks your agent.



You're going to put your novel in a drawer in the attic and maybe visit it every now and then. But the time has come for you to bite the bullet and apply for a teaching job at the community college in town. Until you get a break and get hired to teach a craft you should be perfecting yourself, you'll work for minimum wage at anyplace that will have you.

Your wife sums it all up best:

"Isn't there a publishing house that has its own subscription list and following among rabid readers that would publish this book with alacrity and professionalism? A place where the best books by extremely talented writers who have the courage and ambition to push the envelope could be collected and published? A publishing house that only published the genre-benders that just missed the purview of the Big Five? A place that sat in between the chaos of self published works and the rigidity of Big Corporate Publishing? A publishing house that actually explained why they published what they publish and employed editors with the passion to put themselves forward to stand alongside the books they loved?

A publishing company like that annual list of the best unproduced screenplays in Hollywood, the Black List?

Isn't there a Book Black List?"