

Media Tie-Ins: Why They are Nearly Impossible for Beginners To Publish

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Because I have written three STAR WARS novels, and three novels set in Isaac Asimov's Robots-Foundation universe, I get a lot of standard-mail and e-mail letters from readers who want to know: "How can I get to write that sort of book myself?"

It's not much fun to give the answer to that question, because the answer is: "You can't." No one who mails in an unsolicited idea or story or novel to Lucasfilms (the folks who run STAR WARS) or Paramount (STAR TREK) or any of the other media "franchises" ever gets it published. Period. End of story.

ALL of the writers who have written STAR WARS books **were approached by the publisher** and *hired* to do their books. These professional writers, once contracted to do so, submitted outlines. The outlines were critiqued, modified, rewritten, and (with luck) approved. Part of the approval process in such cases concerned itself with whether the story was good. Part of it concerned itself with making sure the story idea matched the rest of the imaginary universe, and didn't cause continuity trouble, now or later. (In the case of my three STAR WARS books, one key plot line was thrown out by Lucasfilm because what I wanted to do might interfere with future plotlines.) Only after contracts were signed, and the outlines were approved, did the writers actually write the books. And, of course, the final books were likewise subject to approval.

ALL of the writers hired to do the STAR WARS books had written and published books of their own before they were approached. They had track records. They had demonstrated the

ability to write a complete, commercially publishable novel in the only way possible: by actually doing it. (Lots more people start writing books than finish writing them.)

NONE of the published STAR WARS books were written by unpublished amateurs, or written without prior approval of the outline. None of them ever will be. All of the above holds true for the other media franchises.

Hundreds and thousands of unsolicited story proposals, stories, book manuscripts, screenplays and so on descend on the franchise offices every year. None of them will ever be published or produced. In fact, the vast majority of them will be returned, unopened, to sender. There are good, hard-nosed reasons for all this.

First and foremost, to be blunt about it, most of the unsolicited submissions are no good. Based on what I have heard from editors, and have seen for myself, I can tell you that most of these submissions are badly written, or based on a bad idea, or formatted improperly, or inaccurate or careless about the known facts in the universe in question, or just incredibly sloppy. Some are written by people who, judging by their writing, appear to be deranged.

(I am sure that the vast majority of people who submit books and other material to the franchises are sane and competent. But with all due respect to that majority, I strongly suspect that, for various reasons, the nut-author count is higher for media tie-in submissions than it is for regular books. People obsess on some favorite character from the movie. On the other hand, and in fairness, the nut-author count is pretty high just about everywhere in publishing.)

In other words, even if your unsolicited STAR WARS novel is an absolute gem, it is likely to be quite literally buried under a mountainous heap of unpublishable gibberish. It's going to be physically and non-metaphorically dumped in the same pile with all the nut manuscripts, and will be treated in the same way they are.

But even your that diamond of an unsolicited manuscript were the only one to arrive at the publisher's offices, even if the publisher was starved for material, the publisher would return it unread, for one simple reason: lawsuits. Let me try and explain by example.

Let's say that Fervent Fan F, who loves Media Franchise Z, writes a book set in that franchise, in which Character X marries Character Y. (Marrying characters up is a very popular notion among writers, and not much loved by the folks that control franchises. Marriages change too many things and complicates the continuity.) The book gets to Editor E, who reads the book, decides it's no good, and rejects it.

Now suppose that, two years later, in the movie series or TV series or book series or comic book (sorry, graphic novel) series linked to the franchise, Character X does indeed marry Character Y. Or even suppose that Character X marries W, or marries some new character never heard of before. Or maybe Character Q marries Character K. Whatever the case, Fervent Fan F decides that it's close enough, and that Franchise Z has stolen his idea of X marrying Y. Fan F goes to Lawyer L, and sues.

