

PUBLICISTS

CONTINUED FROM F1

Campaigns are tailored to each book

reunion committee and fine-tuning his signature so that it looks like an autograph.

At last it's Publication Day. His agent calls to congratulate him. His sister-in-law hosts a party featuring a cake on which the picture of a book has been rendered in shabby extruded icing. Clerks at bookstores around the country unpack the hot-off-the-you-know-what item and place it on the shelves, ready for sale.

And then . . . nothing. National tour? *Abs in People?* Nope. Appearance on Oprah, "Fresh Air," *Inma's*? Doesn't happen. "Good Morning, Fort Worth"? Not even. A New York hall packed for a reading, to be followed by a Q&A, then drinks with newfound literary pals ("Brett! Jay! Share a beer?") in SoHo? Literally in his dreams.

The book has been distributed nationally, but there are maybe two copies per store, shelves . . . somewhere, they're certainly not up front, on display. And except for in the author's hometown, where (almost) everyone invited to the publication party sort of has to buy one, and in the various towns across the country that are home to similarly motivated family members, these books sit.

For a couple of months, that is — until they are returned to the publisher, who dispatches them to a recycler to be, in an oddly appropriate word, pulped.

The author isn't even the victim of a conspiracy. In the United States, about 60,000 books are published every year. That averages out to more than 1,000 a week, or, to make an analogy quainter still, more than 150 a day.

Publishers advertise, but they don't have limited budgets and they don't divide the pie evenly. For any given book, chances are they'll publish it — printing, say, 5,000 to 10,000 copies — distribute it, pulp it and forget it.

And the author is a remaindered duck — unless he has had the foresight, and the cash (anywhere from \$2,500 to \$25,000) to hire a literary publicist. Someone like, say, Kim from L.A. And one of the most important things she'll do for him, in addition to lining up signings, appearances and interviews in various markets around the country, is dispense some cold, hard truths.

"Each (publishing) house has star authors that carry their house, that pay their bills," Dower said. "The bulk of their authors are just there to make it look like a business. Many authors don't realize that they have to play a major role in how their book is promoted, and that many times they have to use their own money."

"A lot of literary people find it distasteful that they have to sell themselves. They think the work should speak for itself. Well," Dower went on, getting a bit animated, "it doesn't devalue yourself as a writer to spend money to sell your book. Fifteen years ago you were not paying for their own publicists and publicity, but there has been such a backwash of media across the board. There used to be two newspapers in every town, lots of radio — there was enough to go around. Now ra-



San Diego's Debra Ginsberg ("Waiting," "Raising Blaze") sent herself on a book tour and got interviewed on Denver TV and radio.

Jerry Rife / Union-Tribune

dio is syndicated, and very few authors get a fully subsidized tour by their publisher."

'Nonfiction is easier'

Kim from L.A. contracts with publishers as well as individual authors. (Dower handles the West Coast publicity for Warner Books, for example — for those Warner Books authors that the publisher allots marketing funds for, that is.) And she does a lot more than just hit the phones to wrangle guest shots. Before she'll even attempt that, she'll read the book, and read it carefully: A literary publicist, she said, needs not only to get a feel for the writing but also to see if there's anything in the book that she can use.

"Nonfiction is easier," she said. "It has a hook or an angle, a topic, weight. It's about politics, or how to lose 20 pounds. Fiction — well, no one wants to just talk about the book and the author, unless it's a book show. So, I need to find hooks in the fiction that the author can use to sell it."

One of Dower's longtime clients is mystery writer T. Jefferson Parker ("Cold Pursuit," "Black Water," "Laguna Heat"). She looks for something in his tale that comes from real life. Is something loosely based on a case? Did he have to talk to police and do research, and is there something in that research that can be used as a hook?

And that's just from reading the book. Then, she goes after Parker himself, talking to him at length.

"The thing Kim does that's very helpful," Parker said from his home in Fallbrook, "is that she can tell me things about my books that I don't see for myself."

"She's also good at helping you see things rationally instead of emotionally, which is how you write. When you're able to talk about a book categorically or rationally, you have an answer besides a lot of mumbly mumbled. Well, this was what I was trying to do. She helps you talk to people in a way that allows you to get your point across, and once she identifies the point she can guide the interview."

"So many of us are disorganized and unsure. Fiction writers especially are going on instinct and subconscious impulses. When you hold the



Mystery writer T. Jefferson Parker: "Kim throws you life rafts — things you can talk about for sure that are interesting and good about your books." *Roswald Lipin / Union-Tribune*

book in your hands it looks rational and premeditated, but in truth it was extruded one day at a time on a wing and a prayer, and sometimes it takes an outsider to understand what the guy was getting at.

"Kim throws you life rafts — things you can talk about for sure that are interesting and good about your books, so that (in interviews) you're not just kind of flapping your lips."

Which is exactly what Alan Brennert felt he was doing in that first interview for "Moloka'i." So, he came not only for help with publicity, but for intense coaching — via Dower's side business, Perfect Pitch Productions — on how to be an effective media guest.

Because why, after all, should an author have an innate ability to present himself and his ideas effectively on radio or TV? His talents be elsewhere, and they're accessed by sitting alone in a room with a keyboard and a video screen. Now, he must not only haul down years of work into a handful of compelling sentences, but he must do so through being interviewed by (frequently) clueless strangers while sitting in front of a microphone or under blinding lights while wearing pancake makeup — and he usually has three to six minutes to get it done. Little wonder that Brennert squeaked "Help!"

