

December 13, 2010

## Jeff Herman Interview

### Interview Questions

1. What was it like to be a publicist at Schocken Books, now a Random House imprint? What did you learn from this opportunity?  
**Even though this was 30 years ago, I don't think the tasks have changed. I learned how to orally express a story idea in a way that a producer or reporter would quickly grasp. In the 1980's independent publishing was much more vibrant in New York City than it is now. Each of these small houses had its own history and culture, and it allowed for a greater diversity of books to be published.**
2. What was it like to promote the bestseller: When Bad Things Happen to Good People?  
**Because this was my first real job out of college and that book was my first assignment, I didn't appreciate that it was a special book. I read it over my first weekend and felt humbled by what the author experienced and was intrigued by his conclusions. I grasped that this job was going to allow me to think and communicate about interesting subjects, which made me more than a little nervous. My story pitches were done by phone, and a lot of the media contacts didn't think it was a light mass-market story. They were wrong about the mass-market part; when the author spoke, most people ended up listening and thinking.**
3. How did working for a New York public relations firm help you in your career?  
**I learned to respect the bottom-line; about how to get and possibly retain clients, and the importance of thinking outside the proverbial boxes.**
4. How did you get the idea to write a guide book for writers? Do you research and write the book yourself or do you have help?  
**When I became an agent I looked for a master directory about publishers and editors, but nothing of much use existed so I created it for myself and then decided to publish it for everyone. I resented that publishers prefer to cloak themselves from fledgling writers, and decided that exposure would be to everyone's benefit. The guide has always been a team effort with me as leader.**
5. Does your agency prefer submissions from unknown authors, well known authors, or both? How many submissions do you receive per month?  
**It helps a lot if the writer is known by the community she is writing for, or at least has the ability to make herself known. I don't know precisely, but we receive several hundred unsolicited submissions per-month and many thousands per year, and my experience isn't atypical.**
6. What advice could you give writers on how to approach literary agents?  
**There are suggested protocols but there are no rules. The only thing you can do wrong is to fail to get attention. Of course you must avoid negative attention, like being a nag. The safest approach is the old fashioned query letter pitching your work in a way**

**that's likely to arouse an affirmative response. A risky approach would be something like showing up uninvited and asking to meet the agent. I can't say I like surprise visits, but neither can I say that it can't be effective.**

7. What advice could you give writers who want to become published authors?  
**Know that you can be published and decide that you will be. Everything else will often fall into place, though perhaps not per your preferred schedule or path.**
8. What mistakes do you see writers make when they submit a query letter?  
**They can be any or all of the following: boring; self-defacing; unfocused; negative; resentful; dumb; saying the wrong things.**
9. What mistakes do you see writers make in their writing?  
**It can be any or all of the following: fails to reflect their truth; boring; forced and inorganic; meaningless.**
10. Is it better to be published with a publishing house or is it better to self-publish?  
**With few exceptions, it's still better to follow the traditional route. It provides brand credibility; access to genuine distribution; a team of professionals who will handle all the requisite tasks and print the copies at no cost to the author.**
11. Where do you think the publishing industry will be in five years?  
**Digital products should represent more than 50% of market share. Barnes & Noble will be compelled to sell many book by-products and non-book products. All book stores will have to create compelling reasons why people will still want to visit them. Corporate controlled publishers will lose even more of their independence and be forced to cross-promote the corporation's non-book products, and their lists will become more similar and less interesting. Mom and pop publishing will be reborn to save the American brain.**
12. Anything else you'd like to add?  
**To write what you will equals freedom. To publish what you write might not have anything to do with being free.**

**These questions are from a man who wants to help his young son become published.**

These questions are from a man who's trying to help his young son become a published author.

1. How can you go from being self published to being published and put in Scholastic?  
**Send the self published book to agents who handle its genre.**
2. What are great ways to get publishers interested in your work without having to pay a lot of money out front?  
**Paying any money to a so-called publisher or agent is bogus. See answers above.**

2. If you are small time, what is the secret to making it big as an author?  
**Begin by never referring to yourself as “small-time” until you become “big time”, or you will not be respected.**

### More questions from readers

1. What are your thoughts on self-publishing a book? Yes? No?  
**It's fine if you accept that you won't get store distribution and will have to do and pay for everything by yourself.**
2. What does it take to get noticed by a literary agent? A publicist?  
**Publicist: ability to pay a retainer.**  
**Literary agent: establish the likelihood that the she will earn a decent commission from your work.**
3. Are conferences worth the money?  
**Many are, especially if they don't cost much and are non-profit.**
4. Is social media a good way to meet literary agents, publicists, editors, and anyone else in the publishing industry? Do you use social media to promote you and your work? How is it working for you?  
**It's a proven way to forge valuable relationships and learn important things.**
5. Do you think writers are born or made?  
**They are born to make themselves by serving other people's needs.**
6. What do you think of the fiction and non-fiction that's being written today?  
**The use of language sometimes seems weaker, but a lot of great stories are still being written and unlikely to cease.**
7. Book series such as Twilight and Harry Potter have taken the world by storm. Have you read either series? If so, which did you like better and why? Do you recommend writers write a book series? **Neither series is my cup of tea. If your heart shows you a series, make it happen.**
8. Who is your favorite author and why? **Mark Twain, as he was the first to show me that reading isn't dumb.**
9. What is your favorite genre and why? **General non-fiction, just because it is.**
10. What advice would you give to high school students who want to pursue writing as a career?  
**Volunteer to write bylined articles for school, community and all kinds of local publications.**

11. Is it best to provide illustrations with a children's picture book? Is it necessary? **Only provide them if they're of professional quality. If a publisher likes your text, they will often team you with a professional illustrator they like.**

13. In addition to your guide book, what books would you recommend writers read?  
**I suggest simply browsing the writing category and selecting the books that feel relevant.**