



WRITE

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UNION OF
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Writer's Blot

CONTRACTS /

Keep Your Options Open

BY SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA



A few years ago, I was chatting with a colleague who mentioned their publisher had acquired all their rights, including film rights, when they signed a book contract. I told them this was a gross overreach, that writers should hang on to as many rights as possible, and that they should never surrender film and TV rights to a publisher.

This writer didn't think there was much chance their book would be of interest to producers and shrugged the potential loss away. But the truth is adaptations are not limited to new titles or bestsellers.

We are in a boom era for adaptations thanks in large part to streaming services. Book scouts and producers are constantly on the lookout for material and willing to offer an option. Options give a producer the exclusive rights to your work for a fee during a predetermined length of time, in the hope of developing a project for the screen.

Why do options exist? A producer needs time to obtain financing for a movie, and while they're doing this, they need the security that a competing producer isn't running around town trying to adapt the same book.

The industry standard for an option is 18 months (though 12-month options are also common) and can be renewed — which means the producer must again pay a fee to hold the rights for a few months more. These renewals can span many years: I've heard of some options being renewed over half a dozen times.

The clock on an option should start running when the deal closes, and not when the paperwork is signed. For example, if

both parties agreed to terms on January 1, 2022 for a 12-month option, then the option should expire on January 1, 2023, even if all the paperwork didn't come back until April 2022. This is especially important with smaller parties, where the contracts department might be slower, and people might not be able to read and countersign documents so quickly. In the above example, this makes the difference between getting a renewal check in January or waiting until April.

If everything goes well and a producer manages to fund a project, a writer will receive a payment called the purchase price, which is larger than the option. For example, an option might be \$50,000 (initial option fee, applicable against the purchase price), with a renewal or extension at the same rate (\$50,000, not applicable against the purchase price) and a purchase price of \$250,000 (less the initial option fee).

Option fees vary considerably. Canadian companies are thriftier than those with Hollywood funding, and streaming services have more money to burn than independent producers. There are also shopping agreements, which are basically options without any money up front.

An agent I chatted with for this piece, who spoke on background, only recommends shopping agreements in rare circumstances — essentially when the option would be extremely low. In those cases, long negotiations over \$2,000 deals could be a waste of time and a shopping agreement, which is shorter than most options (six months, for example), might be more practical.

In general, though, you should be wary of shopping agreements. Because most projects never get off the ground, the only money a writer might ever see would be that initial option (in my previous example the \$50,000). There is a big difference between getting that one-time fee and getting nothing!

When you're approached about an option, consider not only



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the monetary offer but the credentials and vision of the producer. Producers who are interested in a writer's work will be willing to have a chat to discuss the project and answer questions. If a book is in high demand, these meetings may be more like speed dates, with multiple conversations and offers. But even if there is only one party interested in a book, it's important to have a chat.

Iain Reid, author of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, which was adapted into a movie by Netflix, says writers shouldn't feel pressured or rushed to strike a deal. "There are many potential pitfalls, so I've always found it helpful to seek advice when possible. It's important to ask a lot of questions and to take your time," he says.

Authors in demand often have a film agent in addition to their literary agent. Some large literary agencies play double duty, with agents on staff that can also tackle film deals. But, barring that, a literary agent can provide advice on options. How-to books, articles, and even online forums can help fill any gaps.

The process from book to screen is long and fraught. Options often lapse, which means they're not renewed and a project never reaches completion. Although this may seem like a tragedy, down the road a book might be optioned again, yielding another paycheck.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the bestselling author of Velvet Was the Night, Mexican Gothic, Gods of Jade and Shadow, and many other books. She has won the Locus and British Fantasy awards for her work as a novelist, and the World Fantasy Award as an editor. Her books have been optioned by several producers, both big and small.

COMIC BY SCOT RITCHIE





Baking the Blueberries into the Muffin

BY LAURA BRADY

Accessibility isn't an add-on.

Let's say you're asked to bring blueberry muffins to a party. But you forget about the blueberries and just make plain muffins. On the way to the party, you try to force blueberries into the muffins, poking holes into them by various means, making a bit of a mess. You tidy it up as best you can and present the muffins to your host, who smiles reluctantly and puts them at the back of the table, partially hidden.

I guess they are technically blueberry muffins. But are they good blueberry muffins? Or poor imitations?

