

The Theory and Practice of Droplifting

Or why my unpublished novel is for sale in Waterstones

By Winston-11811

So what could I do after I'd spent two years creating [Revelations](#) – a cyber-novel packed with adventure, romance, jokes, brain-busting philosophy, and more cultural cross-references than you can shake a post-modern ironic stick at? Why, get it published, of course. I just had to write a synopsis, attach a couple of sample chapters, send the lot off to some agents and publishers, and then sit back until the six-figure cash advances came rolling in. Easy.

So I did that. Yes, you guessed – all I have received for my trouble is a stack of pre-printed rejection slips. And of course none of the self-appointed guardians of the gates of print would comment on my book, or give the slightest vestige of a hint as to why they didn't want it. At first I was not discouraged. Any number of great writers went through this; starving in garrets while the rejections piled up. And yes, I do realise that it doesn't necessarily work the other way round – it could be that my book is just no good. But I refuse to believe that *Revelations* is any worse than most of the novels already in the bookshops and best-seller lists. After all, you don't have to make too much effort to construct something better than *The Da Vinci Code*. I just had to wait until my manuscript reached someone with a bit of vision, someone prepared to give it a chance.

Yet after a while, as the postman returned yet more of the self-addressed envelopes containing my carefully-crafted prose, a suspicion began to form. Maybe my submission had not been read at all. Maybe once a week the agents and publishers tipped out all the junk that had arrived from aspirant writers and returned it unread. After all, there are plenty of authors already; their new books must be published, even if they are a lazy reread of previous efforts. Then there are the celebrities: books by or about a galaxy of sports stars, supermodels, politicians and popular singers are all in the queue ahead of mine. And after those literary greats there are the friends of all the agents and publishers – their scribblings must get into print, even if they are giant piles of pretentious tosh (*Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, anyone?).

It seems that anyone aspiring to be published must be connected to the cartel of publishers, agents, reviewers and booksellers that make up the whole self-perpetuating books business. And it also appears that this business, apart from being a nice little earner, is dominated by a single, simple rule: *don't ever, ever read a book*. New novels are never to be considered as perfectly-formed works of art, the fruits of talented specialists who have devoted years of anguished effort to crafting stories, characters, ideas and words. No, books are units, product, lines on a spreadsheet, profit centres, objects to be targeted to a particular market sector. Great novels don't arrive through the post – they are promoted at lunches, discussed at soirees over a glass of rather nice white wine, mentioned by a friend of a friend, or commissioned from an existing author. Of course these people won't read my synopsis or my sample chapters – they won't read *anything*.

These suspicions were confirmed by a recent [investigation by the *Sunday Times*](#)¹. They submitted the opening chapters of *In a Free State* by V S Naipaul, winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 2001, and of the Booker Prize winner *Holiday* by Stanley Middleton to twenty top agencies and publishers. Every one of them returned the usual pre-printed polite rejection. Perhaps the most disheartening fact revealed by this story was that supermodel Jordan has been awarded a publishing contract for two novels. In *The Times* on 25 April 2006, children's author John Howard told how he had submitted a reformatted version of the instruction manual for his new washing machine to thirty agents and publishers under the witty title *The Tin Drum*. The first line gripped the reader with "LG's jumbo drum can wash about 40% more load than conventional washing machines". Back came the standard letters – highly-qualified professionals had read and enjoyed the book, but unfortunately did not feel it was worthy of publication.

Okay, so now I know the score. How, then, *do* I get my novel published? There seem to be two choices: join the ever-rolling party and get some connections into the business, or cut them all out of the loop until the great book-buying public is clamouring to get their hands on a copy. I like that second idea better. If I can get people – and I mean the kind of people who buy and read novels, not the luvvies who circulate at book launches – to start talking about *my* novel, then maybe the luvvies will get to hear about it, and suddenly I will have become the latest hip author before the industry has even heard of me. And then they will all be wanting – no, positively demanding – to publish this book that everyone in the know already seems to have read.

So how hard is that? Firstly, I need some books. A local printer is happy to knock out a few hundred, with a nice shiny colour cover, at around £2.50 a copy. Well, this can be tolerated. It's an investment in my future fame. Now I have to get these copies into the hands of the book-buying public. We have all heard of the [Bookcrossing](#)² idea whereby second-hand books are left in public places – on tube seats, park benches, pub tables – and their subsequent adventures then traced via the internet. The only snag with this method from my point of view is that my precious volumes might just lie there, get thrown away, rained on, or just fall into the hands of someone who doesn't actually read all that much. I don't want serendipity; I want people to *decide* to read my book – and to pay for it. In that way they are judging it fairly against other novels, not just seeing it as a free gift which may or may not turn out to be worth a look. So where are book-buying people to be found? In bookshops, of course. If I can place my novel directly into the bookshops then I will have bypassed the whole system.

This is not a new idea. "Droplifting" or "reverse shoplifting" has already been appropriated by [art terrorists](#)³. For example, they have replaced the labels on tinned food with handmade 'designer' versions then returned the tins to the supermarket shelves – simultaneously undertaking a performance art event and advertising the skills of the artists themselves. Then they swapped the voice boxes of talking versions

¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-1965623,00.html>

² <http://www.bookcrossing.com/>

³ <http://www.shopdropping.net/>

of some Barbie and GI Joe dolls, making an effective comment on gender stereotyping. And the [Droplift Project](#)⁴ encourages singers and bands frustrated by the reluctance of the music industry to listen to new talent (now where have I heard *that* story?) to smuggle their demo CDs onto the shelves of record stores. There has even been an [article in *The Times*](#)⁵ about the whole phenomenon. But the method has not been used for books. Until now.

