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THE BOOK BUSINESS

How to Be Your Own Publisher

By SARAH GLAZER

When Amy Fisher finished writing her memoir about shooting her lover's wife, she told her agent not to send the manuscript to New York publishers. Instead, Fisher, who made headlines in 1992 as the 17-year-old "Long Island Lolita," turned to iUniverse in Lincoln, Neb. The company charges authors several hundred dollars to convert a manuscript into a book and make it available for sale online.

Fisher's "If I Knew Then," which came out in September, is probably the first sure-fire success to start out under the imprint of a so-called self-publishing company. (Other self-published books, notably "The Celestine Prophecy" and "The Christmas Box," became best sellers, but their success was a surprise to the publishing industry.)

iUniverse is one of more than 100 "author services" companies in a fast-growing industry aimed primarily at writers who can't get the attention of traditional publishers. Earlier this month Amazon.com got into the act, announcing that it had acquired BookSurge, a printing company with a self-publishing division based in Charleston, S.C. BookSurge uses print-on-demand technology that makes it possible to guarantee a two-day turnaround to print a book, even if only one customer orders a copy. For the first time, print-on-demand companies are successfully positioning themselves as respectable alternatives to mainstream publishing and erasing the stigma of the old-fashioned vanity press. Some even make a case that they give authors an advantage -- from total control over the design, editing and publicity to a bigger share of the profits.

It was the issue of control that appealed to Amy Fisher and her co-author, Robbie Woliver, editor in chief of the weekly Long Island Press, where Fisher has a column. They were confident that the book would sell well; indeed it appeared on the New York Times paperback best-seller list on Oct. 24, if only for a week. "We figured we might make more money doing it this way," says Woliver, who called the royalties "significantly higher" than traditional publishers', though he would not reveal the percentage. (In a departure, iUniverse did not charge a fee for producing the book.) But he also notes that Fisher was "determined not to be sensationalized" by the media, which she says presented a distorted picture of her as a promiscuous teenager (perhaps following the lead of prosecutors in the shooting case, who maintained she had been a call girl). She wanted to control every aspect of the advertising and media interviews, Woliver says. "We knew that wasn't going to happen with a traditional publisher."

Self-publishing companies like iUniverse have been growing rapidly in recent years, displacing old-style vanity presses and competing with the number of titles produced by traditional houses. AuthorHouse in Bloomington, Ind., which leads the pack with more than 23,000 titles, sold approximately one million volumes between 1997, when it started business, and 2002; in 2003 alone, it sold another million volumes, mostly through online retailers, according to the company. Amazon would have some catching up to do to get to those levels; on the other hand, since it has nearly 47 million customer accounts, the potential growth for its print-on-demand business is obviously enormous.

The difference between traditional vanity presses and modern print-on-demand publishing is essentially technology. Instead of expensive offset printing, which mainstream publishers use, print-on-demand relies on a glorified digital printer. The top three self-publishers -- AuthorHouse, iUniverse and Xlibris, based in Philadelphia -- all use the technology, and introduced a total of 11,906 new titles last year, according to R. R. Bowker's Books in Print database. By contrast, one of the few remaining old-style vanity presses, the 56-year-old Vantage Press in New York, produces between 300 and 600 titles a year.

Meanwhile, for as little as \$459, iUniverse will turn a manuscript into a paperback with a custom cover design, provide an International Standard Book Number -- publishing's equivalent of an ID number to place the book in a central bibliographic database -- and make it available at Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and other online retailers. (Vantage charges anywhere from \$8,000 to \$50,000 for a limited quantity of copies, some owned by the author and the rest warehoused by Vantage.)

"Publishing has been an arcane specialist skill under the control of a guild of people that are unique and different from anyone else," the founder and chief executive of Xlibris, John Feldcamp, says. "Those skills have been so complicated they haven't been accessible to normal human beings. What's happening is all the technologies of publishing are becoming increasingly cheap and accessible," as almost every aspect of production, including design and printing, has gone digital.

"Companies like Random House and Simon & Schuster are in the process of investing in highly valuable properties. They want to find Deepak Chopra; they don't want to find a writer necessarily who has an audience of 10,000 people," Feldcamp says. Ultimately, he predicts, "companies like us will support the lion's share of content out there," though probably not of best sellers, he concedes. The majority of books produced by self-publishers sell a few hundred copies at most.

