

GOING INDIE IN 2021

An inside look at
the current state
of self-publishing.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN



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Self-publishing has always been the rebel of the industry, pushing back against “rules,” forging its own path, and pushing up against the established system. Unfortunately, this has also resulted in a stigma that it is somehow inferior to traditional publishing – and one that’s been hard to shake. Over the past decade, however, it has made great strides, garnering more attention and finally getting the respect it deserves as a viable path to publication.

The past decade has seen explosive growth in self-publishing with print-on-demand capabilities, eBooks that can now be read through apps on a variety of devices (including phones), distributions to readers around the world, unique marketing opportunities, and an abundance of resources on how to self-publish. There has never been a better time to be an independent author and take charge of your path to publication.

Whether you have already self-published or are considering this option, it’s important to understand the current industry because it changes and evolves constantly. By staying on top of new developments in the industry, you will have a clearer picture of what to expect, allowing you to better navigate through the ever-changing landscape.

RECENT SHIFTS IN SELF-PUBLISHING

Mindset

When Amazon Kindle came onto the scene in 2007 as the first eReader, it felt like the Gold Rush of publishing. Writers loaded up their authorial wagons in search of promised riches. They flooded this new market with 99-cent eBooks that admittedly weren’t always the best quality in the hopes of striking it rich. Many readers drowned in an avalanche of bad books, leaving them feeling uneasy about indie titles and harming the already-fragile reputation of self-publishing, all of which helped create the aforementioned stigma the industry still struggles with.

Authors who were serious about getting their books into the marketplace had to step up and realize there was more to self-publishing than writing novels and slapping them on Amazon. Being a successful independent author requires the mindset of an entrepreneur who understands the value of the product – in this case, books – and the value of the business side of it.

Today, there are various platforms to publish eBooks, print books, and even audiobooks, providing many opportunities for authors. To rise above the millions of other self-published books, authors must take advantage of the wealth of resources available to create high-quality books that have been formatted correctly, professionally edited, and have great content and professional covers.

Orna Ross, director of the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), says authors have only been widely self-publishing for 10 years, and the industry is still in its early stages.

“I hear people saying every year that it’s peaked, and it’s going to go away. It’s not,” she says. “It’s here to stay.” As an example, she points to ALLi’s growth since its inception back in 2012. Each year membership increases by 20%, and Ross says the number of indie authors earning a

living from their writing also continues to grow.

Ross is seeing a move toward author empowerment. Authors serious about building a career are taking the time to not only polish their craft but also to learn the business side of writing. “It’s gone way beyond selling your book on Amazon,” she says. “We are seeing a lot more authors selling directly on their own website, getting together with other authors to collaborate on big projects, and imagining new and creative ways of doing things.”

“Rapid release, rapid writing – that sort of ‘hamster wheel of publishing’ that had been working for KU and Amazon is not a sustainable model. Authors were hurting themselves mentally and physically exhausting themselves.”

One area where independent authors have been getting creative over the past couple years is with subscription models like those found on Patreon, where readers subscribe to the author. Ross says this is one way authors can build community with readers and earn income at the same time. When readers become patrons, they pay for more than just the books – they are paying to be closer to authors and to receive exclusive premium products, content, and deals. Many consumers like to feel a part of something, and this is a way for authors to create that experience for their readers.

Authors are also realizing that looking at other publishers and authors as competition isn’t helpful. Ross says,

“It’s more productive to think about your reader and what they are looking for and what distinguishes you from everyone else. All authors are unique, and reading is something that we can grow together. I think authors working together is the future.”

Resources

Many readers don’t seem to care who publishes a book as long as they receive an excellent product. The great news for authors is there are more resources available now, says Corinne O’Flynn, a *USA Today* bestselling independent author of fantasy, mystery, and paranormal romance stories. “There are so many people out there innovating and making a difference for writers,” she says. “Thinking back on the past couple of years, I think the biggest changes have been in the tools available to indie authors. We have more marketing data, graphic design, and marketing avenues than ever before, which all serve to help us save time and manage our business, so we can focus on the most important thing: writing.”

