



Publishing Isn't For Cowards

By Craig Bubeck

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Several years ago, I crossed paths with an old friend whom I hadn't seen in years. We were around a decade out from our simpler-life high-school days, and he was dumbfounded that I could be a father.

"I can't imagine it." He was shaking his head and looking off wistfully toward the horizon. "Why do people become parents?"

He glanced back at me just in time to catch my wry smile.

"Oh, I know how." We both laughed; then, he kind of smirked and looked me dead in the eye. "But why?"

Several years later, during a college composition class I was teaching, a freshman looked up from his desk and blurted out, "Professor, why would *anyone* want to become a writer?"

There is a fundamental similarity between these two questions that to this day makes it hard for me to answer. Anyone in the publishing industry will be able to give the pat response (with a comparably wry smile), "Oh, I know how to make books." But there's a mystery wrapped up in the "Why?" of bookmaking that is very similar to the love that only a parent can know for his or her child.

I think, then, that perhaps the lifecycle of a book's publication might best be understood in terms of that epic struggle parents

knowingly choose to go through by giving birth to, training up, and then releasing their child (the book) into the world.

A Book is Born

It all begins with the concept. Often the book is conceived by a practitioner—perhaps a pastor with a sermon series that has powerfully impacted lives; or a professor whose approach to apologetics has drawn minds and hearts closer to God; or a youth worker who has seen the fires of passion for God's kingdom kindling in the souls of teens, city-wide.

On the other hand, sometimes it is the publisher that will conceive of a particular book. It might begin with the marketing specialist who stumbles across a great title in a brainstorming session for another book. Perhaps it will be the sales rep trying to explain, to a colleague over lunch, the problems Sunday school teachers face these days. And of course there is always that publishing board that passes up one proposal, but turns to the acquisitions editor with a new challenge: find a surrogate author, an expert who can be a strong partner on another subject or direction.

However the book begins, like starry-eyed, first-time parents, even the most seasoned

editors will confess they still look fondly upon this creation stage of a book as their favorite part of the job. Excitement runs high, and dreams for the book's broad-ranging ministry are grand. And there is good reason for the enthusiasm—this is when the creators of books are at their best, when they are practicing part of what it means to be created in God's image.

But bringing a book into the publishing world is done best in the context of a relationship—between two parents, the author and the publisher, whose combined strengths are complementary. And so, necessarily, there must be something of a courtship that takes place, a moment of truth when the publisher and author agree to work together.

Most publishers have a process by which executive leadership (commonly called *The Publishing Board*) can understand the concept and ultimately decide to commit their resources. With the wisdom of godly stewards, they must try to discern what authors and books will be a good fit for their company. No publisher can be all things to all people; no publisher can accept every book proposal, no matter how good the concept.

So a book is born out of a relationship between author and publisher—a relationship that started with a mutual vision and then solidified through a trust that is finally affirmed by contract. Then the book is truly born.

Training up a Book

Of course, the initial stages of a book's life—the conceiving and the contracting—are merely the beginning of a book's life cycle. The fascinating give-and-take of acquisitions, the fun of creating, and the joy of friendships established must inevitably give way to the mundane nitty-gritty of profit-and-loss (P&L) spread sheets, marketing plans, and scheduling.

These are the disciplined stages of book production when a publisher's organizational skills help nurture a book into maturity. Budget models and parameters developed by those gifted in finance set a book's boundaries—to be sure, every book will test those boundaries, but they are crucial to the book's wellbeing (not to mention the publisher's fiscal and mental health).

And of course, it's never too early to be planning for that book's future. As soon as the book is contracted, the publisher's marketing group must invest in a plan to secure the book's future success. Likewise, marketing specialists must work closely together with editorial, design, and sales specialists to develop the book's packaging—title, cover direction, and specifications.

Crucial to this stage of development is the cooperative work of team members with a variety of skills, managed by gifted leaders who understand well the workings of the entire publishing process. (Often this shepherding role is filled by managing or senior editors seasoned with years of direct experience.)

But perhaps the most obvious evidence of a book's maturing can be seen in the editorial process—the time of correction and training for the text. This is the heart-and-soul level of training that requires the firm hand of editorial experience, not only in terms of language, but in theology, in church dynamics, and cultural sensitivity. A publisher who finds such an editor “finds what is good” (indulge the Prov. 18:22 allusion).

The editor has been with the text since its birth, and he or she—alongside an editorial and design team—will nurture it through content editing, copy-editing, layout design, at least two proofs, and pre-press (digital) production. It is the editorial team that must discern theological difficulties and cultural

offenses, and who must negotiate with (and at times, cajole) the author, all the while keeping the process on schedule.

Among the many hats that an editor must wear are those by which the author will know the entire publishing organization: the first-contact, the confidant, and even the fast and loyal friend. This is a high calling for the editor who all the while must also be maintaining (and sometimes applying) the firm hand of discipline on behalf of the publisher.

But it's within these formative times of a book's development that its true character is developed. The disciplines of finance, sales, marketing, and editorial are brought to bear in an effort to train up that book in the particular way it needs to go (see Prov. 22:6) on the day of transmittal, when the final galleys are sent to press.

Finding Its Way in the World

The apron strings are cut, and the book hits the market. This is when all of the strategizing and networking of a publisher's sales team becomes evident. Still, no amount of preparation and planning can change the fact that the school of hard knocks awaits.

Publishers are generally rather philosophical about this leaving-the-nest stage, because they don't have much choice to do otherwise. Any publisher who could lay claim to all the right formulas and best plans for a book's success would have the profits to show for it. But despite all of our best efforts to train up that book, the reality is that book and its market have a will of their own.

Some will stumble and fall from the start, quickly sliding into back-stock liabilities in the warehouse. More (hopefully) will maintain a steady sales pace beyond their initial release, bringing back sufficient income to cover all expenses and eventually even a steady (if modest) profit. And a very

occasional few burst from the gates in a blaze of glory, rising quickly to bring fast and quick profits that will not only cover the losses of other fallen brothers, but even leave a nest-egg to build upon.

More often than not, the blaze-of-glory titles will give their momentary service and then fade away unassumingly. But crucial to any publisher's longevity will be the long-distance runners that enter into the glory years of a publisher's back-list. These titles have matured and mellowed with age exactly because they minister steadily and transcendently, beyond any one generation. A very select few may even live beyond their author's or publisher's years to become classics. For these grand back-listers, publishers will find creative ways to repackage and re-release to a new generation a book that has somehow risen above their own best efforts.

As "the preacher" sagely pronounced, "Of the making of books, there is no end" (Eccles. 12:12—the publisher's favorite verse); and perhaps that's a good thing. To be sure, the parents of any book (the publishing team and the author) will look back on the endless titles that they've helped conceive and give birth to, that they've disciplined and seen mature, and finally that they've watched make their own way to so many bookstore shelves. Yet they'll still marvel at how each book seemed to take on a life of its own. It may be they'll hardly even recognize what a given title has finally become: "Did I write this?" they'll mutter.

They will certainly never recognize all of the lives even one book birthed has impacted throughout its life cycle, be it short or long, from its cradle to its grave.

So even if they can't put into words why it is they endlessly pour themselves into the making of books . . . they know why.

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