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Opening Extract from...

To Publish or Not to Self-Publish

Written by Mick Rooney

Published by
Troubador Publishing Ltd

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Troubador Publishing Ltd
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Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk

ISBN 978-184876-422-4

A Cataloguing-in-Publication (CIP) catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11pt Baskerville by Troubador Publishing Ltd, Leics, UK

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Introduction

There are many reasons why an author starts to contemplate travelling along the road to self-publishing. Like many paths we take in life, sometimes we find ourselves on a path we never expected to travel, and when this happens we find we do not always have what we need to complete our journey safely. *To Self-Publish or Not To Self-Publish: An Author's Guide to Self-Publishing Services in the UK & Ireland* fulfils those needs.

The question of whether an author should choose to self-publish is better understood if we ask the question in a more direct way. An author should always ask themselves the question below rhetorically, long before they set out on any kind of publishing adventure. The answers to the question will say a lot about an author's ambitions and, perhaps more fundamentally, their understanding of publishing in general. For whatever path is chosen, be it through self-publishing, representation by a literary agent, or approaching publishing companies directly (unsolicited manuscript submission), the medium and format of book publication combined with recent viral methods of marketing and promotion (Internet, blogging, ebooks, podcasts, blog book tours, YouTube book trailers, book display sites, etc.) have not changed the hard and fast rules of how and why an author and their book becomes

successful. So, first and foremost, let's ask the million dollar question:

Why do I want to self-publish?

I mean, haven't you heard all the bad press self-publishing gets? That it's just pure vanity and any author solutions service you choose will just take your cash, as much as they can wean out of you, then take you for a very short ride down the self-publishing boulevard of broken dreams.

I have been researching author solutions companies for my website, *POD, Self-Publishing & Independent Publishing* and for my own book publishing projects for some time now. I have yet to meet a self-published author who was anything but thankfully drained, but very much grateful for the experience – even when that experience was less than what they expected – whether through using a poor author services provider or simply finding out that they were less prepared than they should have been. I have met many traditionally published authors who were as equally modest as their self-published counterparts. But the only true vanity I have experienced came from a few traditionally published authors who gushed hopelessly and shamelessly about their books at every public and private moment at which I encountered them. They were usually the ones who spoke about self-publishing as if it were a modern viral ailment in the industry, and any afflicted author should be pitied – but of course only from a safe distance!

Self-Publishing – Perceptions, Perceptions

You see, our perception of something comes from what we hear about it and not necessarily what experience we have of it at first-hand. Large commercial publishing houses like Random House, Harcourt, HarperCollins or Penguin do not feel threatened by the explosion in self-publishing because, for the most part, they do their job well and execute an excellent service for their listed authors. They also have many literary agents representing those authors to keep them on their toes. The idea that publishing companies might be threatened by self-publishing is a complete myth and this myth still persists and grows steadily in a changing industry. However, authors are a different story. Put the business aside and true human emotions like self-doubt and ego kick in. Authors who have followed a commercial path to publishing work hard. They hone their craft, get a literary agent and finally, if they persevere, land that elusive contract and feel a deserved sense of fulfilment and achievement, and so they should. But every so often a Jeremy Robinson, J.A. Konrath, William P. Young or G. P. Taylor comes along and spoils it all! They are the rare self-published global successes, and a reminder to fellow authors and the commercial publishing fraternity that perhaps there are actually other paths to doing this ‘elite’ book publishing gig. For a few commercially published authors, it is once again the story of the emperor’s new clothes. When they see other authors gain a modicum of success through non-

traditional methods, they are stripped naked and all they worked so hard for seems dashed in a moment. It's a bit like Edmund Hillary getting to the top of Everest and finding the fat kid he knew at school sitting on a picnic rug and saying to him, 'Hey, Ed, what took you so long to get up here?'.

The perception of self-published books is that none of them would have ordinarily seen the light of day had the author stuck to the tried and trusted methods of publishing a book. The chanted mantra is that if a manuscript is good enough, it will eventually be published. The inference is all self-published work is of poor literary quality, filled with typographical mistakes, badly printed, and, at best, appeals to a quirky niche of readership. This is simply not true. I cannot deny that the self-publishing industry, like any other industry, is filled with its share of poor service, tricksters, fraudsters, scammers and downright unscrupulous people feeding off the naivety and ignorance of others. Some people, and the businesses they operate, will never change. But what has changed is the landscape of publishing over the past few years. Many strong independent publishing companies have fallen by the wayside and the means by which books are marketed, sold and read is also changing by way of the Internet and electronic reading devices like the Sony Ereader and Amazon's own Kindle device.

