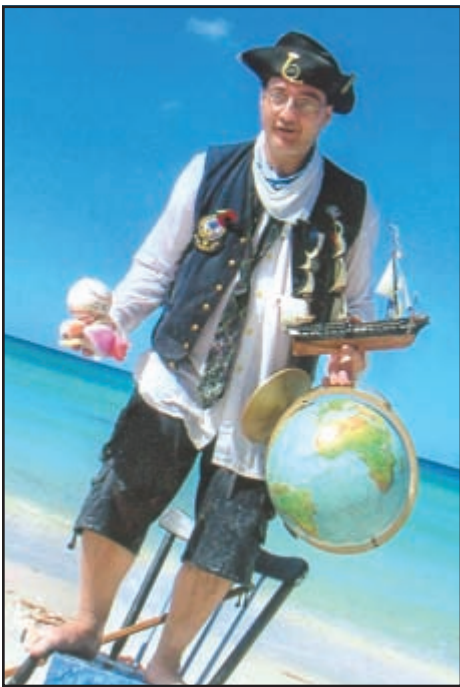


PUBLISHING

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COURTESY PHOTO

Roger Forsythe wrote "A Crucible of Innocence."

literary career I wanted was not that of Stephen King, or anyone who produces popular stuff. I wanted to be the next F. Scott Fitzgerald."

Unfortunately, he has not yet encountered a Maxwell Perkins, the man who worked with Mr. Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway to marshal the writings of each in fabulously fortunate publishing models.

Since Mr. Forsythe's novel is not simply plotted, that might become even more difficult for a modern agent or editor to do. He self-published "Crucible of Innocence" through Outskirts Press and

describes the book this way: "If you take the film a 'A Beautiful Mind,' about mathematician John Nash, and take out the mathematics and replace that with literature, and take out the schizophrenia and replace it with manic depression, that's my story.

"I have my main character do a lot of time travel — in his mind he's responding to conversations in World War I while he's talking to his psychiatrist and others, and they're not aware of each other, and I have him on the Titanic and other places."

The old "write" way

Whatever the goal of writers may be, traditionally they try to convince book agents to sell their works to publishing houses, which buy them, print them, distribute them and market them. Then everybody sits back and hopes the critics will acclaim the books (rambling, gambling, toe-the-line book tours are part of sitting back and hoping, authors say).

In the bear-market world of the book business — ideally, in other words — everybody involved in that long portage across the difficult land between a book's conception and its purchase in great numbers by eager readers becomes either rich, or renowned, or both.

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money," said that 18th century raconteur of literary right thinking, Dr. Samuel Johnson. But that turns out not to be true, or to be only partially true, which is the same thing.

Nowadays, capable writers might or might not apprehend an agent, who might or might not be able to sell a book to a traditional publishing house, which might or might not market the thing successfully, the veteran authors admit. And yet people continue to write.

"I have author friends who have published with publishers, but now they're thinking about self-publishing because it appears to them that manuscripts that would have sold a few years ago are not now being published by the publishing houses," says Mr. Hilliard. "Today, if you're on the marketing end as an author, you're beginning to say, 'Wait a minute, are they going to be able to sell that?'"

Case in point: Mr. Hilliard's longtime agent has been sitting on Mr. Hilliard's novel for a year, one the agent praised in glowing terms. But so far, says the writer, the agent hasn't placed the book. After a year, he figures, prospects begin to dim.

Although Mr. Hilliard has no plans to go into the self-publishing business, he recognizes the allure, he says. Once he and most others would have dismissed self-published books as "vanity" — hence the derivative tag, vanity press — but now he is not willing to do so.

"I feel two ways about self-published

books," he explains. "We don't know anymore whether a particular work is (A): self-published because publishers thought it wasn't good enough; or (B): a good manuscript that should have been published, but because publishers have cut their budgets and production, wasn't published."

And even if publishers get the book out, sometimes they fail on the marketing end, as Mr. Hilliard has discovered more than once.

Ten years ago, he co-authored a book that President Clinton named as one of his favorites, a book *The New York Times* declared as the most radical on the president's list: "Ways of Rancor: Tuning In The Radical Right."

"I remember calling my co-author and saying, 'Mike, we're going to be able to retire,'" recounts Mr. Hilliard. "That particular book was a bestseller for a day or two. It finished in the top 10 or 15 on Amazon.com. But it was a small publisher, and they never followed up with the appropriate advertising, so the book never went anywhere."

Mystery solved

Marty Ambrose was an experienced romantic suspense novelist (Kensington Press was her publisher) when she decided early in this decade to try writing for the genre she calls "cozy mystery."

"It doesn't have graphic violence, it's much more modernized than the traditional Agatha Christie-type mystery, and it's more exciting and humorous," explains Ms. Ambrose, director of the Writing Center and a literature professor at Edison State College in Fort Myers (Ms. Ambrose is married to Florida Weekly contributing photographer Jim McLaughlin).

