

GOING ROGUE

Is self-publishing right for you?

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

WE LIVE IN EXCITING TIMES AS WRITERS.

Gone are the days when the only feasible way to get your book into the hands of readers was to have it published through a traditional publisher. Now, with the rise of technology, online bookstores, digital books, print on demand, and audio books, authors have another option. Self-publishing empowers writers to take control of their work and manage how it is released into the world. But before taking the step toward self-publishing, it is important to understand more about the industry and the reality of venturing off on your own.

Current state of the industry

Self-publishers, also called “independent” or “indie” publishers, are making their mark in the publishing world. While self-publishing may still have a stigma attached to it in some circles, there are many talented, financially stable authors who have gone in this direction and risen to the top.

Mark Lefebvre, director of self-publishing and author relations at Kobo (a Canada-based international eReading service similar to Kindle), says, “Self-published books in the English language are anywhere from 20 to 25 percent of Kobo’s business, which is pretty significant, and it’s something that’s been growing. I think people are starting to recognize this isn’t just a few odd titles that helped build up our backlist, but [rather] serious publishers who are satisfying serious readers.”

These numbers show that self-publishing is not going away. In a recent report, Bowker, the exclusive U.S. agent for issuing International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) and the publisher of Books in Print, stated that self-publishing has grown 21 percent between 2014 and 2015 alone.

Author Earnings, a nonprofit venture focused on publishing industry data analysis, is a collaboration between Hugh Howey and the pseudonymous “Data Guy,” who chooses to remain anonymous so that he may freely share the data he finds without harming his career as an author. The site has become one of the top go-to industry data resources for authors. Its 2016 report echoes the idea that self-published authors are going strong. It found that 42 percent of U.S. sales of adult fiction were from non-traditional publishers (which includes Amazon imprints).

“Within the broader genre categories, there are some niches where self-publishers have completely taken over, and going to a traditional publisher would be trying to swim upstream, putting yourself at a tremendous disadvantage. Romance being one of those [niches],” says Data Guy.

The 2016 report showed that 55 percent of all online U.S. unit sales of romance titles were from independent authors. Another strong category was adult science fiction, 44 percent of which was written by indie authors. Traditional publishers still dominated the U.S. thriller market at 60 percent, along with juvenile fiction and nonfiction.

Consumers’ buying and reading habits

Readers no longer have to rely on eReading devices to enjoy an eBook. Apps make it easy to read on phones and tablets. Plus, digital audio books, which are on the rise, allow readers to listen to books while driving, exercising, or cooking a meal.

Another shift in the industry comes from where readers are buying books. According to Author Earnings, 43 percent of all print books sold in the U.S. in 2016 were bought online. In addition, 70 percent of adult fiction sold in the U.S. was in digital form (eBooks and audio books). Traditional publishers still dominate shelf space in brick and mortar bookstores, but selling through online outlets provides equal opportunity to all publishers, both traditional and independent.



Publishing models

The first step in understanding if self-publishing or traditional publishing is best for you is to look at the process of getting books from the author to the readers.

Traditional publishing model

With this model, the author generally needs to find a literary agent for representation. It is the agent's job to go to bat for the author by approaching publishers and ultimately selling the rights to publish the book. Once the manuscript is complete, the print books are sent to a distribution company, such as Ingram, where the books are housed. This ensures that when booksellers are looking for inventory for their stores, they only need to buy the books from one vendor (in this case Ingram) and not each individual publisher. The reason an author's royalties are so low is because the bookseller, distributor, publisher, and agent all take a portion from every sale.

TIMELINE: This entire process can take two to four years.

ROYALTIES: These differ depending on the product. For print books, it usually ranges from 7 percent to 15 percent, and for eBooks, it can be as high as 25 percent. Literary agents typically get 15 percent of whatever the author earns. The royalties are figured based on either the net revenue (the profit the publisher makes on the book) or the list price of the book. If the author receives an advance, no royalties are paid until the publisher earns back that advance.

UPFRONT COSTS: 0

PAYMENT: Once or twice a year

MARKETING EFFORTS: The publisher will offer some support around the initial release of the book. The author is still expected to help with marketing.

Self-publishing/indie model

With this model, the author becomes responsible for all the tasks done by a publisher, which include editing, formatting, cover design, and distribution to bookseller platforms (Amazon, bookstores, Kindle, eBooks, Kobo, etc.).

TIMELINE: Assuming the manuscript is complete, this can take as little as two months.

