



# 'Excuse Me, How Much Did It Cost You?'

*An Anti-Scam Handout by*

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Some time ago I did a book signing at a mall, and the strangest thing happened. I was sitting there with books heaped around me, and a man approached me and stood there looking diffident. I smiled at him and said "Hi."

This person was in his early 40s, perhaps, well-dressed, well-spoken, with his young son in tow. The kid grabbed a copy of *Rebel Dawn*, my newest Star Wars novel, and said, "Look, Dad, Star Wars! Can I have it?" After the book was signed to the boy, the man cleared his throat. "I'm really interested in writing, too." After hundreds of book signings over the past 14 years, this is hardly a new comment. I smiled and nodded.

"I ... well, I have a couple of publishers who are very interested in publishing my book," the man continued. "So, I, uh ... well, I wondered. Would you mind if I ask you how much it cost you to have these books published?"

If I hadn't been spending the last few months helping out Writer Beware, I would have been surprised and horrified by his question. Instead, I handed him a copy of *Rebel Dawn*. "How much do you think it cost me to publish that book?" I asked.

He hefted the book, riffled the pages. "Well, it's pretty long," he said. "Longer than mine. Uh ... eight thousand dollars?" I gestured at the books in front of me. "What would you say if I told you that this publisher — Bantam — paid me to write these books? About twenty thousand dollars apiece. And I'll most likely earn royalties above and beyond that." The man could not have appeared more thunderstruck if I'd leaped up on my chair and done my Roseanne Barr imitation. "*They paid you?*"

"Yes, they did," I said. I waved at the books surrounding us in the bookstore. "All these authors got paid to write these books. Did you really think they all paid to get published?"

He blinked. "Well, I knew they probably paid Stephen King and Grisham," he muttered. "But the rest ... the new writers ..."

"Sir," I said, "money is supposed to come from the publisher to the author. Not the other way around. Not ever, unless you're wanting to publish something extremely specialized, like your family history, or a volume of your poetry or something. Writers are supposed to get paid for writing commercial books."

Minutes later, I sent the gentleman on his way, armed with the Writer Beware address on the World Wide Web, and an earnest entreaty to look up the page. I also cautioned him not to send his work to any publisher whose books he couldn't find in the average general-purpose bookstore.

This incident brought home to me how much harm the scam agents and publishers are doing to the once-proud tradition of publishing. I realize that most of you who are reading this have done your research and know the pitfalls. But for those who are new to writing, I offer the following guidelines. Feel free to copy them and pass them along. If you follow them, you are unlikely to be rooked:

**I**f an agent charges a fee, they are highly suspect. I don't care what they call it: reading fee, processing fee, contract fee, whatever ... any kind of fee is bad. If an agent charges more than \$50, I suggest you run away. Agents who charge fees in the hundreds of dollars make their money off charging

writers, not by selling their manuscripts to publishers. It's very likely that after you pay the large fee, the agent will never even submit your manuscript to a real publisher.

**2** If an agent refers you to a "book doctor," be very wary. Any agent that says your ms. needs editing should provide you with a list of a number of independent editors, and then allow you to pick the one you want to use. There should be NO financial connection whatsoever between the agent and the independent editor.

**3** If an agent refers you to a co-op or subsidy press, run away. No reputable agent will do that.

**4** If an agent you've never heard of solicits your work, that's not a good sign. Real literary agents have to fight off clients, not go out looking for them. If an agent advertises via direct mail, the internet, or in writers' magazines, back off!

**5** If an agent has an office in some out-of-the-way place like Bumpass, West Virginia, be very suspicious. Most real agents operate out of New York or California. There are exceptions, particularly on the east coast; but if Agent X from Bent Fork, North Dakota writes to you and begs to see your ms., chances are excellent he's a crook. Be smart!

**6** Any reputable agent should be willing to provide you with a list of sales and clients. Go to a bookstore and verify that these books and authors exist. Check references. If an agent claims to be an AAR (Association of Authors Representatives) member, go to the AAR site and look him/her up. Fake agents have lied about this before.

**7** If an agent tells you you're brilliant, and your book is sure to be a bestseller, be wary. Real agents don't make statements like that — at least not to unknown authors.

**8** Never pay a vanity press or subsidy publisher to publish your book. This includes "co-op" publishers. If you must get your book published and have exhausted all professional, commercial avenues, check into

self-publishing with a reputable printing company. Many poets, for example, self-publish their books. Your money will go a lot further that way. Go to your local bookstore and get a book on self-publishing. Check a printer's references before you sign any contracts. You will not receive the distribution and other services normally expected of a publisher, but you will get the books — after they are printed they will be shipped to you. Be aware that most bookstores will not stock self-published books.

**9** Having a poor agent is frequently worse than having no agent at all. If you can't find a reputable agent to submit your manuscript, go ahead and submit it yourself. Most sf and fantasy publishers will still read unagented manuscripts these days. Check out the market reports in the SFWA Bulletin or Speculations. Even the ones who say they won't may still read manuscripts from writers who impress them with a well-crafted, dynamic query letter.

So, to all you prospective writers out there: Never forget. If you're paying anyone to agent, publish, or edit your work, the money's going in the wrong direction, and, quite likely, you've fallen for a scam. You will end up losing money and gaining nothing. You deserve to be paid for your work! Becoming a writer is difficult, and requires a great deal of perseverance. As James Gunn once said, "Anyone who can be discouraged from becoming a writer should be discouraged." In other words, hang in there, and don't expect a bed of roses. But people do "break in" every day, and that's the good news!

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