Publishing options have expanded beyond Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) for eBooks and IngramSpark for print books. While these two platforms are still around, there are others as well. In 2018, CreateSpace merged with KDP, meaning you can now publish eBooks and paperbacks in one place. There are distributors like Draft2Digital and Smashwords that offer formatting tools for eBooks and print as well as a platform to distribute your books to various markets, including Amazon, Kobo, Apple, Nook. Plus, there are more marketing resources, Facebook groups to connect with other authors, formatting tools like Vellum, and guides to help with all aspects of marketing. In fact, there is so much available now that it can be easy to get overwhelmed. Learning the business of self-publishing takes patience, and you need to give yourself time to learn about all you have at your disposal.

Burnout

There was a push a few years back for authors to rapidly release books to build their catalog quickly because more books meant more potential royalties. Many voracious readers use Kindle Unlimited (KU) – an Amazon subscription service that offers readers unlimited access to the KU eBook library for a monthly fee – so the idea with this method was to keep the author in front of readers and therefore keep the attention of the Amazon algorithms, netting more attention and profit as a result.

Mark Leslie Lefebvre, author and director of business development at Draft2Digital, began to notice a lot of burnout with this indie author business model. “They were trying to keep pace with something that is impossible,” he says. “Rapid release, rapid writing – that sort of ‘hamster wheel of publishing’ that had been working for KU and Amazon is not a sustainable model. Authors were hurting themselves mentally and physically exhausting themselves.”

He is happy to see that now authors are moving away from this and more toward a relaxed and long-term thinking mindset. “There is a difference with getting one sale today or a fan for life,” he says. “I would much rather go for the fan for life.”

O’Flynn understands this all too well. A few years ago, she was cranking out romance books, one each month under a pen name, and trying to balance the writing with the business side of it. “My author business was completely overwhelming to me. It felt frantic and full, and every day was a struggle to fit writing time in between all the marketing, advertising, events, social media, and admin. I had to make a change because I couldn’t maintain the current pace – and I really didn’t want to.”

She started paying attention to her return on investment in dollars and joy, causing her to revamp her approach. She made goals for everything, tracked data when she could and

went with her gut for the rest. “I am more successful now than I have ever been, and more importantly, I approach my business from a place of calm rather than the hectic need to keep up.”

“Traditional publishers are like the Titanic and are unable to change course quickly, but we, the indie authors, are in little motorboats zipping around. We can change prices, we can try things, we can test things out.”

Pandemic impact

It’s no surprise the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on the book industry in 2020. Bookstores and libraries had to shut their doors temporarily, making foot traffic nonexistent. Bookstores pivoted to online and curbside sales, but libraries were forced to stop circulating print books because it was unknown at the time if the virus stayed on surfaces. This pushed many library patrons who never considered downloading an eBook or audiobook to utilize this option. Libraries pay authors and publishers per download of an eBook or audiobook or for individual copies of their print and digital books, so this helped indie authors who had theirs available to the library market through a distributor like Draft2Digital. Lefebvre says OverDrive, one of the leading markets to libraries, saw eBook sales increase 130% in the last week of March 2020.

Alex Newton, founder of K-lytics, a platform that provides book market data, saw some surprises in the 2020 numbers. Once the big retailers closed

to in-store sales, Newton saw a dip in sales from March to June, but then the numbers bounced back. “2020 closed with print retail sales in the US at \$750 million. This was up 8.2% from 2019, making it the highest annual growth rate in a decade,” Newton says. On the eBook side, in early April, he saw Google searches for eBooks doubling. With Amazon, he analyzed the Kindle Direct Publishing fund, a good indicator of the market, and found it grew by 25%. His current projections for 2021 indicate 21% growth, showing that more readers are continuing to buy and enjoy eBooks.

Traditional publishers rely heavily on their print sales, especially to bookstores. Independent authors, however, typically rely on online sales of their print and digital content. When the pandemic hit and the publishing industry was disrupted, indie authors were ready to pivot as needed. Lefebvre says, “Traditional publishers are like the Titanic and are unable to change course quickly, but we, the indie authors, are in little motorboats zipping around. We can change prices, we can try things, we can test things out.”

