

Telling Your Story by Yourself

Story by S. Kay Bell

Ease, economy and autonomy make self-publishing an appealing solution for writers who wish to stay in control of their work.

EVERYONE HAS A STORY. THE PROBLEM has been how to get that story to the rest of the world. In this internet age, it's easy to spread your message electronically. But for many authors, there's still something about seeing your name on the cover of an old-fashioned paper-and-ink book. That's why many writers turn to self-publishing.

It's what it sounds like: the production of books or other materials by the author, rather than by an established, third-party publisher. Self-published authors bear the entire cost of publication and handle all marketing, distribution, storage and other production and sales-related efforts. But there are many returns on such a financial and editorial investment.

Why Self-Publish?

A major appeal of self-publishing is control. In addition to having more input into what the finished product looks like, you also retain all rights to your work. The book is your property, to reproduce in other ways you choose. Then there is the money. True, you pay to publish, but you get all the sales proceeds. Authors with traditional publishers, although they might get an advance, typically earn only a fraction from book sales. Accessibility issues also prompt many writers to self-publish. Publishers, like all business owners, keep a close eye on the bottom line. Unfortunately, that attention to costs rather than content means that publishing houses, large and small, are often wary of taking a chance on an unknown writer.

Austin author Shaila Abdullah was quite aware of this hurdle when, in 2005, she started looking for a way to share her first book, *Beyond the Cayenne Wall*, with a wider audience. She spent almost two years writing her short stories about Pakistani women. But when she decided to publish the collection, she realized that as a businesswoman (she still owns and operates House of Design) and mother of a young child, she had no free time to court agents and publishers. "Literary fiction is a very hard market to break into and I figured if I self-published and marketed it right, the book will get the traction it deserved, which it did," said Abdullah. "I also wanted total control over my book's look and production process."

Do Your Homework

Abdullah started her self-publishing quest as all writers do, by gathering information. There are dozens of companies, such as iUniverse, AuthorHouse, Lulu and Dog Ear, which have become popular destinations. "I researched carefully before deciding on iUniverse," she said. The deal worked out well for Abdullah. "I ended up designing the cover and all associated marketing materials," she said, "and was very pleased with the outcome and the response the book received."

But unlike Abdullah, not everyone is prepared to deal with design issues, much less the myriad other publishing tasks. This includes such responsibilities as editing, both for content and typographical errors, photography, layout, finding a printer, ensuring legal and copyright issues are taken >>

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care of, marketing and distributing the book. The list goes on. Some self-publishers offer assistance in these areas. But it's ultimately up to you to make sure you get the best-written and best-looking book to the buying public.

Don't Forget You're Paying

Remember, too, that the prices for all these services are as varied as the many self-publishing companies. Ah yes, the cost. While self-publishing offers many benefits, you pay for them all. In the initial rush of producing your book, it is sometimes easy to forget just how many nuts and bolts are required to get your words bound. That's why some authors look for a "Goldilocks" publisher, a company that's not so big that it totally takes over

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your project, but not so small that you have to do everything yourself.

Jenny Elder says Greenleaf Book Group, LLC, falls right into that "just right" publishing category. Elder, an associate consultant with the Austin-based publishing company, said the company was created to offer benefits of both traditional and self-publishing. "We see that the way traditional publishers do it works for some people," she said. In the traditional model, the author gets an advance payment, but most of the time doesn't see another penny because of low book sales or other costs eat away into the profit. Instead, Greenleaf offers almost two dozen publication services, as well as relationships with major book distributors. "At the top-most level, we are a full scale publisher," said Elder. "What kind of services you want or need depend on where you are in your book."

"We have a core group of authors who are business people," added Elder. "They want to write a book, want to get the information out there, and they have a huge platform of readers. A lot of them have worked with a traditional publisher before, but all they want is a professional looking book that they can get into bookstores but that they can sell themselves, too."

The New Business Card

Elder said Greenleaf's authors also see the business value of a professionally produced book. "Books are the new business card," she said. "You meet someone, say 'Hi, my name is so-and-so,' and hand them your book. Being a published author adds instant credibility."

While Elder obviously believes that Greenleaf brings the necessary professional patina to an author's book, she doesn't dismiss self-publishing. "For a lot of people, self-publishing has opened up a way to get their message out there when it otherwise wouldn't have or they would have lost control," she said. Self-publishing also is a way for some authors to get to a traditional book deal. "J.K. Rowling is the best example. She was rejected by every publisher in the U.K.," said Elder of the creator of the Harry Potter series.

Still Some Stigma

There is, however, still some stigma attached to self-published works. "The mainstream treats self-published books as the ultimate bottom of the barrel," said Abdullah. "Most reviewers refuse to review such books and book festivals don't welcome your books. Those were shocking revelations. Those hurdles limit the number of people you can reach. I couldn't get past the stigma even with numerous awards attached to the book." Such perceptions shouldn't be a problem for Abdullah's second book, the novel *Saffron Dreams*, to be published next February by Modern History Press. She's found the experience with a traditional publisher very positive and expects to publish future works this way.

As for authors still looking to get their words in print, Abdullah cautions them to try self-publishing only if their genre is one that is hard to break into or if they are targeting a niche audience that they already have a way to reach. "If you are a literary author, it is a long and treacherous road and there will be many roadblocks," she said. Ultimately though, the end might justify the means. "There is nothing like holding your own book in your hand," said Abdullah. ★

