

TO MARKET

by Susan Salzman Raab

Making Hay out of Snow in Texas

It does snow in Texas, but almost never in South Texas – in fact, in 2004, there hadn't been a significant snowfall there for more than 100 years. So, when it did snow that Christmas Eve – more than four inches in many towns – it was dubbed a Christmas miracle. For one Texas native, Clark Childers, the event marked the beginning of a self-publishing marathon that, in less than three years, has sold more than 120,000 units of its first books – two for adults (*Snow and More Snow*) and one for children (*More Snow for Kids*). Now RedCab Media, the company Clark, a screenwriter, co-founded with his mother, Kathryn Childers, a Corpus Christi TV personality, is publishing its next children's book, entitled *Texas: The True Story of the Lone Star State*.

What the Childers recognized about that historic snowfall was that it captured the imaginations of many thousands of people who rushed out to be part of the experience – building snowmen, making snow angels – and who, the Childers expected, would want to buy their Snow books. Their challenge was to keep the momentum while getting the books done, to press, and into wide distribution. They knew from the beginning that the schedule meant they'd have to self-publish, and they found distribution through a chain of Texas grocery stores which ordered 10,000 copies of *Snow* right up front.

Clark Childers describes their experience as “gorilla publishing” and says, “We made these books our lives. Getting a book from concept to shelves in six months was a monumental effort. Getting two was a miracle. Without the lessons learned from the previous year's publication of *Snow*, the next two would never have happened. Work on *More Snow* began in March 2006, and we had it on shelves late October. The writing of *More Snow for Kids* began in March, and the first dummy was completed days before the SCBWI's August 2006 conference. On the advice of SCBWI members and guest speakers, we delayed printing a week, made changes to layout and design, and began the ‘gorilla movement’ book tour for the kids. We decked our twenty-five foot AirStream trailer with snowflakes and illustrations from the book, created paper snow glasses, printed T-shirts and scheduled two signings a day in locations across South Texas. It was non-stop.”

He admits they broke a lot of publishing rules, but that was because there wasn't time to find out what the rules were. He says, “Of course, when I talk about breaking the rules, I'm referring to self-publication. At every major publishing industry event I've been to, I find myself fighting to make our little self-publishing company sound like it's a lot more than it is. In order to do that we've had to take on many hats: publicity, marketing, distribution, school readings, newspaper, television, print ads, television ads, songs, lyrics [for the accompanying CD]...everything...We absorbed the risk and took control. The way we were able to do that is we found our distribution before we wrote the book, and we sold our product before it went to print. It may sound like a completely unique situation, but I believe it can be done by other authors if they know where to look. You just have to be willing to take over the marketing of the book once it becomes available.”

While Childers points out that they had marketing experience, good contacts and some money to put behind the project, they were also able to get a lot of in-kind support from people and organizations who believed in their project. And while they were fortunate to have such a special circumstance, they were essentially acting to fill a need in the marketplace. Childers allows this is a different kind of publishing than many authors set out to do. “The best advice I have is to find a niche, a source of funding and/or distribution outlet, then write your story. You might not be able to publish that one great story you love, but if you're a good writer, you can always come up with another.” His plans for RedCab may include publishing other authors' books; acting as intermediary between authors of niche-related books and companies, foundations, and nonprofits; and consulting. Information on the Snow books is at www.texasnowbook.com.

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