

game changer

LOCAL SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELIST HUGH HOWEY HAS WRITTEN A NEW BEST SELLER—AND UPENDED THE RULES OF PUBLISHING.

BY BRETT SOKOL

Talk about a room with a view! Seated at a boardroom table last year, high atop midtown Manhattan inside Random House's corporate offices, science-fiction author Hugh Howey was careful to stare straight ahead. A seven-figure deal was under discussion for the rights to his postapocalyptic novel *Wool*, a chronicle of the last survivors of civilization living within a sprawling underground silo and increasingly suspicious of their leaders. Yet the end of the world, let alone dollars and cents, was the last thing on his mind.

"I'm sitting there with all the bigwigs of Knopf, their head editor, and all the Random House executives," Howey recalls with a chuckle. "But if I turn around and look through the window out across Broadway, there's the Victoria's Secret headquarters with women walking around in lingerie for a photoshoot."

Adding to the disconnect, while he may have been surrounded by seasoned titans of the book trade, Howey felt little of what they were saying made business sense in the digital era. "I was already the highest-paid person in the room," he remembers marveling to himself. "I'm supposed to be there begging these mainstream publishing guys to do something, and they're making offers when I could open my laptop, point to my earnings, and have them say, 'We don't know if we can compete with that.'"

Indeed, a year earlier, despite stern warnings that he was embarking on both commercial and critical suicide, he'd self-published the first installment of *Wool* as an e-book via amazon.com. A true viral success initially launched by word-of-mouth, the eventual result was sales of over 400,000 copies, and all at a royalty rate of 70 percent—far greater than the 10 to 15 percent traditional publishers offered. That

continued on page 104



kindle

Kindle
sensation
Hugh Howey.

THE MAGIC CITY

BELOW: The author being interviewed on NPR's *Marketplace* in March; RIGHT: With his wife, Amber, in front of a boat he captained for six months, on their way back to the US from Antigua, 2002.



continued from page 102

was on top of a Hollywood bidding war for *Wool*'s film rights, won by director Ridley Scott of *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, and *Prometheus* fame—a development that could only continue to boost book sales. And all this was without the benefit of a commercial publishing house, or even a physical print edition available in stores. So what exactly was the point of this Random House meeting?

Instead of signing a deal, Howey returned to his home in Jupiter (just north of West Palm Beach) and continued doing exactly what had sparked a wave of fierce interest—writing a fresh batch of dystopian tales further exploring the terrain and themes of *Wool*, and selling those stories online directly to his ever-expanding fan base.

The capper came this past March when Simon & Schuster finally released simultaneous hardcover and paperback editions of *Wool*, part of a groundbreaking mid-six-figure deal that saw Howey retaining his own e-book rights and continuing to personally sell his work online—a move practically unheard of in the trade. (Howey's e-book sales of *Wool* have now climbed past 500,000.) “We would have preferred to own all the rights, but that wasn’t going to happen. It was a very unusual circumstance,” Simon & Schuster President and publisher Jonathan Karp told *The Wall Street Journal*, in what may be the business understatement of the year. Add in 24 different foreign editions of the novel, from Brazil to Australia, a comic book adaptation, as well as rabid anticipation for *Wool*’s sequels, *Shift* (out now) and *Dust* (set for a fall release), and you have the makings of a bona fide phenomenon.

Howey, now 37, sees all this as simply embracing his desire to remain independent—a spark that first led him to leave the College of Charleston a year short of graduation and sail to the Bahamas. “If I graduated, I was afraid I’d actually have to get a job,” he quips. In the Bahamas, he became a self-described “wharf rat,” living largely hand-to-mouth but tanned and feeling



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—HUGH HOWEY

beatific. He practically fell into a job as a yacht captain. “It happens by telling someone you know how to do it,” he laughs. “Then you need to quickly learn how.” Soon he was piloting a 60-foot yacht down the Miami River and frantically navigating bridge openings. He eventually discovered he was as qualified as anybody else: “It’s amazing how all these multimillion-dollar yachts are run by vagabonds from all over the world.”

Now a dedicated landlubber living in Jupiter with his psychologist wife and writing full-time, Howey is as mystified as anyone over *Wool*’s initial success. “I never promoted it,” he says. “It didn’t have an uplifting ending and hardly seemed commercial.” One best seller later, the only thing

he’s certain of is that the old business rules have changed. In fact, thanks to real-time e-book sales data, he can gauge precisely which promotional efforts pay off and how. For example, a recent *Slate* review of *Wool*—during a period when there was no other prominent media coverage—produced an immediate spike: “I could hit refresh and watch it shoot up the Amazon sales chart to the point where it was selling 800 books a day,” quadruple its previous sum via Amazon, with similar percentage gains at iTunes and Barnes & Noble. A *Wall Street Journal* feature produced a comparable result, but with a delayed reaction—the sales bump only kicked in after key figures on Twitter began alerting their followers to the story.

Yet Twitter—or Facebook, for that matter—is no magic bullet, Howey cautions. “The reader is the new gatekeeper; they’re in charge. The power of social media only comes if you’re writing something that resonates with readers,” he insists. And the so-called marketing gurus? “We’re all learning from each other. There are no experts anymore.” To many publishing veterans, those are terrifying words. But for Howey, “there’s never been a better time to be an author.” E-mail: brett@oceandrive.com **OD**