Choosing to operate occasionally as a traditional publisher and offering better financial incentives, as iUniverse did recently for Fisher, "isn't very hard" for print-on-demand publishers, Feldcamp says, "because they operate under a far more efficient set of economics than classic publishers." For example, after an initial offset printing of 30,000 copies, iUniverse has relied on print-on-demand to meet orders for Fisher's book as they come in. That means "no excess inventory sitting in a warehouse, only to be remaindered," the company's chief executive, Susan Driscoll, says.

In today's world, where books are increasingly bought online, getting one's book into the central bibliographic database, known as BooksInPrint.com, is the cyberspace equivalent of getting published. The database is the primary source for major distributors like Ingram Book Group, whose listings in turn feed into the computerized offerings at Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Borders.

With all this democratic activity, self-published authors have essentially become the bloggers of the publishing world, with approximately the same anarchic range in quality that you find on the Web. Indeed, companies like AuthorHouse and iUniverse say they will accept pretty much anything for publication. "That's the big problem with self-publishing and the stigma associated with it," Driscoll admits.

Most bookstores are reluctant to stock self-published books -- as their authors are disappointed to discover -- because they carry the vanity press taint, they aren't returnable and they aren't discounted as much as traditional books. In addition, major newspapers, including The New York Times, won't review vanity press books.

Driscoll is trying to overcome these obstacles with iUniverse's "Star" program, which will select two or three books a month that have passed an internal editorial review and sold more than 500 copies apiece. "Star" books will be returnable and competitively discounted, Driscoll says, and she plans to send galleys to magazines and newspapers in hopes of getting review attention. The company also presents those books to buyers at Barnes & Noble, which owns a minority stake in iUniverse, for display and stocking in its stores.

But only about 150 titles have been chosen for this treatment out of the company's approximately 20,000 titles. Steve Riggio, Barnes & Noble's chief executive, cautions, "If a writer would like to get a book into bookstores, iUniverse is not the right route." Only about half a dozen iUniverse books will be stocked in his stores at any one time, he estimates. At the same time, he says, "we would like publishers to have their eye on iUniverse" as a "farm team" for promising new authors.

In that regard, self-publishers can point to a few success stories. Natasha Munson, a single mother in Atlanta, recently received a \$250,000 advance and a two-book contract from Hyperion after she published her first book through iUniverse in 1999 at a cost of \$99. (Prices have risen since.) In May and June Hyperion will bring out both books, inspirational guides for African-American women. Munson says stores were "skeptical" of self-publishing and it was difficult to persuade them to stock "Life Lessons for My Black Girls" in 1999 (now called "Life Lessons for My Sisters"). Instead she made sales by sending promotional postcards to black sororities and sending e-mail messages to book clubs.

Eventually, Munson sold more than 20,000 copies of the book. That impressed a New York literary agent, David Dunton, who contacted her after reading a magazine article about her last spring. Dunton says he normally views self-publishing as the "land of last resort." But he adds that publishers these days are looking for appealing personalities like Munson who can promote their own books on the talk show circuit. "It's not all about the writing anymore," he said. "You have to look good and sound good."

Unfortunately, aspiring writers eager to believe that a publisher has chosen them can also be led astray. Last year more than 130 writers petitioned the attorney general of Maryland and other government agencies to investigate PublishAmerica, a print-on-demand company in Frederick, Md., which describes itself as a "traditional publishing company" on its Web site.

The authors say they were duped when they signed contracts with the company, because it is actually a vanity press. In press accounts and in promotions to its writers, the company has maintained that it is highly selective. But Dee Power, an Arizona writer in the forefront of the petition campaign, questions that claim. She says PublishAmerica accepted a bogus manuscript from her that repeated the same 10 pages eight times and changed the main characters' names halfway through. She and other writers say they were shocked by the sloppy editing of their manuscripts and falsely led to believe that stores would stock their books. (The government agencies have so far declined to investigate.)