The fact is, a good book is a good book whatever means it reaches the reader by. We have all read deplorable commercially published books, just as there are deplorable self-published books. The number of commercially published books in existence vastly outnumbers self-published books. So look at it this way—there are more poor quality commercial

books in our world than self-published books! Bear in mind that commercially published books do get better distribution, promotion and prominence in the retail market. Without doubt it is the commercial publishing industry which sets books apart from their self-published counterparts. They get rigorous and professional editing and marketing even before their release to the world. A self-published book will get what its author can afford. Professional editing and market reach and store space are the cornerstones of the book publishing industry and I believe this is the most critical difference between the two, and indeed, these are the areas where self-published authors fall most dramatically short on.

The greatest expense for book publishing is not the 5000, 10,000, 50,000 or 500,000 copies printed, but the design, editing and marketing of a book. Commercial publishers, for the most part, still use offset print methods for their books, allowing a less than £2 cost per unit, whereas, a self-publishing author is more often contracting an author solutions company using digital print on demand methods which result in a +£3 unit cost. The more offset printed books in a single print run, the lower the unit price. Whether you print 1 or 1000 on a digital print on demand machine, the unit cost will still be +£3 per unit. The advantage of the offset method is clearly an ever-reducing unit cost dependant on print run quantity. The advantage of the digital print on demand method is that no print run commitment needs to be made and there need only be the ordered or requested physical quantity. More critically in recessionary times, it removes warehouse inventory storage costs and cuts back on transport costs, with digital print companies like Lightning Source operating plants in the UK

and USA. Consequently, POD (print on demand) books are often sold at a higher retail price, making them uncompetitive, so the margin and scope for wholesaler discounts and author royalties can be limited. Few wholesalers in the UK like Gardners will stock POD produced books much beyond a database listing, as most are listed as ‘non-returnable’—though there are exceptions with titles which prove successful. These are some of the reasons why authors choosing self-publishing paths can be up against it in attaining real physical bookstore shelf space. The POD print model is specifically suited to an order and demand of books whether from a customer or the author ordering stocks for re-sale at signing appearances, author workshops and conferences. It is not about stock placement on shelves, but the availability of books on retail databases and online bookshops like Amazon. The original purpose of print on demand was to supply digitally printed books, one by one, and only after the book was pre-ordered by a customer in a bookshop. Booksellers in the high streets of our towns and cities remain reluctant to physically stock print on demand titles.

Let us return to the perception of self-publishing and try not to rest the blame with disgruntled commercially published authors who believe self-published authors are somehow diluting the quality of books. There are many reasons why self-published authors try to skimp on professional editing and marketing, notably cost. Yet, these remain some of the critical and necessary tools in the pre-production of a book which can help to give it the best possible chance of success and a welcome reception on its release.

How much will self-publishing cost me?

This is another million dollar question. If I had a penny for every time I have been asked this question, I'd be a millionaire! It is like asking how long is a piece of string. There are so many variables in self-publishing to influence how much it will cost an author. I normally reply by reverting back to our original question, 'But why do you want to self-publish anyway? Haven't you heard all the dreadful things they say about self-publishing? It's just pure vanity and all the companies will take you for a ride.'

To answer the question of self-publishing costs is actually easy. Depending on what needs an author has, it can be done for free with some solutions services (the process, not the books), and others services can charge you anything up to £10k+ (the old style vanity presses). Remember, whether you are self-publishing or not, you are publishing your book in an industry where even the smallest of independent presses are spending anything in the region of £10k – £20k per title at a minimum. You will find out why there is such a disparity in the reviews of author services in this book and we will look at the choices for an author, some terminology in publishing, what self-publishing really is, what author solutions services provide, and the standards authors need to look for when selecting a solutions service to publish their book.

To Self-Publish or Not To Self-Publish – That Is the Question

There are several further key questions an author must ask themselves before embarking on their journey through self-publishing, whether they are prepared to go it alone or utilise an author solutions company to do some of the job of self-publishing for them.

1. Have you exhausted all the traditional channels to have your book published?

This may include finding an agent to represent you and your work or you may have chosen to approach publishers who are prepared to look at manuscripts directly submitted by authors. Pursuing this path for a period of time can actually prove highly rewarding for an author. It may take one, two or more years, but the outcome at best could be a publishing contract for one or more books, or, at the very worst, some editorial feedback and direction from an authoritative and expert voice which can help an author improve their book manuscript and hone their own literary skills.