ROYALTIES: Each platform (CreateSpace, IngramSpark, Kindle, Kobo...) has its own breakdown for royalties. CreateSpace (print) is about 40 percent of list price, Kindle & Kobo (eBooks) are 70 percent.

UPFRONT COSTS: 0 to \$14,000. This varies because writers can choose to do everything on their own (cover, editing, formatting) and upload it to one of the free platforms (CreateSpace, Kindle...), which costs nothing. The higher costs come into play when writers enlist the help of professionals. There are some companies out there charging as high as \$14,000. The average cost to self-publish a novel where a professional copy editor, cover designer, and book designer are hired is around \$1,500-\$3,000.

PAYMENT: Monthly

MARKETING EFFORTS: The author's responsibility. Can continue for as many years as the author wants.

How do you define success?

Independent author Joanna Penn is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling thriller author and nonfiction author whose 21 books have sold over 500,000 copies in 84 countries and five languages. She says the first thing authors need to think about when deciding if self-publishing is right for them is their *definition of success*. If success involves winning literary awards or seeing your book on the shelves at every Barnes & Noble, then traditional publishing is better suited to you.

If success means holding your book in your hand or having it available on Amazon, and it's not about the money, then use a print-on-demand service like CreateSpace or IngramSpark.

But if your definition includes making money from your books, and you are writing in a genre that sells well, then you will need to take a different approach. "If you are doing this as an indie, you are the artist, but you are also the publisher, the marketer, the business owner," says Penn. "I have a master's degree in theology from Oxford and a subsequent degree in psychology. The training I have in publishing is self-taught; learned from courses and other people. In the same way we learn how to write a book, we have to learn how to market and we have to learn how to run a business. I would say the personality type of the successful indie author is one who enjoys the business side as well as the creative side. And someone who balances their 'maker time' with their 'manager time.'"

Control over the process and the timeline

Many authors seem surprised to learn that with a traditional publisher, they usually don't have any input into the cover or layout of the book. That is something the publisher does on their own. Also, the timeline for getting a book out can be a few years.

Having control over the cover, layout, content, and timeline is important to some writers. They don't want to hand this authority over to a publisher.

Award-winning author William Kowalski had been traditionally published but was interested to try self-publishing because of curiosity, frustration, and a desire to control the timeline. “My novel, *The Hundred Hearts*, won a major award in Canada and has been translated into German, but my agent wasn’t able to place it with a major house in the U.S. after a year of trying very hard. For a recognized American writer writing about contemporary American issues, that’s a blow. Most likely, if I had been willing to wait another year or two, we would have gotten a deal with a smaller house. I have nothing against smaller houses, but I didn’t want to wait that long. The book had already been edited, and there was no reason to sit on it any longer. That, plus the fact that I was probably going to have to do all my own self-promotion anyway, convinced me that the time was right.”

For Data Guy, the ability to continue to market his book is a definite plus. “Three years after my last release, anytime I see myself dropping in my sales, I set up a marketing campaign, run some Facebook ads, or do BookBub. I can take a book that is three years old and put it back into Amazon’s top 100. That is something traditional publishers disempower their authors from doing. Not deliberately, but that’s just part of the system. They move on to new books.”

Self-publishing is not really ‘self’

“Everybody thinks that indie publishing means doing everything completely on your own,” says Robin Cutler, director of IngramSpark. “I believe you need help from professionals to really enhance the book as much as possible...Self-publishing doesn’t mean you are off the hook. You still have to do all the tasks that a traditional publisher would do: editing, book design, figuring out costs and pricing, and investing in the sale and marketing of your book. You have to learn about all those different publishing tasks and be prepared to invest in all of that.”

“PEOPLE REALLY DO JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER. THEY ALSO JUDGE IT BY ITS FONT AND ITS LAYOUT.”

Forming a team of professionals for proofreading, formatting, and cover design is imperative if your publishing goal includes financial success. Kowalski advises spending the few thousand it will take to have a beautiful, professional-looking book, instead of trying to do all this yourself or doing it on the cheap. “Appearances are extremely important in the publishing world. If your goal is to be taken seriously as an author, do not skip this step. Even if you’re only putting out an e-book, it needs to be as attractive as possible. People really do judge a book by its cover. They also judge it by its font and its layout.”

Cost

The process to get a book traditionally published can take a couple of years, but there is no financial investment on the part of the author. If you decide to become an independent publisher, the timeline to have your book in the hands of readers dramatically decreases. In addition, if you plan to put out a professional-looking book that rivals those from the Big Five publishers, then you need to invest money into the creation of your book.

