

Self-Publishing Success Stories

By Kerrie Flanagan

With the success of ebooks, print on demand platforms like CreateSpace and even audio books, the number of self-published authors over the past five years has skyrocketed. We hear success stories, but they tend to be the Cinderella, dream come true stories. But what about those we don't hear about? Those authors making a good living? What's their story and how did they find success? Here are four authors from around the globe who are making a way for themselves in the exciting world of self-publishing.

CJ Archer

This former technical writer from Australia and mother of two young children, is the author of 32 novels (mostly historical fantasy) and writes full-time. Before self-publishing she went the traditional route and secured an agent. Several times they nearly landed a traditional publisher, but after two years, all four manuscripts went nowhere and the agent eventually terminated the relationship. CJ had about ten completed manuscripts at that point when she decided to try another route.

What made you then decide to pursue self-publishing?

I hit my professional rock bottom. I'd been writing for 15 years and I had won some contests here in Australia. I just felt like I was writing the best work I could and that still wasn't getting me anywhere. I literally threw up my hands and said, *that's it. I quit.* And I did quit, for all of a few weeks. I stopped submitting manuscripts for a little while. At that time in 2010 the self-publishing movement was starting to make some waves. I started reading everything I could about it. The more I read, the more intrigued I was about the idea of it. About the freedom. When I first started I wanted to test the waters. I wanted to put out some feelers; put out some old manuscripts and see what happened and do it anonymously. I didn't tell anyone except my husband. But the plan was to keep submitting my current stuff to agents and publishers.

How did your experiment go?

It went really well. I put out one book at the end of January 2011. Sales started happening straight away. It was a trickle, but I was blown away by the fact that complete strangers were buying my book and reading it. That gave me some courage to put out a couple more of my older manuscripts. Eventually the sales kept mounting. I gave myself a whole year to make an income and if I couldn't make an income in that year, I would go and look for a "real" job.

That year passed and I was making enough of an income to warrant me staying home and writing full time. I was making good part time job money. After two years, I was making good full-time job income, better than I was earning as a technical writer. After year three I was making over 100k. *The Watchmakers Daughter* (book one in the *Glass and Steele* series) took me from a low six-figure to high six figure income this last financial year.

What is your writing process for getting these done so quickly?

I am now putting out four full-length novels a year. I work around my kids' school hours. I write when they are at school; about four hours per day. I also edit what I have written during that time while the words are fresh in my mind. I find that is probably the most important part of the process. That very first initial edit that is done on the day that I write those words. I aim for 3,000 words a day. I can write a first draft in about six weeks. I will spend another week at the end of the draft to do another edit. Then I let it sit for two months. Then I come back and do another edit. Once I am happy with that edit, I send it off to my editor and my beta readers. They generally get back to me in two to three weeks. I do another edit based on their suggestions. Then I get it ready to publish.

What do you do for Marketing?

BookBub ads by far are a thousand times more successful. Absolutely worth the investment. Make sure you have a way readers can subscribe to your newsletter. The very first thing you need, after writing, *The End* and before you have a page break is a *coming soon* link or a *you can now buy* and then have a direct link to that book. Update that back matter as soon as that book is available. In that same area have a sign up for your newsletter. Try to hook them that way. Every time I send out my newsletter I will get a few thousand pre-orders or purchases. I have about 7,000 on my list

Advice for those considering self-publishing

Do your research. Research how to do it. Research other books in your genre and how they present themselves, do their covers, their price point and read their blurbs. Read their reviews to see what readers like about that book. Write, not only the best book you can, but it has to be as good as the other books out there [traditional and self-published]. We are not the best judges of our writing. That is why I value my critique partners and my beta readers. Get that independent feedback somehow. Then put your head down and write the next book. There is no point marketing one book. Keep on writing, get as many books out as you can, as high quality as you can as professional looking as well.

Monique Martin

Monique Martin is the author of 14 novels including her bestselling, *Out of Time* series which combines elements of romance, adventure, mystery and time travel. She attended the University of Southern California's Film School where she earned her BFA. For a few years, she worked full-time in television in post-production before being called in to help the family business where she then worked for 10 years. She felt it ate away at her creative soul so decided to try writing a novel.

Why self-publishing?

I do not know what possessed me to write a novel instead of a screenplay. I wrote at night, on my patio, a story I wanted to tell. I took classes at night because I had never written prose before. There was really no other option except the traditional route (around 2009). I did what everyone else did. I sent out letters and I got fairly far, but it was too depressing. I was not in the right place emotionally or strong enough to keep climbing that hill. I put it in a drawer where it sat for about six months. Then I read an article about Kindle publishing. I thought, heck, it's just sitting in the drawer. I made my own cover and I published it. I had zero expectations. Which was wise, because for the whopping price of 99 cents, I sold about 20 books that first month. The world was a different place back then for self-publishing. I managed to develop a following by pulsing between free and 99 cents with this full-length novel.

