

Bestseller

Or: A Cautionary Tale Recounting Treacherous & Deadly Occurrences In Publishing

A Novel

by Josh Piven

One

1. *Cut a groove in a ten-inch piece of wood. Place a one-foot length of Schedule 40 1/8-inch steel pipe (gas or water will work), threaded on one end, into the groove. Secure with electrical tape.*
2. *Screw a cap onto the threaded end of the pipe and place pipe in a vise. Drill a 1/8-inch hole in the cap. Remove cap.*
3. *Secure a piece of galvanized roofing tin to the wooden stock, using nails, just below the side that will accept the cap. Solder a roofing nail to the tin, or just pound it through. This is the trigger. Make sure the nail fits through the hole in the cap. Connect the trigger to the wooden stock using two small springs or sturdy rubber bands. Test by pulling it back; it should snap forward.*
4. *To fire, place a .22 caliber cartridge into the pipe, then screw the cap on. Pull back the trigger with thumb and forefinger, then release. The nail will travel through the hole and strike the primer, firing the bullet.*

—*How to Make A Zip Gun, from Sticks and Stones and Broken Bones*

Publishing's a mysterious business, so no one can say with any real certainty when all the trouble began.

Some people claim things went bad from the beginning. Publication day. Others think it took a bit longer: A downward spiral that began perhaps a few months after the book became a highly unlikely hit. A few oddballs went the other direction. They pointed

scolding fingers at the authors' upbringings. They blamed the Godless parents. They'd spawned two bad seeds, they said. The book was the devil's work, they claimed. As if most authors had loving parents and happy childhoods.

In truth, the call from the *USA Today* reporter was probably the beginning of the end for *Sticks and Stones*. And for Chuck Cohen, first-time author. First-time, *best-selling* author.

The important part, that last bit.

How does a book become a bestseller? In publishing, nobody knows anything for sure. But most insiders will tell you it's one of three ways. The first way is your name is Stephen King or Danielle Steele or John Grisham. When you're already a "major name brand," you can pretty much write your own ticket: Type up your grocery list, give it a catchy title, and it's going to sell hundreds of thousands of copies right out the door. Good or bad, it doesn't really matter.

Or, the book's a sequel to a bestseller—or better yet, another in a bestselling series: Grocery List, Part II. By then you've got a built-in audience. These readers like one author and they may buy and read only one book a year. But if it's *your* book you are golden. Who cares if they only buy the books at Costco and Walmart—and at eighty percent off retail at that? These people wait all year for the release of the newest Grocery List as if it were the eleventh commandment.

The third way is known in the industry as snowballing. A little book becomes a big book. Again, nobody knows for certain how it happens—on some level it's all juju. But here's how most publishers and editors think the momentum builds. You start with a small book by nobody anyone's ever heard of. That book gets a good review in a widely-read newspaper or magazine, or becomes a favorite of independent book sellers. People begin to hear about this terrific little book and they tell two friends, and they tell two friends, and soon the newspapers and magazines run positive reviews. Or even mediocre reviews. It doesn't really matter.

At this point, the chain bookstores pick up the ball and begin the protracted process of bleeding the publisher dry. They may propose moving the book to the front of their stores or onto an end rack, called "tabling" or "positioning." It isn't altruism: Publishers pay big money for it. Or the publisher might be more proactive, throwing well-lubricated lunches or dinners ("pitch parties") for skeptical book sellers. The point is to convince them to "hand-sell" (recommend) the book to potential buyers. If it all goes according to plan, the bookstores order hundreds of copies, way more than they need so there's no risk of running out. But, really, there's no risk to book sellers at all. Ordering books doesn't cost them a nickel because the publisher covers shipping both ways—and the bookstores don't even have to pay for the books until someone actually buys them. If they don't sell, the publisher takes them back (these are "returns," also known as flops.) Meanwhile, the publisher blows their entire PR and marketing budgets on the one book that's actually got a shot, leaving their other unfortunate authors to wallow on blogs and AM radio.