With Dower was her Perfect Pitch partner, Bill Applebaum. The plan: Talk to Brennert for an hour or so, asking him questions about the book and what he'd like to say. Then go to a small adjoining room, a facade of a TV studio, where Bren-

ner would be videotaped, Applebaum playing the part of an interviewer. Brennert's performances will be dissected, discussed and — fingers crossed — improved. Time is short, as the author will soon begin his book tour: Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and Hawaii.

Brennert's novel, which begins in 1890, tells the story of Rachel Kalama, a 7-year-old Hawaiian girl who contracts leprosy and is torn from her family and sent to the isolated leper colony on the Hawaiian island of Moloka'i.

"I get two reactions to the book," Brennert began. "That it's heart-breaking and that it's uplifting. It's sad, but the primary message is that yes, that's where people died, but it's where people lived, too. They had normal lives, as far as they could, and that's a triumph."

"It's difficult to read because it's so sad," Dower said. "People were forced to go there, and almost everyone Rachel meets dies."

"But people in any circumstance can adjust," Applebaum added.

Dower had spotted a nugget. "It's sad," she said, "but there are people who like a good cry." A few minutes later, Dower and Applebaum zeroed in on a flaw in Brennert's attitude. In his TV interview, Brennert told them, he was thrown because he was asked an off-the-wall question. By the time he finished his stammering, round-about answer, time was just about up.

"Make it your interview," Applebaum emphasized. "Go in to make your points. You're in control."

"You suffer from Good Student Syndrome," Dower said. "You're not a politician — you can answer the question any way you want. . . . The rule of thumb is, get to three main points. We'll put in your arsenal that this is a great read for people who like a good, sad book. You're not going to decide that you're going to die right in."

"Another idea is disease. People like that, just like they like a detective story where people get chopped up."

"CSI Moloka'i!" Brennert shouted. "I just changed my title!"

Later, in the mock studio, things weren't looking good. On camera, Brennert tended to give long, too-involved answers, delivered in a monotone. Applebaum and Dower looked for ways to pare the message down while amping it up.

"If we can get across what drives you . . . Applebaum cooed.

Dower. "What compelled me to drop the TV writing to tell this story. . . ."

Applebaum: "People were taken away from their homes and made to live the rest of their lives in a remote colony, away from their families."

Dower, suddenly inspired: "Can you imagine if all the AIDS patients in California were rounded up —"

Brennert: "— rounded up and taken to Anacapa Island!"

Applebaum: "That's using your passion."

Dower: "Anger! I want you to bring that out! You've gotta let it go, because you're not a guy who's going to lose control. That's not going to be a problem. I mean, we've had some lectures in here. You're interesting, you're a nice guy, and we want to bring that out."

"There are great writers who can't say a sentence on TV," Dower said later, "and fairly mediocre writers who can get on TV and charm anyone. My job is to make great writers be great guests."

"A good publicist has to make the author understand that the job they now have, publicizing the book, is as important as the first job — writing the book. And that they're two separate jobs."

Debra Ginsberg understands that as well as anyone. A San Diego author ("*Waiting*," "*Raising Blaze*" and the upcoming "*About My Sisters*") who

first got into the business as a reader for the Sandra Dijkstra literary agency in Del Mar, she knew her publisher, HarperCollins, wasn't going to pony up much for publicity for her first book.

"They liked '*Waiting*,'" Ginsberg said. "It was an in-house favorite. There were some little advertising things here and there that they were thinking about, but they didn't have a tour assigned for me."

Even a bare-bones, one-market-only publicist was out of Ginsberg's price range, so she sent herself on tour. She had friends she could stay with in Denver, and she knew about the Tattered Cover, a large, author-friendly Denver bookstore. All the HarperCollins publicist had to do was set up a signing at the store, then call media outlets. Ginsberg was interviewed on local radio and TV.

"One thing led to another," she said. "I got so many bookings that they got a media escort for me. But if I hadn't sent myself, it wouldn't have happened."

"It was the same in San Francisco. The publisher didn't pay for anything — no escort, even — but I ended up on the Ronn Owens (radio) show, and that led to a lot more media. Radio hooked up to other radio, and a grassroots effort started. The publisher picked it up after that. They flew me to New York for national media."

But a book publicist can do more than just arrange readings and interviews. Caitlin Hamilton started her one-person agency in Denver after working as marketing director for the small, prestigious literary publishers MacMurray & Beck and BlueHen. Like Kim Dower, the first thing Hamilton does — even before taking on a client — is read the book.

"Then, I start a conversation with the author," she said. "What's your publisher going to do? How do you feel I can be most effective? I get some basic info together, then draft a proposal."

Tailoring her campaigns to each book, Hamilton often comes up with unique ideas — hitting niche markets like book catalogs, for example, and exploring local and regional libraries, and online sales outlets. She'll also work up Q&A suggestions for radio appearances, snag quotes from favorable reviews to include in pamphlets and flyers she writes and designs, advise on how (and whether) to spend money on advertising.

Hamilton, too, believes that authors have to become involved in the marketing of their books. And she's noticed they're getting the message.

"It does seem like a lot of authors are taking the reins now," she said. "People realize there are so many books that they need to be proactive if their book is to have a chance."

Debra Ginsberg drops into bookstores unannounced, introduces herself to the staff and signs copies of her books. She attends book fairs and festivals even if she's not a featured author. She got to know Gabriel Barillas, one of HarperCollins' national sales reps. "I went a bit far," she allowed. "I ended up dating him."

"You've got to keep it going," she said. "It's your business, really."

Coming in February: "The Savvy Author's Guide to Book Publicity: A Comprehensive Resource — From Building the Buzz to Pitching the Press," by Lisa Warren (Carol & Gail, \$34).