

1. HARD FACTS FOR FIRST NOVELISTS

What follows is a chronology of a Canadian novel, from inspiration to final royalty cheque. Writers in the US, UK and other countries would have essentially the same experience.

October 13, 2006:

You get a brilliant idea for a novel and begin writing at the rate of 1,000 words a day (about four double-spaced manuscript pages).

January 13, 2007:

You complete a novel of 90,000 words (about 350 typed pages).

January 14-21, 2007:

After careful proofreading, you mail ms. to a Toronto publisher on January 21.

January 28, 2007:

Ms. arrives and happens to catch the eye of a senior editor as she passes the slush pile, where unsolicited manuscripts usually await scrutiny and rejection by a junior editor.

February 1, 2007:

Editor phones you, says she wants to do the book and will send you a confirming letter.

February 15, 2007:

Letter and contract arrive by courier. The offer is an advance of \$2,000 against royalties based on 10% of list price of hardback, 50-50 split on sale of paperback rights (if any). You read, sign, and return the contract by courier the same day.

February 16-March 30, 2007:

You revise the ms. according to the requests in the editor's letter, and courier the revised ms. back to Toronto.

April 30, 2007:

First installment of advance arrives: \$666.66 (one-third of advance payable of signing contract).

July 1, 2007:

Second installment of advance: \$666.66 (payable of receipt of acceptable revised ms.)

December 31, 2007:

Earliest possible publication date – too late for Christmas market. Novel postponed to fall 1998: editing and production scheduled accordingly.

April 1-4, 2008:

Page proofs arrive. You proofread quickly, return corrected pages by courier.

May 1, 2008:

Publisher holds meeting with sales reps to discuss the new fall catalogue, which mentions your novel. As a first novel, your book doesn't draw much interest (an average Canadian first novel in hardback sells about 800 copies, so no wonder!). But sales reps will mention it when they talk to booksellers. About this time you see the cover art and dustjacket blurb, but you have no say about them.

October 1, 2008:

Publication day! Books have been off the presses for weeks; pub date is the day by which copies should be in all the stores that have ordered it.

October 15, 2008:

Final third of your advance: \$666.67 (payable on publication).

April 1, 2009:

First royalty statement: Between October 1 and December 31, your novel has sold 300 copies at \$30. Your royalty is \$900, applied against your advance.

October 1, 2009:

Second royalty statement: Between January 1 and June 30, your novel has sold another 1,200 copies. Your total royalty so far is \$4,500: you receive a cheque for \$2,500.

October 15, 2009:

US paperback house offer \$12,000 for your novel.

December 1, 2009:

You sign contract for paperback. Your share is \$6,000 US, payable half on signing contract and half on publication.

February 1, 2010:

You receive cheque for \$3,000 US.

April 1, 2010:

Royalty statement on hardback; your novel has sold 33 more copies. You receive cheque for \$99.

April 15, 2010:

Your publisher takes the hardback edition out of print, sells 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, 2010:

US paperback edition appears.

October 13, 2010:

Exactly four years after you got your inspiration and began writing, you receive a second cheque from the paperback house, again for \$3,000 US. This is the last money you will see from the novel. The US publisher hasn't even printed enough copies to earn out your advance – he'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. 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. If your first two or three books do 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 up a pension fund. You are sacrificing today in hope of success several years from now. As the scenario implies, actually writing the novel can be the least time-consuming part of the process. But if you take years to get the novel into publishable shape, you are only delaying the payoff even longer. As an efficient craftsman, you should know how to get a salable manuscript to market as quickly as possible.

Assignment:

Given what you know about your present or planned novel project, work out a realistic timeline for completing the manuscript and seeing it published. For example, if you've taken three months to produce 5,000 words, it's likely to take five years to produce a 100,000-word novel. If this is too long, write yourself a letter setting out ways you might finish the book more rapidly.

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

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