AUDIOBOOKS

The audiobook market continues to grow, as do the tools available to self-publishers to create and distribute their audiobooks. According to the Audio Publishers Association’s Sales Survey, publishers’ audiobook revenue grew 12% in 2020 to \$1.3 billion, the ninth straight year of double-digit growth. Listening behavior shifted from listening in the car to home because of the pandemic stay-at-home orders. Fifty-five percent of listeners said they listened most often at home compared with 43% the year before; and only 30% listened in the car compared with 41% the previous year.

In 2020, more than 71,000 audiobooks were published, a 39% growth over 2019, making it the largest growth in new titles since 2015 and the highest

number on record. The most popular audiobook genre continues to be mysteries/thrillers/suspense, but interest in romance, self-help, and business genres also increased.

Will Dages is the head of Findaway Voices, a platform that allows indie authors to connect with narrators, publish, and distribute their audiobooks to 40+ markets around the world. He says he saw an initial crash in audiobooks when the pandemic first hit because commutes went away. Dages became nervous, but the market showed its resilience: “After about two weeks, things started to bounce back, then they stayed at a higher baseline for the rest of the year, higher than it had been before. People recalibrated and found other ways to listen, and the listening and purchasing rebounded.”

ACX (a branch of Audible) used to be the dominant force for indies to create and distribute their audiobooks. The company has made some changes lately regarding their contracts in an attempt to compete with other indie audiobook services. The big one is if authors go exclusive with ACX (because they want to receive a higher royalty rate of 40%), they are no longer required to stay with the service for seven years. Authors are now only required to be exclusive for 90 days

(similar to KU). After that, authors can continue being exclusive or go wide.

In 2017, Findaway Voices came onto the scene with a new indie branch of its company. This allowed authors more options in the audiobook realm and a platform for worldwide retail, library, subscription, and direct sales distribution. “This year, we’re working hard to expand the audiobook industry worldwide with a new way to create audiobooks called Marketplace,” Dages shares. “Right now, narrators are embracing their new modern profile pages and seeing the benefits of having a ‘narrator homepage’ on the web. To the delight of authors around the world, Marketplace makes it easy to find the right voice for their project.”

The audio market continues to grow, but it is a big investment, Dages cautions authors. “An audiobook is not going to save a failing series. If the book is not performing well in eBook and print, you probably won’t magically find an audience for it in audio.” On the other hand, if it *is* doing well, then you’re missing out on the market share by not having audiobooks. For established indie authors who have a solid readership, there are definite benefits to releasing an audiobook simultaneously with your eBook.

Dages says Findaway Voices has seen a 30% gain in profits when authors do this.

EXCLUSIVITY VS. WIDE DISTRIBUTION

There is a lot of talk lately in the self-publishing world regarding publishing eBooks exclusive with KDP (Amazon), meaning you cannot have them available to distribute on other platforms. When opting to be exclusive, authors have the opportunity to make their eBooks available in Kindle Unlimited (Amazon’s subscription program) and to run free and count-down deals. It is still possible to have eBooks on KDP without being exclusive, but then you can’t be in KU or participate in the promos.

The argument for exclusivity is that Amazon is the biggest marketplace, so why not take advantage of all it has to offer? The side against exclusivity argues: Why put all your eggs in one basket when you should be thinking about diversifying?

Lefebvre, author of the book *Wide for the Win: Strategies to Sell Globally via Multiple Platforms and Forge Your Own Path to Success*, says being exclusive is more short term, and indie authors should be thinking more long term. “It used to be that you would only focus on the big one (Amazon); now there is the big four (Amazon, Kobo, Apple, and Nook), five if you include Google Play,” he explains. “But there are other platforms that authors are starting to pay attention to, and they are starting to think beyond North America.”

He encourages indies to think more globally. “Being successful as a ‘wide author’ is more than just putting your books on other platforms, but it is also engaging with those communities, engaging with the platforms, and engaging with your book on those platforms, so you understand it the way you understand Amazon.” Lefebvre wants authors to think of their revenue as many streams of income, instead of just one.

