
Business & Reports

Reading the Numbers: What Authors Can Take From the 2012 Publishers' Report Card

BY JAMES GRAINGER



It's been five years since The Writers' Union of Canada commissioned and published its last Publishers' Report Card, but it seems that, at least in the world of Canadian publishing, the more things change the more they stay the same.

A total of 558 respondents (an 85% increase from 2007) completed TWUC's 47-question survey about their experiences with Canadian publishers, and as in previous surveys, the most common complaint concerned marketing and promotion.

Only 44% of authors felt that their publisher did a satisfactory job of promoting and marketing their work, and though that number is up from 36% in 2007, the increase is likely due to an overall lowering of expectations. In other words, it's harder for authors to be disappointed when they expect so little of their publishers' efforts to get books into the hands of the media and consumers.

Parsing the Numbers

The survey asked authors to rate their publishers on a scale of one to five (with five being the highest mark) in several categories, including contract negotiation, editing, book layout and design, and communications.

Individual publishers who scored the highest rankings include Groundwood Books, with a perfect score of 5 in every category, Freehand Books (average score of 4.96), and Random House Canada (4.93) close behind. Pedlar Press (4.72), Goose Lane Editions (4.66), and Gaspereau Press (4.58) also scored high marks from authors. Simply Read Books scored the lowest rating (2.08), with Tightrope Books (2.95) and Lorimer & Company (2.99) rounding

out the bottom three. (Note: Only publishers that were rated by four or more respondents were tabulated.)

The categories that scored highest with respondents were editing, with an average rating of 4.4, and book layout and design, at an average of 4.6. Marketing and promotion finished at the bottom with an average rating of 3.3, or barely a C+.

In spite of this and a few other areas of concern, about 80.4% of respondents said that they would work with their publisher again, with approximately 67% saying they would recommend their publisher to another author.

Marketing and Promotion

The survey also allowed Union members to include personal comments on areas they felt strongly about. Not surprisingly, the Marketing and Promotion category received several such comments. One respondent bluntly summed up their experience with several publishers' marketing efforts: "You will be responsible for your own marketing, no matter what the publisher promises at the time you sign your contract." Another respondent wrote, "Publicity is pretty minimal for about six weeks after publication."

In one case, the limited resources of smaller publishing houses was actually seen as a bonus: "Recognize that it's a small press and will not offer big advances or generous terms, but the staff are dedicated book-lovers [who] will do their very best to push your book out into the world." George Murray, a poet who was interviewed about the survey findings, said that he's happy with the efforts of his current publisher, ECW. "They've done more for me than any other press, including a very large publisher, McClelland & Stewart, with whom I published two collections. I'd rather be respected at a small press than forgotten at a big one."

So what should authors expect in regards to marketing and promoting? Murray, who is also the former publisher of the popular Book Ninja site, provided a handy checklist for his fellow

TWUC members: “Submission to major awards, advance reading copies and books for reviewers, mailouts to festivals and series as necessary, as much travel as the press can afford, assistance organizing a publicity plan, and follow-up calls to media outlets.”

Ebooks and Digital Rights

This was the first TWUC survey to collect information on ebook rights and royalties (74% of respondents had an ebook clause in their contract between 2008 and 2012). The responses reveal a wild variance in royalty rates, with many authors expressing regrets over agreeing to what they perceive as a low rate for their ebooks. The figures seem to back them up. Although royalty rates varied from 1 to 85%, only 19% of respondents received royalty rates of 50% or better, with 39% receiving 25% and 30% receiving lower than 30%.

Marilyn Simonds, the Chair of TWUC, attributes the variance in ebook royalty rates to industry uncertainty about this emerging sales delivery model. “Some of the smaller publishers don’t really know what the ebook world is going to be like moving forward, which may explain why their rates are both too low or too high,” Simonds says. “A big house will likely have boilerplate contracts and ebook royalty rates that come down to them from head office.”

Chris Bucci, an agent and partner at Anne McDermid & Associates, advises authors to demand a minimum ebook royalty rate of 25%. “Most big publishers contracts state that the rate is 25%,” Bucci says, “unless the industry standard changes within the next two years, at which point they can re-negotiate to the industry standard.”

