



## Publishing Nonfiction Books on Spirituality

benebell wen

### MODULE 5

## Commentary

*In Modules 1 through 3, commentary was provided as downloadable audio files. However, by Module 4, the laptop computer I used to record the audio went defunct, so the course materials that should have been presented as audio, with the category label "AUD" were just the PDF documents of my transcript notes prepared for audio recording. For the final Module 5, what should be the audio lecture portion of the course is now presented as written commentaries. Much of the commentary was written with the intention of being script, so please forgive the casual, informal style of the content. In the course syllabus, all Commentary files will bear the category label "ESS" for blog-style essay.*

## Author Endorsements (Book Blurbs)

The endorsement. Praise.

These are the words used in the publishing industry to describe book blurbs.

Here's the thing about book blurbs. They're meaningless, and everyone in the industry knows it. But everyone *outside* of the industry think book blurbs are everything. Most uninitiated readers take book blurbs rather seriously. "Oh my goodness, *Publishers Weekly* gave a raving review of this book!" not knowing that you can actually *pay* a couple hundred dollars for a raving review from *Publishers Weekly* to print on your book cover. Same with *Kirkus Reviews*. For a couple hundred bucks, you can get a blurb that, for all intents and purposes, looks legit.

Now, the book blurbs from established authors and industry experts tend to be legit. Those are real, and authentic. Eh. To a certain extent. Here's something I learned once I was invited into the inner circle. There is an unspoken industry rule that as an established author, if a newbie author approaches you for an endorsement, unless you have a very good, very compelling reason why you can't offer an endorsement, then you have to give it.

What are some compelling reasons?

You have cancer or are too busy right now caring for a loved one with cancer so you can't read the newbie author's book and write a blurb.

Yep. That's an acceptable reason for an established author to not offer up a blurb.

Or maybe: The thesis of the newbie author's book is one you don't support.

But then you better take the time to really explain yourself, and frankly, if the whole reason why you couldn't offer a blurb is time constraints, it takes more time to appropriately say no than to simply say yes and submit something fluffy.

Back in 2008 the New York Times published a great piece on book blurbs, noting how established authors have a tacit understanding that they're obligated to volunteer free book blurbs to newbie authors:

For the most famous writers, blurbing is often a matter of noblesse oblige. Many authors blurb down, endorsing former students (Joyce Carol Oates on Jonathan Safran Foer), less celebrated writers working in a similar vein or up-and-comers who validate the blurbers' own influence without challenging their supremacy (Salman Rushdie on Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" and Kiran Desai's "Inheritance of Loss"; Chinua Achebe on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Half of a Yellow Sun").

There is also the practice of lateral blurbing. Lateral blurbing is the phenomenon of you scratch my back, I scratch yours. Authors of equivalent repute blurb each other's books, and for the most part, readers are none the wiser.

Again, there is a tacit understanding that established authors should not decline giving a book blurb. There are many reasons for this. For starters, writers and editors are a gossipy bunch. You bet if you reject offering a blurb to an author that author's publishing house and all the editors at that house will know. Editors transfer jobs to different publishing houses all the time and talk. They share gossip. I know this for a fact because I've been privy to such gossip.

Eventually, an established author acting like a diva will have gained a bad reputation among editors and publishing houses without even really knowing it. To avoid that, established authors just take the easy road and give blurbs freely. Plus, they know that everyone "in the know" knows that blurbs are obligatory fluff. In a weird way, giving blurbs makes you, the established author, look better. It implies that you are gracious, generous, and "a good sport."

To me, how a well-known author treats new writers asking for book blurbs says a lot about that person's true colors. Author and scholar Mary K. Greer in the tarot world is extraordinarily gracious, and as big as she is, she never throws her weight around. She's beyond kind to new, unknown writers in the tarot world and at tarot events, treats fellow big name tarot folk and young, aspiring tarot newbies with the same amount of attention and care. As a result, she is renowned by all as not just incredibly knowledgeable in her field, but also a kindred spirit. You would do well to model yourself after Mary K. Greer.