Now imagine you're starting a publishing project and asked to address accessibility concerns as you go. You read the brief, think you understand it, but mostly ignore the gnarly accessibility part until 90 percent of the way through. That's when you panic and try to jam a few buzzwords into the project in a hasty attempt to catch up on that task — a task that suddenly feels not just like a lot of work, but work that is slightly outside of your ken. You're not evil, you didn't intend for this to go pear-shaped as you try to jam accessibility into the project. You have good intentions.

I have some news: The best intentions won't erase the fact that you've contributed to a lousy reading experience for print-

disabled readers.

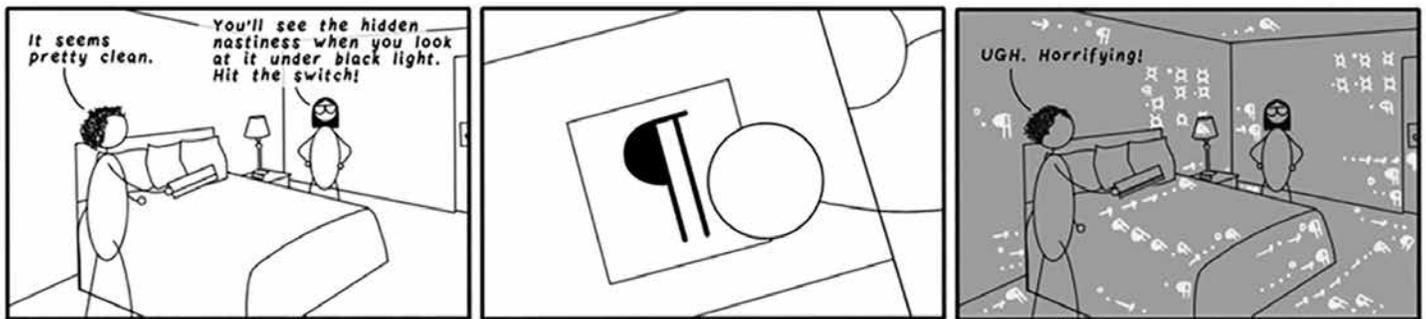
Everyone in the publishing chain has a role to play in making accessible books. Creators, publishers, and even consumers can do the work and insist on a culture of inclusivity in the writing and reading world. We can all contribute to increasing accessibility. It isn't something best left to experts. And when we are all thinking about and contributing to inclusive publishing, the outcomes are far better.

What does it mean to roll accessibility considerations into a writer's work? I would sum it up like this:

- Be aware of what the print-disabled reading experience looks, sounds, and feels like;
- Put that newfound knowledge into practice in your own writing;
- Ask questions of your publishers to understand how they are meeting readers in the marketplace.

The print-disabled reading experience is incredibly diverse — it varies from using synthetic voice to have an ebook read out loud, to being able to swap out the font and changing the page layout to something that's more comfortable, to reading digital and physical Braille transcriptions. This group of readers needs

Accessibility isn't something best left to experts but something we can all play a part in.



COURTESY OF IVA CHEUNG

digital content that is well-structured, cleanly coded, includes image descriptions, and makes good use of best practices in semantic markup. For example, marking sidebar content as such means it is skippable, so the reader can focus on the main narrative. When reading with a screen reader, users make robust use of navigation, often jumping from heading to heading while skimming through the content. If a writer has manually made their headings larger and bolder than body text, instead of using, say, built-in Word styles that would code a header as a header, those headings will look like headings but won't act like headings. The content needs to be separate from the styling.

The visual rendering of your headings should take their cues from style sheets, not styling overrides. This allows for your writing to be parsed correctly by rendering engines — that is, it makes your book understandable to machines who can then serve it up to a variety of readers as intended.

The National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) has a series of videos on accessible publishing available on its YouTube channel. The one called “Common Accessibility Issues in EPUB Files: Introduction” was created by a blind reader, and shows some of the pitfalls of poor navigation.

First, we watch as the reader pulls up a table of contents, selects the chapter they want to read, and hits “play.” All very smooth and easy. Then they switch to a different book — one that is poorly designed for accessibility. From the video’s transcript: “The navigation pane is empty, ‘play’ reads one word at a time... and the ‘next’ button only skips by 15 seconds... This book has been produced in fixed-layout and has no chapter navigation.”

Can you imagine listening to a book being read with a full stop after each word? I can't, and I don't imagine you can either.