The bookshops to target soon became obvious. Small and specialist shops were unsuitable because the owners and staff would be familiar with their stock – a new contribution would stand out immediately. Station-platform bookshops and the big supermarkets just stock a few best-sellers, so again an interloper would be hard to hide. No, the large chain bookshops were ideal – there are plenty of other volumes among which my contribution can be discreetly placed, and the staff are low-paid, high-turnover units whose interest in the stock is minimal. Just one question remained: what happens when my book is taken to the tills? I had already obtained an ISBN number (it's easy) which in turn got me into the Nielsen book catalogue. To my amazement, I soon found I had an entry on the Amazon website, and on those of other online bookstores like Ottakar's and Blackwell's. They were only too pleased for me to update this entry with further details about the book, and a picture of its cover. Doubtless the computer systems are all interlinked, so that when a new ISBN is issued it makes its way into the databases of these online sellers. To my delight, this also proved to be the case for the bookshop chains I was targeting. After a delay of a couple of weeks, I was able to take my novel to the counter and pay for it in the normal way. The only exception was the US chain that for reasons best known to itself sticks a label with their own barcode on top of the one that's already there. I decided that the effort of making my own sticky labels was too great, so I was left with just three major chains – quite enough for my purpose.

But what about the morality of all this? Well let's look at it. Someone picks up my book in a shop, decides to buy it, takes it to the till and pays. They may or may not enjoy their purchase (although I've done my best...), but that is pretty much the case for any other book they buy. In fact, I'll make my purchasers an offer: if you don't like my book then return it to me and I'll refund the price you paid – how many other authors have that much faith in their own product? Meanwhile, the bookshop has contributed some shelf space, but they get their money. In fact, they get more profit than they would for their 'legitimate' stock because they have not had to buy my books from a wholesaler or publisher. The only loser is me – and I am happy to gain another reader who may begin to spread some word-of-mouth publicity.

“Ah, but,” the luvvies will complain, “supposing *every* aspiring author did this. The bookstores would be full of... well... new books, and err... some of them might not be very good.” So how does that differ from the current situation, exactly? Only in that the filtering mechanism applied by the agent/publisher/bookseller/reviewer cartel is no longer applied. Yes, that very filtering mechanism which ensures that only the highest-quality novels reach today's best-seller lists – real class, such as the truly unique prose of Dan Brown; the clones churned out once a year by Patricia Cornwell,

⁴ <http://www.droplift.org/>

⁵ <http://www.davidrowan.com/2005/08/trendsurfing-reverse-shoplifting-times.html>

Terry Pratchett and the like; and the comfy, simple stories promoted by Richard and Judy. Suddenly it sounds as if it is my duty to the world of literature to raise two fingers to this cosy system before the ever decreasing numbers of agents, publishers and bookshops have merged to the extent that you can only buy bestsellers, which then remain bestsellers because they are the only ones you can buy. And they have the nerve to describe the people who duck out of this lazy, cynical and Philistine system as "vanity publishers". Where did that term come from, I wonder? For I have never encountered people so vain as those who think that being in the book trade in some way makes them cultured, important or interesting.

So how hard is it to get a few copies of my book into a shop? They have store detectives on the lookout for shoplifters, and to them the action of droplifting might not seem not too different. At first I tried bringing the copies in a bag, but getting the books out of this and onto a shelf just seemed too difficult to undertake without someone noticing. It's much easier just to carry the copies into the bookstore. A security guard may be at the door, but he will be looking for people carrying piles of books *out* of the shop. Once inside I don't look at all suspicious – plenty of people are wandering about with a few books in their hand. Now I go to the fiction shelves and place them in a free space, looking for all the world as if I have decided not to buy them after all. Then out of the shop, carrying nothing. And if I ever did get 'caught' then what's the problem – what law have I broken, exactly?

Tables or shelves is the next decision. If I place my books on one of the tables then they will be more easily spotted by customers – and more easily by the bookshop staff, too. But on the shelves they may languish forever. However, experience has now demonstrated that the shelves are the best solution. Publishers actually pay to get their books into more prominent positions, as part of "three for two" promotions and the like. As a result, these areas are more likely to be serviced, and any interlopers removed. Placing my book on the appropriate shelf, in its correct alphabetical position, actually works. I find when I revisit a shop that three or four of the five books I usually leave are still in place, thus demonstrating that the bookshop staff have not spotted them (or have chosen not to remove them) and that one or two have been sold. But sometimes I like to be more provocative. Placing my books into the "staff picks" display (which I sometimes suspect contains corporate picks, judging by the overlap in titles) is particularly satisfying, the little review cards being easy to fake.

So does it all work? Unfortunately there's no real way to tell. My ultimate aim – to create the word-of-mouth publicity that is my ticket to the heady world of book launches, signings, film deals, Richard and Judy, and the rest of the publishing circus has not yet been achieved. And I suspect it never will; I'm not going to be welcomed into the magic circle now. But I know there are plenty of copies of my novel out there in the wild. I've had a few emails from readers – and yes, they liked it. I still have several hundred copies left, and distributing them among London's bookstores is a daily joy. Maybe the whole plan will never work, but at least it's better than sitting at home, dreading the rattle of the letter box in case it augurs the arrival of yet another rejection. So I say to all unpublished authors – try droplifting. It's legal, moral, inexpensive and great fun, but most importantly it places your books directly in front of the people who might want them. And then who knows what may happen...