

Book Imprints: Research Your Market as You Write

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If you're serious about getting your manuscript published, whether it's a literary novel, a true-crime book, or a genre romance, it's a good idea to find out who exactly might publish it. It's your job as an author to be well informed about publishing houses. Learn how understanding imprints can help you, even if you have an agent.

Understanding Book Imprints to Get Published

If you're serious about getting your manuscript published, whether it's a literary novel, a true-crime book, or a genre romance, it's a good idea to find out who exactly might publish it. "But that's my agent's job," you might say. True. But it's also your job, and your responsibility to your career as an author, to be well informed about publishing houses. Gather any knowledge you can about who's publishing what—whether you have an agent or not.

Most publishing houses, especially big ones, are divided into "imprints," which publish under a separate name, often in a specific genre. They usually have their own set of editors, though some editors acquire manuscripts for multiple imprints. Some are narrower in focus than others—books published under the imprint that shares the name of the house (Random House, Simon & Schuster, etc.) usually cut a wide swath: fiction and nonfiction; literary and commercial. But each publishing house also has more specific imprints and regularly creates new ones. Random House, the world's biggest publisher, lists no fewer than fifty-five U.S. imprints on its website.

Visit Random House's website, and those of other publishers. Even if you think it's not the place for your genre, you may be surprised. Most publishers list their imprints with brief descriptions, and often a specific imprint doesn't fit the overall image of that publishing house. Houses create new imprints to follow book industry trends—following the success of such authors as Bill O'Reilly and Ann Coulter, several politically conservative imprints appeared, including Crown Forum at Random House, Sentinel at Penguin, and Threshold at Simon & Schuster. Other imprints, such as Rayo at HarperCollins, are popping up to cater to the fast-growing market of Latin-American readers.

After you consult the publishers' own lists, bypass their marketing lingo and look at bookstores. Browse Amazon, or go into your local Barnes & Noble, and head for the section where you think your book belongs. Browse the shelves, or scroll down the Amazon pages of books similar to yours, and list the imprints you see. A few will appear over and over—the major publishers—and you'll see a few others, perhaps smaller houses or new imprints. If you're in the mystery section, about one-fourth of the books' spines will say "Berkley Prime Crime"—Penguin's mass-market mystery imprint.

Once you have an agent, if they're competent, they'll know to submit your genre mystery series to an editor at Berkley who acquires for Prime Crime. But let's back up: if you see a particular type of mystery filling the shelves (or missing from them), keep that in mind when devising your own series idea. But don't follow trends blindly: remember that the books now on the shelves were acquired as long ago as two years, and the trend you see may already have passed.

An even more helpful goal is to be able to ask a prospective agent the reasonable question, "What are some imprints you might submit my manuscript to?" If you've written a commercial mystery series, and they don't mention Berkley, perhaps that agent isn't savvy enough or simply isn't the right one for your manuscript. If you've done your homework, you're equipped to make an informed decision.

The same holds true after you've signed with an agent. Refrain from sending them a list of publishers you want your manuscript submitted to. That says "I don't trust you to do your job." Few things annoyed me more when I was an agent.

And, I beg you, don't contact an editor who received your manuscript through an agent, unless you know the editor personally. Following up is your agent's job. However, it is (or should be) perfectly acceptable to ask where your manuscript was submitted and why an imprint isn't on the list.

There's a terrific reference book for info about both publishers and agents: Jeff Herman's *Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents*, which is updated every year. It needs to be, since its long list of book agents and book publishers is ever-changing. It provides company contact info, names, submission policies, and genre preferences of both agents and publishers. If your agent mentions a publisher/imprint to you that you haven't heard of, look them up in the guide, search for them on Amazon, and Google them.

In short, become as knowledgeable as you can about the industry. It can help you focus your manuscript, especially if it's in a commercial genre. It'll help you find an agent, work with your agent to market your book to the right places, and identify whether your agent is doing right by your manuscript. You don't need insider contacts or a subscription to *Publishers Weekly*. Just browse the Web or the bookstore, and reap the benefits of your homework!