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Book Description: HAUNTED BY SIN

Following the trail of a dismembered corpse, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji arrive at the gates of Yi City: an old, abandoned town shrouded in mist and restless spirits. A fiendish foe awaits them in the shadows, heralding a tale of heartbreak and tragedy. When the mysterious corpse's identity is finally revealed, the hunt for its killer plunges Wei Wuxian back into the depths of the cultivation world's politics, where he must keep his enemies close and Lan Wangji even closer.

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As a young writer, my naiveté about the publishing process nearly led me to financial ruin. Here's how to avoid my mistakes.

The first thing I tell debut authors is this: Assume nothing.

If just one person had sat me down when I signed my first book contract and explained how publishing works, how nothing is guaranteed, and how it often feels like playing Russian Roulette with words, I would have made much sounder financial and creative decisions. I would have set a foundation for a healthy life as an artist, laying the groundwork to thrive in uncertainty, to avoid desperation, panic, and bad decisions that would affect me for years to come.

How would my life be different if a fellow writer or someone in the industry had told me that the money I'd be receiving for my advances was absolutely no indication of what I could make on future book deals? What pain could I have avoided if they had advised me not to spend that money as though there would be more where that came from? I suspect I may have avoided a near nervous breakdown and not come so perilously close to financial ruin and creative burnout. But no one came forward.

Let me back up. One of the most respected publishing houses in the world gave me \$100,000 to write two books, one of which was already finished, and I was feeling... well, fancy.

As a kid who'd once stood in line with her mother to get food stamps, I could not believe the figures in my bank account.

Now, I want to acknowledge the inherent privilege that I hold as a white, educated, middleclass American. The problems I write about here are "struggles" many people would love to have. They are good problems. Lucky, even. Growing up with a lack of financial literacy didn't mean there weren't opportunities for me out there because of my positioning in the world. I had a leg up, even when it felt like I was in the trenches. Access equals privilege, and I understand that. I try hard to acknowledge my privilege and not be part of the problem, but didn't do so explicitly in the original version of this article. Revising is my favorite part of the writing process, and clearly a big part of my personal life. In fact I wish I could go back and revise the past six years.

I did play it smart, though: I didn't quit my day job, and wrote a larger-than-usual check to my student loan company when the advance came through. I didn't know if this was a onetime thing or not.

Each new book is like a weekend in Vegas: Maybe I'll get lucky, maybe I won't.

But when I sold a trilogy to another publisher the following year for over \$250,000 dollars (even now I cannot believe I wrote that sentence and, furthermore, that it's true), I really thought I had made it — forever, not just for a moment. Not for this one book deal. Forever. Otherwise, I reasoned, they would never have paid me such enormous sums. These publishers must be investing in me for the long run. I was one of their own.

It had happened twice in a row, these six-figures: Surely I had somehow become one of the chosen few. After years of research and struggle to break out in such a ferociously competitive industry, I'd somehow come out ahead.

But in that process, I'd somehow missed several critical aspects of the business, and that was on me (to some extent). Surely there were writers who had gotten the memo about how advances worked, and the ins and outs of publishing. But so much of an aspiring writer's life — and so many of the resources available to them — is focused on getting that first book deal. What came after was beside the point.

It would also be fair to say that the same energy and drive that had landed me a book deal in the first place guided much of my decision-making process in ways that weren't always helpful. I reasoned that if I'd achieved the impossible once, why not again? Someone has to be on the bestseller list, win the National Book Award, have the big movie deal.

Did anyone working with me — agency, publishing team — tell me that a sumptuous advance was not something I should depend on or get used to? Or that, in fact, it's extraordinarily common in the publishing industry for untested debut writers to be paid large sums that they may never see again? No. Did anyone in the publishing house take me under their wing and explain to me how the company made decisions about future book deals? No. Did the publisher tap a more seasoned author on their list to mentor me, as many major corporations encourage within their companies? No. Did the MFA in writing program that I was part of, in any way, arm me with the knowledge to protect and advocate for myself in the publishing world? No.

After that second advance came through, I stepped into my dream life: I quit my day job to write full-time, moved to New York City, bought \$15 cocktails, and learned (with astonishing

speed) not to worry about prices when ordering at a restaurant. I said yes to travel (often book research I wasn't reimbursed for), concert tickets, new shoes, and finally being able to buy people the kind of presents I felt they deserved. I donated large sums of money to organizations I cared about, and delighted in the feeling that I was making a real difference.

Did I pay off my student loans? No, though I made a few large payments. Did I set money aside for retirement? No. My reasoning was that after the next book I sold, I'd take care of all that. Right now, I had to suck the marrow out of life — and invest heavily in trying to build my author brand. To that end: an expensive website no one told me I didn't need, and swag to give out at events that didn't make a difference at all for my social media presence or book sales.

