

BY USHA RAJAGOPALAN

The Writer's Market

A guide for aspiring authors on how to get their works – books, articles, plays, poetry, short stories etc. published...an excerpt from Usha's book, 'Get published!'

Creative writing has always been an unpredictable profession. The uncertainty lies as much in the writer's faith in his or her continued ability to write as in the reception from a publisher to what he/she has written. We have heard, tales of writers whose piles of rejection slips are higher than their piles of manuscript. Then there are also the success stories of those who hit the bull's eye with the very first novel. We hear about publishers clamouring for the manuscript and offering millions as advance. Examples of these are far too well known to be repeated here. The figures that are quoted by way of royalties, film rights, etc., are mind-boggling and would tempt most people to throw their hats in the ring.

There is no formula to write a masterpiece but it is possible to offer some tips on how to ensure that your typescript does not find its way to the editor's dustbin. The secret lies in the work that you do after the writing. If, for instance, you have written an article or a short story, study a few recent copies of the magazine that you would like to send it to. See what kind of material they publish. Does your writing match theirs or is it better? Are they likely to be interested in your subject? There is no point at all in sending a powerful feminist story to a conservative magazine. You will only be wasting precious postage and time that it will take for your story to come back.

(Sometimes it won't. Some editors do not bother to respond even after one has enclosed the all-important SASE-Self Addressed Stamped Envelope. When you don't get an answer in spite of many reminders, the only alternative is to fish out another copy of your piece and try your luck with another editor, keeping your fingers crossed.)

Uncertainty is the name of the game. Only the strong can survive in this field. If you are the sensitive, delicate, nervous or weak-at-heart type then creative writing is not for you. Not if you want to publish your work. Scribbling in a diary will do no one any harm and your ego will remain intact. The moment you are willing to show your writing to someone, even your best friend, you should be prepared for criticism. If you want to succeed as a writer then you need to develop a thick skin and the ability to remain unruffled by rejection slips; be optimistic to carry on writing despite all odds; be egoistic and tell yourself that your writing is good enough to be read by an editor (if you are beset by doubts about what you have written you will never send it out!); but also develop the humility to think that you can improve as a writer and learn from the works of the masters; be hard to please about the quality of your work; be ambitious; and above all, be disciplined enough to write something everyday even if you

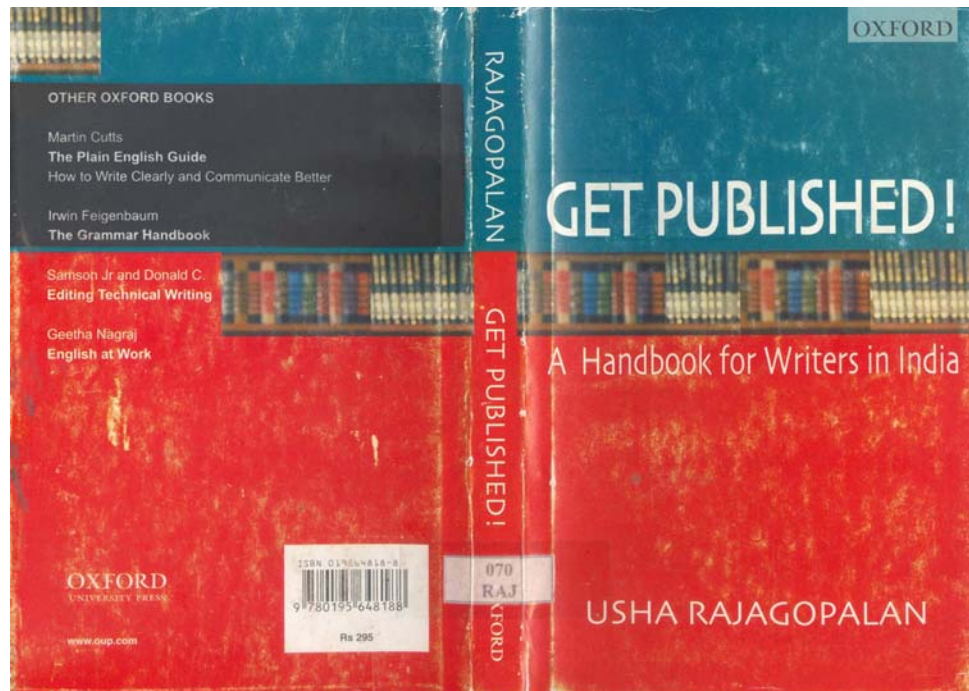
have to erase whatever you had written the previous day. Unlike other careers it is not easy to make a living as a full-time creative writer, at least not in our country and not till you produce that phenomenal bestseller or have a syndicated column in a few leading newspapers. To be able to find a publisher willing to take on your manuscript or an editor willing to support your regular column you need to establish yourself as a writer first. A situation more vexing than the chicken and egg problem.

