



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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MY FIRST SALE by Madeline Hunter

I am sure that there are writers who have unusual first sale stories. The slam-dunk wonders certainly do. Or at least I always thought so. Since it took me so long to make my first sale I just assumed it took everyone that long. The common wisdom says it does.

Then I went on a signing tour with a dozen other writers. We found ourselves one day in a library, doing a panel discussion on writing. The first question was about our first sale.

I was sitting in the middle of that long table. To my amazement, every writer ahead of me described how she had sold her first manuscript. Not how she made her first sale, but how that first sale had been of her very first manuscript written. Ever. I was impressed. Dumbfounded. What were the odds all these slam-dunk wonders would be gathered in one place?

The microphone was handed to me. I looked out on the audience. I thought about making up a story. Something like:

I'd never written anything before but one day I had an idea for a story so I just sat down and wrote the book of my heart. Then I figured, what the heck, I'll send it to a publisher. Lo and behold three weeks later this editor called me and offered me a gazillion dollars and . . .

After all, it was what the audience wanted to hear. They were mostly aspiring novelists.

Instead I took a deep breath and told the truth. "I wrote a million words before I sold."

I am one of the writers who waited and waited, who wrote and wrote, who received so many rejections it started becoming funny. My first sale fulfilled every warning, prediction, cliché, and exhortation that unpublished writers hear. I am a poster child for the following truths:

1) Tenacity is Everything.

I began writing seriously in 1996. By seriously I mean that I wrote regularly, I completed manuscripts and I wanted to get published. I had been writing in other ways for years before that. It took me



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three years, six completed manuscripts and two long partials, and many rewrites and edits before I got the call. Like I said in that panel, a million words. I never counted my rejections - too depressing - but I collected an impressive stack of them from every publisher in the business.

2) A Sale Depends on the Right Manuscript Getting on the Right Editor's Desk at the Right Time.

I can vouch for this one too. The manuscript that first sold had been turned down by a good number of other editors. Some thought it was horrible, and were very explicit in explaining how. Others loved it but could not fit it in their list for one reason or another. Eventually it was bought by an editor who loved it so much that she fought to give me a big push and a major launch. Although bought first it was actually published second, and is titled *BY POSSESSION*.

3) Luck Plays a Big Role in Getting Published.

It sort of scares me how much luck was involved in my sale. I was getting rejections and decided to attend a conference - my first one - just to see if it might help. I received two appointments with editors. One of them, the one who eventually bought my book, rarely attended regional conferences and decided to attend this one at the last minute. She wasn't even on the editor list.

I totally blew the interview, by the way. Trust me, I was an idiot. I could hear myself babbling. So I cut it short. I had 7 precious minutes to pitch my book and after 3 I stopped talking because I assumed I would only make a bad situation worse if I kept going.

She asked to see it anyway. She ended up buying it.

What if I hadn't gone? What if she hadn't been there? What if I had pitched a different book (I had 6, after all)? What if. . . See what I mean? Scary.

4) You Need an Agent Who Loves Your Work.

I sure did. After all, she represented me through years of rejections. I doubt she took me on thinking it would take so long. Every submission was money out of her pocket and an act of trust that one day this would pay off. The truth is, she believed in my work more than I did.



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5) Getting the Call is One of the Most Exciting Days of Your Life.

My call came from my agent. You know how there is “jump up and down” excited? This was not that. This was bigger. This was “stunned while the world froze and mind emptied” excited. I was in a state of mild shock for about two weeks. The only thing I remember from that period is drinking a lot of champagne. My husband kept insisting on toasts whenever we told anyone. Gee, maybe I wasn’t in shock after all. Maybe I was just high.

6) After the Call, Everything Changes.

Post shock, reality created some interesting psychological issues for me. For example, rather suddenly every creative thought left my head and I was sure I would never have another one again. The first book that I wrote under contract was the most difficult book of my career. I was still writing because I loved it, but it had also become a job. It took me a while to deal with some of these changes. The thing about a dream is that it is. . .a dream. Having a dream come true can be a daunting experience.

I don’t usually tell beginning writers my story, unless I find myself on one of those panels. I am afraid it will be too depressing. Although maybe not, because it ended well. I do often tell it to writers who are waiting and working and dreaming like I was not all that long ago.

They already know that they won’t be slam-dunk wonders. I figure it might help them to know that all those truths up there really are true.