Advances and Contracts

Perhaps most distressing was that the median level of author advances for both agented and non-agented book contracts was largely stagnant or lower than in 2007, especially in the upper ranges (from about \$9,000-\$90,000). The numbers are clear: publishers are being far more cautious with advances.

Bucci attributes the trend to flat-lining sales figures across the industry, especially since the 2008 downturn, and the perception within publishing houses that they were too generous with

advances in the past. “They feel they were overpaying on far too many titles and need to get advances back in line with what they can expect to make back,” Bucci says. He also cites fears in the industry that, as the market moves increasingly toward ebooks, the low cover price of digital copies will eat into publishers profits on hard covers and paperbacks.

Respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with their royalty statements, with only 36% strongly agreeing with the statement, “The royalty statements were clear and understandable to me.” The timeliness of royalty payments was another thorny issue. Simonds reminds authors who are waiting on royalties that it’s okay to be vocal with their publishers. “Authors should send their publishers a notice saying that overdue royalties will be charged interest. You can do that — charge 2% per month, every month, until you’re paid.” She also says that publishers should be able to explain the specifics of a royalty statement to any author who asks.

The Value of Self-Education and Complaining

Simonds advises members to educate themselves as much as they can about business issues, and to seek help from experts such as agents and lawyers for issues they don’t feel they can do alone. That includes using the resources available from TWUC, including the *Help Yourself to a Better Contract* publication and their *Bill of E-Rights*, which lists all the rights you should have in your contract.

Simonds also stresses the value of old-fashioned complaining. “If authors are as unhappy about some issues as this Report Card shows,” she says, “then the Union’s grievance committee should be inundated with complaints. It’s only through author complaints that we know which publishers are not being compliant. We can work with those publishers, but only if we know who they are.”

The Union can also influence non-compliant publishers at the funding level. “The agencies that fund many publishers rely on us to tell them if royalty payments aren’t happening. So by complaining, you’re not only doing yourself some good, you’ll be doing other writers good because it’s our way to help the industry, both through ourselves and through our relationships with funding agencies.”

