



# The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

Number 37, Fall 2010

## Researching Your Book Idea

You're a writer. You've got this crazy, good idea for a book. You're excited and get half a dozen chapters under your belt. It goes well and more chapters pour out. And then – CRASH! You're 12 months in when a friend tells you that they've just read a book like yours.

Now your eyes are wide-open but teary. Yes, you've learned a lesson the hard way. Writers must always check out book ideas before expending months of energy writing something that has already been published.

Ideally writers do this research before starting work on the book, but if you are preparing an outline and digging into the subject, it's not too late.

Here are some ways to find out if your book has already been written:

- Start with Amazon.com. Use keywords to search their online catalogue for books like yours, whether novels or nonfiction. Make a list of those that might be close.
- Then Google your “keywords +book” and start hunting all the websites displayed. Add titles found to your list
- If your idea is nonfiction, Google “keywords +associations” and see what you turn up. Search databases at the library (with help).
- Then take your list to the library and get the books out or order them using the inter-library loan system.
- Also, consider visiting specialty book stores (e.g. mysteries, cook-books, children's) – their owners can be a mine of information. Ask to see books with similar themes to yours. Order them from your library too.
- Read all the books on your list from cover to cover and make notes on each.

All may not be lost if you find a book similar to yours. For example, if you can find a fresh approach, a better angle, a different audience, or a new setting, your idea may still be saleable. Perhaps, you find a gap that you can expand into, rather than go over the same ground as other titles. If you can't make a shift in the idea that works, at least you haven't wasted months of writing and you've learned a lot about your subject as well.

Always do your due diligence before you undertake a huge project like a book. You won't be sorry—it's time well spent.

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### From the editor's desk

The lead article is a must-read for writers writing their first book or contemplating doing so. Many writers in my workshops are unaware of the necessity to find out if their idea has already been done, so I've offered a few ways on how to do the essential research up-front. I hope they deflect disappointment.

I have also been following the surge in electronic publishing and the growth in ownership of e-readers like Amazon's Kindle. It's been quite astonishing. Publishers are scrambling to get their back lists digitized and are launching their new titles in both print and electronic formats. Self-publishing authors need to follow suit.

I had great plans for the summer. This is my time for writing up a storm as I don't go away till the fall. This year worked out differently. I was going to finish the revisions on my novel – I never opened the file! I was also going to completely redo my website – it's only half done. Instead I experienced a rush of ideas for articles and have been working on them all summer, doing interviews, and trying to sell the pieces. The latter has been a hard slog but worthwhile because I found many new markets. However fees have dropped, which is disheartening, especially since they've never been decent.

Enjoy a productive fall!

**Julie H. Ferguson**

## What Does an Acquisitions Editor Do?

By Joyce Gram, writer and editor

In the summer *Beacon*, I did my best to convince you of the value of hiring a freelance editor to take a dispassionate look at your manuscript to show you what's possible and help you gain perspective on your work. I argued that taking this step might make the difference between having your manuscript looked at by a publisher or tossed into the slush pile. Here, I'm going to tell you what an acquisitions editor does—and if this doesn't convince you, then perhaps nothing will.

Publishing houses acquire books in two main ways: 1) by choosing manuscripts received from agents or authors that have excellent commercial promise; and 2) by seeking out authors to write specific projects that the publishing house has determined will sell. Both jobs fall to the acquisitions editor. She is the first to see a manuscript, and if she doesn't like it—*really like it*—it will go no further. But she must do more than just like it. She must convince her superiors—the publisher and marketing department—to *really like it* as well. She must pitch it down to the last detail: the superior quality of the writing; the manuscript's uniqueness and slant; its suitability for the publisher's booklist; its favourable comparison to other titles in the market; cost to produce; timing of publication; price; expected profit; longevity. She must also assess the author: How well known is he? How many titles has he published? What are his sales? How much marketing experience does he have? Is he cooperative or a pain in the ass? Does he "show" well at media events and book signings, or does he look like he'd rather be hiding in the weeds?

The acquisitions editor's job is riding on all of this. If the titles and authors she promotes do not end up making money for the publishing house, she's gone. So, this is not really about you, the writer; it's about her! If you want to impress her, do everything you can to produce the best you can; and, please, check the publisher's submissions guidelines.

Take a look at this article on being your own acquisitions editor:

<http://www.fonerbooks.com/2005/10/acquisitions-editor-and-publisher.html>

And this is a must: Elizabeth Lyon, *The Sell Your Novel Tool Kit: Everything You Need to Know About Queries, Synopses, Marketing, and Breaking In*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

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[www.gramediting.com](http://www.gramediting.com) and [email@joycegram.com](mailto:email@joycegram.com).

Take Joyce's workshop, *Self-Editing*, at SWS on Saturday, Nov. 6, 1–4 p.m. Details/register at <http://surreywritersschool.com/coursesandregistration.aspx>

## Events for Writers

**Oct 17 – *Get Published on Your First Try!*** Save time, money, and stress: Learn the best publishing options for your book. Renaissance Books, 43-6th Street, New West, 2-4p.m. **Free**. Reserve seat at 604.525.4566. (Debra Purdy Kong and Julie H. Ferguson)

**Oct 20 – *Pitching Travel Articles in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***, Vancouver Public Library, 6:30-8:30p.m. **Free** but sign-up req'd (max 20) at 604.331.3603. (Julie H. Ferguson)

**Nov 19-20 – *Mining Your Memories***, a memoir writing retreat for travel and lifestory writers. Blue Vista Resort, Mayne Island. \$217 incl. meals, but not accommodation and transport. (Sylvia Taylor and Ruth Kozac) P: 604.807.5358

**Surrey Writers' School:** Fall schedule, course details, and registration are available at <http://surreywritersschool.com/coursesandregistration.aspx>.

## Port Moody Writers' Workshop expands again

The popular, multi-genre **Port Moody Writers' Workshop** is expanding to two groups to meet demand

I'm excited because the second group will run in the **evenings** and provides an opportunity for those who are employed or attending college or university to join us.

Ideal for emerging or experienced writers, the groups offer excellent critique of works-in progress, discussions on every aspect of the writing life and publishing, and ongoing support.

**Register at 604.469.4561 for *Creative Writing*** (12 sessions - \$112 inc. HST):

- Mondays, 7-9:30p.m  
Course# [35615](#) (Sep 20-Dec 6)
- Thursdays, 9:30a.m. to noon  
Course# [34983](#) (Sep 23-Dec 9)

Held at Kyle Centre, 125 Kyle St., Port Moody, BC.

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[www.beaconlit.blogspot.com](http://www.beaconlit.blogspot.com)



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