

# PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

**Publisher Sara-Jade Virtue gives Kathleen Whyman an insight into what happens between acquisition and publication – and why the process takes so long**

Publishers don't sit around all day reading, they're not as rich as kings, and putting an advert on the side of the bus won't automatically make a book a bestseller.' Sara-Jade Virtue, Simon & Schuster's brand development director for fiction, tells it how it is. Not because she's negative about the publishing industry – on the contrary, she couldn't be more passionate – but because she believes in being 'as honest, transparent and kind as I can be'.

As well as dispelling any myths about the publishing industry, Virtue feels authors can benefit from having a better understanding of what goes on behind the scenes. Instead of moaning that you haven't heard back for days/weeks/months, you'll appreciate there's a reason for that. You might still have a moan, but at least you'll know why it's taking so long, and hopefully be more patient.

Because there's a very simple reason why it takes at least a year from your book being acquired to it being ready to buy. And that reason is that there's a hell of a lot to do.

'I work 50 hours a week,' says Virtue. 'I'm not complaining – I love my job – but that's what it takes to get the work done. And that's before I've read a single manuscript.'

## Pile-up

Acquiring the book in the first place can be a lengthy process and I understand why when Virtue explains that S&S receives hundreds of submissions a week, not including the manuscripts that arrive daily from existing contracted authors.

There are teetering To Be Read piles of submissions on every surface and every



device that demand immediate attention,' says Virtue. 'Those piles are never ending and there's a misconception that editors do nothing but sit and read all day (it's a standard joke among the sales team). That's not the case. Your reading time is also on the commute or at home when you should be out with friends or cooking dinner or cleaning the house.'

But what about the frenzied bidding auctions where unknown authors are catapulted to instant fame and untold riches?

'There are deals that are done,' confirms Virtue. 'Normally pre-London Book Fair and pre-Frankfurt, very rarely at the actual fairs themselves – many of those press releases are made up – and they can be done overnight in a frenzy of auction bidding. But, in the main, the acquisition process involves the huge TBR pile.'

Acquiring the book is just the start. It takes roughly a year from signing a contract with a publisher to the book reaching the shelf. Very few submissions are shelf-ready, so the book goes through a series of structural and copy edits, which often takes several drafts.

## Trust the experts

Next, every book has to have a jacket, whether it's physical or ebook, and a title. This is the point at which authors have to hand over their baby and let the experts do their job.

'The author's thoughts, needs, wants and desires are taken into consideration at every stage,' says Virtue. 'But writing a book is so personal and the author's been in their shed or at their kitchen table working on it for so long that letting go of it can be a bit of a hindrance to the actual process of publishing it.'

'I wouldn't suggest to someone who's building a wall that they're putting the bricks the wrong way round because I'm not a bricklayer. Similarly, an author may have had, for example, a working title since they first thought about their novel, but that doesn't mean it's going to work commercially.'

While the editorial department are working with the author, the sales team are approaching retailers, working up to a year in advance. This may sound like a long time, but once Virtue breaks down everything that has to happen during this time, it really isn't. Particularly as much of that work has to be done within the first three months so that the book can go 'live', enabling consumers to pre-order it nine months before it's officially on sale.

In those three months, the publisher has to set up Biblio data feeds. This is

essentially the information you see on online retailers such as Amazon – the book, the title, the jacket and all of the appropriate selling points, including the synopsis and author bio.

'Within that process are a million things that have to be done,' says Virtue. 'From the basic task of raising an ISBN, and what

*Much of the work has to be done in the first three months so the book can go 'live'*

is involved in raising an ISBN, to putting in place a full marketing and publicity campaign. Three months is no time at all to do everything to set ourselves up for publishing that book well.'

Well is the operative word. Everyone in S&S is committed to making each book a success.

'It's heartbreaking when a book doesn't sell as well as we believe it should,' Virtue says. 'We're as upset as the author is.'

## Marketplace

To help avoid this, every book S&S publishes, regardless of format, genre, whether it's fiction, non-fiction or children's, has the full force of the marketing and publicity team behind it.

'Every book is allocated a dedicated marketer and publicist who plan the best ways to reach readers,' explains Virtue. 'They go through the various gate keepers, including retailers, festival programmers, print reviewers, bloggers and every influencer who might have a voice to connect a book with an audience.'

Virtue is quick to point out that there isn't a one-size-fits-all, or a secret formula

## SIMON & SCHUSTER

- 99 per cent of the books S&S acquire come via an agent.
- S&S's annual #oneday initiative invites authors to submit the first chapter of their novel for consideration. Christina Pishiris submitted in 2018 and her debut novel *Love Songs for Sceptics* launched as an ebook last November. The print version is available in March.
- Sara-Jade launched the women's fiction community Books and the City on Valentine's Day 2011. It now has more than 20,000 members.

booksandthecity.com

to make every book a bestseller.

'If there were, every book would be a bestseller,' she says. 'Throwing money at a book doesn't mean it'll sell. There's a lot of talk amongst the author community about how much money a publisher is spending on your campaign. Outdoor advertising and a book tour around the country doing events and media are considered to be the Holy Grail. But while publishers may be perceived as being as rich as kings, I assure you this isn't the case. Nor is it true that if you advertise a book on a bus or a poster at a train station it'll be a number one bestseller and stick in the charts for years. If it were, we'd do it for everyone.'

Virtue believes there are far better ways to reach readers than with an expensive ad campaign. 'I've never once bought a book because of an advert on a station,' she says. 'But I'm always buying books because someone I trust has recommended it, or I've seen a bookseller or librarian or blogger shout about it.'

Promotional support and marketing activity that S&S uses includes the publisher's own social media programme, NetGalley, proof copies, materials, Facebook advertising, AMS (Amazon marketing services), magazine adverts or advertorials and publicity activity – reaching out to the media to secure reviews and to bookshops for events.

'This is a sales process as much as a publicity process,' Virtue explains. 'We're looking at getting column inches in the media in the same way we look for shelf inches when we sell a book into a retailer. And we try to sell every book into every possible retail outlet.'

## Author input

Given that the job of getting books published is so phenomenal, is there anything authors can do to help, I ask?

'Unfortunately, authors can't actually do anything to help the physical publishing process,' Virtue says. 'What they can do though is write the very best book they can. That's the key thing we can't do.'

Given the vast amount of elements involved in publishing, writing the novel is almost the easy part of the process. (Note I only said *almost*.) But next time you're waiting to hear from a publisher, don't complain or fret or check your email every 30 seconds.

Instead, take comfort in the fact that it's taking so long because someone like Sara-Jade is doing everything they can to make your book a success. And that's worth being patient for.