Going wide also means thinking beyond the five retailers, such as the aforementioned library market. Platforms like Radish, Wattpad, and the



new Kindle Vella offer unique reader experiences through fiction serialized in short episodes. More and more authors are selling their books direct using payment apps like Payhip. For authors who think bigger, there are many opportunities beyond the main markets.

MARKETING

Marketing strategies are always evolving in the indie world, and authors have become more business savvy by utilizing the many tools and resources at their disposal when creating a marketing plan that fits their genres and budgets. It can be easy to get overwhelmed by everything available, so authors need to understand their options and then choose the ones that best fit into their overall strategy, not try to implement them all at once.

“I think almost anyone who invests a little bit of time into self-publishing will realize after two days [of] Googling that it has become professional,” Newton says. “It’s no longer gold digging.” Authors understand they are running a business, and a business needs market data to guide its decisions. Newton’s company provides useful data to help authors make informed decisions about covers, successful genres, pricing, book lengths, and other information to better navigate their careers.

For Karen Inglis, author of *How to Self-Publish and Market a Children’s Book*, the most exciting marketing change has been the expansion of Amazon advertising to Europe, Australia, and Canada. “Until this change came along, I sold 95% of my books face-to-face at events. Access to this sort of advertising was previously limited to the major publishing houses. Being treated on a (near) level playing field has made discoverability of our books so much easier and means there is now a realistic chance of selling your books in the thousands if they are well prepared and targeted.”

Advertising

Self-publishing your books is a fantastic achievement, and one that should be celebrated. But just because your books are available doesn’t mean readers know they are there. One way to reach readers is through targeted advertising on Facebook, Amazon, BookBub, and other platforms. Authors shouldn’t try to learn all of them at once but instead focus on one, study how to best currently use it, and then stay informed about that platform because things can change quickly.

“A lot of authors think they can ‘fix’ their book marketing with ads. Ads will not fix a bad book cover or a poorly designed Amazon book page”

Mark Dawson, author and creator of *Self-Publishing Formula*, says the market is more crowded than ever, but that doesn’t mean it’s no longer possible for authors just starting out to turn a profit. “For those with only a few [published] books and a smaller budget to work with, I’d recommend Facebook ads. They’re probably the simplest to get one’s head around, and you can start with just \$5 a day. Run tests to find something that works, and then reinvest that profit [made from ad-related sales] in your ads in order to scale up.”

For authors further along in their careers who have a larger budget to work with, he recommends splitting advertising budgets between Amazon and BookBub in addition to some Facebook ads.

Newton finds that authors with series receive a better return on their advertising dollars. He also believes if

you want to be one of the top earners, there’s no way around having ads. But Penny Sansevieri, marketing expert and author of *How to Sell Books by the Truckload on Amazon*, says authors do not necessarily need to “pay to play.” “A lot of authors think they can ‘fix’ their book marketing with ads. Ads will not fix a bad book cover or a poorly designed Amazon book page,” Sansevieri says. “Ads will, however, enhance what you’ve already got. But ads are not mandatory for success.”

Newsletters

Newsletters are an effective tool in any indie author’s toolbox. They are permission marketing at its best: By giving you their email, the reader offers consent to contact them directly. You don’t have to wonder if they saw your latest post on Facebook or Twitter or some other site. Tammi Labrecque, author of *Newsletter Ninja: How to Become an Author Mailing List Expert*, believes digital newsletters are essential. “It’s a platform that you control. Amazon can close your account. Facebook can ban you. Social media falls in and out of fashion, but your newsletter is yours.”

The idea of a newsletter and the principles of what makes one effective have been around for a long time. But what has changed, says Labrecque, is the necessity of having one, which has increased. “As social media fragments and Twitter is introducing a paid option, it’s even more important that you are able to reach out directly to your people.”

The tactics and tools for building your list have also changed. In 2018, StoryOrigin came onto the scene with a new platform that helped to organize newsletter swaps with other authors, group promotions, reader magnet landing pages, and options for getting your book to reviewers. Book-Funnel is a platform where authors can send a reader magnet (an incentive, such as a free book or short story) to readers. Now, it has expanded its features to include newsletter swaps and group promotions.

