

The Story Behind the Story: *Himalayan Dhaba*
By Craig Danner

In the early spring of 2001, I sold the reprint rights for my independently published novel, *Himalayan Dhaba*, to a major New York publisher for a six-figure advance. Since then, I've often been asked what I did right to achieve such a coup, and so I offer the following story of literary agony and success.

Ten years ago, my wife and I left our medical practices, sold our house and our two cars and traveled high up into the Himalayas, to a remote town with a tiny hospital, where we were to join a talented Indian surgeon. He was performing amazing feats of medical magic using the most basic medicines and surgical equipment, and we had written him, asking if we could work at his side and learn how he was able to do so much with so little. He enthusiastically agreed, but after traveling halfway around the world, we finally arrived to find that he had left the hospital three days earlier, for a nine-month training program in Uganda.

Like most things in life, the experience was not what we'd expected. Working mostly on our own, we spent a long, cold winter simply doing the best we could. We encountered illnesses we'd never seen before, and battled feelings of shame and incompetence when we couldn't save a patient, and enjoyed feelings of pride and elation when we could. There were, of course, huge cultural and language barriers, and we worked hard to learn some of the local Hindi dialect. We quickly memorized such phrases as "What color is your phlegm?" and "Have you passed gas yet today?"— common questions in the hospital, but not very useful when sharing dinner at a neighbor's house. One evening we were called from such a meal to rush to the trauma room to take care of a three-year-old girl who had fallen off a balcony. She had landed on her head, and she needed an operation to drill holes in her head to relieve the swelling on her brain. We rushed her to the surgery, where I administered ether anesthesia and read out the gruesome instructions from a surgical textbook as my wife and a young Indian doctor used barbaric looking instruments to perform an operation none of us had ever seen before. The surgery took all night, during which time the first winter storm descended on the valley, and I will never forget the incredible sense of elation as I carried this precious little girl back to the wards, the tired nurse swinging open the courtyard doors to display a two foot blanket of sparkling snow beneath a bright blue Himalayan sky. The surgery was a success, and three days later the girl was playing in the trampled slush of the courtyard.

By the middle of January, the snow was deep enough to close the trails and passes that led the patients to the hospital. For several weeks we had little to do, and it was in an unheated room above the hospital lab that I began writing *Himalayan Dhaba*.

I'll move the story forward now, ten years later, to the spring of 2000, to April 3rd, my 41st birthday. My wife and I are now living on a small farm in Oregon, and *Himalayan Dhaba* has already received over 120 rejections from literary agents, 16 rejections from editors at all the best literary publishers. I had suffered the anguish of a failed book auction, drafted and redrafted the manuscript a half a dozen times, and used everything but a toilet plunger to try to shove the novel into the proverbial "desk drawer" so I could get on with my next novel. The manuscript, however, would not be ignored. Then, on my 41st birthday, I received an email from an agent in New York. She'd had the manuscript for over nine months. At various times she had lost it, found it, was getting a second opinion from a colleague; she liked it, but needed to talk to her boss. This is what her email said: Dear Craig, thank you for sending me your manuscript, but our agency no longer handles literary fiction.

The decision, then, was made to take what many told me was an awesomely irresponsible, foolhardy and more-than-just-slightly mortifying step of becoming a Self-Published Author. In some of

my prior incarnations, I had been a photographer, a typesetter, and the production director for both a newspaper and an advertising agency, and so I pretty much had the skills to produce a book. However, nobody can do a good job editing their own book, so I asked my friend Tim Sheehan, a fellow novelist, if he would edit the manuscript, and he amazed me by agreeing. I thought at first I would print out 500 copies, but then with Tim's help the manuscript finally reached maturity, and after manipulating some photographs my wife took in India, we ended up with what we felt was a stunning cover. I started thinking about a print run of 1000. I sent out Advance Readers Copies to some northwest authors I admire, and suddenly I had a full page of glowing blurbs. I bumped the print run up to 2000.

My biggest break came after the books arrived from the printer in Michigan. Staring at two tall pallets of books representing over \$15,000 of our life savings, my wife, Beth, agreed to be my publicist. She's a charming woman, and writes a great cover letter. She got things started with a full page color feature in our local paper, then glowing reviews in *The Dalles Chronicle* and the *Salem Statesman-Journal*. Except for *Booklist*, the novel was ignored by all the national review journals, but even so our page of review blurbs was getting longer and more credible.

Our plan was to start locally, and let the publicity grow in ever widening circles, and we knew that handselling by independent bookstores would be our only hope of getting readers to buy. We started making cold calls to small stores. Now, Beth and I have both worked in Emergency Rooms, and so we're both experienced in talking to all manner of deranged patients, yet we both agree that it is easier to talk down a blood-soaked psychotic schizophrenic stoned on crystal meth than it is to walk into a bookstore with a self-published book. I remember circling the block three times before entering a store, terrified that some sweet young clerk would look up at me from beneath the hoop pierced in her eyebrow and sneer. But, with a little practice, we started having some good bookstore experiences.

Karen West at The Book Mark in Eugene bought our first three copies. Bobby at Annie Bloom's in Portland took my novel home and read it, then got her staff excited about hand selling it and probably sent in our first Booksense 76 nomination. Jan Waldmann at Powells became a champion. She brought *Himalayan Dhaba* to the attention of Partners/West, and urged PNBA's Executive Director Thom Chambliss to take a serious look. Thom invited me to speak at the fall PNBA show, and Judy Ness diplomatically guided us into renting a table on the exhibit floor, and very graciously put a bug in the ear of a *Publishers Weekly* correspondent. On the exhibit floor, we got a chance to meet booksellers, giving out several hundred autographed readers copies.

As booksellers started reading *Himalayan Dhaba*, we started getting invitations for readings and signings. I spent 10 hours at Annie Bloom's one Saturday, and because the staff was so enthusiastically behind the book, I sold enough copies to make the top of their bestseller list. We then hit the jackpot when it was their turn to list their top ten in the Sunday *Oregonian*, and I became a #1 bestselling author based on the sale of 23 books.

We did a series of book tours through the Northwest, and booksellers started sending in Book Sense 76 nominations. Six weeks after the PNBA show, we had sold out our first printing of 2000 copies. By the end of November, we heard from Carl Lennertz that we'd made the 76 list for January 2002. By the middle of December, we were quietly told that *Himalayan Dhaba* would be winning a PNBA award. In January the Book Sense list hit the stores, the novel was featured in a *Publishers Weekly* article, and suddenly the phone started ringing.

Over a period of nearly 10 years, I had collected an entire ream of rejections from New York agents and publishers. It was a delicious feeling to finally get the chance to reject some of them. By the end of two weeks, we had weathered a bidding storm which left in its wake a six figure advance and a book deal with Penguin/Putnam, the second largest trade publisher in the world.

Perhaps it is a bit ironic that the success of *Himalayan Dhaba* as an independently published novel is measured by the size of the advance for reprint rights from a major publisher. But from another perspective, we had our first success when we opened the box from the printer, and after years of effort, finally held the book in our hands.