

NEW IMPRINTS, NEW PROBLEMS

By Jerry D. Simmons

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Commenting on an article in the Arizona Republic, front page, Arizona Living section: *Harlequin romancing older women with mainstream fiction* by Bridgette A. Lacy.

Writers and authors beware. The launch of a new imprint causes a ripple effect with other major publishers. Editors will be on the lookout for writers to fill the phantom demand, but the marketplace has not suddenly expanded, and there are no new spots on a bookrack of the mass merchants (Wal-Mart, Target and supermarkets) to place these new titles. Instead, the publisher will offer massive incentives to get a large distribution for their new books in hopes of making an impact during the launch phase.

The competitive forces in the industry will note the press releases and articles in the trade magazines in which Harlequin announces their intent and describes the new market. Soon others will follow suit, and the so-called new category niche will be flooded with new titles, new looks and, most likely, new authors.

It is a terrific opportunity to get published, but the number of copies being distributed will far exceed capacity. The returns for some publishers would astound you! The problem here is publishing on instinct, without proper research and with total disregard to what happens if the new category fails to sell copies.

Harlequin has obviously taken a first step in this area with positive results. Now, with nothing more than a hunch, they will make a massive launch with new looks, new books and many new authors. The competition will not sit back and allow Harlequin to take away market share, so they in turn will also offer new incentives to keep their books on the rack.

In truth, the retailers will accept the new incentives, order even more books, and the marketplace will turn over much faster. Rather than a group of titles receiving two or three weeks of placement on a bookrack, they may now only get one-and-a-half weeks. This forces the product to get rotated out. Even books that sell will not be reordered, and the returns on individual titles will skyrocket.

A good scenario if you are a writer looking to get your first book published, but potentially fatal if you are not aware of what is happening behind the scenes and understand to what extent this publisher will go to make this launch successful.

If this is your opportunity to finally get your book published, know what questions to ask your publisher about the new imprint. What are the marketing plans? How much advertising, marketing and promotion dollars have been committed? What is the expected distribution of the books? Is the publisher offering incentives to their customers to purchase large quantities of books? How long will these incentives last? What is the acceptable return percentage before the publisher decides to pull the plug?

As a writer, you want to make absolutely certain that the company is committed to making this new imprint work. The distribution on each title must be in the 200,000-copy range, which is huge for a non-bestseller. The article mentions a retail price of \$5.50, which means these books are mass-market paperbacks. At that price and taking into account the kinds of incentives needed to get the imprint off the ground, they cannot be offering their authors much in the way of an advance.

They need to commit a minimum of \$100,000 to the advertising, promotion and marketing budget. If the pub schedule for these titles does not extend out at least twelve to eighteen months, this would show a lack of long-term commitment. The publisher may not have properly researched the market before the launch, but they know how long they can offer retailers incentives and continue to absorb returns before this new category becomes just another imprint.

If this is your chance, then ask the right questions and evaluate the opportunity. Your name and your book associated with returns greater than 60% could spell doom for your career. You will be a published author but you will have sacrificed your future on the whim of a publisher who will live to launch a new imprint the next time they feel they need to increase distribution.

Jerry D. Simmons spent more than twenty years as an executive with The Time Warner Book Group in New York. He is the author of **INSIDE The Business of Publishing What Writers Need to Know** and the creator of www.WritersReaders.com, where information essential to writers and their careers is available, **FREE**.

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It should always be about the writers and the books....