



Categorizing Your Book: The “where to shelf” Dilemma

by Julie H. Ferguson

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Aspiring authors must “categorize” their books accurately. Whether you write fiction or non-fiction, you need to know where a bookseller will shelve your book after publication. Do not fall into the trap of leaving an editor or agent to figure it out or, worse yet, of mis-categorizing your work. Publishers need the information up-front in your query letter and, later, in your proposal or outline. The process to discover the correct category takes research and some patience to complete successfully and may result in improving the focus of your manuscript to make it fit better.

Fiction has three main categories (genre, mainstream, and literary) which are divided into myriad sub-categories (romance, historical, thrillers, sci-fi, horror, etc.) If you present mainstream fiction with a romance in it to romance editors, rejection will surely follow, as will misery. Editors/agents also shy away from “cross-over” novels that fit into two or more categories, as they are hard to market as a first book.

Non-fiction categories are almost limitless, but a visit to a large bookstore will show you the main ones. They include business, self-help, history, biographies, and Canadiana, etc. These too have sub-categories, which you will need to explore. If your book does not fit a clear shelving category, it risks being put somewhere that your readers will not think to look. Further, if your book could be shelved in several places, consider that you may be writing for too large a market, and narrow your focus.

Other useful tips include discussing the shelving of your proposed book with a trusted retailer and your writing group. These informed, but impartial, individuals will bring an objective eye to the matter.

Categorizing your book not only helps you to sharpen its slant, but also to market it to publishers. Categorization enables you to send your inquiries to publishers and editors that specialize in your type of book and to mention the category in the first sentence of your query letter. As well as guiding you while writing, categorization also significantly improves your chances of acceptance by a publisher.