

My Book Fair Experience: 5 important lessons

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This entry is part 1 of 5 in the series [Buchmesse Experience 2015](#)

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From October 13th until October 18th, the Book Fair in Frankfurt is where you will find many publishing companies (over 7,100) and a good number of literary agents and scouts (about 800) from around the world gathered in one place to do business. I'd like to share with you my book fair experience and some of the important things I learned while there.

The total number of trade professionals is well over 170,000 people from 132 countries, making this book event the largest in the world.

[The fair is also the publishing industry's largest media event of the world](#), with news and other media coverage from nearly 10,000 journalists and 1400 accredited bloggers. (I'm one of them!)

The bulk of the book fair is closed to the general public. The weekend days, Saturday and Sunday, are open to everyone - and that's when it gets really crazy. But if you want to meet with someone for professional reasons (and not merely the shared love of books), then you need to get in during the week.

A bit like Disneyland.

It's still a madhouse, even on those closed days. No kidding, it reminded me of trips to Disneyland as a kid. It's very exciting and busy - everywhere. Every café and bathroom has a line by noontime. And all in

all, it is quite a ride. Books and bookish people are all around.

I must say, I didn't envy [the literary agents](#) who were there. Those guys are in one meeting after the next, back-to-back. They do get smoke breaks, and I could easily spot those who were agents quickly trying to relax before their next pitch.

As a writer attending the fair to pitch just 9 manuscripts (7 of my own and 2 others from my students), I was absolutely exhausted by the end of the day. I can't even imagine what an agent must do while there!

It's just so much to hold straight in your mind, because you need to [know your pitch](#) (backwards and forwards and on your head) for each project and you need to know which publishers would be interested in which particular project – and why (because that's also part of your pitch).

So much to learn!

In 2015, in attending the book fair, I learned some really interesting and somewhat surprising things about current trends in the publishing world. I experienced an incredible amount – so much, that I needed to take breaks every so often to scribble down notes.

I knew that if I didn't, I'd forget the details. It was all just so much to take in. So over the next several weeks, I'm going to be writing about what happened and what I learned. Yes – it's really that much.

Here's my list of the big lessons about market trends this year - what you can just grab and take-away with you in a few short minutes.

The Big Five, 2015.

1. Being there is better than research.

I've said many times that if you want to be a writer, [surround yourself with people in the writing business](#). This really key point is magnified perhaps tenfold with this kind of experience.

I spend considerable time (read: daily) researching publishers, reading and [studying storybooks](#), keeping myself up-to-date on what stories are on the market, and who is creating them and with whom (publishers, agents, etc.). Being at the fair this year, one of the things that really struck me was how differently a publisher's actual mission will appear when you're standing right in front of them.

We can go online, or go to the library or local bookshop and get a pretty good idea of what a particular publisher is about. It's research. But standing in front of [an Editor](#) or a Rights Manager while they sit surrounded by their latest products – those books that aren't yet on the market – that really shows you, in a few short seconds, what that publisher is really about.

You pick-up on the finer details that aren't mentioned anywhere on their website or in any book. It's the reality of their day-to-day decisions being brought all together in one tight space.

There is no comparison, the vast difference in the kind of understanding you can get. The expressed mission of a publisher isn't always in line with their actual mission, and that's something you can see very plainly at a book fair.

I walked up to one publisher's stand, one that I was curious about but not intending to pitch to (just wanted to chat and learn something, really), only to discover a giant larger-than-life Teletubbies display. (Studies have shown that Teletubbies stunts the language development of children who watch it.)

I knew immediately that I needn't bother discussing the educational value of great books – or anything else important to me as a mother, teacher and human being. I kept walking. Carrying Teletubbies, while loathsome, wouldn't be enough for me to shrug them off. But a picture of one that stands twice my size? That shows me how much importance that product is getting, and *that priority* more than anything tells me they make decisions I could not make.

Don't forget: it isn't just that the writer's work needs to be good enough for the publisher. The publisher should also be a good fit for the writer. Otherwise, there will almost certainly be problems down the road. So if you [decide to pursue traditional publishing](#), be picky.

2. Self-publishing is part of the publishing house business model.

The influence of [self-publishing services](#) and the ability of a single person to fully control their manuscript (from first draft to final, market-ready product) is fully accepted by the publishing houses.

Many large publishers now provide publishing services for indie writers or are about to do so. This is now part of their business, so that the house doesn't just produce and/or distribute for smaller publishers, they also fulfill Print On Demand services and customer support for individuals.

3. Self-publishing has affected a writer's need for an agent.

A few years ago, not having an agent was considered acceptable, especially for writers of illustrated storybooks. Publishers would, for the most part (not all, but most), accept manuscripts from writers, not just their agents. This year, in talking to many publishers at the fair, I learned that this is really no longer true (for the most part).

Because of the popularity of self-publishing, the idea is that if you want to be published traditionally and to a worldwide market (where your work is professionally translated), then you must have an agent. Publishers are contacted by perhaps a hundred or more agents about manuscripts on a daily basis. If you don't have an agent, your chances of being glanced at are severely reduced.

4. Storybook writers are expected to have agents now.

A few years ago, the word on the street was that illustrated storybook writers don't need agents. In fact, five years ago two different agents told me that it would be best if I *didn't bother* to get one. (I have an agent to represent my screenplays, but not my storybooks... *yet*. Trust me, that's about to change!) As it was explained to me at that time, there just wasn't enough money in books for kids.

This trend has flipped around completely. Now: if you write stories for kids, you *especially* need an agent.

There's a huge demand for it on the market, so that's where the money is. This market trend is here in full force in large part due to all the stuff that comes with or follows a successful storybook: merchandise (toys, games, etc.) and film rights. To make those licensing deals and translated rights, you absolutely need an agent. So the professional expectation today is that if you want your story to be distributed on that scale, an agent is a prerequisite.

To be clear, there's no reason an individual couldn't launch their own publishing company (not by using Create Space or a similar retail outlet, but hiring a printing company, hiring translators, and partnering with a distributor and merchandiser, etc.). But this is for most people a very expensive self-publishing option - certainly an all-consuming one. And yes, I did meet some people at the fair who have done this!

5. Some publishers, despite these trends, are still interested in submissions from writers.

YAY! There are a handful of really good publishers who do, and they tend to be small or medium-sized publishing houses that are well funded by previous (and continuous) market successes. Over the next several weeks, I'll be covering these publishers in some depth, so check back here for that - or just sign up for my newsletter and I'll send it right to your inbox.

There's so much to share, it's a little overwhelming, really. But I'll do my best! I promise.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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