

ESSAY | Elizabeth Royte

Publish and Perish

FOR any writer, the publication of a book, labored over for years, is an exciting event. But excitement is a fleeting emotion, and the business of publicizing the book, so that it sells and the author can earn out his advance, quickly displaces any initial euphoria. The writer then embarks on a tortured journey toward acceptance of the fact, several months after publication, that his book isn't going to vault him into the empyrean of fame, or even improve his life. At the intersection of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief and Stendhal's stages of love, the contemporary author trudges along a predictable path that can only be described, in hindsight, as self-induced misery.

● **The Fog of Love:** Galleys are being printed, and the final installment of the book advance has been spent. You give the galley to your agent, "who gets paid to tell you you're great," says E. Jean Carroll, the au-



thor of a long-running advice column for *Elle* magazine and of "Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson."

"You're still in that mad, golden phase." The galley goes out for review and, says Mary Roach, the author of "Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife," "you can't believe people are actually reading it." So far nothing bad has happened.

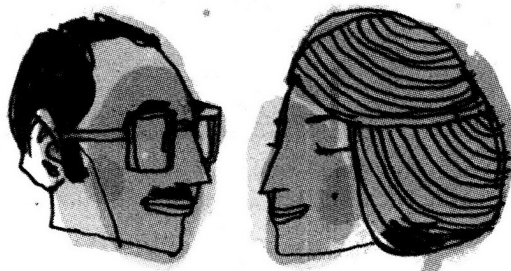
● **The Big Suck-Up:** Author contacts anyone who's remotely associated with a publication that reviews books, anyone with a cousin at the "Today" show, and starts to badger and wheedle. He begs Important People to attend his book party and sends flowers and candy to his publicist.

● **Naked in Public:** Yearning for affirmation mixed with equal dread of being attacked, misunderstood, or ignored. Terry Reed, whose first novel is "The Full Cleveland," likens pre-pub-date fear to the classic nightmare: "You dream you're at the party, thinking you're wearing Prada, but you look down and realize you're wearing nada."

● **Euphoria:** A positive review creates a craving for more positive reviews. "It's a feedback loop, and it's totally addictive," Roach said.

Negative reviews, obviously, extinguish Euphoria. Author skips directly to Denial (see below).

Elizabeth Royte is the author of "Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash" and "The Tapir's Morning Bath: Mysteries of the Tropical Rain Forest and the Scientists Who Are Trying to Solve Them."



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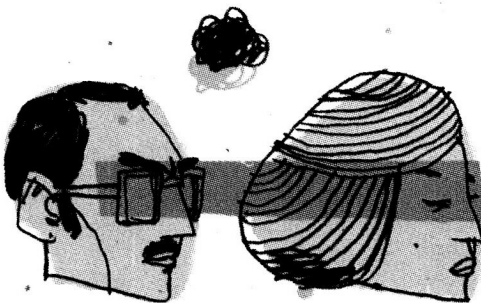
● **Honeymoon:** Enjoyed by all, but mostly the publicist. "It's a great phase. They don't call you," said Alisa Wyatt, who spent 16 years working for university and trade publishers and gave that all up to teach Pilates. ("I still feel like I'm helping people, but now after an hour they go away," she said.)

● **Obsession:** The tour concludes, the sugar high ends, and the author begins to enter withdrawal. He calls the publicist several times a day. "I call this stage infantile narcissism," said Lynn Goldberg of Goldberg McDuffie Communications, a public relations company that deals with many big-name authors. "They're completely self-absorbed, and they can't understand why they're not selling more books or getting on TV."

Todd Oppenheimer, the author of "The Flickering Mind: Saving Education From the False Promise of Technology," recalled: "I wrote long memos and pitches and lists of contacts to the in-house publicist. I left no stone unturned." And the publicist? "She'd say, 'I'm on it, Todd. Every hour I talk to you is an hour I'm not publicizing your book.'"

Author spends hours and hours in auto-erotic self-Googleing and checking his Amazon ranking (and the rankings of his friends' books and of books published during the same time frame as his). He moves his book to the front of the bookstores, changes its position on display tables and flips shelf orientation from spine out to cover out. He cajoles friends into writing positive reviews on Amazon.

● **Denial:** Author speed-dials publicist to ask, "Are you *sure* there aren't any other reviews?" Hires private publicist. "For nine



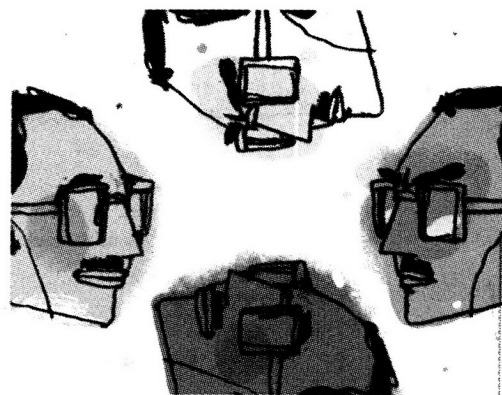
weeks, you keep hope alive," Carroll said. "You check Jane Austen's ranking on Amazon, and if you're outselling her you figure you're O.K. You overcome your doubts."

● **Bitter Recrimination:** Disappointed by lackluster sales, author blames in-house publicist for not sending out enough books for review; publisher for releasing it in the wrong season, choosing a bad title, commis-

sioning bad jacket art or miscategorizing the book, so buyers can't find it.

● **Shame and Embarrassment:** Keenly experienced by author at a reading attended by only one person, or when author feels he's being jerked around. "You ask yourself, 'Why am I getting up at 4 a.m. to go to Fort Lee, New Jersey, to be on a business program that no one will see when I wrote a sensitive literary book about relationships on the Internet?'" said John Seabrook, the author of "Deeper: My Two-Year Odyssey in Cyberspace" and "Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing — The Marketing of Culture."

● **"What About Oprah?":** "Every author eventually asks this question. I tell them, 'I'm sure someone has thought about it,'" said Nicholas Latimer, the director of publicity for Alfred A. Knopf.



● **Reality Beckons:** "I'd put together three media events in this city and had been driving around all day. I was stuck in traffic, it was raining, I had no readings lined up and I was headed toward a store to sign between 6 and 10 books," Oppenheimer said. "That's when I realized I'd pushed this thing too far."

● **The Last Hurrah:** "It's a hideous thing," Carroll said. "You get a good review." As Stendhal wrote of the last stages of love, this review is "the final torment: utter despair poisoned still further by a shred of hope." Carroll likens the book's sudden resurgence to the Drunk Dial, when a lover asks, "Can I come over one more time?" "So you make love, and then that's it," Carroll said. "You never ever rise on Amazon again. The interview with Terry Gross falls through, and even the publicist's assistant won't return your call."

● **Withering:** Publicist attempts to wean author. The message is delivered subtly; most authors get it. "I'm sorry," they might say in the tone of an emergency-room surgeon. "We've done all we can." For some authors, though, "all" isn't enough. "I have a saying," Oppenheimer said. "You never know what's enough until you've done more than enough. My publicist, the second one I hired, finally told me, 'I think it's time for you to think about the paperback.'"

"The beginning of acceptance," Seabrook said, "is when you realize that the reason your book isn't in bookstores isn't because it's sold out. It's not there because the store never ordered it in the first place." □



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