
SOCIAL MEDIA: DOES IT REALLY SELL BOOKS?

It works for big names with large followings. How it works for new names is an open question and a bit of a tease.

Barbara DeMarco Barrett

Most writers I know have a love-hate relationship with social media. I know I do. I love seeing what friends are up to, but I'm often reluctant to do what it takes to post regularly.

When my first book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within*, was published by Harcourt in 2004, I wanted my new website's URL printed on the back cover. My editor, **Andrea Shultz**, wanted to make sure I would keep it up—stay current with blog posts and website updates and such. Social media didn't take off till 2005, so it's not surprising Shultz was skeptical.

When *Palm Springs Noir*, an anthology I edited and contributed to, was published by Akashic last year, my publisher focused its social media launch on Instagram—fortunate for me because Instagram is my favorite of all the venues. Mostly images, few words. One of the anthology's contributors, **Ken Layne**, whose Desert Oracle Instagram page has 12,000 followers, drew the most attention to the book. "Desert Oracle is still one of our top 25 posts for both likes and impressions over the past calendar year," says Akashic publicist **Susannah Lawrence**. "The local publicity and bookstore support were the main drivers, but the social activity certainly didn't hurt." Tip: if you're creating an anthology, it helps if your contributors have thousands of followers.

But all this focus on social media has made me wonder: If you're not a celebrity, will it sell books? No one knows for sure, but one thing everyone agrees on is that it can't hurt to have a social media presence on at least one site.

"I will say about social media the same thing I say about publicity," says book publicist and poet **Kim Dower**. "It's better to do it—to try—than to do nothing. Nothing does nothing." And if your book is largely ignored by reviewers and major media outlets, social media is all you have.

Mark Wish, coeditor/publisher (along with Elizabeth Coffey) of *Coolest American Stories 2022*, says, "Much as I feel social media can be a harmful distraction for writers, I've found it rather valuable because both Facebook and Twitter have

helped generate sales. . . . There's nothing other than social media that could have helped our inaugural volume sell as well as it has so far. That is, sell impressively well as a book of short stories, even compared with books of short stories published by Big Five houses."

Naturally, I'm happy about this because I have a story in the premiere volume, yet success in selling books with the help of social media more often depends on genre. "Because marketing fiction has been eternally challenging," says literary agent **Laurie Fox**, "I personally feel that social media gets the word out faster—and cheaper—than almost anything else. Whether it results in hardcore sales, I don't know. What I do know is that social media continues to feed fans new tidbits about the author's life and therefore grows an ardent fan base."

Fox cites **Joyce Maynard's** lengthy posts on Instagram and Facebook, which offer her followers a peek into her personal life, something her fans enjoy, and repay.

Novelist **Janet Fitch** is another generous writer who clearly enjoys social media and posts on several different platforms, in several different tones. "Facebook skews older and more 'in real life,' and posts will be more personal," says Fitch (*Chimes of a Lost Cathedral*). "On Instagram, followers tend to be younger, former students and readers, and those with a visual sensibility. On Twitter they tend to be other writers and their readers, plus strangers whose interests and ideas overlap with my own. Most important is engagement and not just hawking something. Nobody likes people who only come to the party to sell them something."

Fitch also posts reviews on Goodreads, which she loves doing, and she says she has more followers there "than on all my other social media combined. These are *all readers*. There is an observable relationship between my posting there and the sales of my own books."

She's also an exemplary literary citizen. Every Wednesday at noon Pacific time Fitch hosts "Writing Wednesday" on Facebook, where she answers questions about writing from all comers.

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A publicist at Little, Brown suggested it, and she's been doing it for almost five years, archiving the talks on YouTube afterward.

Debut author **Lisa Cupolo**, a former book publicist for HarperCollins in Toronto, has a short story collection, *Have Mercy on Us*, that will be released by Regal House in January 2023. She's revving up her social media presence in advance of publication and thinking of ways to be a good literary citizen by posting book recommendations.

"I'm lucky to have bookstore events lined up," Cupolo says, "but not sure if that sells books anymore. To engage readers or attract attention seems like an all-hands-on-deck operation, with a lot of outreach, work, and expense. But also, I think it will be a lot of fun and it's not lost on me that I'm very lucky to have a book published at all."