Now, even if Lawyer L knows there is no case at all, she might well decide to go for it anyway, in hopes that Franchise Z will offer a settlement just to make Fervent Fan F go away. And, if there is enough bad publicity, and Franchise Z concludes that they are going to have a lot of trouble proving a negative (ie: that they never heard word one from Editor E about Fan F's book in which X and Y get married), then Franchise Z might well decide it would be easier and cheaper just to pay up.

Never mind that the franchise holders thought up the Franchise Z universe, and invented Characters X and Y. They have just, in effect, been sued for violating their own copyright. And

suddenly every unpublished writer in the world realizes that Franchise Z has caved in and settled one suit, and who knows, they might settle another, and another, and ...

There is a very simple way for Franchise Z and Editor E to avoid this nightmare scenario: all they have to do is *never look at unsolicited manuscripts*. If they return the unsolicited manuscripts unopened, and/or return them with a letter stating they have not been read, and that the office does not wish to see any further material from the submitting writer, or take various other precautions, they will be able to demonstrate they had never seen Fan F's tale of romance and marriage, and they can avoid this nuisance suit, and the hundreds of others that would almost certainly follow a settlement or a judgment against them.

Unsolicited media tie-in manuscripts don't get read. The franchise holder and the publishers thus avoid a very real and highly probable danger by turning their back on the rather hypothetical and quite highly improbable hope that Fan F has written something vastly better than anything they could get from their stable of professional writers, and something that exactly fits in with all their future plans for the franchise.

Variations on the above logic apply to cases such as the Asimov universe, where the "franchise" is a book series, rather than a TV series or movie, and likewise apply to other cases where someone holds an existing copyright. Further variations cover the writing of scripts for TV and movie series. As far as scripts go, I am no expert, but here are the rules as best I understand them: no one in Hollywood will read *your* script based on *their* characters, show, or premise until you sign a release form promising not to sue them for reading it. (See J. Michael Straczynski's *THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SCRIPTWRITING* for a detailed discussion of this topic.)

It's not fun to tell people the bad news, but there it is. You're not going to be able to publish your unsolicited *STAR WARS*, or *STAR TREK*, or *X FILES*, or Asimovian Robot, or *HERCULES*, or *REN AND STIMPY* novel, story, poem, or comic book. Period.

Now that I have explained that it is impossible to get one of these writing gigs, a rather obvious question pops up: How did I get two of them? Simple. I wrote a lot of books that were all my own, and developed a name and a reputation in the science fiction field. By so doing, I proved that I knew how to write a commercially successful book, and proved that I understood the business. I had to write my own books before they came to me and asked me to write their *STAR WARS* and Robot novels.

This brings me to another topic. I am firmly of the opinion that writing in someone else's universe is, generally speaking, not a good thing for a beginning writer to do. Books and stories are built out of three interlocking things: plot, setting, and character. If someone else has already dreamed up the people, and worked out precisely what the world they live in is like, that's two out of three — character and setting — that are gone. You, the beginning writer, will have no chance to practice creating the people and places in your story. All you are left with is plot, and even there, your freedom will be severely limited by all the things that have already happened.

A beginning writer wishing to develop his or her skills will do far better working on his or her own material, as such will give the new writer the chance to work on *all* the aspects of telling a story. And, ironically enough, the only way to get a chance writing in your favorite franchise universe is by first becoming a professional writer in your own right. You get to write in their world by writing in your own universe first.

I know of exceptions to much of what I have just laid down as flat-out, absolute, unalterable truth. But virtually all of those exceptions are misleading, or trivial, or so wildly improbable that they might as well not exist. Going into details would just raise false hopes.

What I have said here is 99.999 percent true. Your odds are much better writing your own stuff, rather than pursuing the .001 percent I got wrong.

One last side-note. I myself have completed my contracts with the STAR WARS and Asimov franchise holders. I'm working on my own material, and have no further contractual right to do work in either of those universes. Unless and until I get asked again, *I* can't write in those universes again, either. Therefore, it's no good sending me STAR WARS or Robot ideas. I can't do anything with them, and there's no way for me to act as a conduit, passing the ideas on.

So write your own stuff. Believe me, that's the best way to get published.

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