Designing for accessibility also means thinking about italics

and bold. In print, italics look the same, whether they are used for emphasis or to indicate a title. But these require different coding for screen readers. When a word or phrase is italicized for tonal inflection, it gets coded differently than for a title. This ensures the assistive technology reads it with the correct stress. Take this sentence: “I never said I *wanted* to go — I said I would consider it.” In this example, “*wanted*” needs emphasis, not just italics. But in the sentence, “The film adaptation of *Scarborough* was *excellent*,” we would want the second italicized word read with emphasis but not the first.

Using separate style sheets for those two uses means that someone isn't guessing how to code it later in the process.

The above comic from Iva Cheung is an excellent illustration of the traps that are often buried in a manuscript. (Used with permission.)

Format your manuscripts cleanly. Use style sheets rigorously. Work with a hierarchy or navigation panel open, so the structural hierarchy of a manuscript is visible as you move through it. That navigation is critical to a print-disabled reading experience of your writing. If you have images, think about image descriptions from the start. The writer is the best person to describe imagery in the context of their own work.

Be an accessibility advocate. It means that your work will be seen by more people. Ask your publisher about their plans to publish accessibly. Are they getting their websites and ebooks audited for accessibility? If they are not, they are not only missing out on a healthy chunk of consumers, they may soon be blocked from participating in large markets like the European Union, where the world's most rigorous accessibility legislation is due to go into effect soon.

If your poetry is published as an image of text because

Understand the print-disabled reading experience. Write and format with accessibility in mind. Be an accessibility advocate.

of formatting considerations, push the publisher to include rigorous image descriptions and not to skimp on how that's implemented. In my experience, digital poetry is marked up like a print artifact instead of leveraging digital to work, even in a synthetic-voice reading. It might be useful to use text-to-speech technology to read your poetry out loud so that you get a sense of how the print-disabled reading experience of it will go. Is the read-aloud pausing in the right places? Does the clever word play sound artfully chaotic or just chaotic? It is possible to make elegant, artful digital poetry that is a good reading experience for all kinds of readers without turning the page into an image.

Encourage your agents to include accessible formats in publishing contracts. Ask your publisher about their plans to market your book or article as accessible. Are they using robust accessibility metadata? How will they meet the needs of diverse readers when asked for a Braille transcription or an audiobook version?

Access to information is a human right. There are organizations in Canada working hard to serve print-disabled readers, using the copyright exemption to make what are known as alternate formats of traditionally published materials — Daisy Talking Books (synthetic audio), accessible EPUB, eText, Braille transcriptions, etc. The NNELS and the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) do the heavy lifting in this department every day. Make their jobs easier by depositing digital copies with them or insisting that your publisher does.

You might even go a step further and insist that events surrounding your publication are accessible. Ramps, microphones, and accessible venues go a long way to demonstrating one's commitment to inclusive publishing.

Baking accessibility into the content creation process means that no one is playing catch-up later on. The developers who handle the digital transformation of your work don't have to do any guessing and can focus on the task at hand. It's important to note that making content accessible results in better content. It's also critical to point out that content that is born accessible makes for a better reading experience for everyone. Good accessibility is good usability.

Disability advocate Debra Ruh once said, "Accessibility allows us to tap into everyone's potential." I would adapt that quote to writing and publishing, to say that accessible publishing helps us

to find every reader.

Knowing something about the print-disabled reading experience, and implementing good information architecture as you write, in addition to advocating for accessible publishing practices, goes a long way to creating an inclusive publishing landscape in Canada.

Laura Brady is an accessibility expert whose priority is always to put users first. She has more than 25 years of trade-publishing experience and has worked in digital publishing for the past 15 years, creating and converting ebooks, training publishers on accessible workflows, writing a blog helping developers work more accessibly, and consulting for services organizations about how to publish inclusively while worrying about everyone's reading experience. She lives in Caledon with a rescue dog and an assortment of Blue Jays fans.

WHAT IS A PRINT DISABILITY?

