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Group Therapy-Acquiring Self-published Books

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Group Therapy — Acquiring Self-published Books

Column Editor: **Jack G. Montgomery** (Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky Libraries) <jack.montgomery@wku.edu>

GRIPE: Submitted by **Nicholas G. Tomaiuolo** (Reference Librarian, Elihu Burritt Library, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT)

I am hoping that you will consider sharing your formal or informal policy on acquiring self-published books. By self-published I mean subsidy/vanity press books, books that were self-published through print-on-demand services, and books for which the author has assumed all production tasks.

If you have added any self-published books to your collection, would you please indicate the total number of books that you have added in the number of years? For example, "I have added one self-published book in the four years that I have had collection development responsibilities."

Any thoughts are appreciated.

RESPONSE: Submitted by **Marsha J. Hamilton** (Professor and Head, Monographs Department, The Ohio State University Libraries, Columbus, OH)

There are a lot of stereotypes about self-published books — some are true, some are not.

The stereotype is that self-published books

are all "vanity" books, that is, books of poor quality that no publisher with high standards would print. The stereotypes of a vanity press, or self-published, author is someone who has a piece of poorly-written prose or poetry or an item with fringe opinions that they could not get published without using their own funds. Although this stereotype is true in many cases, it doesn't represent the full scope of self-published books currently on the market.

Some self-published books are just that...the author has chosen to keep the profit from their work by keeping control over the copyright, production, and distribution process. If the author has a reputable list of other publications, the fact that they chose to self-publish one or more titles should not prejudice the buyer against them or the content of their work.

As self-publishing has become easier in the last 20 years, more quality authors are choosing that route on occasion. Also, in some countries (my experience is with some Middle Eastern countries), I have seen self-published books by scholars and well-known authors that are of high quality. Many small documentary filmmakers also "self-publish" their works; that is, they produce their works and sell directly to buyers without using a large distributor.

With those caveats, I'd say a library is

unlikely to purchase a huge number of self-published books, simply because it is harder to find good reviews of those titles. When writing a policy, it is not necessary to exclude a title simply because it is self-published. On the other hand, your collection development staff should review every title being acquired, especially if it is a donation, gift, or self-published title, to see if the subject matter and quality of the content fit within your collection development guidelines.

A piece needn't be accepted simply because the item was donated by the author or because the self-published author is a member of your faculty or community. However, it shouldn't be excluded IMHO just because it was self-published either.

This is a long way of saying that the content and quality of the book should guide our decisions on whether to add a work to our collections, whether as a purchase or a gift. The method used to publish a work (trade, university press, self-published, etc.) shouldn't be the only deciding factor.

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RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Mary E. Barbosa-Jerez** (Head of Collection Development, Rolvaag Memorial Library, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN)

Here at **St. Olaf College**, I don't have a policy statement per se concerning self-published works. Though we do, from time to time, receive titles as "donations" from the authors, I haven't incorporated any into our collection in the two years I've been here.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Michael A. Arthur** (Head of Acquisitions and Collections Services, University of Central Florida Libraries, Orlando, FL)

I have several subject specialists and there is no way I can monitor everything they are buying so I can't give a good response to this question. I would hope that we are not adding self-published items that have not gone through some level of review. We don't add much fiction at all because of space constraints. I suspect we are avoiding vanity presses and self-published materials, though I don't have hard numbers.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Jack Montgomery** (Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University Libraries, Bowling Green, KY)

I have adopted a somewhat open policy to self-published books. When they arrive, they are examined for bibliographic completeness, basic content, and grammatical sophistication. If they are acceptable at these three levels, I generally accept them into the collection as a gift and send an acknowledgement. So far I have received a wide variety of publications from well-written poetry and short stories to incomprehensible rants on the government and the assertion that we are being controlled by space aliens or Satanic Forces.

However, with the proliferation of self-publishing, some of it quite sophisticated, I do not think we can dismiss this form of publication out-right as somehow unworthy of inclusion. It has become a legitimate form of publishing that is certain to continue in the future. As an example, we have a number of local historians who write and self-publish local histories. It would not be responsible to exclude such publications.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Douglas Black** (Assistant Librarian, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI)