Why did you take classes and how did it help?

I took two extension courses at UCLA on how to write prose because it was a mystery to me. I knew how to write dialogue and description. I needed to learn the craft. It demystified things for me. I found other souls who were in the exact same boat I was and when the class was over we formed a writers group. We met weekly and that nurtured me through the process of writing that first book and that was invaluable.

What do you enjoy most about self-publishing?

The freedom. It's what you love and you loathe. The decisions are yours. Its great! But *all* the decisions are yours. I can write whatever I want. I am not beholden to anyone but myself and my current readers. To have that flexibility. That freedom and responsibility.

What do you do to get new readers and hang on to current readers?

I am engaged with a small group of readers on Facebook. It's that idea that if you can get superfans, that they do the work of a thousand fans. I of course have a newsletter. I have a new release newsletter with several thousand people on that. That helps right out of the gate when I have a release. When I have a third book in a series, I get a BookBub ad for books one and two and that really propels readership. I had a very successful BookBub marketing scheme about two months ago and I am still feeling the glow. The key is to capture the readers; to make sure you have a mailing list. I have a call to action at the beginning and the end of both print and ebooks to sign up for the newsletter and reach out to me on Facebook.

At what point did you realize you could be doing this full time?

Between book three and four I realized I could make an actual living on this and not just a supplemental income. My income ranges from \$70,000-\$100,000. It's a good living and I am doing as well or better than many mid-listers (traditionally published).

Advice for those considering self-publishing

Write quickly. If you have anything that remotely takes off or that you are passionate about that is a series or potential series, publish every three to four months if you can. I think this is the one thing most people don't realize. In today's consumable world, especially if you are writing genre fiction, you have to keep churning them out. That's not to say you have to sacrifice quality, but you have to keep your nose to the grindstone.

Chuck Barrett

Retired air-traffic controller and award-winning author, Chuck Barrett currently has six thriller novels out. He spends his days writing, marketing and enjoying the Colorado outdoors.

What made you decide to self-publish?

A good bit of why I chose the self-publishing route was the industry itself at the time. It was the worst year the publishing industry had seen in over 60 years and the traditional option was, well, not much of an option. The majors were not buying. Rejections from agents came almost faster than I could send them. I did not want to wait until the market turned around, so I explored my self-publishing options. My first two books were under the imprint of a small publisher. I scrutinized everything she did to see how she did all of it. I didn't have a good enough handle when my second book was coming out to jump out on my own. I kept doing my homework and felt I was ready by the time my third novel was ready, so I took the big step and ventured out on my own.

What do you enjoy most about self-publishing?

There is a satisfaction knowing that I am not only doing the creative writing involved in writing thrillers, but that I am also wearing the hats of cover designer, interior designer, marketer, promoter, and all the other hats needed to make the business side successful. I started the self-publishing out of necessity, but actually found it enjoyable. Sure, there are things that seem tedious at times, but now that I've acquired so much experience publishing books, I find that it's fun.

When did you start seeing traction for your books?

With each book I added, the total number of sales went up. The third book made a big difference. Series are easier to sell because people get invested in the characters and once they get invested they want to keep reading to see what happens. I started getting a steady income. When my fourth book, *Blown* came out, it was a standalone (the first in a series) and everything changed. I started running Facebook ads and I did Net Galley for the first time. I had about 60 reviews from Net Galley going into my release. I sent emails to all those people with the link thanking them for the review on release day and this was the first day they could post a review on Amazon. I got a bunch of reviews that day. For that first year I was making about \$3,000/month on just *Blown*.

Tell me more about your beta readers

With the first book, I made the mistake of having friends read it. They didn't want to hurt my feelings. I now have a good little cadre of beta readers (all volunteer). They range from retired special forces, English teacher, newspaper editor to my wife. I also have a few subject matter experts, since I have no military or law enforcement background; I have a U.S. Marshal and I have a cop. These guys make sure that things aren't wrong and they give me vernacular. When you are looking for beta readers you need to find people who want to volunteer their time and people who genuinely want to see you have a better book.

What do you do to build your newsletter subscribers?

I recently started using an automation chain for new subscribers. I use my first book, Savannah Project as my lead magnet and inside the book is a link to sign up for my newsletter. When someone signs up for the newsletter it starts the series of automated emails that go out every few days that include free downloads, information about each book, and other personal insights about the books. What has happened is when each automation goes out about the different books, sales of that book go up.

