

The Self-Publishing Option

by

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One final type of independent publishing must be mentioned, both because of its increasing importance on the literary scene, and because it nullifies the effects of Establishment snobbishness, conglomerate bottom-line decision-making, and narrow parochialism, and because, in the politics of publishing, it reverses the traditional power relationships, denying any power at all to the Establishment publishers and conferring it all upon the individual author. I refer, of course, to self-publication. For the author/publisher, it is the ultimate political act.

As regards print media, or text on paper, there are two forms of self-publication currently in practice. One is the cooperative or collective model, in which a likeminded group of authors pool their resources (or work out various ratios of commitment) to enable individual members to publish their work (perhaps under the aegis of the group): this time it's Sarah's book; next time John's. Or, Mary's book is very important; let's all work to get it out. In the collective model, decisions on policy, and which books to publish, and (perhaps) editorial matters frequently are made by the group as a whole. In the other form of self-publication, the author goes it alone, becoming at once financier, editor, publisher, promoter, distributor, and sales force (and, if in possession of the requisite facilities and skills—and so desiring—perhaps typist, fonter, book designer, layout/cover artist, printer, and binder, as well). The production end of things can be contracted out to professionals if authors prefer to do so and if they have the resources to cover expenses.

Electronic publishing of texts, whether to lists of known e-mail recipients, or to an indefinitely large cyber-audience through collective or personal websites, blogs, or online chatrooms, will be increasingly utilized as an alternative to print on paper. As electronic publication of literary works evolves, many protocols, conventions, safeguards of property rights (or perhaps a complete re-thjinking of 'property rights') will probably emerge. While granting that this mode of publishing does exist and will continue to expand, I wish to confine my comments here to self-publication using print and paper.

Solitary self-publication has the advantage of giving the author/publisher complete control over the book. Commensurate with available resources and skills, the book will have the form, shape, content, and appearance the author desires. No external editor will suggest the cutting of material, the adding of more sex and violence to Chapter 9, changing the language, or shifting focus or emphasis. A drawback of solitary self-publication is that it requires the author to spend a great deal of time and energy producing and selling the book. (In mainstream, big-house publishing, the Establishment publisher is nominally responsible for these tasks; but the author can only hope that, within the narrow confines of the contract, the publisher will do a good or even adequate job.) Compensating for the expenditure of time and energy, though, are the useful information and skills the author/publisher acquires regarding editing, book production, and business practice, the legitimate pleasure of achievement, and the many personal contacts which are inevitably made. It also takes money to self-publish. One must have capital to invest. However, the self-publisher is able to choose the level of financial commitment he or she wishes to make. There are many levels of production-quality that one can choose for launching the work—ranging from typing and stapling of pages to photo-offset to computer print-out to handset letterpress, with various kinds of bindings to suit. All of these methods constitute publication, which is simply “the duplication of copies of a work for public dissemination”.

The difficulties faced by the self-publisher in advertising, promoting, and distributing the book, and in getting it reviewed (which brings it to public attention) are essentially the same that would be encountered if the book were issued by an independent small press. A major disadvantage of solitary self-publication is that the time and energy one must devote to promoting and selling the work can slow one’s writing of the next book; yet many authors feel that the absolute control conferred by self-publication more than compensates for the energies consumed. If the self-publisher is imaginative and industrious, the book might do better in reaching its audience than if an Establishment publisher were doing the job, for the self-publisher is not bound by the habits, orthodoxies, customary channels, back-scratching, and overhead expenses of the mainstream publisher. Besides, there are no ironclad guarantees that an Establishment publisher will actually work very hard for a serious literary work—particularly if the firm’s commitments already lie with the season’s blockbuster. Good books have been allowed to languish, thus triggering the self-fulfilling prophecy of the book’s financial failure and assuring its consignment to the remainder house or the shredder. The self-published book can remain in print as long as the author wishes it to, giving it an indefinite life to be out circulating in the world.

Some authors even today are inclined to shrink from self-publishing because of a persistent popular notion that equates self-publication with “vanity publication”, and of the onus that accompanies the latter. Vanity publication and self-publication have one feature in common: the author puts up the costs of production. But there the similarity ends.

In “vanity publishing” the “publisher” is frequently a company that produces physical copies of books for pay (sometimes with little regard to the literary merit of the work) while taking little or no responsibility for promotion and distribution. These jobs fall to the author, who, having little by way of experience, know-how, and contacts for distributing the books, is often in the position of having to give copies away to friends and relations. In vanity publishing, the author pays with the primary aim of *getting the book into print*.

In self-publication, the production costs are seen as an investment, and having the book in print as only a means to the end of *getting it to its audience*. In “self-publication”, authors usually create a unique imprint (thus creating their own publishing companies), pay a printer to have their books produced, and then *handle promotion, distribution, and sales as a business*, assuming responsibility for the fulfillment of orders, tax collection, inventory management, and accurate book-keeping.

Distribution is undertaken as a business to be conducted in a businesslike manner. To do this, many self-publishers create their own publishing companies and imprints. This gives them the status of being publishers in their own right. People who look askance at self-published works, seeing them merely as vanity publications and therefore inferior to works bearing the imprint of Establishment houses (or even independent small presses) have fallen prey to, and are laboring under the illusions of, the Validation Fallacy (discussed earlier): “The book can’t be any good; if it were, an Establishment house would have published it”. This prejudiced assumption, reflecting an ignorant and parochial attitude, is simply wrong, and should be laid to rest once and for all. When an author self-publishes, that action brings into being “an alternative press”.

During the last two hundred years, authors who have borne the costs of publishing their works have labored under a stigma: a pervasive assumption on the part of the general public, Establishment book reviewers, and large publishing houses—too frequently shared by the authors themselves—that if a work *did* have merit, it would have been brought out by a commercial publisher at the publisher’s expense; conversely, that if a commercial publisher did *not* take it on, the work clearly *didn’t* have merit (or else they would have). And further, that if a book is published by a commercial publisher, it *must* have merit (else, why would they have published it?). These assumptions are based upon another: that commercial publishers can be relied on to accurately judge a book’s merit and to have sufficient concern for literary culture to want to see a good work published. A careful survey of the books being churned out by commercial publishers at the present time should reveal the fallacies in these assumptions.

And, finally, why should there be a stigma for underwriting the cost of producing one’s books? Self-publication has a long, honorable history and tradition. Self-publishers find themselves in distinguished company—rubbing

shoulders with the likes of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Walt Whitman, James Joyce, Benjamin Franklin, Robinson Jeffers, Mark Twain, and Beatrix Potter, to name just a few. Having a good book to market, adopting aggressive and imaginative sales techniques, and observing sound business practices can make self-publication a rewarding (note: I did not say `profitable`) enterprise. And, as I said earlier, it is the ultimate political act for an author. It constitutes a true declaration of independence from the controls and limitations of Establishment (or even small-press) publishers and from the necessity of relying upon the mediation of literary agents. It constitutes *self-validation* by asserting to the world one's self-defined status as an author, freeing one from the crippling need to be validated by external "authority". It makes it possible for any book to see light, find its best audience, and stay indefinitely current doing its work. And finally, the only parochialism the author has to worry about is the author's own.

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