Publishing is a business like any other. The publisher will obviously be interested in keeping the maximum profit possible from a book to himself since his firm depends on the income generated from publishing. At the same time, he cannot survive without the author. Royalties vary from publisher to publisher, and may be paid on net prices (published price minus discount) or published prices. The writer may get anything from 10 or 7.5 per cent of the net or published price on books sold though some publishers offer a lower percentage to first-time writers. If the cost of a book is Rs 100, as its author you may get Rs 10 from each book sold. If the bookseller was able to sell 1000 copies of your book then you will get Rs 10 x 1000, i.e. Rs 10,000. The rest of the amount, i.e. 90 per cent (or more) is shared between the publisher who has spent his money on

GENERAL INTEREST

producing the book and the bookseller who is responsible for effecting the sales. The process of book publishing involves you, as the author, the publisher and the bookseller. Publications such as newspapers and journals have different rates for contributors. Two short stories of similar length may not fetch you the same amount from two magazines. The effort should obviously be to get the maximum for your work. One freelancer I know has her own ranking for the newspapers that she writes for based on what they pay. A prolific 'middler', she sends one first to the newspaper that pays the most; when it is rejected she sends it to the second paper and then the third and so on till almost all her middle column articles have been carried by some newspaper or the other! The only exceptions are those which she feels are 'really not good enough'.

Another lesson to be learnt from my friend is to be honest enough to realize and accept when your writing is 'really not good'. It is often difficult though not impossible to be able to assess your own work. If you are truly honest, you will read your work as if someone else has written it and feel free to criticize, think of how to improve it, what to change, what to delete and what to add. Ultimately, your writing should satisfy you, the critic. Initially though, this will be difficult and it maybe more practical for you to get someone (whose impartial opinion you value) to read what you have



written and give an honest appraisal. Think twice before you approach an established author for this task. Without doubt they will be extremely busy with their own work and will not want to spare time to vet the maiden effort of someone they don't even know. If, by some freak chance, you have written on the very plot that the author was contemplating then it can turn to be a potentially embarrassing situation.

Writers are touchy people and editors, even more so. You obviously cannot mail any trash to an editor hoping that s/he will accept it but, at the same time, if your contribution appears to be reasonably good then there is no reason for you to hold on to it. Quite often, a beginner is too harsh on himself. By this you are only denying yourself the chance to see your name in print for it is likely that the editor was looking for just the kind of article you did not send! Does this mean that luck is a factor I have omitted in my list? Yes, because luck has as much or as

little a role to play in creative writing as it has in any other profession. An actor may get a lucky break in films but a writer has to write in order to succeed. Indeed, more than luck, perseverance and discipline are the virtues that cannot be overemphasized for a writer. Without a typescript or at least a book proposal, you cannot even approach an editor or publisher.

However strong your belief that your colleague got his or her book published thanks to an uncle who knows the editor's grandfather, the truth is : good writing will get noticed and accepted. It is really a question of finding the right publisher. The difference between you and your friend is probably that of time taken to locate one. Diligent research and lots of patience will help. One of the first requisites for a writer is not to wait for that divine moment of inspiration. It is possible that a stray remark overheard in a crowded bus stand could trigger off a chain of thought resulting in a brilliant

GENERAL INTEREST

short story but if you hover hopefully around large groups of people you are merely wasting your time. The only alternative is to approach this task of creation methodically, at and for a certain time everyday and attempt to write something even if you feel that your mind is a total blank. It is this discipline together with ruthless revision and craftsmanship which produces that one good piece of writing out of a worthless pile of junk. Inspiration may work-but not always and not for everyone.

Another friend is convinced that if he ever got the time he could write a novel to beat all other contemporary novels. This is like saying that you will bathe in the sea when the waves have ceased. All of us have to play different roles at the same time; that of a writer will just have to be fitted in somehow. Gurcharan Das, before switching to full-time writing, was a very dynamic, high-profile executive and a successful playwright (of course, he has also written a novel and many articles!). Shobha De is a mother of six and has a line of best-selling novels to her credit. Sitakant Mahapatra and Upamanyu Chatterjee are busy bureaucrats and prolific writers. Girish Karnad's achievements are too diverse and many to be listed here.

If you want to turn professional or earn your livelihood from writing, it may be necessary for you to branch into more kinds of writing than just one. However versatile you may be, it may still be a good idea to work in a regular job for a while and build up a bank account before turning to full-time writing. Writing in some genres, in fact, may not even be easily accepted by a publisher. Poetry is one such.

