June 2013

Self-Publish or Perish!

John D. Riley
jdriley@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Riley, John D. (2013) "Self-Publish or Perish!," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 3, Article 9.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6516>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Self-Publish or Traditional? ... from page 16

make sure things are spelled right and typos haven't crept in. Some writers find line editing and copyediting intrusive. I've always found editing valuable: with only 20+ books and 500+ articles to my credit, I believe my words can always be improved.

Your book will be professionally designed and typeset — which *might* mean it will have a more polished look than you'd get through self-publishing, although that's not a given.

You'll benefit from a professional cover design — at least most of the time. Look at the cover of *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*: I believe it's a great concept carried out superbly by a first-rate cover designer. I could not have done nearly as well.

The publisher will market your book — which involves knowing who should get review copies and sending them out, inclusion in the right catalogs, approval plans if you're lucky, ad mailings in some cases, and all the rest. (The publisher will also handle printing, binding and order fulfillment — but so do **Lulu** and **CreateSpace**.)

For me, the primary advantage of traditional publishing is that last one (although good covers are also nice). It's the reason I'm likely to turn to a traditional publisher if I can make the case that the book will sell well enough and if I can tolerate the delay in getting the book to market.

Marketing Issues and Publishing Delays

Here's where things fall apart, at least for me. The best I can do for my **Lulu** books is publicize them in my e-journal *Cites & Insights*, on my blog, in other social network spaces, and in library lists. You can't do serious marketing using library lists such as PUBLIB: It violates their terms of service; and, in some cases, your messages will be rejected. I did one PUBLIB announcement of *Give Us a Dollar and We'll Give You Back Four* (2012-13), which should have been my biggest self-published book. It would clearly have been inappropriate to do more. I'm not on the speaking circuit; I don't have thousands of people hanging on my every word; I wasn't willing to spend a few hundred dollars up front to print multiple copies, try to find the right review outlets, and send them review copies.

The results? Even though I set the price low and offered eBook versions at an even lower price, this book — designed to help even the smallest public library tell its story to funding agencies — has sold 67 copies in its first five months. That's about one-tenth of the minimum I was hoping for (there are nearly 9,000 public libraries in the U.S.). I have no doubt that the right library publisher could have sold at least 600 and quite possibly thousands of copies of the book. *If* the publisher thought it was worth doing and *if* the delay in publishing what's distinctly a time-sensitive book didn't prevent it from working properly.

Delays in publishing can be a real issue. My most recent manuscript for a traditional library book publisher went to the publisher in March 2012. It was through all editorial processes by September 2012. As of this date (April 2013), I'm still waiting for it to appear. It was based on large-scale, somewhat time-sensitive research done in the late fall of 2011. By the time it does emerge, the research will be more than a year old. That may or may not be a problem for this particular book. I would regard it as a major problem for a book like *Give Us a Dollar*. It doesn't have to be that way; but, when you work with a traditional publisher, you have little (if any) control over the scheduling.

Decisions and Unknowns

The final answer can only be: It's complicated.

If you're an experienced writer, have honest friends, who will review your work, or be willing to pay for an editor (and possibly a copyeditor as well), if you use my template (*The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing* points to it) or build your own and if you pay attention, you can produce a professional-quality book and get it into self-publication rapidly. If you're good at marketing and publicity, that may be the way to go.

If you're *not* so good at marketing and publicity, if your words need professional help, or if you're not willing to deal with the detail work of getting layout right, then you should stick with a traditional publisher. 🐼

Self-Publish or Perish!

by **John D. Riley** (Regional Sales Representative, Busca, Inc.) <jdriley@comcast.net> www.buscainc.com

What is so great about getting published by a mainstream publisher? First of all, you have to locate a literary agent; or they won't even look at your manuscript. No more "over the transom" surprise blockbusters. Plus locating a literary agent is almost as hard as finding a publisher once was. Perhaps publishers are wary of looking at your book for fear of a law suit if they publish something similar in the future, or they might just feel inundated with stuff and want the books vetted by someone in the industry. Did I say industry? Publishing is first and foremost a business, and your book will be looked at only if it has commercial potential.