2. Have you implemented the advice and suggestions from agents or publishers to improve you as a writer and your book?

In reality when an author types ‘The End’ on the book

manuscript, it rarely proves to be the final published version that will go to print. Skilled literary agents and editors can often provide an objective perspective and offer suggestions on improvements. Ultimately, a healthy working relationship between editor and author is paramount and it is the editor who is going to have to ‘sell’ the manuscript to the publishing house he/she works for. If you are fortunate as an author to reach this stage and decline many changes suggested to you, your agent may stop working so hard for you and simply ‘run down the clock’ on your contract with them. Publishers, too, can be fussy and they like their books to ‘fit’ easily into their genres and catalogue listings.

3. What is your own personal measure of success for your book?

The range, scale and expectations for a book differ greatly depending on how serious an author is about their craft of writing and how they perceive their own books. Some writers’ long term intentions may be to earn at least a living income from writing books and articles. Other writers may have ‘fallen’ into the craft and do not see beyond the printing and publication of their first book. Hence, the wishes, aspirations and needs of writers differ greatly. There was a time when an author handed over their book to a publisher and the two in tandem floated off down the river, leaving the author almost stranded on the river bank as if they were saying goodbye to a teenager leaving the family household for good. Now, publishers expect an author to work actively on promoting their book and raising their public profile as an author as much as possible.

4. Have you carefully studied the market for your book?

A good idea for a book may be the perfect way to start writing a book, but when finished, you may find the market flooded with a thousand and one other similar books. Knowing the market for your book will also greatly influence what publishers to approach with your manuscript, and it will help you target your readership and the mediums you will use to reach them, particularly if you are considering self-publishing. Understanding your market is also critical in putting together any book proposal for a commercial publisher. It also forms the foundation for any self-publishing author tasked with selling and making their book a success.

5. Have you researched and studied the requirements of self-publishing? How much do you know about author solution companies and how to identify a reputable one?

If this is the stage you are at and the reasons why you are reading self-publishing articles, browsing online resources and why you bought a copy of this book, then it is time to seriously and carefully consider the following question and which area you as a writer fall into. This will determine what path you should take, and crucially, if self-publishing is really right for you at your present stage.

6. Has the feedback from fellow writers, submissions to literary agents and publishers resulted in one or more of the following?

- (A) They have told you that your work could be written better and is not of a publishing standard.

- (B) Your work falls into niche markets which would not generate much revenue for publisher or author.
- (C) Your work is interesting/good but why did you send it to our publishing house?
- (D) You have previously published with a commercial publisher but did not enjoy the experience or have a great amount of success.
- (E) You do not get any feedback from agents or publishers when you submit to them.

(If 'A') Take constructive criticism on the chin. You are a long way off honing your writing craft and achieving publication. Every writer can always improve with time, effort and proper guidance. Join a local writing workshop run by an established writer and teacher. Join a book club and widen your own reading taste. Then, start an entirely new writing project and begin submitting your work again to agents and publishers.

(If 'B') Clearly you have writing ability. It may be that book publishing does not suit your niche. Try submitting your work as articles to magazines, physical as well as online magazines. Try small niche publishing presses or ebook publishers. If you do not have a blog, create one and write about general subjects in the news. This may also help to build your own public profile. Consider taking your writing to a different medium – local radio/TV or a local community newspaper for your niche interest/subject. Raise your profile and try expanding from there.

(If 'C') You might be the next Stephen King, but however

good you are, you must have at least some understanding of the publishing business and the kinds of publishers there are. Make sure the agent/publisher you are submitting to actually represents/publishes the kinds of books you write. Study *The Writers' Handbook* as well as the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* for publisher and agent listings. Submit query letters first and always ascertain an editor's/agent's name when you are submitting your work. Not every book is published by Penguin, Random House, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster. There are thousands of publishers in the English speaking world. Find books of a similar genre or theme as your books in your local bookshop and find out who the publisher is. Read the boring acknowledgements you usually skip over and find out the name of the author's agent he/she is thanking there.

(If 'D') You have done the publishing gig the commercial way and learned that the majority of published authors do not earn a living from book publishing alone. You know the book publishing business pretty well, have your own dedicated following of readers and public profile, but you find the traditional book publishing business to be controlling and restrictive. Self-publishing is a very serious option for you to consider. Form your own imprint and investigate the distribution and marketing methods you can use for your next published book. You may find that through self-publishing you may get a better profit on royalties, more control on editorial and design decisions and you may finally be able to resurrect books which your last publisher rejected. Finally, talk to self-published