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Inroads for the Electronic Slush Pile

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Historically, an unpublished fiction author packages his manuscript in a cardboard box, mails it to one or more book publishers, and waits (and waits and waits) anxiously for a reply. The response is typically months away.

Publishers can take nine to 12 months before they finish the process of reviewing a manuscript, giving copies to the poor saps who read the slush pile submissions, and usually sending a polite rejection letter.

That's all done with paper, even now. But a few forward-thinking publishers are starting to modernize that process, visualizing the electronic slush pile as the tip of the electronic workflow.

Science fiction publisher Baen Books, Bronx, N.Y., now gives authors a choice between paper and electronic submissions. And at least one mystery book publisher, Poisoned Pen Press, is refusing to accept unsolicited submissions on paper.

But the vast majority of publishers maintain a preference for paper. "Screen reading wrecks your eyes, and we're wary of downloading files from strangers," says Bryan Devendorf at literary publisher Soho Press Inc., New York. "To print a deluge of e-submissions would be tedious and quite costly, too, since ink cartridges are going for thirty bucks [each]."

During the slush process, editors are more likely to read manuscripts that arrive on paper, because they feel like an ordinary book. "They're attuned to the feel of paper and the turning of a page," says Mukil Krishna, an industry analyst at consulting firm Frost & Sullivan, Palo Alto, Calif.

However, not every book publisher is giving electronic submissions the cold shoulder. Among the enthusiastic adopters of digital technology: Poisoned Pen Press, Scottsdale, Ariz., which produces 36 mystery titles a year, and has been nominated for two Edgar awards.

Poisoned Pen Press not only requires manuscripts to be submitted in a machine-readable format—they won't accept a printed version. The publisher ends up producing five or six titles of the 30 to 50 manuscripts it receives each year.

That's a relatively high percentage, especially when many publishers won't accept unsolicited manuscripts at all. The company credits their electronic slush pile for its ability to efficiently process manuscripts, and deliver faster-than-usual response time to writers.

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Poisoned Pen Press's electronic slush pile is processed in three stages. The initial readers review only the first three chapters of a slush pile book. Those initial chapters are sent to two or three people, to minimize the impact of a reader who likes or dislikes a certain kind of story.

To accomplish this, the office staff saves the manuscript, usually submitted in a word processing format, as a PDF file. The PDF file is then e-mailed to the readers who are spread across several U.S. states and even a few countries.

"PDF is the easiest format for our readers to cope with," says Robert Rosenwald, publisher and president of Poisoned Pen Press. "We don't have to worry about formatting differences, and we know the readers can read the file no matter what kind of computer they use."

The initial readers' responses are collected. If the initial chapters meet their approval, the publisher might ask the author to electronically submit the rest of the manuscript. Two different readers then review the entire book, this time on paper.

"If the first set of readers like the story, we print out the paper version and send it off to two other readers," Rosenwald says. "They need to read the whole book, and doing that on-screen would be too much."

Assuming the second group of readers likes the entire manuscript, the last hurdle is approval by Poisoned Pen Press's senior editor, Barbara Peters. A high ratio of rejects in the first phase, says Rosenwald, means the only books to see a printed page are those being seriously considered for publication.

It's more common for book authors and their editors to exchange electronic documents once the project is under way.

"The Fiery Cross [published in late 2001] was the first book of mine that the publisher didn't take on paper and do stuff to, but rather asked for and dealt with in electronic form," says best-selling author Diana Gabaldon. "But they did finally get around to that point, and asked for the e-form of Lord John and the Private Matter almost as though it were a matter of course."

But hopeful authors? They still need to pay postage.

– Esther Schindler

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