When she started trying to publish her cozy mystery works six years ago, publishers were still looking for the thriller, she says. "With the economic downturn, however, now they're looking for something lighter."

Last month, the first of the three novels she's written in her Mango Bay mystery series appeared from the mid-size New York publisher, Avalon Books. For "Peril in Paradise: A Mango Bay Mystery," the writer received an advance somewhere in the \$1,000 to \$3,000 range. That's about half what the publisher might have advanced a novelist five years ago, she says, and a great deal less than famous writers may get.

It prints first in hardback, then a year or so later it goes to paperback and foreign distribution, which is where significantly more money might be her reward for the art she produced.

The intervening process to get to this

point, however, was difficult, she says. First, she had to find an agent — and that's not the hard part. In this case, she met a successful representative for several big-name authors at Sleuthfest, a Mystery Writers of America convention in Miami. That happened in 2003, and the agent, Roberta Brown of the Brown Literary Agency, liked the book enough to stick with Ms. Ambrose for many years.

As Ms. Ambrose sees it, this step is essential, since self-published books almost never go anywhere.

"I can understand when people resort to self-publishing, because they are just so frustrated. But my agent told me that even with an agent, your chances of getting a publishing house to buy the book are about one in 100,000."

At Avalon, about 10,000 manuscripts arrive each month, she's been told. Almost all of them are warehoused and never read.

But even with an agent, Ms. Ambrose had to let a very careful, very unhurried editor move the book toward print.

"Faith liked the idea first in August of 2007," says Ms. Ambrose, describing Faith Black, an editor at Avalon Books. "She sent me a revision letter, with no commitment to buy. Of course, you'll sit for five years, but they want it back in two weeks. So I did that."

"Then it was January of 2008, and it went out to readers again — the manuscripts go to outside readers. And in February or March of 2008 she sent a two-page, single-spaced editorial letter, describing things she wanted changed. So I did that and sent it back. They finally bought it, in March of 2008, and it took until March of 2009 to come out — that's how long it takes."

The Avalon editor told Ms. Ambrose that one reason she decided to support the effort was simply because Ms. Ambrose appeared to have no "ego" — if the editor asked for a change, Ms. Ambrose made it without question or resistance.

She considers the editor both hugely talented, and a friend as well as a business partner, she adds.

"It's kind of like a combination between a business relationship and a marriage. She's very professional, but she's also a very kind person, and the book is much, much better because of her editing. That's one thing that self-published books don't get — they don't get the process."

Whether Southwest Florida's writers publish through traditional publishing houses or non-traditional venues, however, they would all agree with a single piece of advice from Ms. Ambrose.

"It's a long haul," she says. "It's very difficult. But if you truly want to write and publish, there's always going to be a way to do it. I don't think you should ever give up." ■

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New in the stacks, with a local connection

Florida Weekly's abbreviated list of books (some by new authors, others by veteran authors) written recently in or about Southwest Florida.

- >> **Works of scholarship**, such as "Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia," by Fort Myers residents Benjamin and Anita Hill (Algora Press, New York, 2008)
- >> **Works that weigh popular culture**, such as "Hollywood Speaks Out: Pictures That Dared To Protest Real World Issues," by Sanibel and Boston resident Robert Hilliard (Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, Hoboken, N.J., and San Francisco, Calif., 2009)
- >> **Works of literary fiction**, such as "Crucible of Innocence (A Poetic Novel)," by Neapolitan Roger Forsythe (Outskirts Press, Denver and Naples, 2009).
- >> **Works of popular fiction** with agents and publishing houses promoting them, such as "Peril in Paradise: A Mango Bay Mystery," by Pine Island resident Marty Ambrose (Avalon Books, New York, 2009).
- >> **Children's books**, such as "Airport Mouse," written in four volumes by Neapolitan Ruth E. Clark and sumptuously illustrated by Phil Jones (Hibiscus Publishing, Naples, 2008)
- >> **Fictional memoirs**, such as "A Bear Called Charlie," also by Neapolitans, the late Isabelle Crane Goldberg and her daughter, Peg Goldberg Longstreth (Gold Mountain Press, Naples, 2008)
- >> **Mystery thrillers**, such as "ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile)" by David Depcik (available at publishers-graphicsbookstore.com)
- >> **Self-help books**, such as "Inheritance Hijackers: Who Wants To Steal Your Inheritance and How To Protect It," by Cape Coral attorney Robert C. Adamski (Ovation Books in cooperation with Sun Book Publishers, Austin, Texas, 2009)
- >> **Inspirational memoirs**, such as "Lifeletter," by Howard Newhard (Xulon Press, a division of Salem Communications, Longwood, Fla., 2008)
- >> **Guidebooks**, such as "Very Washington D.C.: A Celebration of the History and Culture of America's Capital City," written and illustrated by Diana Hollingsworth Gessler, who displays her art at Shaw Gallery in Naples and Bonita Springs (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2009)