

Sunday, November 16, 2008

A major book store

I can't reveal the name of the store because I'm still waiting for a payment for two books of mine that sold. I mentioned this business in *I Don't Want to be a Pirate*, but since that book was published, there have been some new developments. To refresh your memory, this was the store with Slim, the shelf clearer. I mentioned the book signing, but didn't describe how it went.

For that Saturday afternoon, I figured I would go all out and market my appearance to maximize sales. I emailed *Buffalo Rising*, an organization that promotes the city, hoping for an announcement of my gig. I was told that since it was in Cheektowaga, a suburb, they couldn't do it. I had another possibility. In the closing months of 2007, a journalist from a small area newspaper had written a nice article on *This Page Intentionally Left Blank* and I gave her a copy of my 2008 book, hoping she would repeat the effort, thus bringing a few people to the store. While at my mom's home, she pointed to page five of the newspaper, so I searched for the article. I couldn't find it because nothing was there except for a few lines mentioning my book signing. Moreover, this announcement was merely in the Cheektowaga edition, rather than throughout the county.

I had placed a flier about the signing on the bulletin board of the Ellicott Creek Trailway, where I walk quite frequently, and there was an announcement on WBFO, a local jazz and NPR station from the University at Buffalo. On the Monday before the event, Louise Continelli wrote a wonderful article in The Buffalo News about my soon to be published book on the failure of technology, *Press 1 for Pig Latin*.

The described disappointments bothered me somewhat, but I figured I would sell a few books in the two hour time slot. I planned to say a few words about *I Don't Want to be a Pirate*, since that was the only one the bookstore would allow me to sell that day. In addition, this meant that the fine News article was a bit out of sync, since I wasn't selling the book described. Indeed, that would have been very difficult since it was yet to be published. One person was actually there to hear me speak about the failure of technology and my manuscript. Rita did buy a book from me, anyway.

I finally met Lulu and was given a small table with ten copies of the book close to the entrance of the store. I really wanted a place – maybe in the back – where people could sit while I talked a bit about the book, but she said that where I was positioned was the best place from past experience. I had emailed Lulu the image of the cover of *I Don't Want to be a Pirate* as well as my photo, but neither was on the minimalist thing in the store advertising my signing. She mentioned that local authors at their signings

there tend to sell one book, unless they're more aggressive. In reply, I facetiously asked, "Should I tackle the customers?" I don't believe she has a sense of humor. I really wanted to relate all my marketing attempts up to that point, but instead kept my mouth shut and eventually sold a whopping one book, just like the average.

I know all about bookstores. Had I been informed about the number of books that I would sell there when I was asked if I cared to do a signing, I would definitely have refused the opportunity. As I mentioned so many times to listeners and readers, the worst place to sell a book is in a bookstore, unless your name is Grisham, King or Patterson and that surname has to be with the right first name. It will be a long time – if ever – before I do another signing at a book store.

### An excerpt from *This Page Intentionally Left Blank*

One thing writers do is sign books, sometimes even at bookstores. On the evening of the last day of September in 2005, I was part of a group of local writers at the Barnes & Noble store on Niagara Falls Boulevard in Buffalo. In an hour and a half, I sold six books – not bad for an evening's work. What wasn't too great was the fact that I brought the books in myself and for each book sold, was only to receive 60% of the cost of the book – that at least was my impression. You may think that's not bad but don't forget, I paid the publisher for the books in the first place.

Authors were encouraged to tell their friends, family and groupies about this event to fill the store with customers. The thought was that with so many people congregating at the tables, other people would drift over to see what the buzz was all about and may even buy a book or two. Maybe they were giving away cheesecake. I didn't tell many people since I figured that my friends didn't like dessert, they either had my books or they could buy them from me, increasing my profit. I also felt that too many people congregating might actually get in the way of buyers, something the store didn't consider.

People that bought books took their purchase to a register and paid the list price of the book, plus tax. How many books each writer sold was done by an inventory check with each writer before and after. Prior to the event, each book identification or ISBN was entered into the store system. B & N got paid for the sales that very night. You might feel that the authors should have gotten paid at the same time, but are you ever dreaming! Allow at least a week for payment, but I was more pessimistic and gave them a month or two.

I am a patient person – although not that thrilled about being a patient in the hospital – but in February 2006, more than four months later, I had still not received the check for the sales of these books. I called Dawn,

the woman in charge that September evening and she said that there had been a snafu, which she would handle. After a few more weeks I still hadn't gotten the check so I emailed her, but there was no response. I emailed again with the same result. Then I composed a letter to corporate headquarters of the company, getting the address from their web site. In it, I demanded the full cost of the books since I had to wait so long. That made no difference so I contacted Diane Newton, a friend who also sold a few books that night. I included a copy of the letter to her and she advised me that I needed to include the ISBNs for each book. When I talked to her, Diane mentioned that she got paid for her sales a few months after the event.

