

Advice on Getting Published

By Steve Frangos

Special to the National Herald

I am a Greek-American writer. As a full-time writer on the history and culture of Greeks in North America I am among less than a dozen people who regularly write and get published. Regardless of what you may hear about the predictions on the future of Greeks in North America, I am truly among the last of my kind. Inexplicably this often places me in an odd situation. Over the last few years at least a dozen unpublished Greek-American writers have contacted me by letter, phone call, email, and even visits in their quest of learning exactly how do they go about getting their unpublished manuscript into print.

Ignoring all my other writings, over the last twenty-five years, I have had only one book published The Greeks of Michigan (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004). This does not make me an expert on how to get a book successfully into print. Which is, a fact, I always point out to those who seek my help. The only reason, I can imagine, that I continue to receive all these requests is because my articles appear regularly in the National Herald.

In all of my exchanges with these prospective authors, and many of them have subsequently had their books published without any help from me, is that they wanted some kind of personal contact or entry into the world of publishing. That I have no such contacts was very often simply not believed by those who contacted me.

They acted as if I was unwilling to divulge my sources or make the effort to help them. Few believed I

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Advice on Getting Published by a Fellow Writer

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knew nothing about the process.

In my conversations with these would-be writers I always stress that since 1980 more than 100 Greek-American authors have published biographies, autobiographies, community histories, photographic history books, and family-histories all in what is largely an unexamined explosion of work. These volumes have been published by the largest publishing houses in the world, state university presses, noted prestige presses, small local presses, and even self-published by the authors. Since no one is taking the time to think about why this phenomenon is taking place this truly unique moment in Greek-American history is simply being ignored.

My interactions with these potential authors have been such that I believe I can report to you the real problems these individuals face. The core problems involved would also explain while approximately a third of all the Greek-American authors published since 1980, have been self-published. That even those books published by recognized national companies often fail to have high sales figures is also part of the same cluster of Greek culturally produced expectations.

I have always advised those who have contacted me to get a professional literary agent. A literary agent is an individual who works for a long established company whose whole reason for existence is to successfully place a manuscript with a publisher. The best way to locate such an individual is through one of the Writer's Market volumes.

You must believe and act as if you have faith in your own written work. You must be the unyielding force behind whatever you write for others to read.

Now for those of you who are just readers and not writers the Writers Market (Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books) is just that an annual of now well over a thousand pages that offers writers a vast listing of reputable literary agents, places to sell their work cited by categories and types and then a list of publishers. Among the various categories in

down. The money paid a new author stinks. I heard from one Greek American writer that he and his sister (they were joint authors) actually turned down a university press offer because they weren't (according to this man) even going to receive back what they had paid for the copying involved in the many years of research undertaken in their historical account.

Greeks who are so gifted in the everyday business world seem to leave everything they know to be true behind when they want a book published. When these prospective authors tell me one of these "the money was no good" stories I always "ask what does the average independent writer in North America make per year?" To date, no one has known the answer.

I once heard George Pelecanos, a writer of some 16 best-selling books and countless television screenplays; say he only received \$1,500 for his first novel. That he did not make more than \$2,500 per book until after his third book.

Once several years ago, Dan Georgakas, the author/editor of seventeen published books and one screen play, told me to look at, I believe, the National Writers Union website since they had just posted a study that reported most writers in America make on average less than \$5,000 a year. Go try and tell your yiayia that figure and see what she says about your dreams of being a writer. Most independent writers in America make a living at something else and then write.

Another point that bothers the prospective writers is all the work necessary to promote their own book. You absolutely have to go out and promote your own work. I have had various Greek writers, all hard workers by the way, come to me and say they just didn't have the time to promote and push their own books. One Greek American poet even offered me a salary, a fax machine and other incentives if I would place his poems in magazines for him. I told the poet I was not a literary agent and if he did not believe enough in his own poems to try and place them in literary magazines why would anyone else want to read them in the first place?

The other issue that Greek writers I have spoken with choke on is the issue of editing. Collectively they see this as censorship, and on this point I have to agree. Unless there is

can effortlessly find: novels, scientific writing, children's books, comedic, script writing for television or movies and all the rest. Given the real scope of publishing possibilities in America, aside from the general annual Writer's Market volume there are in fact a number of specialized Writer's Market volumes devoted to any array of specialized fields such as Mystery Writing, Movie Scripts and so on. All in all the Writers Market is the standard reference guide for the writing industry in the United States.

You can walk into any large chain bookstore and either purchase or order one of these volumes. No Greek, I have spoken with, especially from New York City which is the undisputed publishing capital of North America, wants to go through this process.

There seem to be two reasons for this reluctance. First you have to pay the literary agent a non-refundable fee for just having the agent offer your book to an array of potential publishers. Next and this is really the root of the problem once contact has been made and the paperwork processed the potential author usually does not hear from the literary agent again unless the book has been successfully placed. If the agent's efforts bring no results all the potential author "sees" for their money is a letter at the end of months of waiting.

Greeks being Greeks they feel they have been personally cheated and that the agent made no real effort to place their book. From my sustained conversations with these potential writers what troubles them the most is they can't see how the money is applied (what "work" is the agent really doing) and they have no personal contact with anybody after the process is in motion.

They do not under any circumstances accept the simple truth that their book is either accepted for press or it is not. The argument that all writers must go through this process does not penetrate the Greek writer's mood on the matter. This is the part of the conversation I have with these Greek writers that always amazes me. The literary agents often receive a considerable bonus if they successfully place a book. Consequently all literary agents want to find the next "Best Selling Writer" so they can reap the financial benefits along with the author and publishing company.

Another complaint I have heard is that what the writer was offered was too little and they turned it

or a word-count limit that all newspapers and magazines must deal with to physically get the publication to press there is no real excuse for editing. Whatever the case maybe editing is always troubling and no one can avoid it when following the standard routes.

All of the above has led a whole group of Greek Americans to self-publish, which allows them to jump over all these issues of literary agents and editing. Self-promotion is still there but that is usually resolved by Internet advertisements and websites. Self-publishing also by its very nature is based on the personal one-to-one interaction of author with reader.

The principal problem with the face-to-face sales technique coupled with the total absence of anything even vaguely resembling a Greek-American cultural network is sales are always local and very low. I recently learned that the Arcadia Publishing Company which has published some four different books on Greek American communities around the country has experienced such low sales figures outside of the home communities themselves they are now reluctant to publish any more such volumes elsewhere.

Nevertheless there are many books on how to self-publish. One such handbook is Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print, and Sell Your Own Book by Dan Poynter (Santa Barbara California, Para Publishing, 2006). Mr. Poynter not only first self-published this book in 1979 but it is now in its 15th revised edition which has seen 19 printings in 27 years of being in continuous print.

In the end the most interesting question for me is "why are so many Greeks in the United States writing at this particular moment in time?" I believe, the over 100 books we have seen published since 1980 is a clear indication that Greek Americans realize that their collective story has not been told. It is a sad truth of our times that our academic class (but obviously not our true intellectual class) has totally abandoned us.

Ultimately, in some sense all writers compose the stories, poems, and books they wish they had to read. You must believe and act as if you have faith in your own written work. You must be the unyielding force behind whatever you write for others to read.

Readers who wish to contact Mr. Frangos may e-mail him at greek-write@yahoo.com.

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