Advice for those considering self-publishing

Understand going into it that it is a lot of work. It takes a lot of time. It takes a total commitment. Readers expect a certain level of professionalism; from your editing, to your product, to your cover. There are right ways to do it and wrong ways to do it and sloppy is wrong. The writing is a reflection of you as the author and the product is a reflection of you as a publisher. You don't want to put a bad product on the market. When people see it that first time, if they are turned off, they are not coming back.

Melissa F. Miller

Melissa F. Miller, a former lawyer with an undergraduate degree in English literature with concentrations in creative writing poetry and medieval literature now spends her time homeschooling her three children and writing legal thrillers. She is a USA Today bestselling author of 16 novels, including the *Sasha McCandless* series and three novellas.

Why self-publishing?

The short answer is that I am a bit of a control freak. I home school my children, and when my husband and I were practicing law, we had left big law firms to have our own two-person practice, so I like to be in charge. When I wrote the book in 2010, I was ready to start sending it out in 2011. This was when KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing) was starting to take off. The other self-publishing platforms didn't exist. It was KDP and CreateSpace. My husband sent me an article from some

tech magazine that said, “so you wrote a book, why don’t you just self-publish it?” It was about using these technologies instead of going the traditional publishing route. I thought, *this sort of fits my personality*.

Had you explored traditional publishing at all?

Not really. I had joined Sisters in Crime and had gone to a conference and did pitch sessions for the first book I wrote, not the first one I self-published. That first book will never see the light of day; it is my drawer novel. I sort of dipped my toe in but never went that route.

What parts of the process do you do on your own and what parts do you hire out?

This has changed over time. I previously had the books formatted and the covers done through independent contractors. But my husband took a PhotoShop class and he bought the formatting software to format the print and ebooks (Vellum). We have a team of editors and proofers that are freelancers. So, I pay for that. I have some marketing help; a virtual assistant and I have copy editors and proof readers who I hire.

What is your book launch strategy?

My book launch strategy is really the preorder. The six to eight weeks leading up to a launch I will get excitement going by posting excerpts and then, on the day the book is live, I will send my newsletter to folks and post on social media. When I can, I get a Book Bub promotion on that first book. For me having the first book free is a great funnel into the series and it seems to draw people through the entire series.

What are your sales now after an initial launch?

This varies depending on the series, but usually 5,000-10,000 copies in the first three months.

What does that translate into for you with annual income?

For the past couple of years, I have been making in the low six figures.

How many books do you typically put out each year?

I try to release four books per year. In the beginning, I was still practicing law full time, so in those first couple years, my releases were very erratic. That’s one thing I learned the hard way. Once you develop an audience and you have a following, you have to keep feeding that. Especially if it is a series. In an ideal world, I would have my releases be very predictable.

If you could have done anything differently, what would that have been?

If I could have done anything differently, I would have mapped out the first couple of books in my first series and had a more predictable release schedule for the books.

Advice for authors considering self-publishing

There are so many blogs and books on self-publishing. I would read widely before you start. It's a different skillset than writing; the publishing part of it, and I don't think that everybody who is a talented, successful writer would enjoy self-publishing. Take everything you hear with a grain of salt because things do change so quickly in self-publishing. The advice that worked when I first started, was not the advice that was working two years ago and it certainly is not the advice that is working now. Being willing to be able to adapt and change course is crucial.

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Sean Costello

Why did you decide to self-publish?

My first 3 novels (*Eden's Eyes*, *The Cartoonist*, *Captain Quad*) were published by Pocket Books in 1989, '90 and '91. In those days I had an agent (Richard Curtis) and a dream of writing fulltime. Sadly, the advances sucked, and mass market paperbacks got a month on the shelves and that was it. At the time, I was working 60-80 hours a week as an anesthesiologist, and had a son born in January of '92. Pocket offered me a book-a-year for 3 years at that point, and I had to decline. Once the rights to those books had reverted back to me, Curtis offered to give them 'renewed life' in the then-emerging ebook marketplace. I agreed, but the books languished, so after several years I decided to take over the job myself. By that time I'd had a half-dozen other titles published by various small presses, so I started fresh a couple of years ago, publishing all of them electronically on Amazon, Kobo, iBooks etc.

What do you enjoy most about self-publishing?