We rarely acquire self-published or subsidy/vanity material, though we do have a few local authors who produce respected work. If there are no reviews and the material can't be examined firsthand — and author/publishers generally don't invest in review copies or grasp the approval concept — we'll just move on to other titles. Donated materials pose a minor

challenge, but the archives residing in our library preserves Upper Peninsula as well as university history, so local or regional materials may find a home there. An example that everyone's encountered (or will, eventually): A local author recently brought in two self-published books, signed, for our collection. One of them represented valuable material on a little-known facet of regional history. Unfortunately, having been self-published, the book was unedited, and while the material would have been of great interest for the general collection, it was very poorly written. Beyond the writing itself, the biggest problem lay in the author's attributions, which were confusing at best. Had a student brought me the volume at the reference desk and asked for help sorting out which quotation came from which cited source, I might have left librarianship and bought a pig farm instead (not to denigrate suidae, of course). In short, great basic material but unacceptable quality, and if I'd read about that problem in a review, I'd have stopped reading right there. Given the local author and unique regional history, it was of enough value to place it in the archives, if only to document the historical work done here. That's not so different from collecting holographic letters and diaries, but we don't add those to the circulating stacks, either.

The other volume was a series of personal recollections, so poorly written that much of it was opaque or completely incomprehensible. The heartbreaking thing was that I could see what the author had been attempting to do; the work had a intriguing underlying structure (if only partially developed), and with the attention of a talented editor/coach, it might have been a decent memoir. Maybe. Absent that development, though, it offered nothing of value to either collection. I haven't had the heart yet to recycle it, but **Better World Books** isn't likely to take it, and I'd hate to have the author come across it in a local bargain bin. It's a fairly small town here, and its relative geographic isolation does help shape town-grown relationships, including local writers' relationships with the university and its library. But while we can employ a little flexibility to account for social context, certain scholarly standards are more universal, and the self-published material we've seen doesn't often rise to meet them. We'll consider it if we can evaluate it, but we seldom buy it.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Leah Black** (Head of Acquisitions, Michigan State University Libraries, East Lansing, MI)

The **Michigan State University Libraries** has no official policy on self-published books. Publishing circumstances are one factor among many to be considered when contemplating a purchase. The "author pays" aspect of open access is a complicating factor, to be sure.

In addition self-published or "vanity" press publications are sometimes difficult to identify. I'm sure we have examples of self-published books in our collection — I won't even attempt to estimate how many.

In practice our selectors are expected to apply a number of criteria when assessing the value of a potential addition to the collection,

and self-published books are not rejected based entirely on that one aspect.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Kathleen E. Richardson** (Bluegrass Community and Technical College, Lexington, KY)

Our collection development policy doesn't address the issue of self-published materials specifically. The policy gives priority in purchasing to faculty recommendations; subject-specialist librarian recommendations are next, with explicit mention of the use of review sources to garner information on the qualities of possible titles to purchase. This knocks out most of the self-published materials from consideration, due to a lack of coverage by standard review sources (*Choice*, *NYT Book Review*, *NY Review of Books*, *Booklist*, etc.).

On the other hand, we have at least one faculty member who brings in, as a guest lecturer for a class, a local, self-published author, or who is a self-published author. **Nita Clarke**, whose three "Mint julep" novels are all self-published, has talked to several classes over the last few years for this instructor. [**Ms. Clarke's** "publisher" is **PublishAmerica**, so she spends a considerable amount of time promoting her books herself, of course. This is not the **Nita Clarke** who wrote *London for Beginners*, apparently.] The faculty member also requested we purchase each of the three books, so these purchases automatically were categorized as all-important faculty requests.

In terms of usefulness in our collection, although only the first book of the series has seen significant circulation activity — presumably because it was required reading for a class — at least one of them, to my recollection, has also been out on interlibrary loan. In terms of library holdings for her work, **WorldCat** shows holdings of the three books by not much more than a handful of libraries (7 for book one, 6 for book two, and 4 for the third book). If you're curious, check out the catalog records at <http://kctcs.kyvl.org> or on **WorldCat**.

On the other, other hand, the essentially self-published nature of many Websites doesn't prevent us from "collecting" them through links to recommended resources on our library's Website, although we don't take the extra step of cataloging each of those sites and adding a bibliographic record to our catalog. Some of these come to our notice because of a review in *Choice*; some are recommended by other online sources — bloggers, formal review resources, and the online versions of "word of mouth."

Our collection development policy doesn't address the issue of self-published materials specifically. The policy gives priority in purchasing to faculty recommendations; subject-specialist librarian recommendations are next, with explicit mention of the use of review sources to garner information on the qualities of possible titles to purchase. This knocks out most of the self-published materials from consideration, due to a lack of coverage by standard review sources (*Choice*, *NYT Book Review*, *NY Review of Books*, *Booklist*, etc.). 🍷