The cost to actually upload your book to the different publishing platforms like CreateSpace, Kindle, Kobo, Nook, or iBooks is free. IngramSpark has a small fee of \$49. The main investment happens in the editing, formatting, and cover design.

Cautions when looking for help

There are many companies offering services to authors interested in self-

publishing. Some are reputable and offer great services at a reasonable price, and others seem to be preying on the dreams of writers. Be diligent with your research of each company. Here are some things to consider:

- *Understand what the company is trying to sell you.*
If you are new to self-publishing, there may be terms that are unfamiliar to you. Some of these companies have long lists of services and items they are offering. It can be overwhelming, but if you take a deep breath and go through the list item-by-item, you will start to understand. Sometimes services are added to the list that aren’t really things the company does, but things that happen automatically or they are tasks you can easily do yourself. For instance, if you see a line item that says, “Amazon ‘Look Inside,’” be wary. This is something Amazon does once a book is uploaded; it isn’t something an outside company can do.
- *Understand the limitations of what they are offering.*
Dig deeper into to each line item so you are clear on what it means. Sometimes you will see “editorial assessment.” This is not a full, comprehensive edit. Usually, it is a sample edit with the hopes you will add a full editorial service to your package.
- *Figure out your return on investment (ROI).*
Putting out a great product is

important and will take an investment on your part, but you don't need to break the bank to put out a professional-looking book. If a company is charging \$10,000 for one package, and you calculate that you will receive about \$4.00 per book from online channels like Amazon and Kindle, then you are going to have to sell 2,500 books just to break even.

Bookstores/distribution

Many authors dream of seeing their books on the shelves of bookstores. Although this is not an unreasonable goal, you need to understand how the bookstores work, especially if you decide to self-publish. Remember, when a bookstore needs to place an order for books, it goes to a big distributor like Ingram. For bookstores to make money on books, they actually need to buy them at a wholesale rate from Ingram, which is typically 40 percent to 55 percent off the retail price. They can then turn around and sell the books for retail and make a profit. Books that don't sell are sent back to Ingram or are destroyed.

This is important for self-publishers to know. If you want your books to potentially be available in a bookstore, you need to have them available through Ingram, which is possible to do through IngramSpark. You need to set a discount of at least 40 percent and make your book returnable. This doesn't mean every Barnes & Noble is going to stock your book; it only means it is available for them to buy or for people to special order. If the book doesn't sell, then it is returned to you and you are charged for the shipping. Because of the large discount you need to offer, you may not make a big profit on each book, and if it is shipped back at your expense, you may even lose money.

Independent bookstores are more open to stocking books from indie authors. If it is available through Ingram, they can order it through there; others offer consignment

programs where they will stock your book and if it sells, you get paid your 60 percent and the bookstore keeps 40 percent. They typically keep it on the shelf for a couple of months. Some also charge fees to small publishers to help cover their costs and the time it takes for employees to add your information into their system.

Forging ahead

"The indie spirit is the life blood that is rejuvenating the publishing industry," says Lefebvre. "I look at what indies are doing today, and I say it's not all that different than the innovation that built our entire industry. It is the fresh blood that is going to keep our industry prosperous and strong. Indie authors understand the importance of experimentation and trying different things and picking themselves up and failing fast and failing hard, and then picking themselves up and trying again. They also understand it's not about publishing a thousand titles and hoping that one of them sticks, which is what the big publishers end up doing. It usually comes from innovation, niche markets, and publishing things they are most passionate about, which is what publishing really is."

All of this boils down to the fact that there are more options today than ever before when it comes to publishing your book. It is no longer a one-way street. You have the ability to decide if self-publishing or traditional publishing is the route you want to take, or you can become a hybrid author and do both. Regardless of what you choose, it is important to understand what you are committing to with each of these options and understand exactly what it entails before deciding the direction you want to go. **W**

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RESOURCES:

Digital books:

Kindle: kdp.amazon.com

Nook: nookpress.com

Kobo: kobo.com/writinglife

iBooks: apple.com/itunes/working-itunes/sell-content/books

Cover design:

99Designs: 99designs.com

Fiverr: fiverr.com

Podcasts:

Rocking Self Publishing Podcast: rockingselfpublishing.com

Creative Penn Podcast: thecreativepenn.com/podcasts

Sell More Books Show: sellmorebooksshow.com

ISBN number:

Bowker (ISBN#): bowker.com

Other helpful resources:

Digital Book World: digitalbookworld.com

Jane Friedman blog: janefriedman.com/blog

United States Copyright Office: copyright.gov

My Writing Network (founder William Kowalski): mywriting.network

Author Earnings: authorearnings.com