

GET IN THE GAME

By Craig Lancaster

A couple of years ago, when quite to my surprise I had managed to write a novel to completion after years of aborted attempts, I did a blissfully ignorant thing: I published that baby myself through CreateSpace (www.createspace.com) and started thumping it around my home region, guided by certitude that readers and the Montana literati alike would throw open their doors to welcome it.

Naïve megalomania can be an ugly thing. But there's a flip side, and that's the aspect I'd like to examine today: I came to play. I was ill-informed, yes, and more than a bit delusional, but I wasn't on the sidelines, where I see so many prospective authors who are paralyzed by their own insecurities. I plunged headlong into the current and learned how to swim.

The book, "600 Hours of Edward," (http://www.amazon.com/600-Hours-Edward-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1606390139/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1256144119&sr=1-1) went on to be picked up by a regional publisher, Riverbend Publishing, and has since become a Montana Honor Book and a finalist for the High Plains Book Award for first book (the big announcement is Oct. 8 on that one; cross your fingers for me, please). So, by subjective measures, I did the most important thing right: I wrote a good book. My advice is to start there. Once you've done that, your second mission, should you choose to accept it, is this: Get in the game and be an active participant in your book's fate.

Those early days of schlepping around with my self-published book taught me some important lessons about persistence and making my own breaks. I'd talk to any civic group that would have me. I dragged my book to arts festivals. I put it in front of the noses of people who might read it and give me advice and direction. (Aside: There's a fine line between being persistent and being obnoxious on these things. Please find that line and remain on the side of right, to whatever extent possible.) When a local English professor, Sue Hart, invited me to come talk to her composition class about writing, I jumped at the opportunity. That's turned into an every-semester gig for me – my opportunity to engage with prospective readers and budding writers and to give back some of the good advice that's come my way. And Sue, it turns out, has become a wonderful friend and a source of helpful contacts. You never know where your best opportunities are going to come from, so it's important to knock on every door possible.

The fun part, for me, has been seeing all of this promotional work start to pay off. Early on, I more or less induced a book club to take on my book, offering a cut-rate deal on signed copies. Those folks ended up inviting me to their meeting, where I had a rollicking good time answering questions about the book and enjoying good food and good drink with good people. Now, similar invitations come my way without my seeking them out. Good word of mouth is a self-perpetuating thing – its momentum builds naturally, organically, and you as the author reap the

benefits of readership and fellowship with the most ardent fans of your work. A lot of the doors I knocked on in the beginning now open without my asking to be let in. So I look for new doors. I'm not in a position to rest on the work I've already done, but even if I were, I'd like to think I wouldn't coast. That sense of urgency keeps me looking for new ways to get my work out there – and, when something pays off, the resulting sense of progress buoys me and helps to offset the darker thoughts that occur when momentum seems to be moving against me.

Consider the words of Joshua Mohr, the author of “Some Things That Meant the World to Me” (http://www.amazon.com/Some-Things-That-Meant-World/dp/0982015119/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280507468&sr=1-1) and “Termite Parade” (http://www.amazon.com/Termite-Parade-Joshua-Mohr/dp/098201516X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280507504&sr=1-1). His books are put out by Two Dollar Radio, a small literary publisher – literally, a three-person shop. And yet, by releasing excellent books by motivated authors like Josh, the titles have seen some remarkable success. “Some Things” was picked as one of the top 10 reads of last year by O Magazine, a selection that surely changed its trajectory for the better.

In an interview with “All About Lulu” author Jonathan Evison, Josh said (<http://threeguysonebook.com/an-interview-with-joshua-mohr>):

“It’s just us shaking trees, making the phone calls, pimping books. Probably because of all my years playing in crappy bands, but I like being involved with that stuff. The thing I’m the most scared of as a writer is investing 3, 4, or 5 years writing a book, and it comes out and vanishes without a trace. Unfortunately, it happens all the time—good books get lost in the shuffle (and bad ones get hype because of nepotism). So I can use my anxiety about this phenomenon as gasoline to hop on the phone or send a batch of emails or cyber-stalk those that need cyber-stalking. I’m a pro-active cat when it comes to these sorts of things.”

Call it what you want – shaking the trees, burning the shoe leather, pimping the books, getting in the game. The nomenclature doesn't matter. The effort does.