

## For Writers

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### Invest in Yourself...

What's the key to getting published? As an aspiring novelist I found dozens of answers in the books and articles from various writers' clubs. In that assortment of solutions a common theme emerged: produce quality work and sell what the editor is buying. A financial advisor—not an editor—provided the essential clue. Invest in yourself. She was recommending a savings program, but her advice, applied to writing, was sage.

As I read nearly thirty Writer's Digest books on how to write the great novel, I came to realize that my investment up to that point had no metrics by which to measure success. I had no idea if I was writing what the customers were buying or if my work was of the quality that the publishers considered acceptable. It was time to invest in a professional reviewer, not a critique group. I committed to pay someone for an "acid test" evaluation of my manuscript.

There are dozens of freelance editors available. To find the right one, I recommend that you start with Sally Stuart's Christian Writers' Market Guide, and follow up with a web search for editors in your genre. After three months of research and cost comparisons, I selected Heather Szott of Hawkeye Editing, Inc. to coordinate my review. Heather has a broad selection of freelance editors for any genre and she brought in the big guns at my request. I wanted an unabashed no-holds-barred review. Good or bad.

Linda Nathan of Logos Word Designs received the initial assignment. Her background in Christian fiction was a perfect fit for my needs. In my first contract with Hawkeye, I asked for a sample chapter review, to determine whether Linda and I worked well together, ensuring that I got what I paid for. I recommend that, in your first contact, you ask for a detailed document critique, with the review focused on a small segment of your work. An editor-writer team needs to be complementary, and a trial run is always advisable. Linda Nathan did a marvelous job, and while she praised my hard work, she made it clear that I was a long way from publishing a novel. Linda offered to critique me into compliance, if I was ready to absorb the pain that the revision work would entail.

You won't learn the writing craft unless you do the work yourself. It will cost you more, but I recommend my path, which involved two full developmental edits of my novel, then a complete line edit. In the developmental edit, Linda critiqued the manuscript, pointed out those places where I needed work, and watched over my shoulder by e-mail as I rebuilt the manuscript from the ground up. We repeated the developmental edit process, a necessary evil since I'd made such massive changes in the first round. After that second review, she tore the book apart line by line, making additional recommendations for better wording, repairing common mistakes, and providing one more read for a macro-level view of the book.

You must invest in yourself. It took me fifteen months of hard work and a \$5000 equity loan on my house, to reach a point where Linda felt I was ready to look for a publisher. That loan was the source of some heated discussions at home, as it might be in your family too, if you follow my path. But you have to invest to grow, and be advised that there will be investments after you complete the editorial phase. In my case, I came to realize that I didn't know the publishing industry well enough to sell my writing. As a result, I decided to invest again. I contracted Hawkeye Editing for a manuscript submission service, wherein Heather advised in the development of the query letter, recommended one hundred potential agents and publishers, and helped me develop a complete proposal. I borrowed additional monies for Hawkeye's marketing support and duplication support at Kinko's, and signed my next contract.

At this point, I was almost \$7000 and eighteen months into the process. I could have self-published for about \$10,000, but I wanted to sell my work, not force my novel on the market. Heather and Linda helped me to build a query letter and proposal, did all the duplication, then took on the task of writing on my behalf to fifty agents and fifty publishers. The rejection notices started three weeks later. As we went down this path, it became apparent that an agent was essential to penetrate the major publishing houses, and Heather shifted her focus to finding me representation. Six months later I was signed with Les Stobbe, just as we ran out of leads. Les has what I consider to be a ministry in his focus on first-time

authors. As the past Editor-in-Chief for Moody Press, with Christian publishing credentials that span five decades, Les was just the right agent for my work. He is a mentor, and I had been searching for just such a person.

Les had some sage guidance for me from day one. A bit of wisdom that I recommend every writer follow was “go to a writer’s conference.” He offered me two that were coming up soon and I chose the Mount Hermon Christian Writer’s Conference, near Santa Cruz, California at the Mount Hermon Christian Camps and retreat. What a great bit of advice from Les! I had always considered these gatherings to be for writer groupies and critique groups. I was so wrong. Mount Hermon exposed me to a dozen interested editors and that networking was the catalyst to get my work into print. In the many seminars and editor meetings that I attended in those critical five days, I found that often a publisher buys the author as well as the book. A conference gives you the chance to interface with people who are seeking an author that will be a draw for audiences in the marketing phase, and an author who can articulate the message of his or her manuscript. Mount Hermon was a watershed event in my publishing process.

From the day I set out to find a freelance editor, until I signed with Les Stobbe, I was focused on a single goal—to get into print as a paid author. That singular focus paid off: Within seventy two hours of my contract with Les, he had five publishers interested in my work. I must caution you that to find so many publishers so fast is quite unusual. Yet I’m convinced that one reason Les had so much success in our first three days was that I’d invested the preparation time far in advance. Some writers secure an agent and then revise their manuscripts. I would recommend doing the homework first, with the paid services of a tough freelance editor, and only seek an agent when your material is ready for “prime time.”

Was it worth it—the delay and the expense? I’d say so. I have a great contract from NavPress, I’ve broken into the fiction market, paid myself back, and made a profit. I recommend that you invest in yourself, just like I did. You’ll be a better writer for it—and there’s a much better chance that you’ll sell your work.