

The Tricky Art of Self-Publishing

By Foster J. Dickson

It is commonly said that self-publishing is an option for writers whose works are not up to the caliber of the work published by commercial publishing houses. That rumor is perpetuated by the well-spring of writers who self-publish second-rate novels and little collections of semi-poetical ditties for their own friends and families. However, it is far from the whole truth. Self-publishing is a tricky game and, for some writers, a worthwhile venture to undertake.

There are some inherent difficulties with self-publishing that should be noted up front and most of them have to do with the book business as a whole. The issues with the process require an author's time and money, and without them the process will more than likely be a failure. The first difficulty is that nearly all of the major retailers refuse to carry self-published titles, which is their own safeguard against being flooded with titles to manage and distribute to stores and online customers, not an affront to the self-published. The second is that reviewers will typically not review self-published books and major media will usually not print reviews of self-published books. The third difficulty is that all of the workload of publicity, shipping, invoicing, accounting, and promotions are all on the author, where commercial publishers have multiple employees each undertaking one of these tasks and thus doing them more effectively. The final difficulty is simply having the money to pay for the print run, which is a lesson to be learned about the printing business.

There is one major reason that major retailers will not carry self-published titles. Booksellers have the right to return unsold books to the vendor or publisher. A private individual who is not savvy in the ways of the book business will be a hassle for the accounts payable, accounts receivable and shipping departments of large companies because every company is different and a professional relationship is necessary to effectively communicate and sell the book, as well as handling returns. For instance, most people are not aware that book wholesalers are entitled to a 55% discount off the retail cover price, which is in most cases non-negotiable. It is hard enough for the big boys to deal with all of the publishers in the U.S. and Canada, so they opt to not deal with private individuals because these relationships would necessitate whole departments of extra employees for relatively minimal profits. Self-published books are generally publicized by writers who are moonlighting as their own publicity agent (with little or no experience and minimal success) and who do not have a core audience outside of their own hometown. Beyond that, a private individual will not be reachable during the day for questions or problems, making most of these processes impossible. It is unfortunate but the big booksellers and wholesalers know these authors need them more than they need self-published authors, so

they choose not to do business with them. There are ways around this, however; you can start your own “publishing company” and make your book the lead title, but this also requires money and time.

For these same reasons, book reviews will seldom or never appear for self-published books. There are whole departments in book publishing houses with people who send complimentary copies of books to reviewers, some of whom might receive 20 or more books a day with requests for reviews or for *blurbs* which are the quotes about the book’s content that are available on the back cover. The reviewers and major media receive so many unsolicited books from publishing houses seeking reviews and blurbs that they also opt to not deal with private individuals as a rule.

Once you realize it will be nearly impossible to have a worldwide bestseller with a self-published book you can begin to understand the roles to be played if you are to be successful. The author must become his or her own publicity agent and shipping clerk, not to mention accountant; items like sales tax have to be tallied and paid. These roles, especially publicity, are hard work because the self-published writer must stick to smaller retailers and shops, choosing more non-conventional methods of publicizing, because of the limitations of not being able to work with the big booksellers. In this role, the author must be multi-tasking all the time and willing to work extra hard, treating the publication as the beginning of the road, not the end. This is not to mention author signings, which are the best way to publicize a book. An author’s real work begins after the book comes back from the printer. This is true even for commercially published authors.

The final major obstacle to overcome is paying for the print run of the books. The best idea is to expect to spend between \$10,000 and \$20,000 on printing the books, in order to keep per-unit cost down. Large printing presses can produce as many as a few hundred unusable books before producing usable books, because of things like color-matching and other design aspects. Thus, a print run of less than a thousand books can cost a printer more than the job is worth if they don’t charge large amounts of money for the job, in order to re-coup their losses. Having thousands of dollars to pay for a print run can be a strain on nearly anyone.

Unlike many people, I always want the bad news first. That was all of the bad news coming first. There is a lot of good news, too. If self-publishing was impossible no one would ever do it. If it was not worth the effort then only a few people would do it and almost no one would do it more than once. The truth is that many people are self-publishing many books every year and succeeding has a lot to do with understanding what is trying to be done and how. Some of the most famous writers self-published first, including D.H. Lawrence, Anais Nin, James Joyce, and more recently James Redfield, with his Celestine Prophecy. Self-publication is an unorthodox method and one that must be undertaken completely differently from conventional publishing and bookselling.

The key to any game is understanding the rules and playing within them in order to win. Just as a 5'5" basketball player will not try to drive in and slam-dunk the ball, a self-published author should not try to play the big boys' ball game at all. If the major retailers will not carry a book, then the other option is finding someone who will. If newspapers will not review a book, then publicizing by other means becomes necessary. The self-publishing author merely has to be creative and hard working to do well, and doing well is relative.

Reasonable goals become necessary in self-publishing. I heard through the grapevine recently that the book that won the American Poetry Prize last year has sold about 4,000 copies so far, so if a person self-publishes a poetry book, then a print run of 1,000 is probably far too ambitious. Likewise, just as getting per-unit cost down is advisable, it is not a good idea to have too many printed and get stuck holding the bag. The best advice is to begin planning before the printing begins and get an idea of how many might be sold and buy that many plus a few extras. Being too ambitious on the first go-round is not wise, because a first-time author, unable to use major retailers, and being a one-man show, it is probably best to have a 1,000 books maximum printed, even if there seems to be interest. You may also want to think about taking advanced orders.