On the other hand, there are some renowned authors in the occult community that have gained a secret, behind-the-scenes reputation for being complete asshats. A certain author declined offering me a blurb and was candid about why: I did not cite his work in my book. Since I did not cite *his* books in *my* book, he wasn't going to give an endorsement. He then hinted that I could write in a reference to his book and if I did that, then he would be more than happy to give his endorsement.

I declined. I didn't get a blurb from him. My editor at the publishing house assured me that was not normal protocol. There is no rule, spoken or unspoken, that you have to cite someone for that someone to give you an author endorsement. That made me feel a little better.

Then I confided in other well-known authors I'm close to in the occult community and it turns out well before I came along, this author has already gained a reputation among other well-known authors for being an asshat. He is, secretly, one of the great disappointments of the occult world. Who he appears to be through his published work and who he actually is in real life were two entirely different personas.

Giving book blurbs is about being supportive of other writers, especially newbie up-and-coming writers. To *not* give a book blurb to an up-and-coming writer is to imply that you are *not* supportive of up-and-coming writers, and no established writer wants to give that impression.

So as a newbie author, be ambitious, be bold, and reach out to established authors for your endorsements. Chances are really high that they will give it.

With that said, once you become an established author yourself, know the unspoken rules. If an up-and-coming writer approaches you for an endorsement, know that you are pretty much obligated to give one. Yet do not see it as a chore or go about it with a negative attitude. This is about celebrating the new generating coming up after you. This is about being supportive of the rising stars in your professional community.

Also, once you're an established author, do not ever gain an air of snobbery over new up-and-coming still-unpublished writers. Honestly, you never know who is going to be who. That newbie, who-is-she-again-and-where-did-she-come-from unpublished writer might just become the next big thing in your field, overpowering even you, and let me tell you: karma's a bitch. To the established authors and once you are an established author yourself: be nice and gracious to everybody.

So, in the unlikely and rare event that you, an established author, are for whatever reason unable to give that blurb or author endorsement to a new author, take the time to nice and gracious in your reply.

Another point: you know what's fair grounds for an established author to decline giving you an author endorsement? Your shitty query letter. Do not send a shitty query letter. Your query letter has to be personalized.

It needs to be evident in the first paragraph of your query letter that you *even know who the hell* this “established author” is. Don’t just query someone because that person is “famous.” Are you familiar with that author’s work, and I mean *actually* familiar? Have you read that author’s body of work? Do you own a copy of that author’s book? What do you like about this author that inspired you to request a book blurb? Why *this* author for a book blurb over any other author?

If you send a boilerplate, generic, it’s-so-obvious-you-put-zero-thought-into-this query letter, then the established author has every right in the world to say no. A sample query letter to an established author requesting a book blurb is provided among your course materials as a Handout. There’s also a template Log of Endorsement Queries to help you track your efforts.

Don’t place too much importance on book blurbs when you see them. Most insiders in the publishing industry know they’re pretty useless and chances are high that most of the public figures giving the book blurbs haven’t actually read the book.

Now you’re wondering—if book blurbs are such bull, why bother? Well, by and large readers do not know that book blurbs are bull. And unfortunately, a lack of blurbs might just work against you. A lack of blurbs might convey to a prospective reader, “No one famous is paying attention to this book so why should I?” That is an incredibly unfair judgment call for a reader to make, but unfortunately, it’s the oft-reached conclusion when a book is blurb-less.

So get a couple of blurbs.

I made the mistake of asking for too many for *Holistic Tarot*. Call me an eager beaver. I was also a newbie and had no idea what I was doing. So I went overboard.

For *The Tao of Craft*, my personal life and day job working life took over and I didn’t have the time I needed to devote to promoting that book, so I didn’t get as many blurbs as I should have for my second book. So I went in the opposite direction of *Holistic Tarot* and didn’t get enough.

Seek out balance. A total of 5 blurbs is good. 5 to 10 endorsements is a very healthy number to query for. More than 10 and it’s just excess. I learned that the hard way.