Once your Great American Novel or History of Bean Sprout Farming is finally released, your publisher will love you for about a week before focusing attention on the "Next Big Thing." **Mark Pendergrast**, a former academic acquisition librarian and acquaintance, wrote a fascinating social history of **Coca Cola**

entitled *For God, Country, and Coca Cola*. His publisher dutifully put it in their seasonal catalogue, sent out review copies to the trade, and had their reps show the book to bookstore buyers while on their rounds. After that week-long blitz, he was on his own. His publisher had moved on to promote the next book in its list. **Mark** tried visiting bookstores to promote his book at his own expense. He even had to buy copies of his book to show to prospective buyers. His profit per book sold was under a dollar. If you get a chance, buy a copy. It's a great read, and he even gives away the "secret formula" for Coke (hint: it involves neroli oil).

Another drawback to publishing with a commercial publisher is that they own the copyright to your book until it goes out-of-print, but o.p. is actually a thing of the past as print-on-demand will give your publisher indefinite rights. But if you self-publish, you retain all rights to your book. Another consideration is commercial publishers generally will

not issue simultaneous print and e-versions of your book, but you can.

Bob Holley, the editor of this special *Against the Grain* segment, asked me to recount my experiences as a self-published author. I published my first book in 2004, *Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops*. I distilled my forty years of work in bookstores and libraries into a series of short stories. Fiction gave me the freedom to encapsulate many different experiences and speculations in one narrative. I found it much more fun and creative than a straightforward history or autobiography. Writing fiction was a new experience for me, and I really took to it with zeal. I also found that writing on a word processor was liberating, much in the way that digital photography allows you to try many angles and points of view before you commit to print. I have since written three books of fiction (with another one in progress).

I fell into self-publishing almost by accident. I might have remained one of those frustrated writers who wallpaper their homes with rejection slips from commercial publishers and agents. Fortunately it turned out

continued on page 20

Self-Publish or Perish! from page 18

that part of my marketing responsibilities as a vendor required me to frequently bring print jobs to **Collective Copies** in Florence, Massachusetts. They are a worker-owned collective that does excellent printing and copying work. On one visit, I noticed that they were printing and marketing books for their customers. So when I approached **Steve Strimer** with my clutch of stories, he was ready to work with me. I had already delivered my manuscript to **Toni Branmill**, a friend, as well as writer, book editor, and one time legal counsel for the **Writers' Guild**. She was kind enough to read my manuscript and saved me from inflicting some real howlers on my unsuspecting readers. I then handed off the edited manuscript on a flash drive to **Collective Copies**. They took care of all of the formatting and printing. From drop off to finished product was less than two weeks. **Steve** had chosen some beautiful paper (Mohawk Vellum Cream); the typeface looked great too (Bembo). I was now the proud father of fifty handsome copies of my little book. Anytime I needed more copies, I could order them in twenty-five copy increments. The texts were stored on the print shop computer and could be printed "on demand." I also kept back up files on a CD.

When I self-published with **Collective Copies**, I was responsible for my own editing and cover art; but **Toni** had volunteered to be my editor. I also produced my own cover by using public domain art. With all that work done, the final cost to publish each book of ninety pages was under five dollars. For around two hundred and fifty dollars, I now owned fifty copies of an imminent block buster. **Collective Copies** placed it in their three shops, an excellent beginning as they are popular haunts of the Five College Area academic community. Additionally, I hand sold it to the four new bookshops in the area and mailed review copies to **St. Mark's Bookshop** in the East Village in Manhattan, which graciously carried it (and sold nearly thirty copies). I also placed it in some willing used bookstores where it sold very well to other book dealers and librarians. They found it to be both a fun read as well as a truthful representation of the used book business and library world.

My best advice when self-publishing is to aim for a core audience. If your book is non-fiction, you probably already have a built in audience to focus on. If you are publishing fiction, poetry, or children's books, you will have a harder time finding your audience. Since my fiction book dealt mainly with bookshops and libraries, I already had a focus audience where it sold well through word of mouth. I had a funny experience in a local library when I heard the librarian recount how a friend had given her a copy of *Else Fine* when she was recovering from cancer. She had found the title and subject matter apropos to her profession as well as to her state of health.