The freedom. Having battled editors at Pocket, I much prefer self-publishing. This way, if a reader knows who I am and enjoys what I do, they're getting exactly what I want them to get. And with a strong advance reader team—those 44 avid readers—believe me, I'm not getting away with anything. If I've screwed up, they take me to task on it. And I get a hell of a kick out of the reviews,

even the bad ones. The funniest come from the language police, whom I offend on a regular basis, in spite of the clear R-rating for language in bold text in the first line of the book descriptions.

Approximately, what is your initial investment for each book? What services do you always pay for (editing, cover, layout...)?

Around 300.00 for cover art via 99Design. Initially, that's it. I have a few trusted readers who enjoy having an early look at new stuff, so I manage to keep other expenses to a minimum. I do my own layout in Sigil. With each new book, the ongoing costs—primarily promotion—have diminished considerably, as the impact of everything but BookBub tends to be inadequate at best and hence avoided. I've lucked into three BookBub promos in the last 2 years, and their impact has been considerable in terms of building a mailing list.

What is your book launch strategy?

I've got just under 7,000 names on my mailing list, 550 of which are also on an advance reader list (44 of whom actually read and reviewed my last title). I notify the main list a few weeks in advance, then send the book to the advance readers. The deal I have with the AR group is they read and comment on the novel, then buy it for 0.99 and review it in the first couple of days after publication. After that the price goes up; then it's pretty much about trying to score a decent promo. My short novel *Squall* has been a great performer, garnering over 3K reviews (84% 4- and 5-star) and funneling subscribers onto my list. I credit that book with most of whatever financial gains I've managed to attain.

What is one marketing strategy you tried that worked really well? One that bombed?

In both instances the answer is BookBub. When I started out making an actual effort in the ebook field, I ran *Finders Keepers* as a perma-free novel. I scored a BookBub on that one and joyously watched the Units Ordered graph on Amazon jump by several hundred copies every time I refreshed the screen. That one maxed out at 42K downloads and took months to drift down to 500/day. The same thing happened with *Squall* when I made it my perma-free (permanently free) title; that little guy remained in the top 10 freebies in the Thriller/Crime category for more than a year, and still ranks between 10 and 17 on any given day.

But these were free books. *Here After*, the novel I consider my best work (optioned to film by David Hackl, director of *Saw V*), and the only BookBub promo I've scored for a book at 0.99, totally tanked. That was a little heartbreaking.

Tell me more about *Here After* being optioned for a movie?

I've had a long and unsatisfying past with film companies—4 contracts on 3 novels, all of which expired and were not renewed...thankfully, due to ruinous script revisions—and had all but given

up hope when director David Hackl (*Saw V, Life on the Line*) contacted me 4 years ago to express an interest in *Here After*, which he and his wife had purchased during a search for Canadian authors online.

I had a screenplay written, and David has been using it to gather funding. The original 4-year option expired a few months ago and I expected that to be the end of it. But the Hackls renewed for another year, and mentioned hoping to get started on the project this fall.

You still work full time along with being a writer. How do you balance the two? Do you hope to someday write full time?

This is a timely question. I've been writing hobby-style since the late 70s, had a few short stories published in small press mags in the early 80s, then the 3 Pocket Book horror novels in the late 80s, early 90s. I've been a full-time anesthesiologist since 1981—and scrambling for time to write ever since...evenings, weekends, holidays. However, I'm looking at retiring end-of-December this year. And then yes—I'm hoping to write fulltime. After 9 novels and tons of reading, I feel I'm finally settling into a voice of my own, and look forward to the opportunity to give 'er shit 24/7 in the very near future.

What is your writing schedule/routine like and how often to you put out new books?

It's too sporadic to be called a routine. Catch as catch can. The other problem is, I'm an obsessive self-editor. Crazy hours doing that. I throw the Word doc on a Kindle and use the highlight/notes features to do my edits. It gives me the combined benefit of a fresh device to read on (without wasting reams of paper and expensive toner) and a mechanism for making the edits. I do that over and over until I can read the book on the Kindle without the slightest hesitation. In other words, when it reads like someone else—a real writer—wrote it, I know it's as good as I can make it at the time. Writing is editing.

As for output: right now, maybe a book every 2 years. Writing fulltime—if I remain *compos mentis*—probably 2 a year.

If you could do it all over again, is there anything you would do differently?

I wish I'd had the courage, when I discovered my love of writing, to hang up the stethoscope for a while and really go for it.

What advice do you have for those considering self-publishing?

I don't feel much qualified to advise anyone on self-publishing. What I can suggest is that you give your absolute best to everything you write—even emails; it's all practice—trust your own voice,

edit tirelessly, avoid the many charlatans the ebook business has spawned, and grow a thick skin. Then go for it, flat out.