ADVICE FOR INDIE AUTHORS

Mark Leslie Lefebvre

Keep in mind the long term. A lot of times, we worry about right now. Be patient, and don’t be afraid to ask questions and learn a little more before you push any buttons. You only get one chance to make a first impression. There’s a lot to learn. I’ve been in the business since the early ’90s, and every day I’m still learning a ton and way more than I can keep up with. You’re always going to feel behind. Cut yourself some slack. Writers try to take on too much, then they set themselves up for failure. And it hurts them...They should have taken a smaller piece of pie: Finish that first, have a nice cup of tea, then try another slice.

Corinne O’Flynn

Take stock in everything you’re doing, record where you’re spending your time and energy, and do a serious gut check. It’s possible to be successful in this business and also not lose your mind.

Karen Inglis

There’s never been a better time to be a writer! And with more and more tools and promotional opportunities coming down the line, it just gets more exciting. Audiobooks are also a growth market for once your brand is established, and there are platforms to help with this, too.

Orna Ross

Finding your own creative conditions of what you need to master these three different skills: writing, publishing, and business. And integrating those. Give yourself the time it takes to do it. And maybe think in terms of three books, not one. It’s book number three that people begin to really find their feet and what works for them...In the end, coming back to your own creative patterns and what makes you feel good. The whole point of having this creative freedom is to use it. And not just to do what everyone is telling you to do.

Penny Sansevieri

It’s easy to focus on the really big things and lose sight of small details – but it’s those small details that matter to your reader. An author bio, for example, is where a lot of authors spend the least amount of time – but readers love getting to know authors! Small tweaks to your Amazon book page, like adding that standout review to lead off your book description, can sometimes really boost your sales. We often want to focus on big-picture things, which is great – but the details matter to your reader, absolutely, and it’s the small things that often lead to big success.

With both of these platforms, you can obtain a reader’s email in exchange for one of your free reader magnets, making it an easy and effective way to grow your subscriber list.

Social media

Although the main social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram) have been around for more than a decade, there are frequent shifts in usage habits, and new platforms come and go. This makes it difficult to stay on top of everything. Many times, new authors think they have to spend most of their marketing time on social media because it’s the only way to reach new readers and connect with current ones. But this isn’t true. If you enjoy a certain social media platform, then by all means, use it. If you don’t, then it will be evident that you feel obligated to post, and you won’t be very effective. And there is no reason to be on all the platforms. Do one, and do it well.

David Gaughran, author of *Let’s Get Digital: How To Self-Publish, And Why You Should*, is a huge proponent of newsletters and believes building your list should be your first priority but says there is one thing social media does well that a newsletter doesn’t, and that is amplification, especially Facebook. “A huge number of readers in every genre are on Facebook, and things can go viral.” It’s a flexible platform, and there is so much you can do with it. He says one mistake people make is thinking their social channel should always be about them or their products. “I would say 20% of your content should be about you and your books. Then share things you love. If you are a sci-fi author and NASA does a fly-by of Jupiter, I’d be slapping up those pictures. If a really cool movie is coming out, talk about it – why you loved it, why you hated it. Post about a book you like. That’s what will create engagement.”

Inglis maintains a “consistent” presence on social media. “A key part of the strategy to grow followers is, of

RESOURCES FOR INDIE AUTHORS

HELPFUL WEBSITES

Alliance of Independent Authors:
allianceindependentauthors.org

Jane Friedman Blog:
janefriedman.com/blog

Kindlepreneur:
kindlepreneur.com

Alex Newton:
k-lytics.com

Patreon:
patreon.com

BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

Corinne O’Flynn:
2021 Publishing Planner (available at authorproductivity.com)

Mark Leslie LeFebvre:
Wide for the Win: Strategies to Sell Globally via Multiple Platforms and Forge Your Own Path to Success

