

The Mixed Blessing of a Book Contract

by Kate Epstein, Epstein Literary Agency

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Working with authors has always been my joy. Holding their hands through the publishing process is an honor. I've occasionally made up an excuse to call an author merely because I needed a lift.

I hope that I *personally* bring a lot more good than bad into the lives of authors. But I know that the book deal that brought me into their lives as an editor, and that will be the goal now that I'm an agent, can bring almost as much bad as good.

For most writers, a book contract is a dream come true. But the reality brings some moments when you feel like you're falling into nothingness and wishing you'd wake up. Whereas the validation that a contract provides could banish self-doubts, it often just brings new ones to replace the old. *Is the manuscript my best work? Is it worthy of me? Will my editor think it's good enough? Is my publisher worthy of my manuscript/worthy of me?* It's the classic swing of someone who wonders if she should join a club that would have someone like herself as a member.

Then once publication becomes imminent—*what if I get bad reviews? What if I get no reviews or publicity? Will the book sell? If it doesn't will I ever publish again?*

The nonfiction authors with whom I've plied my trade generally write the book *after* the contract. Of course, it's great to have an advance while you write, and to know that your book will be published *before* you invest the time to write it. But writing a book is a lonely business whether you have a contract or not. Having a contract imposes a deadline, which many writers find helpful. But it's also a lot of pressure.

I've found that, for writers, small victories can even be better than big ones. People whose stories had been accepted in anthologies are generally happier than book authors. These receive a small fee for their work and appear—even if is on page 135—of a book that may be widely distributed. These kinds of publications don't touch off paroxysms of doubts. The book contract is still in the future—still a dream.

Unfortunately, writing itself is a poor antidote to pressure and doubts. The happiest writers I knew seemed to have found other antidotes, and it is with gratitude to them that I pass these on:

Community. You won't hear the voices in your head as much if someone else is talking. Get out. Talk about something else.

Look at writing as a job. Sure, you're an artist. But writing *for publication* is a job. It's got its ups and its downs.

Sign with a publisher and don't look back. At least for this book, you've made your decision. This publisher is your partner. Second guessing your decision is a waste of time. And second guessing the publisher's decisions (which is different from meaningful consultation) will only tick off your best allies.

Practice your zen. You can't control your reviews, your publicity, or your sales. You can help. You can hire a publicist. But if Oprah doesn't want you, she doesn't want you. You don't know the future. You can't prevent the fact that a typo will probably get through the process and into print. Make your book as good as your favorite books like it, and don't read it after it's printed.

Enjoy it all. If you're like most people, you struggled a lot to get to see your book in print. Look at it in every bookstore you enter. If you see space, make it face-out. If you see a stranger reading your book, tell him or her it's yours. (I do that and I'm not even the author.) Your enthusiasm is your best asset.

Your enthusiasm is also the reason your editor and/or agent calls you, every once in a while, when she *could* email instead.

Kate Epstein founded The Epstein Literary Agency (www.epsteinliterary.com) in October, 2005. She is actively seeking clients for nonfiction projects.