

PROFILE



BEWITCHED

Brunonia Barry cast a spell on the publishing world with an indie novel that became a breakout success.

BY JORDAN E. ROSENFELD

Brunonia Barry's story sounds, as she puts it, like a "not-in-your-wildest-dreams" tale. Her self-published novel, *The Lace Reader*, was on shelves for only two weeks before it ignited bidding wars among mainstream publishers—and soon after its release by William Morrow, it hit *The New York Times* bestseller list. Barry credits her success to the fact that she and her husband, Gary Ward, approached publishing just as they had other business opportunities: with a solid plan and some entrepreneurial flair.

STARTING WITH STRATEGY

"As my husband puts it, we were emboldened by our ignorance," says Barry, who wrote for the Beacon Street Girls young-adult series before penning *The Lace Reader*. "We jumped right in. Having lived in Hollywood—where we saw the rise of small studios—we thought the small indie presses were the next big wave in publishing."

The two established Flap Jacket Press in hopes that the novel wouldn't be considered self-published—a term Barry felt carried a certain stigma—but "small-press published." She knew her novel, which follows a family of Salem "witches" capable of reading fortunes in lace, would have strong appeal in her hometown of Marblehead, Mass. So months before going to press, Barry approached one of her favorite local independent bookstores and asked if one of its affiliated book clubs could test her manuscript. "I wanted the [members of] the book club to be brutal with me," she says. "I told them to tell me every place they stopped reading or got bored." The group did exactly that, and Barry improved her book based on those suggestions.

Barry and Ward also hired professionals for editing and design and sent the book to Worzalla printing in Wisconsin, opting for a budget-friendly trade paperback binding and a traditional print run over a quicker, but lower quality, print-on-demand method.

Thanks to the store's willingness to help, Barry says that when advance review copies of the book were produced and delivered, 30 book clubs were lined up to read her novel. Those readers spread the word to their friends and family. "We were trying to make it a local book, but it broke free and went to California, Florida and New York by word of mouth," she says. "That's one of the things William Morrow liked from a marketing standpoint."

Barry and Ward sought out local reviews for immediate buzz—to positive response—and hired a public relations agency, Kelley & Hall, that managed to score the book a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*. Two weeks after the first printing, most of the 2,000-copy print run was sold.

GETTING NOTICED

Barry believes that starred review was responsible for gaining the attention of book-to-movie scouts, who soon began calling "out of the blue" asking for movie option rights. Barry had done a stint as a screenwriter in her 20s and had been "burned" after selling a movie option for one of her screenplays, so this time she called a screenwriter friend for advice.

The friend liked the novel and sent it to her agency, Endeavor, which had just started a literary department. There, Barry gained representation by Rebecca Oliver, an

agent who wrangled offers from five publishing houses. "It was amazing because I got to talk to each editor to see what they would change, how they saw it and how they saw me as a writer," Barry says. "I got to pick, and it really wasn't about money in the end."

Each publisher told her she didn't have to change anything if she didn't want to, but Barry was impressed with William Morrow editor Laurie Chittenden, who offered up interesting suggestions for reversing the order of the first two chapters and clarifying the relationships between characters. "I liked all the editors, but Laurie and I just had some rapport that was special," Barry says. "I also thought the marketing plan and promotion was amazing."

Even though she had spent a lot of time and money on the project, Barry says it wasn't hard to give up and let her publisher take over.

"My husband and I are entrepreneurs, and therefore control freaks," she says. "But I was blown away by what they could do—for example, we could get the book into retail chains, but they'd only take one copy, whereas our publisher could get them to order in bulk—and it was easy to give up control. I'm very proud of what we did, but we couldn't have possibly taken it where they have."

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Barry also stresses in hindsight that she was lucky to have printed *only* 2,000 copies of her book, and to have focused on her local audience. Any more than that, she says, and the bigger houses might have considered it too overexposed to take on. After selling her novel, Barry removed herself from Flap Jacket Press. Her husband remains at its helm, pursuing other local books. Ultimately, when she holds up the two versions of her book side by side, Barry admits that she likes the hardcover edition published by Morrow better. "I'll always love ours because we did it ourselves, but what Morrow put into launching it is what made it successful," she says.

The author is candid that her small-press path was expensive, and in many ways doesn't fit the typical self-published model. While she isn't sure she'd do it the same way again, it remains clear to her that it's precisely *because* of the time, money and professionalism she and her husband put into it that *The Lace Reader* found a mainstream home.

"It would be irresponsible to recommend everyone do it this way," she says. "[But] if you have that kind of entrepreneurial spirit, it makes sense." [WD]

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