Karen Inglis:
How to Self-Publish and Market a Children’s Book

Penny Sansevieri:
How to Sell Books by the Truckload on Amazon

Joanna Penn:
Successful Self-Publishing

David Gaughran:
Let’s Get Digital: How to Self-Publish, and Why You Should

Mark Dawson:
Learn Amazon Ads: Use AMS to Find More Readers and Sell More Books

NEWSLETTER SWAPS & READER MAGNET DISTRIBUTION OPTIONS

StoryOrigin

BookFunnel

DIGITAL BOOK PLATFORMS

Kindle:
kdp.amazon.com

Nook:
press.barnesandnoble.com

Kobo:
kobo.com/writinglife

iBooks:
authors.apple.com

Google Play:
play.google.com/books/publish/u/0

FACEBOOK GROUPS:

Wide for the Win

20booksto50k

StoryOrigin Authors
(cross-promo & giveaways)

COVER DESIGN:

99designs: 99designs.com

Fiverr: fiverr.com

Damonza: damonza.com

Art by Karri: artbykarri.com

FORMATTING

Vellum
(Only available for Mac):
vellum.pub

Reedsy Book Editor:
reedsy.com/write-a-book

Draft2Digital Formatting Tool:
draft2digital.com

AMAZON ADS HELP

Publisher Rocket:
publisherrocket.com

Self-Publishing Formula:
selfpublishingformula.com

PODCASTS

The Creative Penn Podcast:
thecreativepenn.com/podcasts

Sell More Books Show:
sellmorebooksshow.com

Stark Reflections:
starkreflections.ca

Self-Publishing Show Podcast:
selfpublishingformula.com/spf-podcast

AUDIOBOOKS

Findaway Voices:
findawayvoices.com

ACX: acx.com

GRAPHICS

Canva: canva.com



course, to use hashtags that are relevant [to your target audience] if posting on Twitter or Instagram and, as always, try to be authentic. I also have a blog and newsletter and update these with news whenever I have a new launch.”

Blogs and podcasts

Blogs and podcasts have evolved over the years, and they share attention with all the social media sites. To be successful, their content must be relevant and interesting to readers. This can especially be a great tool for nonfiction writers who position themselves as experts in one particular area.

Sansevieri loves blogs and podcasts and believes they can really help with authors’ overall visibility on Google. “But as with anything you’re doing,” she says, “be sure you’re prepared to keep it going. If you start a podcast or blog and don’t have enough content to keep it going, it’ll look like you left your own party. Pick one thing you feel you have the time to do – because a blog or podcast is an investment in time and effort!”

Author Jeff Adams and his husband, author Will Knauss, have hosted the Big

Gay Fiction Podcast (jeffandwill.com/biggayfictionpodcast) for nearly six years. They share book reviews as well as interview authors, mostly in the gay romance genre. “We’re also authors within the genre that we cover on the show,” shares Adams, “and that’s helped us network within the genre as well as market our books.” He cautions that gaining traction for a podcast is not going to happen instantly. “It was about three years in before we started seeing a good return in terms of the network we’d formed and the attention the show received.”

You don’t have to start your own blog or podcast to benefit from them. Consider being a guest on ones that are already established. Sansevieri says authors can gain a lot of visibility by being interviewed (or reviewed) on other blogs or podcasts. “Be mindful of that fact that, much like blogs, there are a lot of podcasts out there, so be careful of who you pitch yourself to – because while there’s nothing wrong with pitching yourself to a brand-new podcast, you also want to be sure that they’re going to continue the show.” She encourages authors to find podcasts that have been around for at least a year.

A CHANGING MARKET

Self-publishing continues to grow and evolve, proving it is a viable path to publication. It allows authors to control the direction of their writing career, giving them the freedom to experiment and to pivot when necessary. As with the pioneers who ventured west into unknown territory, early self-published authors forged a new path for us to follow. New settlers joined the community, building on the existing experiences and knowledge, creating an abundance of self-publishing tools and resources. Now, authors who are patient and take the time to stay current on all that is available will be more confident and are more apt to become successful. 📖

Kerrie Flanagan is a freelance writer from Colorado and the author of 18 books; 17 of those are self-published. She moonlights in the world of romance with a co-author under the pen name C.K. Wiles (ckwiles.com) as well as the fantasy realm under the pen name C.G. Harris (cgharris.net). She’s helped dozens of writers navigate the world of self-publishing. Sign up for her monthly newsletter at: bit.ly/KerrieFlanaganNews or visit her website at KerrieFlanagan.com.