As it turned out, it wasn't really my dream life: When I wasn't writing like mad to meet deadlines, come up with new books to sell, and stay relevant in the industry, I was hustling like nobody's business, trying to build my brand in hopes of getting on that coveted list. Forever.

My publisher didn't tell me I had to get that website. And no one said I should be buying fancy cocktails. That was all my choice, a combination of an almost manic pursuit of *joie de vivre* (Fitzgerald would understand!) and an attempt to keep up with successful authors who seemed to know what they were doing. I figured they had cracked the code — swag, website — and I just needed to follow suit.

Despite making some poor choices, I did try very hard to do right by this unexpected reversal of fortunes. The school where my husband taught had a financial planner that offered services to teachers, so we met with him and his partner, but it was obvious they only wanted to sell us life insurance. Our tax guy told us what to write off, but we had no idea what we were doing. No writer I knew had someone they trusted for financial advice, and our unconventional earnings made getting clear advice very difficult.

The sum of \$375,000 (the combined total of my two big advances), less my agent's commission of 15% and taxes, is about what a teacher in the New York City public school system makes over the course of, say, four years. I lived in Brooklyn, a borough of one of the most expensive cities in the world. While I was buoyed by the very small, very occasional foreign book deal, this was it until there were more books in the pipeline.

Let's take a pause. What could I have done differently? I could have opted to move to a city that was less expensive, certainly. (But I'm an artist, so throw me a bone! I'd wanted to live in New York City my whole life, so that was always the plan, even before I got my book deal.)

I could have chosen not to quit my day job, but it would have been tough. I had five books under contract at once, plus the enormous task of building and maintaining an author brand. I began a two-year MFA program two weeks after I got my first book deal — a program I entered in the hopes of ensuring I'd always have work as a professor, even if book deals were low, or slow in coming. I had no idea (and was not told upon entering the program) how nearly impossible it is to find work as faculty in any college or university, regardless of how qualified you are.

I could have (and now wish more than anything that I had) paid off my student loans.

I could have put myself on a strict budget — one that assumed I was never going to get big payouts as a writer again.

I could have saved a down payment for a house.

And I could have put money aside each year for retirement.

But I didn't do any of those things.

As the royalty statements came in, and a foreign book contract was dropped due to low sales, my worry began to grow. I started to notice that my publishers, by and large, weren't promoting my books. One sent me on tour, which is about as luxe as it can get for an author, but very few people showed up at the events, and that was that.

Panic began to set in when my first book wasn't released in paperback — never a good sign. When the third book in my trilogy came out, I received a call from the publisher two days after its release to say how sorry they were the trilogy hadn't worked out as they'd hoped.

I couldn't catch a foothold on literary social media, and my following had plateaued, no matter how much I reworked my approaches.

Fast-forward to my third book deal, for a contemporary novel. This was after I'd already won a PEN award for my debut novel (the Susan P. Bloom Discovery Award), garnered several starred reviews, had multiple books on important lists, and worked hard on author-branding and social media. I expected my advance would be commensurate with the last one the publisher I'd submitted this new book to had given me: \$50,000 per book; that big debut two-book deal.

What other job would lower your salary after getting such great performance reviews? But by this time, I'd heard some water-cooler talk among authors that if your sales numbers aren't great, it can affect your next advance. But no one tells you your numbers, so I really had no idea where I stood.

Whenever I asked, I either received no answer or a vague, "Oh I'm sure the book's doing great, just keep writing." Writers are often kept in the dark to such a degree that we don't even know our book release date until a Google alert tells us that our book — which we may not have even been paid for yet (true story) — has shown up on Amazon.

After the acquisitions meeting for this most recent novel, my agent told me the news wasn't great, as my first two titles hadn't "earned out." This term simply means you sold enough books to cover your advance and can now begin earning royalties. The publisher still wanted to work with me — something I was thankful for — but they were only willing to offer me what my most recent book had made: just over \$17,000. Never mind that the book was critically praised and had made some of those nice lists. It wasn't making money.

It is a business, after all. However warm the fuzzies might get because we love reading, there's still a bottom line. Which is fair... to a point.

My editor, a real gem who believes in my work and is currently editing my most ambitious fiction project to date, advocated hard for me, and the acquisitions team agreed to increase the amount of my advance to \$35,000. This, of course, is less my agent's commission of 15% and Uncle Sam's cut. When it was all said and done, the advance wasn't even enough to live on, at least not in Brooklyn. In reality, they were paying me less than half the salary of a local public-school teacher.

I do more marketing than most marketing professionals, including loads of promotional work such as interviews, guest posts, and podcast appearances. My publishers have never made so much as a bookmark for me (though twice they agreed to design them if I paid for the printing). If I wanted to go to a book festival or important industry conference out of town, I had to pay, unless the festival organizer covered the costs, which they rarely do. I couldn't afford to do that, which meant I was unable to connect with librarians, booksellers, and industry professionals to amplify my books and, thus, my sales. I have a book coming out next year that is getting more marketing attention already, but I know better than to get my hopes up. Each new book is like a weekend in Vegas: Maybe I'll get lucky, and maybe I won't.