PUBLISHERS REPORT CARD RESULTS

for publishers with four or more responses

| Publishing Houses | No. of responses | Contract Negotiation | Editing | Book Layout & Design | Marketing & Promotion | Payment Practices | Communications | Average Score | Would work w/ publisher again (% yes) | Recommend Publisher (% yes) |
|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Groundwood Books Ltd. | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5.00 | 100 | 100 |
| Freehand Books | 4 | 5 | 4.75 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4.96 | 100 | 100 |
| Random House Canada | 4 | 4.75 | 5 | 5 | 4.75 | 5 | 5 | 4.92 | 100 | 100 |
| Pedlar Press | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 3.33 | 5 | 5 | 4.72 | 100 | 100 |
| Goose Lane Editions | 6 | 4.67 | 5 | 5 | 3.67 | 4.6 | 5 | 4.66 | 100 | 100 |
| Gaspereau Press | 4 | 5 | 4.75 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 4.75 | 4.58 | 50 | 50 |
| Ronsdale Press | 6 | 4.6 | 4.67 | 4.5 | 3.67 | 5 | 4.67 | 4.52 | 100 | 100 |
| Great Plains Publications | 4 | 4.75 | 5 | 4.25 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4.50 | 100 | 100 |
| Thomas Allen | 6 | 4.4 | 5 | 4.83 | 3.83 | 4.6 | 4.2 | 4.48 | 60 | 60 |
| Arsenal Pulp Press | 4 | 2.5 | 5 | 5 | 4.75 | 4.5 | 5 | 4.46 | 100 | 100 |
| Caitlin | 9 | 4.63 | 4.75 | 4.44 | 4 | 4.25 | 4.67 | 4.46 | 100 | 89 |
| Mother Tongue Press | 4 | 4.25 | 4.67 | 5 | 5 | 3.5 | 4.25 | 4.45 | 75 | 75 |
| Annick | 10 | 4.6 | 4.5 | 4.89 | 3.29 | 4.5 | 4.67 | 4.41 | 85.7 | 75 |
| Scholastic | 13 | 4.31 | 4.83 | 4.6 | 3.82 | 4.3 | 4.55 | 4.40 | 100 | 80 |
| McClelland & Stewart | 6 | 4 | 4.83 | 4.5 | 4 | 4.83 | 4.17 | 4.39 | 80 | 67 |
| Brindle & Glass | 6 | 4.67 | 5 | 5 | 3.5 | 3.67 | 4.4 | 4.37 | 80 | 60 |
| HarperCollins Canada | 12 | 4 | 4.36 | 4.8 | 3.7 | 4.5 | 4.7 | 4.34 | 91 | 64 |
| Penguin Canada | 12 | 4.73 | 4.91 | 4.64 | 3 | 4.5 | 4.25 | 4.34 | 82 | 55 |
| Signature Editions | 5 | 3.8 | 4.6 | 4.4 | 4.4 | 4.33 | 4.4 | 4.32 | 100 | 75 |
| Doubleday | 15 | 4.17 | 4.31 | 4.83 | 3.73 | 4.6 | 4.25 | 4.32 | 100 | 83 |
| Kids Can Press | 8 | 4 | 4.57 | 4.86 | 3.14 | 4.57 | 4.71 | 4.31 | 100 | 86 |
| Douglas & McIntyre | 7 | 4.83 | 5 | 4.8 | 3 | 3 | 4.86 | 4.25 | 80 | 80 |
| Guernica Editions Inc | 6 | 4.17 | 3.67 | 5 | 2.5 | 5 | 5 | 4.22 | 100 | 100 |
| Inanna Publications | 5 | 4.4 | 4 | 5 | 2.5 | 4.67 | 4.6 | 4.20 | 100 | 60 |
| Quattro Books | 6 | 4.33 | 4.83 | 4.5 | 3.17 | 3.67 | 4.5 | 4.17 | 100 | 50 |
| Biblioasis | 5 | 3.75 | 4.75 | 4.75 | 4.25 | 3 | 4.25 | 4.13 | 100 | 100 |
| Coteau | 4 | 3.5 | 4.75 | 4.25 | 3.75 | 4.25 | 4.25 | 4.13 | 100 | 75 |
| Turnstone Press | 5 | 4 | 4.8 | 5 | 2.8 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 4.07 | 75 | 50 |
| Nimbus Publishing | 4 | 4.33 | 4.75 | 4.5 | 2 | 4.5 | 4.25 | 4.06 | 75 | 75 |
| Tundra Inc. | 6 | 3.83 | 4.17 | 4.2 | 3.25 | 4.25 | 4.6 | 4.05 | 100 | 80 |
| McGill Queens | 7 | 3.5 | 4.29 | 4.71 | 3.33 | 3.8 | 4.33 | 3.99 | 67 | 50 |
| Second Story Press | 7 | 3.4 | 3.33 | 5 | 3.67 | 4 | 4.5 | 3.98 | 100 | 60 |
| Nightwood Editions | 4 | 3.33 | 4 | 4.25 | 3.75 | 3.5 | 4.75 | 3.93 | 75 | 50 |
| Firefly | 5 | 4 | 4.75 | 4.8 | 3.4 | 3 | 3.6 | 3.93 | 80 | 60 |
| Black Moss | 4 | 4.75 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 4.5 | 3.88 | 100 | 100 |
| Hagios Press | 4 | 4 | 4.33 | 5 | 3 | 3.33 | 3.33 | 3.83 | 75 | 0 |
| Cormorant Books | 16 | 4 | 4.43 | 4.71 | 3.15 | 3.09 | 3.38 | 3.79 | 64 | 38 |
| Fitzhenry & Whiteside | 12 | 4.2 | 4.75 | 4.33 | 2.7 | 3.36 | 3.36 | 3.78 | 73 | 46 |
| NeWest Press | 8 | 4.33 | 3.75 | 4.14 | 2.75 | 3.5 | 3.88 | 3.73 | 75 | 50 |
| Libros Libertad | 4 | 4.33 | 3 | 3.75 | 2.5 | 4.33 | 4.33 | 3.71 | 100 | 33 |
| Oolichan Book Publishers Inc. | 8 | 4.38 | 3.86 | 4.86 | 2.71 | 3 | 3.43 | 3.71 | 83 | 43 |
| ThistleDown Press | 9 | 4.25 | 3.63 | 3.88 | 2.38 | 3.5 | 3.89 | 3.59 | 78 | 44 |
| Dundurn | 36 | 3.44 | 3.71 | 4.33 | 2.37 | 3.61 | 3.75 | 3.54 | 71 | 53 |
| Lorimer & Company | 13 | 2.75 | 3.38 | 4 | 1.58 | 3 | 3.23 | 2.99 | 42 | 25 |
| Tightrope Books | 4 | 2.67 | 4.67 | 4.75 | 2.5 | 1.75 | 1.33 | 2.95 | 0 | 0 |
| Simply Read Books | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1.5 | 2.08 | 0 | 0 |
| Average | | 4.12 | 4.44 | 4.65 | 3.27 | 4.00 | 4.24 | 4.12 | 82.97 | 66.11 |