Then comes the final step. The reviews continue apace until the success of the book becomes a news story in itself. That's when you know you're set, when *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker* or some other East Coast arbiter of taste begins to write about a publishing phenomenon. Articles appear in the business section. The book itself becomes secondary to the *idea* of the book, or what the book says about *us*: Our culture, our social and sexual mores. Or our mothers. If the book covers some seemingly controversial topic, so much the better. Because then all the people who hate what you've written are going to buy it, too. Or at least talk about it as if they've read it, which is almost as good.

Chuck Cohen was no Stephen King—though he was taller and had a better haircut. He wasn't very creative and he wasn't particularly prolific and he wasn't mentally disturbed. Still, he was a decent writer. But the book had been written in his spare time, on a whim. *Freelance*. And he didn't know anything about books—aside from how to read them—when he took the job. He wrote professionally, but he wasn't an “author.” Or hadn't been, up to that point. He'd been an English major at Emory and now, several years out, he worked for McKinnon Pharmaceutical, in their public relations department. It wasn't his dream job, but the commute was manageable and the people were well-groomed and mostly bearable.

His work wasn't especially taxing, and it didn't call for lots of creative thinking.

Primarily, he wrote boilerplate copy and releases touting “Somnium,” the company's blockbuster sleep aid that paid everyone's salaries. *Somnium, the wonderful nighttime sleep aid that works wonders, taking effect in just thirty minutes and offering deep, restful*

sleep without that groggy morning brain so common among other sleep aids. When the drug had first been released he'd called his friend Amy in marketing, unsolicited, with his own creative naming suggestion.

"I think they should call it 'Drowsease,' " Chuck said.

"That doesn't end in *ium*," Amy said.

"So?"

"*ium* is very soothing. Think about it. It's relaxing. It makes you sleepy just saying it.

Eeee-ummmmm. It's like a mantra. Plus it sounds *really* close to 'Ambien.' "

" 'Drowsease' sounds sleepy, too."

"But it's too close to 'disease,' Chuck," Amy said. "Anyway it sounds like a supplement, not a real drug. Like 'NO-DOZ.' And it doesn't mean anything."

"So what? They're all made up words. What the hell does 'Viagra' mean, anyway?"

Nothing. It sounds like 'Niagara.' "

"Right," Amy said. "But it connotes meaning. Think of the word 'virile' and then add massive quantities of thundering, flowing, spurting liquids. Get it?"

“Oh. Right. Hey, wouldn’t it be cool if during the side effects segment of the commercials we said ‘Warning: Will cause drowsiness?’”

“Chuck?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t quit P.R.”

Somnium was a hit, but nobody in the P.R. department was getting rich; there were no stock options. To supplement his modest \$40,000-a-year salary, when he had the time Chuck took on freelance writing jobs. Nothing fancy. Most of the work was advertorials and phony “human interest” stories placed in *Mature Woman* and *Fit!*, barely-veiled P.R. pieces extolling the benefits of various expensive “me-too” drugs of suspect efficacy. The work helped pay his bills. And it gave him a sideline “business” against which he could expense his nights out, to shave his tax bill. In a good year it brought in an extra ten grand. He liked working for himself, but he wasn’t keen on paying his own health insurance. Full-time freelance struck him as financial suicide. So the freelance thing was a sideline and nothing more. Until the book, that is.

For Chuck, the combination of the office job and the freelance work was perfect. He didn’t aspire to write great literature. He didn’t even *read* great literature. Or hadn’t,

since college. His father had once told him that a smart man knows his limits. Chuck knew his. Yes, he could write. But he'd never really been an "idea guy." He was good at taking editorial direction—"Chuck, we want Mrs. Smith to be blond, with long legs and straight white teeth and flawless skin that used to be as cratered as Mt. Kilimanjaro"—but he didn't sit around thinking up brilliant notions for books or dramatic investigative magazine articles. Who had the time? He was a go-to guy, a researcher. The writer who got things done on time and without a lot of drama and hand-holding. He wasn't prolific. Just fast. Which is probably why he'd been approached to write the book in the first place.

