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Self-Publishing: Breaking Down Barriers?

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Many barriers that once existed in publishing have been torn down. Today, more authors than ever before are able to bring books to market by doing it themselves through self-publishing models. Authors taking the self-publishing route have multiple options when launching a new project — and many of them opt to work with author services companies. Author services companies offer a suite of services that are tailor-made for self-publishers, often including file creation, design, layout, editing, and marketing services. Oftentimes, author services firms form alliances with companies like **Ingram Content Group** to gain visibility for titles in wholesale, retail, and library channels as well as to take advantage of print-on-demand services. Those authors with the needed knowledge and skill might handle pre-press, production, marketing, and ISBN purchases on their own and then work with a company like **Ingram Content Group** to provide “back-end” services for printing and access to sales channels.

While substantial back-end services are provided to self-published authors by author services companies or companies like **Ingram**, “front-end” services such as publicity and marketing, unless specifically contracted for, remain the responsibility of authors. The result is that while some self-published titles are marketed expertly — self-published authors, in fact, pioneered online marketing techniques that large publishers adopted later — most are not. The result is that each year many thousands of self-published titles appear but remain all but unknown.

This is particularly true for the library market where library selectors, hard-pressed for time and reliant for decades on the title lists, announcements, and approval plans offered by vendors, are normally less committed than individual readers might be to monitoring various sources of online information for titles of possible interest. While industry reviewing mainstays such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal* have begun in recent years to give some attention to self-published books and while the efforts of **Colorado’s Douglas County Libraries** to acquire self-published eBooks in bulk for **DCL’s** own platform have been well publicized, the fact remains that self-published books have a more difficult time making their way into library collections than is true for books from established publishers.

Examples of this are easy to find on the current Best Seller list of the *New York Times*.

The novel *Hopeless* by **Colleen Hoover**, for example, is currently number fourteen on the *Times* “Combined Print and E-Book Fiction” list where it has been listed there for seven weeks, one short of the current eight-week stay for *Hopeless* on the “E-Book Fiction” list. Yet a search of **OCLC’s** WorldCat database shows only eight public libraries nationwide owning the book, each having acquired the print version available from **CreateSpace**, **Amazon’s** self-publishing service. This is in contrast to the current number one Best Seller on the E-Book Fiction list, **Nicholas Sparks’** *Safe Haven*, from **Hachette’s Grand Central Publishing**, held in print by 2,762 libraries and as an audio-book by 1,146.

No doubt *Hopeless* will soon achieve similar numbers since a paperback edition is scheduled for May from **Simon & Schuster’s Atria Books**, an imprint whose goal as described on its Website is “to create an environment that is always open to new ideas,” by “looking for innovative ways to connect writers and readers, integrating the best practices of traditional publishing with the latest innovations in the digital world.” This same mainstream-later publishing route was most famously and recently taken by **E. L. James’** *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a book that was resisted by some public libraries, even in the face of spectacular reader reception.

Library vendors to date have done very little with this disconnect between the exploding self-publishing world and an increasingly uncertain library market even for traditional books. Partly this is due to the sheer number of self-published books released each year. **OASIS**, an **Ingram** database for academic libraries, shows many thousands of titles loaded from author services companies. Each title displays basic metadata, including a price and often a jacket image so that a library could order it like any other traditionally published title with routine procedures. Yet library sales are meager for this group of titles where the vast majority sell no copies at all, and those few that do often sell no more than a single copy. **Ingram’s** iPage, the database used by public libraries and retail customers, often shows better results; but these are mostly retail sales. Even the best-selling titles sell only as well as typical academic monographs.

It is much easier to routinely load thousands of bibliographic records into a database, of course, than it is to pick out the ones of high potential interest and then treat them in the way mainstream books are treated under the collection development services offered by li-

brary vendors. While it would be no service to libraries to notify them, say, of all ten thousand titles loaded from a given company, to notify libraries about none of them is probably not the best possible answer.

One example would be a recent book by **Carl Reiner**, a major figure in television and film for over fifty years. **Reiner**, who published a number of books with traditional publishers during his career, is publishing his memoir, *I Remember Me*, himself through **AuthorHouse**, an author solutions company. On the Web, readers will find blurbs on behalf of **Reiner’s** book from **Jay Leno**, **Jerry Seinfeld**, and **Mel Brooks**. On **Amazon**, readers can “Look Inside” the book and will find a description of its contents, a biographical blurb about **Reiner**, starred customer reviews, “what others bought” suggestions, and prices for Kindle, cloth, and audio-book versions. In other words, the full **Amazon** treatment.

Reiner’s new memoir is displayed in both of **Ingram’s** library databases. Some of the **Amazon** metadata is also available within the iPage record while **OASIS** offers less detail. Using either database, however, *I Remember Me* would be no more difficult for a library to order than the week’s #1 Best Seller would be. The problem is that a library first would need to know about the title. Without an especially vigorous selector in the area of television and film, at this stage in the book’s life, at least, many will not know about it and so will not be placing any orders. In the case of a high-profile author such as **Reiner** and in the instance of his particular book where good metadata was provided to **Ingram**, it is far more likely that **Reiner’s** book will be chosen by **Ingram** collection development staff for selection lists and approval plans and therefore become available for normal library selection routines than would be the case for most other self-published titles.

This alerting and highlighting function is today the weakest link in the chain of vendor services that so routinely connects library selectors to titles from traditional publishers. In their defense, vendors themselves benefit from what in effect is an alerting and highlighting system directed at them by these traditional publishers. Because this network of systems and relationships is so highly developed and is supported by an underlying business model, vendors can then in turn routinely alert libraries about pertinent new titles. Author services companies and library vendors, if they wish to fully develop the library market for self-published authors, would need to work together closely to develop a parallel set of connections capable of identifying, from a starting point of perhaps ten thousand titles, a subset of books library readers would find themselves happy to open and read. 🍷