Self-publishing can also be an avenue to getting commercially published, as it was for James Redfield. Sending a well-designed book to a publisher's acquisitions editor rather than a box full of loose sheets may show that the author has enough faith in their own work to put their money where their mouth is. Publishers know what printers cost and seeing a bound book says that the author spent a few thousand dollars getting his or her work in tip-top shape, so it may well be worth taking a look at it. Another way that this may be an avenue into commercial publication is that if the author has a print run of 1,000 books and sells them all, reserving a few copies for himself, then submits it to a publisher stating that the print run of 1,000 is already sold out; it may peak their interest, seeing sales possibilities put right in front of them. Basically, if the author could sell 1,000 with his or her limited resources then the publisher might see it as an opportunity to sell 10,000 or more. The key in this strategy is hard work and a lot of patience.

Publishing is a strange business. It is the only business that I know which has an open return policy, where any quantity of books can be returned by the bookseller to the vendor to ask for and get a full refund. It is a business where wholesalers get a 55% discount and retailers get a 40% discount (these are typical but not an end-all-be-all rule), rather than the standard business practice of mark-up. It is also a business where it is not necessarily better to have more product to sell, but just the good quality. It is a business of reputation.

The things, beside these basic business elements of publishing, that many people do not understand are the details. Publishers set up a niche for themselves and so there is no need to submit a book about World War II to a

publisher of travel books, even if they are the only publisher in your area or the friend of a cousin's uncle's brother's friend. The publisher that I work for publishes regional (Southern) fiction, African-American and Civil Rights books. We get, however, submission of all genres, which we reject or divert to another "imprint," which has a broader range of topics. Some people see this as being put on the second-rate list, but it is not. A publisher must uphold its niche or lose its credibility within the business and that is sad but true. For a self-publishing author, this is an integral fact to know before submitting work or trying to find a publisher. It is best not to waste time -- no matter how good the book is -- submitting it to a publisher who will not publish it because of its subject.

This brings me to the explosion of self-publishing imprints in the United States and Canada these days, brought on by the advent of the Internet. There are a lot of honest ones, a lot of scams, a lot of honest ones that look like scams, and vice versa. This was all made possible by a revolution in publishing called print-on-demand, which allows the books to be stored in a digital file (like an e-book) and when 3 are ordered, 3 are printed, unlike printing 1,000 and waiting for orders. Many self-publishers will ask an author to pay for 1,000 books then do print-on-demand which, though not illegal, is unethical. The best thing to do with these is a lot of homework, reading fine print and not signing anything until it is sure that what seems real is actually real. There are of course many companies to be found online, like Lightning Source, which is a subsidiary of Ingram Book Company, the largest book wholesaler in the U.S., iPublish, which is a subsidiary of Time-Warner, and Xlibris, a subsidiary of Random House.

I tell people often -- and I believe it -- that writing is about art and publication is about money. That is another fact that is sad but true. Publishers care about sales and that is the reason for the difficulty of getting published. Commercial publishers invest huge amounts of money in forthcoming books every year and some flop, so they have to be extremely careful about what they choose and this is what gave rise to self-publishing. The publishers can be wrong, though, and Celestine Prophecy, which I heard was rejected by 27 publishers, is a good example. The problem is that most authors are not savvy business-people and do not want to be, but self-publication necessitates it. It is a choice to be made.

The best illustrations of this may be some stories. The first that comes to mind is the young man who came into my office one day with a steno pad of hand-written poetry wanting it to be published, requesting a very naïve way. I talked to him for a while encouraging him to first go type his work and proofread it, then re-submit it, considering self-publication. He did not understand what I meant by self-publication. I asked simply, "Do you want to pay for this book to be produced or are you expecting us to pay for it?" He looked at me as though I was absolutely bonkers and replied, "I want Y'ALL to pay for it!" He could not understand that, just because he liked his own poetry, other people might not buy it. His approach was very naïve and irrational and yet he was precisely the type of person who should have considered self-publishing.

Regarding the many online self-publishing companies, beware. It would not be fair to warn against using them at all, but beware of doing business with anyone that does not offer face-to-face interaction and requires large sums of money. I was privy to a conversation about someone we knew who was going to self-publish her full-length novel. One of the large online companies gave her a quote of 13,000 dollars to get editorial services, layout and design, 75 author copies and additional copies at 50% off within the print run of 1,000 books. If she bought all 1,000 books on a full length novel - if the list price was 25 dollars, for example - she would spend roughly 23,000 dollars obtaining them. That would mean that she might make a profit of 2,000 dollars if she sold every book at full price, which would be almost impossible to do, considering giving retailers' discounts. Read the fine print and understand fully what is being purchased and what rights are being given. For instance, check into whether or not a proof copy is given to review between editing and printing, because if not they will have the right to re-write your book and it will be too late before the author sees the changes. If thousands of dollars are being spent on self-publication, the author should have more rights concerning his or her own work than the company being paid.

Perhaps, I should lay out a few more facts to close things out. Because self-publishing is an unorthodox venture many of the companies' methods are rather unorthodox. For instance, iPublish requires a submitting author to review three other authors' work before being allowed to submit any of their own and all submission are subject to the same process. To avoid being sorry later, it is best to obtain price quotes from as many self-publishing companies and printers as possible before settling on one and take plenty of time, even consulting a lawyer with the contract, because spending an additional few hundred on top of a few thousand may save a lot of money and heartbreak in the long run. In many cases it can be better, also, to pay a freelance editor to work on a manuscript before submitting it to be published, because the rates for editorial services in some companies can be very high priced but not very personal, where a freelance editor can work one-to-one.

If self-publishing is an option, be careful and be wise. There are many loopholes, pitfalls and facets of the business that may require creative thinking and extra hard work. However, if the money is available then the venture may be worthwhile. Just like the publishers have no way of being certain of what will be the next blockbuster, neither do the authors. The book manuscript that is collecting dust on the shelf under a pile of rejection letters may be the one that sets a new standard, the way the works of James Joyce or even D.H. Lawrence did.