By this time I felt that headquarters should have contacted the store here and verified my claim and the ISBNs should not have entered into the picture. Anyway, I redid my letter, including sending a copy to the local store, but all these efforts proved futile. At this point I figured it might be better to end this caper and forget about the profit for that evening. I could have avoided all this had I been a prophet.

Sometimes, someone smiles down and looks after you because on one Sunday, I saw a feature in the Buffalo News by Karen Robinson, a woman who writes a column handling complaints by consumers against corporipoff America. I emailed her about my predicament and within a few days she called. A day later I spoke to a B & N company representative, Mary Ellen Keating, who wanted to settle the matter as quickly as possible. I guess you could say we had her "sweating bullets" – which would come in handy at the gun club. It might be more accurate to say that this was Karen's doing, since my efforts until this point had been completely futile, as I mentioned.

Ms. Keating mentioned that there had been a screw-up, but no one was to blame. What? Do I have to forget everything I learned in logic class? Well, I can tell you who was to blame. First, the local people were culprits because they knew that the writers had to get paid, within a reasonable amount of time and they didn't take care of getting at least one check sent. I got the corporate address from their web site, so if it was incorrect, the main office messed up. Since I wound up sending three letters, corporate headquarters gets blamed again. Certainly Cliff Claven may not be the best government worker, but from my experience, the mail does eventually get delivered with great regularity. Granted, it may arrive mashed, crushed, pureed, mangled and broken, but at least you receive the gist of what was sent. I think I would still have been able to cash the check.

A day after talking to Mary Ellen, by overnight mail, I got a check for the entire amount of my book sales. In addition, there was a one hundred dollar gift card. From that September evening, B & N should have gotten \$15.27 from the sales of what I wrote – I later discovered they took merely

twenty percent of sales. Instead they wound up paying approximately \$120 for their screw-ups.

I was grateful to Karen, so I sent her thanks and the following Sunday, my letter was in the business section of the paper with how it was resolved. Somehow the article seemed to exonerate the company, especially after such a long wait. It wound up being settled in June 2006, over eight months after the book signing. The headline was, “Barnes & Noble more than makes up for delayed payment.” I can only conclude that Karen either has a relative working at B & N or else Ms. Keating agreed to settle the matter, throwing in a \$100 bonus if Karen agreed to have it sound like the store should be recommended to consumers.

Needless to say, I used the bonus and bought a few books, but how can I recommend this store to anyone? I won't shop there and probably won't get involved in any more of those book signing evenings there. This last decision is based on the fact that this caper gets even worse, even before it started. Diane, who I mentioned earlier, another writer from the Authors Guild of Western New York, emailed me news of this event about a month before it was to take place. At first I thought I wouldn't get involved because of past experiences with this store, but then I thought that even if I sold nothing, I would get some exposure – not that kind, I'm not that type of person.

I called Rene, the woman who was in charge but didn't talk to her. Instead I talked to Dawn and she said that she was doing the event and would call me the next day. I'm not sure what she considers to be a “day,” but a week passed and I heard nothing from her. A week later I phoned again and she told me to be patient and she would get back to me soon. Another week passed but she failed to contact me.

By this time, it was getting close to the event and when I reached her, she mentioned that all the slots for authors were filled. I was furious but stayed calm on the phone with her, becoming even more determined. She said that there could be cancellations. I then asked if she wanted me to drop off my latest book and she said that would be fine. My house is nearby, so I stopped in with the book but she was at a meeting. Managers spend too much time at those things rather than working. I gave the book to someone who said she would deliver it.

The next day, I called Dawn again and asked if she got the book and she thanked me for taking the trouble. She also mentioned that no one had bowed out of the event but I just said that I would still be there with my books, despite no writer withdrawals. She then stated that she wouldn't have a flyer for me and I wouldn't be listed in the program but I told her that was not a problem; thus I became part of the night. I'm sure I sold more books there than some of the people in the program.

I mentioned my apprehension at first because I also got involved there on a similar evening the year before. On that occasion, I managed to sell no books. Two years before, I had given my books along with contact information – including my address, email address and phone number to Rene. She didn't contact me and when I reached her by phone, it turned out I wasn't part of the agenda. Why she didn't contact me I don't know. Maybe I should have sent her some Godiva chocolates!