Chuck's little bestseller plopped squarely into the snowball category. And it was controversial. The right-wing crusaders of Values in Reading, God in Schools (VIRGINS) had pronounced his book a danger to children and families and quite probably small animals, too. A danger, really, to all God-fearing folk—or at least white folk. And, quite possibly worse, the book was a virtual Satan's handbook, an illustrated instruction manual for doing dangerous, stupid things. Things that went against biblical teachings and would surely result in eternal damnation in hellfire for the reader. Oh, *and* it was poorly written.

That part really stung.

Recently the VIRGINS had even begun attacking Chuck and Jason Berling, his co-author, personally. They were "lost souls." "Angry young men." They were not "God

fearing.” This charge was true, actually. Chuck feared lots of things—falling behind on his rent, going to prison, being hit by a car and ending up a quadriplegic, blowing through one of those tubes—but God wasn’t one of them. Who had the time? The Reverend Mitch Daniels, the self-righteous head of VIRGINS, had appeared on Rush Limbaugh’s popular conservative talk show and excoriated the book, and pronounced them “untethered young men.” Also “moral drifters in need of guidance and spiritual direction.” Interestingly this was remarkably similar to how Chuck had been described in high school. Back then, it was just the teachers he’d disappointed. Now it was the fundamentalists.

If it’s tough to figure out when a book finally goes wrong, it’s also hard to pinpoint exactly when that same book becomes a phenomenon. For *Sticks and Stones* it may have been at the same moment. At the very least, though, that phone call from Rob Garcia, from *USA Today*, brought things to a boil. And it put the reporter onto the story. For good.

“So Chuck, tell me about ‘Sticks and Stones,’ ” said Garcia. “How did you come up with this idea?”

Chuck took a moment before answering. He’d gotten this question quite a bit.

Straightforward as it sounded, in his situation it was always a tricky one to answer completely honestly.

His book, *Sticks and Stones and Broken Bones: How To Do Everything Your Mother Warned You About* was, in his mind at least, little more than a humorous guidebook to doing things one really shouldn't—or needn't—do. The entry titles said it all. *How to Roll a Car. How to Open An Anthrax-Filled Letter. How to Blow Up a Toilet with a Cherry Bomb. How to Cheat on Your Wife. How To Make a Zip Gun.* And one of his personal favorites, *How to Survive Torture* (“Step 1: Don't Panic.” *Ha ha.*) In general, how to do dangerous things and accomplish ill-advised goals. It was sort of a more modern, more knowing version of that old standby *The Anarchist's Cookbook*. And it was selling. Extremely well. Apparently 9/11, now four years gone, had continued to instill a great fear in the nation's collective psyche about anthrax and torture. Go figure.

“Well, the original idea was inspired on the *Anarchist's Cookbook*,” Chuck said.

This was his standard canned answer. It wasn't really a lie, though it wasn't the whole truth either. He was always careful in describing his role in the whole enterprise, and it often felt like walking a tightrope: He couldn't claim ownership of the original idea. Yet he didn't see any reason to minimize his role, either. After all, he *had* written the book. As he saw it, he'd made something out of nothing. Or if not nothing, then next to nothing. It was just that the origins of the idea for *Sticks and Stones* didn't belong to him. They belonged to Jason, as did the outline he'd been handed. But unless asked that question point blank, he didn't see anything to be gained, from his perspective, by pointing it out. Minimizing his involvement didn't strike him as a great career move.

So he hedged. And shaded. He wanted to build on his success, not claim to be what he truly was: a freelancer who'd gotten lucky. Because now he was fielding calls and emails from literary agents and TV producers and crackpots. All wanting to work with Chuck Cohen. Clever, witty, best-selling author Chuck Cohen. Nobody was calling to talk to Chuck Cohen, freelance writer who hit his deadlines and whose most original previous work was "How I Used Vagilene To Conquer My Feminine Itch Problem." (And *that* had been ghost-written.)

Chuck would never take all the credit for the book's success—and he didn't deserve to. But he was more than willing to share in it. Rob Garcia and the rest of the press could draw their own conclusions. If they weren't quite accurate, that wasn't his fault. It was a fine line he tread, this position of subordinate co-author-and-hired-hand. He shared in the profits, too, and now they were starting to roll in. But he didn't share equally.

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," the reporter said. "There's definitely some pretty controversial stuff in there. You actually give instructions on how to assemble a dirty bomb. Right?"