Triumph, for a poet as indeed for any writer, is publishing his first book. But, though there may be many poets in our midst, there are few publishers willing to spend money on a collection of poems. This is ironic, considering that poetry is read and written by a wide spectrum of people-from prime ministers to beauty queens. School children may balk at writing the mandatory essay but not verse. If your intent is to publish individual poems then there are more than enough avenues. Sunday newspaper supplements and general interest magazines devote some space for poems. My research revealed that poetry magazines far outnumber any other form, except those catering to general interest. Getting your poems published in these should go a long way in boosting your morale though it will not line your pocket. The idea that poetry will not sell does not match the presence of so many poetry journals. It is true that most of them have a small readership but a very committed and interested one. This is one of the unexplained paradoxes of Indian publishing.

Short story collections stand a much better chance than poetry. Several leading publishers such as HarperCollins and Disha (an unit of Orient Longman) take on short fiction. There are many periodicals too that carry fiction regularly. Katha encourages the writing of quality fiction through their annual search for excellent short stories both in regional languages as well as in English. The other reputed anthologies such as Civil Lines and Namaste are erratic. The Gentleman collection brought out by Sterling Newspapers Pvt. Ltd. is a comparative newcomer but one to be taken seriously by a short story writer.

Screenplay writing is a more difficult field, particularly for an Indian English writer. The problem is compounded by acute shortage of avenues. The television boom has inspired hacks by the dozen as is evident in the quality of the programmes. Almost all programmes in our country are in regional languages and English has little or no chance at all. This is what makes screenplay writing even more challenging: to be able to write a script that will win over a producer, and to write that unique screenplay which will test the skills of the director and the actors. If you can do this, you will be encouraged by the ever-so-slight change in the trend for the big and small screens. We do have an occasional soap opera in English and bilingual movies with an international cast.

The theatre is more welcoming. Compared to other genres of writing, Indian English drama is not as well developed but it has grown from the nascent to the budding stage. A few writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have carved a niche for themselves as professional Indian English playwrights. The latter hit the headlines by winning the prestigious first Onassis International Cultural Competitions Award for Theatrical Plays in 1997. Two other playwrights, Dina Mehta and Abhijat Joshi, have won the first prize in the BBC's international competition for the best radio plays. Within the country, regional language theatres may attract packed houses but there is an unequivocal (and growing) place for theatrical pieces written originally in English. The scope for these plays is expanding and

GENERAL INTEREST

now it is up to writers themselves to take up the challenge and write better and meaningful plays for the more receptive audiences. To quote Dattani, 'There is a necessity for more playwrights operating in the English language to express themselves through the theatre.' English in India (and in many other countries as well) is no longer the 'foreign' language that opened doors. More and more speakers consider English their mother tongue in addition to one or two regional languages. With a greater number of people turning to writing in an English that is specially theirs, of an experience that is universal, the result will be 'a version of the English language that is as unique and potent as American or Australian or Afro-Caribbean English,' says Dattani.

This is not to imply that English is the only language flourishing in our country. Not at all. Writing in regional languages attracts a greater number of readers now than ever before. They not only want to read what is written in their own language, either in the original script or in translation but also masterpieces in other languages. This has led to a spurt in the volume and quality of translations. The apparently insatiable demand

from publishing houses and readers indicates the gold mine in regional

language literature. In the words of Professor Satchidanandan, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, "Indian English writing alone cannot cater to the needs of the book market in India nor satisfy the sensibility of the Indian readers of books in English. There is also an increasing awareness of the literary value of writing in the languages that reflects Indian life in its real depth and variety." In fact, the days when one took pride in knowing only English are over. In the coming years it may even be important for an Indian English writer to have the same command and depth in at least one regional language. This enables one to have access to the best of two worlds, two cultures.

A good translation brings out the essence of the original language in addition to the meaning. What the reader is looking for is not just the framework of a story or the gist of a poem but the feeling of words, their nuances and myriad associations. Although this may sound strange, in the final analysis, the job of the translator is probably more crucial than that of the writer. The task of bringing a work to life in another language is daunting because the translator

must also inspire, according to Professor Satchidanandan, "... a whole new generation of urban readers who have by circumstances been deprived of their languages and would like to be acquainted with their literatures." It is not just urban readers within the country who seek this 'acquaintance' but also readers abroad to whom people like Arundhati Roy or Manjula Padmanabhan are only representatives of a rich native culture and literature.

In the pages that follow, several well-known authors have talked about how they go about this all-important task of writing. Remember that even the best advice will remain mere words on paper unless you are prepared to act on it. One cannot be called a writer till one begins to write and keeps writing.

From Get Published! (Oxford Univ. Press, 2001). Usha Rajagopalan is a writer and homemaker. After her MA in English Literature from Kerala University, she has worked as radio announcer and programmer, teacher, executive assistant to the Chairman, National Dairy Development Board, editorial assistant, Comparative Indian Literature (a comprehensive work in two volumes) and editor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. She resigned from regular employment in order to bring up her two children and pursue her interest in creative writing.

