The Martian for Ninety-Nine Cents

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Andy Weir was not your average novelist. While other writers spent their days in coffee shops gazing thoughtfully out the window, Andy spent his writing computer code. He had been a programmer for most of his working life. As he once explained, he went into programming because he wanted to eat regular meals.

But Andy had a secret passion. He loved space. Not the swooshing, laser-blasting kind from the movies, but real space, with real orbits, real rocket fuel, and real arithmetic.

There was only one problem: nobody wanted to publish his books.

The First Try

Years earlier, Andy had taken time off from programming to write a novel. He spent three years on it. When it was finished, he tried to find a literary agent to represent it.

He could not get one. He could not get any interest at all. Looking back, Andy has said the book was not very good anyway, which is a remarkably cheerful thing to say about three years of your life.

So he went back to work as a programmer, and he went back to writing just for fun.

A Chapter at a Time

Andy had a personal website, and a small group of readers who visited it. They were, in his own fond description, science nerds just like him.

He started a new story. An astronaut named Mark Watney is accidentally left behind on Mars. His crew thinks he is dead. His supplies are limited. Help is years away. The only way he can survive is by being very clever about chemistry, botany, and math, and by keeping his sense of humor.

Andy didn't send this story to agents. He posted it on his website, one chapter at a time, roughly every six to eight weeks. Anyone could read it for free.

Readers With Calculators

Here is where things got interesting. Andy's readers did not just read the chapters. They checked them.

Andy knew a great deal about space, but chemistry was not his strongest subject. His readers wrote in when the numbers didn't add up or the chemistry wasn't quite right. Andy fixed the mistakes. Chapter by chapter, his little audience of volunteer experts helped make the science in

the story sharper and more accurate.

Most authors pay editors. Andy had a team of fact-checkers who did it for the love of Mars.

The Price Floor

When the story was finished, readers asked if they could have the whole thing in one file for their e-readers. Andy put it together and offered it as a free download.

Some readers had trouble with the download. They asked whether he could just put it on Amazon so they could get it for their Kindles the normal way.

Andy was happy to do it. He wanted to give the book away for free. Amazon, however, would not let him. The lowest price the system allowed was 99 cents.

So that is what "The Martian" cost: 99 cents.

Then a very strange thing happened. More people bought the 99-cent version than had ever downloaded it for free. The book climbed to the top of Amazon's science fiction bestseller list with no advertising at all. According to The Wall Street Journal, it sold 35,000 copies in three months.

Andy has admitted that at first he thought the sales might be some kind of mistake. Then the checks started arriving.

The Phone Starts Ringing

Remember the literary agents who would not take Andy's call? Now an agent was calling him.

An editor at Crown Publishing, part of Random House, had heard about this odd little Kindle book that everyone seemed to be reading. Through a colleague, the editor got in touch with a literary agent named David Fugate, who read the book and contacted Andy.

Soon Andy was negotiating a book deal. At about the same time, 20th Century Fox wanted the movie rights. Andy has said the two verbal agreements came just four days apart. In March 2013, he sold the print rights to Crown for more than $100,000. An audiobook company, Podium Publishing, had already signed for the audio rights that January.

Crown published "The Martian" in print on February 11, 2014. Within weeks, it was on The New York Times bestseller list.

From a Website to the Big Screen

On October 2, 2015, the movie version of "The Martian" opened in theaters. It was directed by Ridley Scott and starred Matt Damon as the stranded astronaut. It earned $54 million in its opening weekend and went on to gross hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide.

Andy Weir, the programmer who could not find an agent, quit his day job and became a full-time author. He has kept writing about space ever since.

What We Can Learn From an Astronaut

Andy Weir did not break into publishing by knocking louder on the front door. He went around to the side of the house, where his readers already were, and gave them the story for free.

His readers became his first editors, his first fans, and eventually his loudest advertisement. By the time the publishing world noticed him, he did not need to convince anyone that people wanted his book. Tens of thousands of people had already proved it, ninety-nine cents at a time.

So if you have a story nobody seems to want, consider Mark Watney's approach. Work with what you have. Solve one problem at a time. And don't underestimate a small group of enthusiastic nerds with calculators.

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