

'Bad track': bad science

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The first property we bought was a disaster. It was a flat with the most beautiful floor to ceiling windows. It should have been a lovely home, but there was a problem in the building. I moved in with my mother to try to escape it, while my husband painted walls through the night so we could sell it fast. Eight months later we moved out. We decided never to buy a house again, instead to become life-long renters. Why? Clearly we were no good at home ownership. As property investors, we had already developed a bad track record.

The first baby I had, Connie: when they put her slippery body up onto my bare chest, all I could say was 'she's so beautiful.' And she was; my eyes were full of wonder. But my labour had been 23 hours long, had nearly cost my baby her life near the end, and left me a wreck. I decided never to give birth again. Why? Well, I had 'bad track' in mothering, already.

My marriage was a long road that took in some stunning views, some gorgeous long stretches, before it ended where it did. But I've decided never to get married again. You know why. Bad track.

Oh, and I've decided to avoid falling in love again at all costs too. Obviously: bad track.

I have this author – her first and second beautiful, intelligent books didn't sell well. Her publishers decided not to publish her ever again. Other publishers also told me it would be too risky to take her on. 'With sales like these, her next book will be D.O.A. in the US,' a colleague advised me, wearily. Why? Bad track, of course.

Only one of these stories is true.

Bad track, bad track. I never want to hear these words again. I have heard them too often, already, for one career in publishing – one lifetime. I'm done with them. Of course we all have 'bad track' in multiple areas, commercial and personal. And then we get up, brush ourselves down, change path, do differently, hope for better luck, better help, better days.

Over the past ten years or so, published authors have learned to live in dread of developing bad track. Now that the majority of their book sales are recorded by retail-tracking companies such as Nielsen (who use the data to generate bestseller lists, and also sell it back to publishers for analysis), information about sales of an author's earlier works has become one of the most respectable and accepted measures by which publishers assess whether or not to publish their future work.

But I'm exasperated by the way such data, when used with only shallow analysis, traps writers into failure. Some publishers seem to be operating under false perceptions of what it takes to write a bestseller. There are many reasons why an author's last book might not have sold well: wrong jacket, bad timing, ill-judged title, poor representation, new sales director, too much

competition, no marketing support, editor left, retailer went bust that week – these are just some of the explanations I have heard, and most have nothing to do with the quality or appeal of the text. And yet publishers' sales teams are aware that they are pushing against a very heavy door when they try to convince a retailer that an author's new book should be supported even if his or her last book was not successful.

These decisions aren't personal: when a retailer has no opportunity to read an author's new work, their decisions are not based on taste or gut or hope or any real knowledge of the writer. So what you end up with is just the stark and wrongful use of data. After all, Nielsen data is based largely not on how customers responded to the author's last piece of writing, but to the way it was published and merchandised.

Of course retailers cannot get to know every author individually. But loyal editors do, and it is regrettable that many rewarding business and personal relationships are ruptured when it proves impossible to transform a sales team's 'vision' for an author's success after a disappointing debut or sales slide. In this way publishers miss some of their best opportunities.

Because it's not just misguided to cite only 'bad track' when considering whether to publish an author's new work, it's worse than that: it's bad science.

I hope I am not someone to boast, but for these purposes, allow me to tell you that I have been successful these past few years, and so have my clients, across literary and commercial fiction, women's fiction and crime. And you know what the common factor is between the most successful of them? They all have bad track. You want data? You want science? Study this. Every commercially successful author I represent has had bad track. Every single one had bad track until the book that was fought over by publishers at auction; until the book that became a bestseller.

I love publishing. I love the creative endeavour essential to putting books out into the world. But there are some aspects of our industry which frustrate me – such as the publisher's passion for the debut. I am a typical publishing person. I was a great book-eating girl who devoured six novels a week because that was the maximum number my local library would let me borrow. And yet the insatiable appetite that we all feel as readers often manifests itself in the publishing industry as the desire for that which is different or new.

We thrill to the new – to 'debut' – like cartographers clipping fast into uncharted waters. What is it about our joy in writing that pulls us so strongly to 'new voices' and 'fresh takes'? It's not wrong for us all to want to discover new writers and to hope for our cultural language to evolve. But many debut authors are published with a marketing investment and inflated hope of success that is generated at a literal cost to other, more experienced writers who are truly wonderful at their craft, and who themselves

are developing and offering readers ongoing riches. And what is the only real advantage these debut writers have over their more experienced peers? No track.

(What of all the second novels? This is a literary agent's nightmare alright: hundreds of second novels, pressing against the bookshop doors, knocking to get in, with the big fat debuts on the inside cackling, 'this was you, last year!')

As an agent, I look after authors, not books: one of my responsibilities is to keep my clients in work for life. And my experience is that when you offer a good writer loyal patronage, and creative partnership, and close reading, and serious study of where their interests and skills lie and how that intersects with what readers are looking for, their books become not only the best books of their kind but also commercially successful. It might be an author's first, second, fourth or seventh book that becomes a bestseller. What I know is that they'll get there. If they're as talented and hardworking as I think they are, and I give them my support, they will get there.

I have been plotting with good publishers for years now to 'trick the system' in order to keep talented authors in print – often but not always through changing an author's name in order to relaunch them as 'debut'. It isn't as cynical a strategy as you might imagine. My authors have tended to evolve towards the writer they most want to be, shedding pseudonyms and the bounds of genre-writing as they progress through their careers.

But recently an author of mine was pressed hard by a potential new publisher as to why she had decided to write under a different identity. 'I think she's just trying to hide bad track,' I was told the editor commented afterwards. 'Has this author written under another name before?' I was asked by a publisher in New York recently, about a different client. 'We have to inform our sales

team if so. They don't like us to hide bad track – it's not deemed to be honest.' Wait: are these retailers and publishers now suggesting that an author's poor sales are innate to their very being? That, no matter the book, the genre, the date, the publisher or the author branding, if an author has experienced poor sales success before, they have to carry that failure (that failure on the part of others, who failed them) around their neck like a stone, forever?

For book lovers browsing in a shop, any previously unread author is 'debut'. Consider my writer, whose brilliant novels were bought by so few. Her readers couldn't care less that her last two books weren't merchandised in the local supermarket. So what?

In our data-rich society, we have to learn to get smarter as data analysts. Sometimes we have to ignore the data altogether. And sometimes we need to stop and check we're in possession of all the facts. Now that you know that all my bestselling authors have bad track, you can see that the most exciting thing I could send you tomorrow would be a book by an author who has never found favour before. Just as the best decision my husband and I ever made was to buy our little house in London – the second property we owned, a beautiful home in which I gave birth to my second child, my lovely boy. I'm just about to walk out the door with him and his sister now. It's a beautiful new day for me. I'm the great book-eating girl. I know I can write my own story again, and again, and again. Let's go again. ●

Lizzy Kremer is a literary agent at David Higham Associates. A version of this article was first published on Lizzy's regular blog, publishingforhumans.postagon.com, on which she posts about 'agenting, publishing and human being'.