

An Agent Does the Math: Why Do Memoirists Face Such a Rough Market?

Kate Epstein
December 2007

There's nothing I like reading more than a good memoir. I think memoir is the most exciting genre in the bookstore—a place to read about self-discovery and exciting experiences, a place of unadorned, transparent, perfect prose. Memoirists have taught me about myself and about people I never could have expected to understand, and shown me a remarkably good time. For me, memoir ranks as the genre most likely to turn a bad day into a good day.

Add to that the fact that a fair number of bestsellers are memoirs, and it's not surprising that I would seek to represent memoir. Or that I would love so much to find a publisher for those memoirs I have on my list. What might surprise is how low my excitement can be when I find a memoir in my slush pile.

I might be more excited if I didn't get so much of it. Here's the first truth about memoir math: supply outstrips demand. I've gone through about 90 queries in the last three weeks, and 28 were memoir submissions. The numbers may work out differently for agents that represent fiction (or maybe not—at least 20 of my submissions were genres I don't represent, mostly fiction), but I think anyone that represents memoir sees a lot of it.

Of those 28 memoir submissions, I looked at pages for four, and offered representation for one. I'd consider my list unbalanced if I had more than two, maybe three at the outside, memoirs at a time. I have about 30 authors on my list (it depends on how you count) so this may seem like peculiar math. But let me explain.

Memoir is the obese kid on the seesaw. Many authors approach me with a complete manuscript, and that can be necessary to sell certain memoirs, but preparing a full manuscript for submission requires a good deal more of my editing effort than preparing a proposal. And it's generally best to have a proposal as well as the manuscript, so the editing work more than doubles.

On top of that, the work of making the argument for the book tends to be more complicated with a memoir. Remember in “City Slickers” when Billy Crystal says that “women need a reason to have sex” but “men just need a place”? People need a reason to buy a book, and publishers need a reason to take on books. With a lot of book topics, writers need a reason to write them, and that reason tends to be related to the reason people would buy them. But sometimes it seems like, for memoir, writers just need a place. Their own stories fascinate them. (And that's normal.)

So if a memoirist is a man that's eager for sex and a book buyer is a woman that's eager, a man with a place certainly may be able to find a woman with a reason—there are many good reasons. Good writing. Remarkable insight. Exciting stories. But that the fact of an eager man doesn't *imply* the likelihood of an eager woman.

(None of this is to say that I agree with Billy's reactionary, simplistic views about men and women, but I digress.)

This complication may be part of the reason that as a rule memoir is more difficult to place with a publisher than other kinds of nonfiction. Another factor is that publishers as a group seem to be less interested in the idea of memoirs with relatively modest, slow-growing potential.

Just to oversimplify, the big publishing conglomerates are only interested in books that they can believe will sell in high numbers in a short time. The mid-sized publishers do make offers on books with considerably smaller potential, making up the difference primarily in lower costs for marketing and by paying a lot less for placement in the bookstore. For some reason, fewer mid-sized publishers are interested in memoir than in a number of other nonfiction genres. They don't seem to believe in the kind of modest, respectable, steady sales for this category that they bank on in other categories like pets, health, self-help, and many others. It's as if they think every memoir is destined to either hit a bestseller list or sink like a stone. I don't know if this is a reasonable point of view based on past publications, or if it's a self-fulfilling prophecy, but this belief a reality I'm aware of when I evaluate submissions.

So what's the sum of memoir math? I have to be madly in love with your memoir to take it on. I must not only be able to imagine it in the bookstore, but I have to imagine that if I saw it in the bookstore I would be banging myself over the head with the hard covers in fury at my failure to offer you representation. When I look at your baby, I have to not see the randy cowboy in a City Slickers parody. I have to see a beautiful, precious work of art. I have to feel all the pride of an aunt, to see you as a sister or brother with your progeny. And that's when I'll throw out all of the math for the chance just to hold your baby for a while, and help her grow, and love her all the while.

KATE EPSTEIN represents the memoirs *Rock Star Mommy* (Citadel, 2008) and *The Day After He Left for Iraq* (Skyhorse, 2008).