

Part Four

*Winning the Hearts of
Readers*

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Chapter 27

Introduction to Winning the Hearts of Readers

“**M**any people, myself among them, feel better at the mere sight of a book.” Like the quoted novelist Jane Smiley, I feel a bit lost without a book nearby. I was blessed with parents and other loved ones who read multiple books to me daily. In fact, one of my first five words was *book*. This delightful saturation of words and pictures, of stories and imagination, has been my life since I was a toddler. Not too many days have gone by that I don’t have at least one book on my person. I even ran an unofficial (and probably unsanctioned) fiction-lending library out of my dorm room in college.

Since 2015, when I started ReadingIsMySuperPower.org, I have also been an active part of the book community. In addition to being an avid reader, I am a blogger, a reviewer, a first reader, an influencer, a contest judge, a speaker, a conference coordinator, and a publicity tour company founder. In a nutshell, I get to live, breathe, and sleep books. (Is there any better pastime??) With all the various hats I wear in this industry, I have the privilege of chatting with many authors at different stages of publishing and marketing. No matter the hat or the stage, the question that comes up most frequently in our

conversations is, “What can I do to get my book in front of new readers?”

Likely, you’ve asked this question in your own writing journey, or perhaps you’ve asked one of these other variations of the same tune:

- How do I find readers who want to read my genre?
- What do I do with readers once I’ve found them?
- How do I *keep* readers?
- How do I get them to read my book?
- How do I get readers to *buy* my book without selling my soul in the process?
- What draws readers to certain authors, and what turns them away from others?

In our time here together, studying the reader and reviewer gatekeepers of the publishing industry, I hope to equip you with some practical tools that answer those questions. It is also my prayer that you close these chapters with a new appreciation for reviewers, bloggers and Bookstagrammers, and for every reader who invests in a book and can’t quit talking about it. After all, to quote author Amanda Dykes, what a reader takes from and brings to a book “makes the story come alive in a magical way that nothing else can even come close to replicating ... Without them, the story equation is incomplete.”

On Finding Readers

Before you can get your book in front of new readers, you obviously must *find* them and then plant yourself where they spend time.

Most readers are, by nature, introverted. This is certainly not true for all, but many of us recharge by being alone and, well, reading. We tend to prefer low-contact socializing, but we love to talk about books. We are on most social platforms, and we gravitate toward others who

read the same books that we love. While more difficult to find us in person, it's not impossible. We do still love spending hours in libraries, bookstores, and even book festivals. Readers have established active discussion groups on Facebook, creative networks on Instagram and TikTok, and popular hashtags on Twitter. We've also infiltrated the less obvious places you'd look for readers, including a community of over 2 million members who ask others to 'suggest me a book' on Reddit. Readers are everywhere, waiting to be found by you and your books.

In equal turn, however, this 'everywhere-ness' can be overwhelming for authors who already have limited bandwidth. Juggling family life, an additional career or two, writing books, and marketing books doesn't leave much margin, does it? From Facebook to Instagram to TikTok to local festivals and everything in between, how can you best focus your time and energy in looking for readers?

Prioritize

The truth is this: You must filter out some of the options and pick the focus that works best for you. If you don't, you run the considerable risk of burning out on the social/promotion tasks and losing your passion to write those yummy words readers crave. When you do give yourself the freedom to zero in on one or two options, you will invest the largest portion of your budgeted engagement time in platforms that best fit you and your books.

Trying to spend time promoting your work in all the places becomes more like a game of Whac-A-Mole instead of a good return on your time and energy. I understand the fear of missing out on readers through other platforms, but sometimes we are most effective when we become more selective. One of my favorite movie lines of all time (from the 1995 version of *Sabrina*, with Harrison Ford and Julia Ormond) says the same thing a different way: "More isn't always better, Linus. Sometimes it's just more." This is not only true of material things or money; it's also true of book promotion.

Are you most comfortable and most familiar with Facebook? Do you love taking (or looking at) pretty pictures of books on Instagram? Have you dared to brave Twitter and found it valuable for your writing or other areas of your life? Does TikTok feed your creativity? Are you more likely to be on Reddit than Goodreads? Find your sweet spot on social media—that intersection of where you are most comfortable and where the readers of your genre most congregate—and give yourself the freedom to make *that* your target for finding new readers. Feel free to engage on more than one platform if you have the time and energy; just be careful not to spread yourself too thin. And if you reach a point where you feel you’ve exhausted the benefits of a certain platform or you’re ready to stretch your skills elsewhere, it’s okay to change your focus.

These principles apply to in-person engagement as well as social media. If you have a great local library system or bookstore, utilize their established outreach resources and schedule a talk or a signing. If you’d rather attend a festival, book related or not, set up a booth to sell your books if it’s cost effective to do so. The point is, you shouldn’t try to do it all. Prioritize for best results.

It’s worth noting here that you still may feel caught in that Whac-A-Mole game as you prioritize through trial and error. However, once you’ve found the sweet spot we discussed, it should become more of an enjoyable carousel ride. (I call dibs on the purple pony!)

Teamwork

It’s also not a requirement to do any of this ‘reader seeking’ on your own. Team up with your fellow authors for a Facebook party or an Instagram cross-promotion. Share the cost of a festival booth with other local authors. Utilize a paid service like Booksweeps or Author XP and their multi-author giveaway promotions that increase your audience through newsletter subscribers and BookBub followers. (Note: These paid services tend to attract freebie-seekers who will unsubscribe when they don’t win. It can still be a good way to get

your email list or BookBub numbers started, though, and you will likely retain some of those new subscribers after all.) Writing may be a solitary pursuit, but finding new readers doesn't always have to be.

Another great way to benefit from teamwork and put your work in front of new readers is to do what you do best—write. Collaborate with other authors who write in your genre and release a collection of novellas around a certain theme. (Christmas is a great time for this, by the way. Readers eat up Christmas novella collections like candy.) Ideally, at least one of these contributors should be an anchor author who has a larger audience, but this doesn't have to be the case.

This principle most clearly plays out in the television industry. Networks often sandwich (or 'hammock') a new show between two of their most popular ones in that evening's programming. They are working on the assumption that viewers won't want to change channels, thereby giving the new show a ready-made audience. If those viewers like that first episode sandwiched between their favorite shows, they are likely to stay on as fans. So, too, can a collection of authors gain new readers for each other.

I may have grabbed the book because my favorite author is in it, but I'll read these other three or four stories because I'm already here. Chances are I'll love some of their voices, too, and start hunting for those new-to-me authors' backlists and future releases as a result.

I Found Some Readers. Now What?

I realize that at this point, other than giving you the freedom to prioritize certain avenues of promotion over others, I've likely not yet told you much that you didn't already know. Rest assured that in the remaining chapters of this section, we will be taking an in-depth look at reader engagement (including ideas for social media) and giving you practical ways to win the hearts of reader and influencer gatekeepers. Without your prioritizing, however, the rest of what I say won't matter much because you'll be too overwhelmed to do any of it.

Wrapping it Up

You can't do it all. Prioritizing in this area is critical to protecting your creative spirit and leaving you with enough energy left over to write, write, write.

- **Takeaway One:** Find the social media platform where you are most comfortable and where your readers most congregate and invest the majority of your promotional time and energy there.
- **Takeaway Two:** You don't have to go it alone. Team up with fellow authors in reader engagement and content production to share the burden and introduce yourself to their ready-made audience.

Stay with me. We're going to get into the nitty-gritty soon. But first, let's clear the air about some terms and misconceptions.