



Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy

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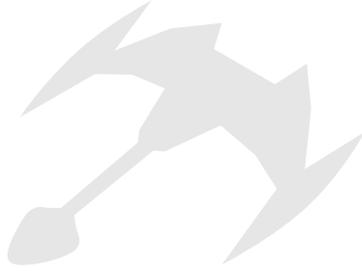
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Part 1: Knowing Your Genre





1

Hard Facts for First-Time Novelists

You're better off understanding the challenge before you get into this business, rather than being disappointed later. So let's look at the obstacles you face as an unpublished writer trying to break into a very tough market. What follows is a chronology of an extremely lucky first novel, from inspiration to final royalty check.

October 13, 2008: You get a brilliant idea for a novel and begin writing at the rate of 1,000 finished words a day (about four double-spaced manuscript pages). You call the novel *Dragonstar*.

January 13, 2009: Now, three months later, you complete *Dragonstar*. The manuscript runs to 90,000 words (about 350 typed pages).

January 14–21, 2009: You carefully proofread before mailing the manuscript to a publisher on January 21.

January 28, 2009: *Dragonstar* arrives and happens to catch the eye of a senior editor as she passes by the slush pile, where unsolicited manuscripts usually await scanning and rejection by a junior editor. Your first page hooks her; she drops her other projects and takes your manuscript home with her.

February 1, 2009: The editor phones you, says she loves *Dragonstar*, wants to publish the book, and will send you a confirming letter.

February 15, 2009: The letter and contract arrive by courier. The letter is flattering but lists a lot of changes you should make. The offer is an advance of \$5,000 against royalties based on 10 percent of the list price of a hardback edition, and a 50-50 split on the sale of paperback rights (if any). You read, sign, and return the contract by courier the same day.

February 16–March 30, 2009: You revise *Dragonstar* according to the requests in the editor's letter, and courier the revised manuscript back to her.

April 30, 2009: First installment of advance arrives: \$1,666.66 (one-third of advance payable on signing contract).

July 1, 2009: Second installment of advance arrives: \$1,666.66 (payable on receipt of acceptable revised manuscript).

December 31, 2009: This is the earliest possible publication date — too late for the Christmas market. Your publisher postpones *Dragonstar* to the fall of 2010 and schedules further editing and production accordingly. Meanwhile the publisher is trying to find a paperback house willing to buy the rights. So far, no takers.

April 1–4, 2010: The page proofs — the photocopies of the book's typeset pages — arrive. You proofread quickly, marveling at how much like a book your story now seems, and you return corrected pages by courier.

May 1, 2010: Your publisher holds a meeting with his sales reps to discuss the new fall catalogue, which mentions *Dragonstar*. As a

first novel, your book doesn't draw much interest. But the sales reps will mention it when they talk to booksellers. At about this time you see the cover art and dust-jacket blurb, but you have no say about them; only very big-name authors can influence their books' appearance. Fortunately, you like both.

October 1, 2010: *Dragonstar's* publication day! Books have been off the press for weeks; the "pub date" is the day by which copies should be in all the stores that have ordered it. You receive ten copies free. You can buy more at a 40 percent discount.

October 15, 2010: You receive the final third of your advance: \$1,666.67 (payable on publication). By the way, your publisher has one of the fastest accounting departments in the history of Western literature.

April 1, 2011: You get your first royalty statement: between October 1 and December 31, *Dragonstar* has sold 300 copies at \$30 each. Your royalty is \$900, applied against your advance.

October 1, 2011: You receive your second royalty statement: between January 1 and June 30, your novel has sold another 2,200 copies. Your total royalty so far is \$7,500: you receive a check for \$2,500. Congratulations! You have not only "earned out" your advance, you have made additional money — a remarkable achievement for a first novelist anywhere, in any genre.

October 15, 2011: Good news! A paperback house offers \$12,000 for your novel.

December 1, 2011: You and your original publisher sign the contract for the paperback. Your share is \$6,000, half of it payable on signing the contract and half on publication.

February 1, 2012: You receive a check for \$3,000.

April 1, 2012: The latest royalty statement on the hardback edition tells you your novel has sold 33 more copies. You receive a check for \$99.

April 15, 2012: Your publisher takes the hardback edition out

of print, selling the remaining copies to a jobber for \$1 each; you don't receive any money from this remaindering, but you will be able to buy copies at the same price. On the remainder table, the book will sell for \$4.95.

September 15, 2012: The paperback edition appears. You hate the cover.