I published my books several years ago (2004, 2006, and 2010 with more to come in the future). The self-publishing world has changed drastically in just that short period. I published first in print and then a few years later made digital copies available through **Amazon Kindle**. **Collective Copies** charged me two hundred dollars to format the three books for upload to Kindle. Nowadays I would recommend that self-published authors go directly to digital and provide a print option for those who want it. What has changed most is that you can now publish direct to digital with many companies and then have them make print-on-demand copies available for the print market. With **Amazon**, you can publish for free on Kindle Direct and then have them create a print copy for sale on the **Amazon Website** through their **CreateSpace** subsidiary. Publishing a book is as easy as creating a Word file and uploading it according to their specifications. However easy **Amazon** makes the whole process, you are still limited to their proprietary Kindle service. Other companies, such as **Lulu** and **Smashwords**, will make your book available simultaneously on all devices from **Nook** to **Apple** to **Kindle**.

Another bit of advice is to not invest too heavily in all the add on services that self-publishing companies offer. Just like a new car dealership, they make most of their money on expensive options. Do your own editing. Get an artist friend to create your cover. Make sure the cover has high impact as it will usually be displayed as a thumbnail picture online.

Use all types of social media to introduce and promote your book. Make a YouTube video where you read and talk about your book.

Make it short: two minutes is good. Set up a Facebook page for your book. Create a blog and Website for your book. Get friends and colleagues to review your book on **Amazon**. Donate free copies to your local libraries.

It's not that there are too many self-published books or that they are inherently of a lesser quality. The problem with self-published books is that most people try to write a best-seller. Leave that to **Grisham**, **Cornwell**, etc. Write on a topic you know and care about. That is how you will find readers. Plus commercial publishers might find you after you have self-published and established a "platform" of readers.

More advice to aspiring authors: Make sure you like your own writing. Write first for yourself. Your knowledge and enthusiasm will translate into a fresh experience for others. Writer **Cyril Connolly** said: "Better to write for yourself and have no public than to write for the public and have no self." Remember that **J.D. Salinger** and **Jack Kerouac** were rejected hundreds of times before they were published and that **Virginia Woolf**, **Edgar Allan Poe**, **Mark Twain**, and **William Faulkner** were all self-published authors at one time. Release your inner artist. Become immortal. Self-publish!

For further reading:

<http://reviews.cnet.com/how-to-self-publish-an-e-book?tag=mncol;txt>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLFhcauX4zw>

http://reviews.cnet.com/8301-18438_7-10119891-82/self-publishing-a-book-25-things-you-need-to-know/

My books:

Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops (2004; Print and Kindle editions)

The Parrot's Tale (2006; Print and Kindle editions)

Superpostapocalypticexpialidocious (2010; Print and Kindle Editions)

The Mighty Charleston Players Present Their Greatest Hits 2007-2012. Written with Eleanor Cook (2012; Available from Busca, Inc. and Amazon) 🐼

Rumors from page 14

the way through southwest Ireland and I didn't fall off the horse once! Memories!

Speaking of memories. I remember when **Don Beagle** (one of the authors in this issue) and his lovely wife visited Charleston. Did you know that **Don** used to work at the **Charleston County Library**? I remember that **Don** developed one of the very first apps (before they were even invented) about Charleston. And he even posted some of the material from a

walking tour of the **College of Charleston** that I did many years ago with **Patrick Squires**. *Azaleas and Stucco*. Of course, it's totally outdated now and long out of print.

One of our colleagues at the **College of Charleston**, **Jolanda-Pieta van Arnhem** and **Jerry Spiller** have just published a paper, "Let's Not Meet: Making the Most of Time with Asynchronous Collaboration." in *Time and Project Management Strategies for Librarians* edited by **Carol Smallwood**; **Jason Kuhl**; & **Lisa Fraser** and just out from **Scarecrow Press**. **Joey** (that's **Jolanda's** real name) is getting ready to finish her library

degree at the **University of South Carolina** which she has managed to do while holding down three full-time jobs! Hooray for **Joey** and Congratulations! PS **Jerry** already has an MLIS!

More congratulations are due as well to **Lindsay Barnett** who recently joined the staff of Technical Services at the **Addlestone Library**. **Lindsay** just graduated from Library School in May! And she has been working for us for the past year. Great having so many new library school graduates for us old codgers to learn from! **Lindsay** plans to start

continued on page 24