Most writers I've interviewed say the lack of followers hasn't deterred publishers from offering book contracts, yet **Tina Tessina, PhD**, a.k.a. Dr. Romance (*Dr. Romance's Guide to Finding Love Today*)—who writes prescriptive nonfiction and moves books at a steady pace—says she's been turned down by publishers many times for lack of followers. (She currently has 4,100 Facebook friends, 3,663 LinkedIn connections, and 6,400 Twitter followers.) Tessina's latest book contract

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—MELISSA STEPHENSON

came to her via a former editor (now working for a different publisher), who messaged her on LinkedIn to ask if she was interested in writing the book. She was, and whenever she posts on social media, there’s a spike in sales.

Nonfiction author **Richard Polt** (*The Typewriter Revolution*) has been on Instagram for years and posts a picture a day. He has 10,000 followers and says, “It’s hard to know how much impact there is, but I know there is some. For instance, I recently posted a pic of some copies of my book on display at a typewriter shop and said that businesses could order signed copies from me if they wished. This led to three orders, totaling 50 copies.”

Memoirist Melissa Stephenson (*Driven: A White-Knuckled Ride to Heartbreak and Back*) revved up her social media presence before her debut title was published, but she didn’t enjoy it. She also had something thought-provoking to say

about gender expectations, which hit home, since I had just talked to several male authors who said they didn’t do social media, either because they’re old school, it hurts their head, or they’re “a writer,” not a social media maven.

“One other thought I’ve had that may have truth and/or may be unfair,” says Stephenson, “[is that] it seems like women are expected to market themselves—as a persona—in a way I rarely see male writers self-market. The idea is that you sell the persona, not a work of literature, and that you need to do so by writing clickbait essays (where the most intimate parts of yourself are the bait) in hopes of going viral, so that you might eventually write the book you really want to write. Men more often get to play the Cormac McCarthy/Salinger recluse act—selling books by withholding their genius selves from the world, while for women, the road to success equals self-exploitation. For men, it’s quiet and solitude, protected from the gaze of the world. I’m speaking generally (and quickly), but the double standard bothers me.”

TikTok has been mentioned more than once as prime real estate when it comes to book promos that lead to sales, but not in the way you might think. Rather than you having to post your own book trailer or promoting your own book, others rave about your book. The trick is getting your book to those ravers.

Publicist **Megan Beatie** says, “I don’t necessarily think the author herself needs to be posting videos, so my approach has been to reach out to BookTokkers and offer them advance copies of books I’m representing. I try to gauge their tastes based on the books they’re talking about.”

Beatie believes social media sells books when the writer genuinely engages with their followers. “But authors who go on Twitter and just start posting reviews and links about their books—very ‘me, me, me’—that is completely ineffective and will just be ignored.

“I suggest authors lean in to whatever platform they feel most comfortable with. If it’s primarily photo sharing, Instagram is great. Older authors often feel more comfortable with Facebook, and Facebook is a good platform for sharing news of

events and doing them online via Facebook Live. I think Instagram Live is great fun and I even do author chats on my own Instagram.”

Candi Sary has been on Instagram for years, sharing books she’s read, many of which come from suggestions and reviews on Instagram. She appreciates authors who post a variety of books, “not just their own.” Her novel, *Magdalena*, will be published by Regal House in 2023, and she’s hired a publicist for that. “The reason I’m willing to pay a publicist is because they have a better understanding of how media works. While I can create my own small community on Instagram through organic connections, a publicist is someone who can strategically connect me to other platforms, publications, readers, that I wouldn’t otherwise connect with.”

We mustn’t forget about other productive ways to get the word out. Remember newsletters? Literary agent **Vicky Bijur** champions the form. “I have clients who wouldn’t dream of posting on Twitter or Facebook or TikTok,” says Bijur, “but write wonderful newsletters they send to a huge list of names they’ve compiled over the years. There are programs—Mailchimp or Campaign Monitor—that gather email addresses from anyone who visits your website. Almost all the publicists I know think newsletters are a productive form of promotion. You can announce new books or publicity events and provide recipes or share life experiences in such a way that your readers feel connected to you. It’s important to remember that you don’t need to reveal anything agonizingly personal—just be chatty and engaging.

“A writer should also think about the demographics of his or her readership and think about where that readership may spend time online. Does Facebook skew older and TikTok younger? Does the writer have a lot of friends on Twitter? A lot of this is about a writer’s comfort level.

“Anything that builds familiarity with an author’s name is a good thing. And once you have a big enough following, there will be all those people out there with whom you can share important news—a pub date, a great review, a movie deal, a foreign sale, and so forth.”

Novelist **Jacinda Townsend** (*Mother Country*) agrees. “Social media platforms have such different ‘personality space’ that writers should go with the one that most suits their profiles/personalities. Facebook has always felt like more of my demographic, and I like that I can share things other than photos, like news articles or other writing that is relevant to my work.”