Chuck laughed nervously. "Well, sort of. I mean, we don't give explicit instructions on how to acquire illicit material. It's more of a general guide to how somebody *could* do it. It's not like a true instruction manual for a terrorist or something." *That's what the Internet's for*, he thought. He knew what was coming next.

“But it *is* pretty dangerous stuff, isn’t it?” Garcia persisted. “Isn’t that part of its appeal? You have a section on how dynamite works.”

“So does *Encyclopedia Britannica*,” Chuck retorted with a laugh. “Lots of this stuff is scattered all over the place. On the Internet, mostly. I guess we kind of condensed it and put it all together.”

“The book is illustrated too. It really appeals to kids, doesn’t it?”

Shit. Evasion time.

“Um, I don’t think so. Not really. It’s meant to be a humorous guidebook for adults.”

“But aren’t you afraid some kid will try some of these things?”

Fuck. Here we go.

“The book actually has a warning in the front, saying this stuff isn’t meant to be taken literally. That’s it’s just for entertainment purposes,” Chuck said. “You didn’t see it? It’s a disclaimer, too. You know, the legal boilerplate about the authors and publisher disclaiming liability.”

Most people thought the warning was a joke. It wasn't. Or anyway that wasn't the intent. In terms of a legal defense, though, Chuck doubted it was worth the cheap paper it was printed on.

"Pretty serious for a humor book, huh?" said Garcia.

"Ha ha, yeah, I guess. I've never really thought about it."

"Chuck, I'm wondering . . . Did you hear about that kid in Seattle who was about to climb out his bedroom window using a rope made of bed sheets?"

Here it comes.

"It was just like you described. He removed the sheets from his bed and tied them together using a square knot. Then he tied one end of his 'rope' to his desk and climbed onto the window sill."

He'd already heard, but he waited for the punch line anyway.

"Chuck, the problem was, they lived in an apartment building." A beat. "On the tenth floor."

Chuck said nothing.

“Fortunately his mother caught him just in time and pulled him back in. He had a copy of your book,” Garcia said. “He’s seven.”

Chuck said nothing, just gazed out over his half-height cubicle wall to the window beyond. The vast rolling lawns of McKinnon’s corporate campus were still covered in a melting carpet of white, the remnants of last night’s brief snow squall. Out in the cold, a custodian fought with a blower, trying to clear the last few spaces in the parking lot. Chuck spotted his own car, a sagging Saturn with bald tires and approximate steering that had nearly killed him on his way to work.

I need a new car.

That was first on his list. With the first big royalty check, he’d ditch the shit box and get something nice, maybe a BMW. With four-wheel drive. Then he and Laura would take a vacation. Someplace warm to escape the snow and the cold and the annoying reporters.

God, it’s going to be nice to have some money. Some real money, not the penny ante shit he’d been making on the side.

Garcia was pressing about the bed sheet kid.

“I don’t know,” Chuck said. “I guess some people believe everything they read.” It was lame, but all he could think of at the moment. He sighed, a slow leak.

How long it would take the intrepid Rob Garcia or another reporter like him to discover that moronic little Jimmy Riorden and his ill-conceived bed-sheet rope ladder was a sideshow? A footnote. Chuck had a much, much bigger problem. The one Jason had called him about right before Rob's call.

His source for the "zip gun" entry had just turned up dead.

Murdered.

Apparently by the home-made zip gun that lay next to his body.

Or possibly it was just a weird coincidence. *Right*. Because people were killed by zip guns all the time these days. Street gangs were building them in shop class: They liked the feeling of pride that came from a homemade weapon. And real guns were just too difficult to obtain.

"Chuck?" said Garcia. "You still with me? Don't you think your book is at least *somewhat* to blame? C'mon man, this advice you guys give, it's pretty dangerous. That kid could've really gotten hurt."

Chuck cursed silently as snow blower guy obviously buried his Saturn in a man-made drift. Now he had to dig it out. It was going to be a cold lunch hour; he'd forgotten his gloves.

“Well, hopefully he read the chapter about building a home-made parachute, too,” was the only response he could think of.