

VILLAGE BOOKS WRITES: How to Talk to a Bookseller-- A 10-Step Guide for Authors

By Melissa Lion

At some point in any author's career she will walk into a bookstore. This could go badly. This could go well. This could go so well that like *Rainbow Fish*, *The Lovely Bones*, or *The Da Vinci Code*, the book will gain momentum from bookseller reviews and suddenly Julia Roberts is playing the author in the story of her life. Here are 10 steps on the Julia Roberts path. Or maybe just the shelf-talker and faced-out path.



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1. Don't treat the bookseller like the help. The person behind the counter or on the floor is the most important person in the bookstore. The bookseller puts your book in customers' hands, she puts your book on display, she writes a shelf-talker, and perhaps most importantly, stands in front of your book with a returns list that has your book on it and she decides if your book gets a stay of execution on the shelf, or if it heads off to remainderville. Remainderville, despite the cute name, is not a happy place for books.
2. Take advantage of booksellers' big mouths. There's a reason publishers have "Big Mouth" lists -- booksellers gossip. Booksellers meet other booksellers at various functions. At these functions three things happen -- drinking, recommending books, and gossiping about authors. We will gossip about good things ("Khaled Hosseini smells amazing") and bad things ("The author of [fill in the blank] shuffles his feet and treated me like the help"). You want to be on the good end of this gossip, so always smell nice and speak kindly to all the booksellers in the store. And pick up your feet when you walk.
3. Ask for the appropriate person. Do not walk up to the counter and ask to speak with the manager or the owner. Customers with a problem want to speak to the owner or the manager. You want to speak with the book buyer if you want the store to carry your book. You want to speak with the events coordinator for booking an event.
4. Use the correct person's name. If you don't know the name of the events coordinator, ask the person behind the counter. As for the book buyer, you want the person who buys your type of book. "What is the name of the person who buys the spirituality books?" Follow this up with, "What is the best way to get in touch with him?" Booksellers, book buyers, bookstore owners, and managers are very busy people. Respect that method of getting in touch.

5. Do not leave a book in the bookstore that you wish to have back. Bookstores' back rooms are filled with towers of books and dust bunnies the size of alpacas. There are moldering coffee cups and one aged bookseller reminiscing about the days when books-in-print was in book form. Your book winds up here. You will only get it back with a machete and a six-pack of PBR [Pabst Blue Ribbon]. You must be willing to let your book go.
6. Be a customer at the store. If you would like a bookstore to carry your book, purchase a book there. Better yet, purchase a book the bookseller behind the counter recommends. Ask for that person's name, go find a shelf-talker by that person, walk up to that person and ask to purchase that book. When she is ringing you up, begin (politely) to ask who the book buyer is. Perhaps you can purchase two books. If you can, please do so. The only way a store can carry your book is if they stay in business. The best way ensure this is to spend money at the actual store.
7. If you are doing an event at the store, ask the audience to purchase your book. Say, "Please purchase my book." Follow this up with, "If you don't buy my book, this bookstore will think badly of me and they will not book me for an event again because they have lost money on my event because only about one-third of an audience buys a book and because the bookstore has spent money on advertising, used prime store placement space, spent hours on staffing, and will have to return the books you have not bought, at their expense." No pressure, of course.
8. Thank the booksellers. My agent has told me many times, "No matter where you find your book, it could be in the dustiest darkest corner, go to the booksellers and thank them for carrying your book." She's a wise woman.
9. Never start a sentence with "You should." As in "you should carry my book," or "you should put my book on the front table despite my book being a tome on the African Diaspora and this table being a display of Chronicle stationery and Happy Bunny books." As soon as you start this sentence, booksellers have a list of "you shoulds" that begin playing softly in their minds.
10. Don't treat the booksellers like the help. This might ring a bell. Bookselling is a labor of love. Chances are the person behind the counter is college graduate, he or she could be a chess wiz, a magician, a stand-up comedian, a nearly professional cello player, or a fellow author -- all people I've worked with (except the author, that's me). Booksellers do this job by choice. With the exception of a few CEO's no one is getting rich selling books. Booksellers love books. They love books to their detriment, resulting in small savings accounts, a predilection toward cheap beer, and the risk of one day being buried in their own homes beneath an avalanche of galleys. Think of this person's fate and then think of your book. This is who will take care of your baby. Be kind to that person, and your book will be loved and defended, often fiercely, like a six-pack of PBR.