Patrick Whitehurst (*Murder & Mayhem in Tucson*) agrees that it’s all about finding the platform you like—for him it’s Instagram—and being consistent. “Posting routinely is important, whether you feel like it or not. One post a day, a week, or whatever you can manage consistently, and taking the time to respond to comments means a lot to the commenter.

“My social media presence has helped raise my visibility as an author and it has sold books. How many? Who knows? For that reason, I spend little time in planning and creating posts. I enjoy ‘real’ posts over staged, overly artistic ones anyway. But as a writer, it’s certainly an important tool. Writing, as always, remains more important. Being noticed by others in the field, and being friendly to readers, is just as important as your social media presence.”

Lynell George (*A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky: The World of Octavia Butler*) finds that Instagram and Facebook—and Tumblr before it faded—have helped her connect to readers who attend her events and buy books. “My editor/publisher definitely wanted me to have that (social media) outlet, but it wasn’t mandatory. What I’m finding, though, when I am part of an event, is that they now collect all your social media handles and expect you to share content/promotion before events.”

Mary Camarillo (*The Lockhart Women*) has both a newsletter and social media presence. “Social media is what I can do, so I’ve tried to make it fun,” says Camarillo, who early on hired a publicist and found it a waste of money. “Hopefully, I’m not annoying people too much. I can’t really tell for sure what the resulting book sales are. I think my Facebook ads bump up my Amazon rankings. I wish I’d created a Facebook author page earlier and started running ads immediately. Having

“I POSTED A TONGUE-IN-CHEEK PICTURE OF A TERRIBLE REVIEW SOMEONE WROTE ABOUT MY BOOK. A LOT OF PEOPLE WERE INTRIGUED BY THE VITRIOL OF THE REVIEW, AND I THINK IT PUT MY BOOK ON THEIR RADAR . . .”
—HALLEY SUTTON

a separate author page is also helpful in keeping some of the shameless self-promotion off my personal page. I know for sure that lowering my e-book price to 99 cents and publicizing the hell out of that sold around 400 e-books.

Novelist **Roslyn Reid** (*The Spiricom*) likes Twitter. “A friend on there was using a template which impressed me, so I asked her if I could use it for my book and she said sure. I filled in the details of my first mystery and tweeted it according to Twitter analytics, which show the heaviest traffic on Tuesdays between 8:00 a.m. [and] 9:00 p.m. (Wednesdays are a close second.) The template seemed to do pretty well for me pre-COVID. After COVID, I used the same template for my new mystery, but it didn’t seem to work as well. Not sure whether it’s the book or the circumstances, although I tend to think it might not be the book because it’s the second in a series.”

There are perks to being on social media besides book sales. **Talia Carner** (*The Third Daughter*), says, “I’ve been active on Facebook for 12 years, over the span of publishing the last three of my five novels. I quickly gathered 10,000 friends, fans, and followers. As a result of my presence, I

have received numerous requests for interviews and write-ups. Also, sometimes organizers of events find it easier to look me up on Facebook than to visit my website to get my email.”

Novelist **Chris Offutt** (*Shifty’s Boys*) concurs. “One thing I’ve learned from other writers: social media has helped them get visiting writer gigs, invitations to festivals and conferences, and invitations to give readings. A positive internet presence will help with literary awards.

“I also see many writers performing within an online persona that differs greatly from their actual personality or their background. Social media offers a mask. Some people take to it like a fish to water. Others, myself included, are more like a rock thrown into a pond: a few ripples, then vanishing into the muck.

“One good element—writers often promote and encourage other people’s books. This helps writers of course. It also serves to communicate one’s status as a ‘good literary citizen.’ I believe it helps build followers, which is possibly beneficial when they get their own book in print.”

It’s hard if not impossible to connect individual social media posts to book sales, but novelist **Halley Sutton** (*The Lady Upstairs*) has had occasion to. “I posted a tongue-in-cheek picture of a *terrible* review someone wrote about my book. A lot of people were intrigued by the vitriol of the review, and I think it put my book on their radar—and readers who are interested in a book called ‘vile’ and ‘sordid’ are probably more my dream readers than whoever wrote the review! I did see a small surge in sales in the week after that post.”

So, all in all, if you enjoy social media, do it. If you don’t, find some other way to stay connected with your fans and potential readers. As for me, I’ve been re-enthused to be a consistent daily poster on Instagram—about hummingbird babies, our cats, sourdough bread, pie, my weavings . . . and writing. See you there? **AG**