



The **LOST ART** of automotive books

TAKE OUT RETURNS, DISCOUNT RATES, AND YOUR ACTUAL COSTS, AND THE MATH IS SIMPLE: IT'S A GREAT HOBBY



Colin at a book signing; sadly he's seated only on a chair, not a pile of cash

many self-publishing options exist (such as Amazon), but with such a specialized product, I've found using an established automotive-title publisher makes life a lot easier. That, of course, has a great impact on...

So, I will get rich from all this, right?

Um, no. If you self-publish and do it right, in a few years you will probably cover your initial cash outlay, and then you'll make whatever margin you place on each book.

If a publisher signs you (and that can be a feat on its own), they will likely offer a small advance — from \$2,000 to \$6,000 — but it is just that, an advance against future earnings that come as a result of a royalty based on the wholesale price of the book. This is typically 5%–10%, so if a book has a \$20 wholesale cost, you would get \$1–\$2 per book sold. If your book doesn't sell, they will charge you back from the advance, and any returns to the publisher are

also charged back to you.

There are also various price levels. For example, many publishers sell books that aren't moving at a "high discount" price to places such as Overstock, which obviously affects your royalty. Keep in mind if you get a publisher to sign a contract with you, there is no guarantee they will print the book, and if it's your first title, don't expect the advance and royalty rate to be generous.

But this thing will sell 100,000 copies, so that's like \$200k, right?

Not likely. A good-selling car book will be around 5,000 copies. A great one? Maybe 15,000. Take out returns, discount rates, and your actual cost of putting the book together, and the math is simple: It's a great hobby.

I can just grab Internet photos, right?

Only if you want to keep attorneys busy. No publisher will print a book without proper photo releases for every picture in the book, along with proper credit. Plus the quality has to be exceptionally good to print well, and that is another struggle, especially with archival images.

I've done it again. I just spent the past few weeks locked in a room finishing up writing a car book. This was my fourth, and it's something I have now sworn three times in the past eight years I'd never, ever do again.

So why do I keep doing it? I honestly don't know. I think it's because I like the accurate historical record that great car books create — something that's becoming rare as the Internet's Wikifacts and open forum opinions take over. Publishing has become a tough business. Witness how many bookstores we had 10 years ago and how many remain today.

But what is encouraging to me is that not a week goes by that I don't get asked what is involved in writing a car book because somebody has an idea for one. So if you're one of those who have something you'd like to see in print, and are even a little curious about doing it yourself, here are some answers to the common questions.

Do I need a publisher?

It depends what your goal is. If you want to self-publish, just know all production issues and distribution are on you, and that can be a full-time job. A few authors have done quite well with this, and today

And while you'd think people would be thrilled to see their work or cars in print, it doesn't always work like that. If you're like me, you'll end up spending about twice your advance on photography. And let's face it, without great photos, people don't get too excited. You need them.

How long does it take to write a book?

That's a question nobody can answer. It takes me about a year to put together a book, write the text, source and assemble the photos, write captions, and other less-glamorous tasks such as arm-wrestling the publisher over design and word count.

Make sure your facts are perfect — screw them up and you're sunk. Figure you'll need at least 50,000 words of text, and about 25,000 words for captions. And if you're like me, to get those 75,000 words you're really happy with, you're going to start at about 750,000 and whittle it down. Get a comfy chair and a room you enjoy being locked in.

After you get what you think is the completed work, for about the next eight months, prepare to go back and forth with the publisher on proofs and other details to get a final product that everybody is happy with. Be prepared. The process is tedious at best.

The real rewards

Now, as daunting as all of this may seem, if you like to write and you have a topic you are passionate about, it is still one of the most rewarding things you can do. There is nothing like seeing the first book off the press, or going to a car show and talking to people who love what you wrote and appreciate it. Plus, there is no better way to stick it to that English teacher who said you "better learn a trade" than to alert them that your name is now in the Library of Congress.


So how do you get started? Run your idea past friends and family who are familiar with the topic you want to explore. Want to write about



The reward for years of work

always need a lot more than you think.

The most important thing? Be passionate about the subject and let that come through on the page. That makes the difference between a book people want to read and one people just thumb through. Make writing about cars an extension of your hobby and not a job, because the minute it becomes a job, you've just made a career choice that will ruin your hobby rather than bolster it.

And, please, this October, consider buying my new book *Shelby Mustang: Fifty Years*. I've got an advance to cover and photos to pay for. 

how to restore Buick Stage 1 cars? Approach the GS Club and offer to write for their club magazine for a while and get your feet wet. Send writing samples to magazines (like this one) and volunteer to cover a few events in the hopes of getting your stories in print. Establish a track record of good writing that a publisher can look at when the time comes to talk to them. Take good pictures of everything you'd want to include in your book and start building a photo library; you're going to need over 300 pictures, and to get there — well, it is just like whittling down words, you

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