The Canadian government estimates that 3 million Canadians (or close to 10 percent of the population) have a print disability. The phrase "print disability" is broad and not just about vision. A print disability, or what is sometimes known as a perceptual disability, can refer to blind, low-vision, or deaf-blind people but also refers to those who are neurodivergent or have ADHD or a learning or auditory disability. People with missing limbs or mobility impairments may also be print disabled as well as those with cerebral palsy or Parkinson's, if they are unable to hold a book or turn its pages. According to the International Dyslexia Association, 20 percent of the population has some form of language-based learning disability. And, I would add, this doesn't account for situational disabilities. Someone who has a broken arm — a temporary disability — may have trouble navigating an e-reader or website. When we fold in other kinds of perceptual disabilities and the aging population, it's safe to say the 10 percent estimate is conservative.

Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

WRITERS-IN-EXILE /

Writing and the Experience of “Slightly Different”

BY AMIR H. YAZDANBOD



Imagine waking up one day to find your childhood toys have become totally unfamiliar.

Opening your eyes and trying to tell stories in a new language feels the same. The feeling that your stories may remain untold as a result is a horrifying, humiliating, and even marginalizing situation for a writer.

When you abandon your native language, which functions as a protective shell for the soul, and are surrounded by the oddities of the new language, you plunge yourself into the unfamiliar. The oral storyteller is naked when entering artistically into another language. The storyteller in exile pays a price in order to understand the whispers of new words and phrases. That price is paid in numerous awkward moments, miscommunication, and ideas and thoughts that become lost in everyday, real-life situations.

Language, the very means of literary creation, can become counterproductive — an obscure device that has lost its magic.

But let me dig deeper! When it comes to writing, putting ideas and thoughts down in words, the situation is even more appalling. The very essence of words, unlike what we see in dictionaries, is not more words and synonyms. It is the feeling, the colour, the taste, and the smell that comes after reading that word that has been built up and taught to you over the course of your life. Those simple yet primary reflex reactions to words in your subconscious — those are the atoms of human communication, working together in different orders, giving rise to different languages and consequently different understandings. Those are the roots, the remaining fossils of language as it must have ruled the pre-Babylonian world.

Does this sound dim and grim? Well, this dark night — especially for established and published writers in another language — ends in a bright dawn. One by one, words start to be resurrected from the darkness of absurdity. Atoms come together to shape new meanings with almost the same combination of feelings.

This sense of “slightly different” is where words give birth to the art of storytelling. It challenges predictable orders of cognition and leads us into uncharted and interesting territories of the literary world. So, as an English audience, you might forget the magic of accent. When you read the story, you hear its voice with your own voice, and that leaves the slightly different unseen — or, rather, unheard.

As someone who has been on the journey of stepping into this

slightly different territory for the past seven years, I have experienced firsthand how my thought process has changed, and how the inner voice in my head has become more complex, ushering me to wider horizons. In the first two years, my dreams started to randomly switch to English. Farsi (my mother tongue), still dominated my dreams, but after a few years that changed too. Now they are more like a poorly dubbed film that starts with more English on top, and gradually, when the pictures dive into a deeper stage, dialogue and scenes crawl back into Farsi. When I come back to the surface, English takes control of the steering wheel again.

This back-and-forth stream of words isn't limited to the dreams and the psychological side of life, so to speak. It happens in daily life experiences. There are moments of pause and stumbles, unnecessary hand movements, and meaningless smiles which never get printed, read or heard. Yet they still contain a great deal of understanding. The efforts of centuries of another nation's attempts to communicate lie behind those slightly different signals.

There are however particles and sometimes vital elements that never pass through the windows of communication. Especially in poetry, where words use their most semiotic meanings, rooted in the mythology of the region. Some of these elements are like baby birds plunging from heights. Some die. They are forgotten. They are not slightly different anymore. Raising the baby birds, steering them safely through the windows, making them only slightly different: this is the irreplaceable role of literature.

When I hear a different cadence in the usual melody of a language, I now clearly know there are newborn feelings somewhere around, waiting for the exploring eyes of readers, waiting for someone to kneel, pick up the baby birds and take them home. I know these words have marks and scars from giving birth to new ideas. These words are slightly different, and that means they have more possibilities to break into the new realms.

Amir H. Yazdanbod, is a member of the PEN Canada Writers in Exile group. Born in 1977 in Tehran, he started to write in 2004 and his short stories won several contests. Amir's first collection of stories, The Portrait of the Incomplete Man (Cheshmeh, 2009) won two national book prizes. His latest book, Stutter (Ofoq, 2013), has been critically acclaimed and nominated for several awards. Amir's subsequent works faced heavy censorship and did not get a publication licence from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. (www.yazdanbod.com)