When I got that \$35,000 advance, desperation set in. I'd been offered a two-book deal, but decided to only sign for one, in the hopes that I could somehow garner better sales and try for a higher advance the next time. None of the people in the room (so to speak) warned that the next time around the advance might be lower. Perhaps my team at the agency and publishing house had as much faith as I did in the book, and truly believed that this one would be the ticket, since they often spoke of wanting me to "break out." Or maybe the people who were making this deal knew, as I did, that we were throwing coins into a wishing well. At the end of the day, I decided that this book deal was better than no book deal. We signed the papers, and made a wish.

That book didn't earn out either, and so the advance for my next book with this publisher was only \$25,000 — half of what they had given me for my first deal and \$10,000 less than the next deal, a year before. In retrospect, I should have taken that two-book deal.

I make sure [aspiring writers] internalize that their fate in this industry isn't entirely in their own hands, no matter how good they are, or how much they hustle.

The smaller the advances got, the more strain I began to experience. Suddenly, the credit card couldn't be paid off, and I was emailing my agent's assistant to inquire about the advances I'd yet to receive for tiny foreign deals — I dearly needed the \$2,000 those Eastern Europeans owed me.

While no amount of mentorship could have determined the outcome of my book sales, it would have helped me make more informed decisions about the books I did sell, and how I spent the money I earned. Instead, I'd dug myself into a hole, juggling multiple projects I'd sold out of desperation, hoping that this one would be the pivot to change the course of my sales. I found myself with more deadlines than ever, but even less time to write, since I'd had to become ever more dependent on side hustles.

Added to the financial despair was shame, depression, and fear. All I could think was that I had wasted the one opportunity the universe had given me to write my way out. Instead, I'd written myself back into the prison of nearly all the people I knew: living paycheck to paycheck; without reliable health insurance; little saved for retirement; no property; and one big emergency away from total ruin. This, as an author published by Big Five publishers, with multiple books out, still more under contract, a PEN award, and critical acclaim.

I pivoted, creating new projects that challenged me to no end and were way outside my comfort zone. While I was genuinely excited by them, I was also fighting with everything in me to stay in the game, to not let my dream of being a lifelong professional writer slip through my grasp after a brief flirtation with the big time.

Of course, I also needed to keep money coming in while trying very hard to write things I cared about, and improve my craft with each project. Perhaps I put on too good a face. So prolific! So productive! Maybe she's born with it, maybe it's... Maybelline?

The range of my advances had gone from \$75,000 per book (my highest advance) to \$20,000 per book (lowest) over the course of five years. The level of work was the same regardless of the advance, maybe even higher. The expectation placed on me — and that I placed on myself — to write these books well soared, but I had the sinking suspicion I was on the verge of being an acquisitions pariah, a financial liability.

Fast forward to right now: I've moved away from New York City to Durham, North Carolina, a much more affordable city. I've embraced the Friday Night Lights mantra as my own: Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose. While I still have four books under contract and am hopeful they will do well, my sense of vocation has expanded.

Now, much of my passion is invested in helping other writers avoid the mistakes I made; writing pieces like this, that shed light on the issues, toxicity, and dangers of the publishing industry. We need more writers who are willing to mentor debut authors like the one I once was, as well as aspiring writers.

There is such a strong focus on how to break into the industry, yet very little guidance once a writer finds herself walking past those gatekeepers. Here are my takeaways:

If you're a writer, don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't worry about seeming too green, too naive. You do yourself no favors when you apologize for yourself. You have a seat at the table. Dig in. Ask for seconds.

Always be an advocate for yourself. Wanting answers and seeking accountability is not demanding, it's good business. Know what you want, value what you have to offer, and ask for what you need — from your publishers, your agency, and anyone else on your team.

Seek quality mentorship from writers who are further ahead of you on the path, and have the kind of career and author presence you aspire to. Don't engage in water-cooler complaining sessions. Be an active character in your story, and someday, when you become the experienced author, pay it forward.

In some ways, I'm just as passionate about artist advocacy and education as I am about writing itself. I tell my students and clients to assume nothing. I teach them about the industry. I tell them they deserve a seat at the table, and try to impart the craft and story tools they'll need to get there. And I make sure they internalize that their fate in this industry isn't entirely in their own hands, no matter how good they are, or how much they hustle.

It has been an unexpected plot twist in my narrative, but I've found that mentoring writers is like writing itself: Words act as lamps in the darkness, helping the reader find the path that will take them where they want to go.

This piece originally appeared in Page Count, a Medium publication that explores publishing and the writer's livelihood.