NOTES:

All questions were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the most positive response.

All responses used above were taken from the following summary questions in each section:

Overall, I think my contract was fair.

Overall, the editing was satisfactory.

Overall, I was satisfied with the design of the book i.e. the layouts, typefaces, style, and illustration.

Overall, payment for my work was fair and followed the terms of my contract.

Overall, they treated me with respect and in a professional manner.

These results only include publishers who received 4 or more responses.

ADVANCES for publishers with four or more responses

| Publisher | No. of responses | Negotiated by agent | 0 | up to \$499 | \$500 to \$999 | \$1,000 to \$4,999 | \$5,000 to \$9,999 | \$10,000 to \$24,999 | \$25,000 to \$49,999 | \$50,000 to \$99,999 | \$100,000 + |
|-------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|---|-------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Annick Press | 10 | 2 | | | | 6 | 2 | | | | |
| Arsenal Pulp Press | 4 | 0 | | | | 3 | | 1 | | | |
| Biblioasis | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | | 2 | | | | | |
| Black Moss | 4 | 0 | 4 | | | | | | | | |
| Brindle & Glass | 5 | 2 | 2 | | 3 | | | | | | |
| Caitlin Press | 9 | 1 | 8 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Cormorant Books | 16 | 4 | | | | 12 | 3 | | | | |
| Coteau Press | 4 | 0 | 4 | | | | | | | | |
| Doubleday | 15 | 10 | | | | | | 1 | 7 | 1 | 2 |
| Douglas & McIntyre | 7 | 2 | | | | 1 | 1 | | 4 | | |
| Dundurn | 36 | 5 | 2 | | 6 | 24 | | | | | |
| Firefly | 5 | 1 | | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | | |
| Fitzhenry & Whiteside | 12 | 0 | | | | 10 | 1 | | | | |
| Freehand Books | 4 | 1 | | | | 4 | | | | | |
| Gaspereau Press | 4 | 0 | | 3 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Goose Lane Editions | 6 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | 4 | | | | | |
| Great Plains Publications | 4 | 0 | | | | 3 | | | | | |
| Groundwood Books Ltd. | 4 | 0 | | | | | 2 | 1 | | | |
| Guernica Editions Inc | 6 | 0 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Hagios Press | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| HarperCollins Canada | 12 | 10 | | | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Inanna Publications | 5 | 1 | 5 | | | | | | | | |
| Kids Can Press | 8 | 1 | | | | 5 | 2 | | | | |
| Libros Libertad | 4 | 0 | 3 | | | | | | | | |
| Lorimer & Company | 13 | 1 | | | 1 | 11 | 1 | | | | |
| McClelland & Stewart | 6 | 4 | | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| McGill Queens | 7 | 0 | 3 | | | 3 | | | | | |
| Mother Tongue Press | 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | | | | |
| NeWest Press | 8 | | | 4 | 4 | | | | | | |
| Nightwood Editions | 4 | 0 | 1 | 3 | | | | | | | |
| Nimbus Publishing | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | | | | |
| Oolichan Book Publishers Inc. | 8 | 1 | | | 7 | | | | | | |
| Pedlar Press | 4 | 0 | | 4 | | | | | | | |
| Penguin Canada | 12 | 10 | 1 | | | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Quattro Books | 6 | 1 | | 4 | 2 | | | | | | |
| Random House Canada | 4 | 4 | | | | | | 2 | 2 | | |
| Ronsdale Press | 6 | 1 | 6 | | | | | | | | |
| Scholastic | 13 | 4 | | 1 | | 4 | 3 | 1 | | | 1 |
| Second Story | 7 | | | | 1 | 4 | | | | | |
| Signature Editions | 5 | 1 | | 3 | 1 | 1 | | | | | |
| Simply Read Books | 4 | 0 | | | | 3 | | | | | |
| Tightrope Books | 4 | | 1 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| Thistledown Press | 9 | 1 | 7 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| Thomas Allen | 6 | 3 | | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | | |
| Tundra Inc. | 6 | | | | | 3 | 2 | | | | |
| Turnstone Press | 5 | | | 2 | 2 | | | | | | |

