

Puppy? What puppy?: Publishing genre fiction creatively

I met with an editor of commercial fiction recently who had plenty of ideas for novels she wanted to commission. They were okay set-ups; each one had a decent premise, or character idea at their heart. The ideas all took inspiration from something that had already been successful, in books or on TV, and then combined that plot or setting or character idea with something else of universal popularity, such as summertime, or biscuits, or gardens, or sex. It's really not a bad recipe, this: take a pinch of something people have already invested book money in, chop in some seasonal goodwill, stir in a complementary ingredient from another source...

If it sounds cynical, well, it doesn't have to be. Without sprinkling some free creative thinking into the mix, though, such a book – one that starts with a list of ingredients – stands a decent chance of getting lost in the crowd and has an almost inevitable cap on its success. Raymond Chandler pointed out in his brilliant essay [The Art of Murder](#) (read it, do, if you haven't, for its passionate interrogation of storytelling and publishing) that "the good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way". What Chandler saw, was that it is almost impossible for the consumer to distinguish good genre fiction from average genre fiction, when the books are about the same things and look almost the same on the shelf.

Now that digital publishing is thriving, the publishing community can throw dozens of overlapping ideas out into the market with barely any risk, hoping to catch a wave or ride a wind, all without leaving the open-plan office. And there are a lot of authors willing to participate in this exercise, even if they aren't paid advances, because they love to write and they'd love to be read, and they are told they have to follow the market if they want to find it. ("Following the market," I can hear one of my clients intone, sardonically, in my head. "You mean more or less copying someone else's bestselling book.")

Even established authors of genre fiction feel they are often working on trammelled lines. One told me recently that she feels her editor reviews each of her plot outlines with a list of tick boxes by her side. ("What about putting in a puppy?" is a not infrequent first round editorial suggestion.)

It's so easy to fall back onto the expected narratives. My editorial advice to authors often comes with a warning: Beware of This Editorial Solution - I Think In Cliches. We all do! And you know what? We apply the same assumptions to life as to fiction. Ever told a load of people you lost a parent, or had a baby, or were made redundant, or are getting yourself divorced? I did that this year. "Did you just meet too young?" near strangers asked me, presumably having recently researched Life by reading Explanations For Divorce: A Dummies Guide. "Did you grow apart?" Er, OK, if you'd like to think of

it that way, sure. My beloved ex-husband and I, being people, as opposed to apple trees, don't quite see it like that. We're knotted at the root and got our branches pretty permanently tangled too.

Instinctively, we'd all love to shape our experiences into narratives, to impose order on life by finding the beginning, middle and end of things. Tidy up those messy emotions. But real life isn't so obedient, and books shouldn't be either.

Chandler argued that what distinguishes a good crime novel from a bad one is the tendency in the latter to allow plot to supersede character. That's the problem with not letting authors write what they want isn't it: every editor knows the rules of good storytelling, and can throw a basic pot on the storytelling wheel, but it takes a writer to show us how to smash that boring clay pot on the ground, pick up the pieces, stick them together in a new way and create the most beautiful drinking vessel you ever used. We should be allowing our genre authors to do more pot/plot smashing. Let the puppy play in the road now and again. (Oh, get over it. Puppy's fine. There is no puppy.)

Even if authors are given free editorial rein, genre writers often feel their work is homogenised during the publishing process and by that they mean dumbed down: identified by only its most basic elemental ingredients. Not only is it a subtly diminishing experience, to be marketed by reference to the works of other authors ("for readers of That Other Author We Package Like This"), too much 'following the market' is unprofitable too. When often the only difference between books in the eyes of the customer is the price, the whole market gets devalued in a rush to the bottom.

It simply isn't possible to exceed at a high level with commodity product. Just because each piece of genre fiction is, by its very definition, similar to something else – 'genre' being a synonym for 'category' or 'style of art' – that doesn't mean that all genre fiction is interchangeable. Genre readers love the specific authors they love and want our help to find more specific authors to love. And in order to sustain the genres we profit from, and to find new bestsellers, I believe experience shows us that we need to publish with the expectation that this is what will happen, not in the hope that someone will mistakenly buy a book because it looks a bit like something else they enjoyed.

Risk aversion is understandable in an industry driven by too few retailers with too much power and too little reading time, but it's important for publishers to have the freedom to work creatively with writers without always being hampered by the preference of the sales/finance teams to predict success. One of the great opportunities snatched from under publishers' noses by the advent of self-publishing was that of publishing books which broke the mould – which failed to fit neatly into category. Many so-called 'unpublishable' self-published books found millions of readers: funnily enough, real readers don't usually want to read the same story over and over again and don't think in

categories. It is a shame that Amazon is now dominated not by these self published one-offs but by homogenised cheap genre fiction.

Any author successful at writing genre fiction (by which I mean, any author who is lucky enough to sell more than a few copies at 99p; any author whose readers buy their books because they have enjoyed them before) has learned to dance a clever line; that between convention and innovation. And the best writers continue to push, developing their sense of who they are as distinct from the next writer. Quality genre fiction publishing should do the same.

One of the agent's jobs is to constantly remind publishers what is unique and special about their client's work and to encourage them to seek ways to distinguish their author's book from the next. When we talk about genre book jackets and titles and ideas, let's carefully listen to authors when they talk to us about their books, their readers. Let's take a lead from our best writers and be more creative, throwing the pieces in the air from time to time. It is when they come down in wholly new ways that we find our bestsellers, creating new genres: leading the market, not following.

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