October 13, 2012: Exactly four years after you got your inspiration and began writing, you receive a second check from the paperback house, again for \$3,000. This is the last money you will see from the novel. The paperback publisher hasn't even printed enough copies to earn out your advance — she'd rather wait and see if booksellers reorder. They don't, and your novel is out of print by Christmas.

This is a very optimistic scenario for a first novel by an unknown writer. Your own experience is likely to be much tougher and more protracted.

You have this consolation: your publisher is likely to respond very quickly to your next novel, and if it's a good one, you can look forward to considerable editorial encouragement. You may even sell it on the basis of just an outline and some sample chapters. If your first two or three books sell reasonably well, advances for later ones will improve. Paperback advances may also be more generous. The publisher may even budget for serious marketing.

Nevertheless, building a career as a novelist is like building a pension fund. You are sacrificing today in hope of success several years from now. And just as you could die before you retire, you have no guarantee at all that you will succeed as a writer.

Consider some other discouraging facts: Hardback publishers throughout the English-speaking world have been losing money on "midlist" books for years. Such books used to be the bread and butter of publishing; they didn't sell in huge numbers, but they sold

steadily and stayed in print for a long time. Readers got a chance to discover them years after the publication date.

But now hardback houses want blockbusters, novels that will sell scores of thousands of copies within a few weeks of publication day. Without such instant sales, booksellers will simply return the unsold copies they'd ordered — often within weeks or even days of delivery. That gives them credit toward the next batch of books they order from the same publisher, but it doesn't do the publisher any good. He or she now has to find another bookseller willing to take the copies that the first bookseller couldn't move. And returns do you, the author, even less good.

If you're working in a genre like science fiction or fantasy, you soon learn that hardback publication is largely for the big names. Readers are loyal to authors they like, and cautious about authors they don't know. If they buy a hardback SF or fantasy novel, it's going to be by an author they know and love. If they're going to gamble on an unfamiliar name like yours, they'd prefer to bet just the cost of a mass-market paperback.



MASS MARKET? TRADE PAPERBACK?

“Mass market” means distribution through supermarkets, drugstores, and newsstands, as well as regular bookstores; “trade books” sell primarily in bookstores. A “trade paperback” is usually the size of a hardback book but with a paper cover and a price halfway between mass market and hardback.

The mass market, however, is another jungle. With hundreds of titles coming out every month, rack space is precious and every new book must earn its keep. If it doesn't, the local seller doesn't even bother to return the books — just the torn-off covers, while the books themselves go in the dumpster. (It's illegal to sell coverless books, but evidently some people do it or today's paperbacks

wouldn't carry warnings about buying them.)

I once saw a drugstore clerk ripping covers off books, and as a paperback writer I took a morbid interest in what she was doing. I asked her how long she left paperback books on the racks before disposing of them. "Some of them never get out of the shipping box," she told me.

So mass-market publishers of science fiction and fantasy rarely print enough copies even to cover the cost of your advance (and they're very reluctant to tell you how many copies they've printed, because they know you can do the arithmetic). They're gambling that your *Dragonstar* will attract enough buyers to make the distributor order more copies. Reorders are essential to your book's success, and most mass-market SF and fantasy titles don't get reordered.

If this doesn't make sense, just recall that a handful of major best-selling authors are making huge profits for their publishers. The publishers invest part of those profits in buying your manuscript in the hope that you might turn out to be the next William Gibson or Robert Jordan. If you do, then some of the profits will help grubstake the next generation of writers. If you don't, you'll find it becomes harder and harder to sell later books.

In genre fiction, especially with mass-market titles, marketing is almost nonexistent. The publisher may buy a few advertisements in trade magazines such as *Locus* (which serves the SF industry — see www.locusmag.com), and may put the first chapter of your book on its website so that potential buyers can see if they like it. Reviews are few, and in any case have very little effect on mass-market sales. Your book may live or die on the strength of its cover. That's because most consumers do indeed judge a book by its cover, and they buy the cover that attracts them. The book jobbers who fill the racks do the same thing.

As the *Dragonstar* timetable above implies, actually writing the novel can be the least time-consuming part of the process. But if you take years to get your novel into publishable shape, you are only

delaying the payoff even longer. As an efficient craftsperson, you should know how to complete a salable manuscript with little or no revision, and then how to get it to the right market as quickly as possible. In the next few chapters, we'll look at ways to improve your craft before turning to the issues of marketing.