CONTRACTS NEGOTIATED BY AUTHOR OR AGENT

Average Advance was calculated using the middle value of each range for calculations.

| | 2007 | | 2012 | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| | Author | Agent | Author | Agent |
| Total respondents | 226 | 66 | 428 | 101 |
| Contract Negotiation | 4.15 | 4.42 | 4.09 | 4.24 |
| Editing | 4.17 | 4.58 | 4.34 | 4.46 |
| Book Layout and Design | 4.26 | 4.43 | 4.53 | 4.64 |
| Marketing | 3.01 | 3.24 | 3.14 | 3.51 |
| Payment Practices | 3.43 | 4.1 | 3.83 | 4.34 |
| Communication | 4.13 | 4.26 | 4.16 | 4.28 |
| Average | 3.86 | 4.17 | 4.02 | 4.25 |
| Would work with this publisher again (% yes) | 73.5 | 83.3 | 79.8 | 85.7 |
| Range of Advance | | | | |
| \$0 | 61 | 0 | 114 | 4 |
| up to \$499 | 24 | 2 | 58 | 1 |
| \$500 to \$999 | 37 | 2 | 39 | 6 |
| \$1,000 to \$4,999 | 69 | 14 | 125 | 24 |
| \$5,000 to \$9,999 | 19 | 8 | 22 | 13 |
| \$10,000 to \$24,999 | 7 | 12 | 6 | 16 |
| \$25,000 to \$49,999 | 4 | 15 | 4 | 15 |
| \$50,000 to \$99,999 | 0 | 11 | 1 | 4 |
| \$100,000 + | 1 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Not stated | 6 | 4 | 57 | 12 |
| Average Advance | \$3,792 | \$28,886 | \$2,849 | \$21,581 |
| Median Advance | \$500 to \$999 | \$10,000 to \$24,999 | \$500 to \$999 | \$5,000 to \$9,999 |

Dear Fellow Authors,

The information contained in the Publishers Report Card is important for all of us authors in order to educate ourselves about the best way to proceed to get our books published. It helps us decide whether to act as our own agent, use a lawyer, hire an agent to increase our chances of getting a better advance, and to check out the publicity plans for each of the publishers.

As Chair of the Grievance Committee these past many years, my Committee hears about very serious complaints about publishers and agents from authors. Some of the complaints we are able to assist with, while our attempts with other publishers meet with resistance or no contact at all.

Authors should know that we ask them to fill in a form with their complaint in order for the Committee to be clear about

the grievance and also what the authors wants us to do for them. This is available from the Writers' Union. We also developed a policy of mentioning in *Write* magazine a list of the publishers who continue to not respond to the Committee's calls or letters after being contacted a minimum of three times.

I have enjoyed my association with the other Union members throughout several President's regimes. Because of ill health I have resigned as Chair of the Writers' Union Grievance Committee, but leave with many happy memories.

I wish to thank Valerie Laws of the Writers' Union for her excellent review of the results of the Publishers Report Card findings for 2012. She did this task for me during my recent serious illness.

Best wishes,
Dr. Barbara Killinger