PublishAmerica does not charge a fee; it pays a "symbolic, token \$1 advance" to most first-time authors, the company's president, Larry A. Clopper, told me. The irate authors contend that the way the company makes a profit is by demanding a list of 100 of the author's friends and family members, whom they bombard with order forms, and by persuading authors to buy books themselves. To that Clopper responds that most authors agree to provide the list, and that the largest source of the company's revenue comes from established booksellers. As for the company's selectivity, while he conceded that PublishAmerica accepts "far more" manuscripts than the traditional publishers, Clopper said, "We reject them all the time because of poor quality."

Another complaint the authors had was with the PublishAmerica contract, which gives the company exclusive rights to publish a book for seven years (in contrast to iUniverse, for example, whose contract permits an author to shift his book to another publisher at any time). Clopper now says that PublishAmerica is offering an amendment to the standard contract that will permit authors to publish elsewhere -- though they have to request it.

Such disputes aside, self-publishing has attracted the interest of some major publishers as well as booksellers. "What's interesting is the capability of having micro-niches that are so small that publishers would not be interested in publishing them in the traditional way," says Richard Sarnoff, the president of Random House

Ventures, which owns a minority stake in Xlibris. "Laparoscopic Adjustable Gastric Banding," a best seller at iUniverse.com, might be a good example of that, not to mention "Be Brief. Be Bright. Be Gone: Career Essentials for Pharmaceutical Representatives," which has sold more than 10,000 copies -- all online, according to David Currier, one of its co-authors.

Sometimes self-publishing offers a second chance. Laurie Notaro, a former columnist for The Arizona Republic, was turned down by more than 70 publishers when she sent out her first book, a collection of humor essays about life as a young single. So she turned to iUniverse. A literary agent saw an ad Notaro placed on Amazon.com, on the page for the "Sweet Potato Queens" series, which also appeals to a female audience. The agent took on Notaro and sold her collection to Villard, which had rejected the book on its initial rounds. Notaro's "Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club" reached No. 10 on the Times paperback best-seller list in 2002.

"New York houses miss out on a lot of books that have worked," says Notaro's agent, Jenny Bent of the Trident Media Group, who also represents the "Sweet Potato Queens." "I've had a fair amount of success selling self-published books."

To some in the New York publishing world, self-published books still carry the stigma of the old vanity presses. But other editors say self-publishing can be a plus if an author has sold a healthy number of copies that way. Angelle Pilkington, an editor at Puffin, was impressed that one author, Charisse Richardson, had sold 10,000 copies of her first children's book, "The Real Slam Dunk," through her own efforts. "It was a very nice number and added some credibility when we got the manuscript," she says. Puffin's sister imprint Dial brought out the book, about two African-American children who get career advice from a basketball star, in February, and will publish a second children's book by Richardson in the fall.

Fireside and Touchstone, formerly paperback divisions of Simon & Schuster, have reissued a half-dozen self-published books successfully, according to Mark Gompertz, publisher of both houses. Most recently, Fireside brought out Matthew Kelly's inspirational book, "The Rhythm of Life: Living Every Day With Passion and Purpose," which sold 100,000 copies as a self-published book. Under the Fireside imprint it became a New York Times best seller.

In a retail world increasingly dominated by national bookstore chains, it's hard to sell books by new authors without a track record, according to Gompertz. "I often say to these people, 'You should try self-publishing first, get yourself known on Web sites and start building an audience and sales; when you have it, come back, because then we can make the case that we can get you out in a big way.'"

Some established authors have turned to self-publishing because they're unable to interest their publishers in a new genre. Piers Anthony, who is known for fantasy and science fiction titles, has published more than 15 books with Xlibris, either to release serious historical fiction or to make out-of-print books available. Joyce Maynard, William F. Buckley Jr. and Marlin Fitzwater, the former White House press secretary, are among the authors who have turned to self-publishing to bring their books back into print.

One New York literary agent, Harvey Klinger, recently advised a best-selling author to publish her latest novel with iUniverse after it was rejected by several New York houses. According to Klinger, publishers complained that Kathryn Harvey's "Private Entrance" -- which he describes as "sexy suspense" -- fit into neither the "chick lit" category nor the older woman's audience (sometimes called "hen lit").

"The self-publishing route has become a viable alternative for a lot of these authors who can't conveniently categorize what they're doing," Klinger says. With the trend toward publishers consolidating, the number of houses where authors can seek out bids is also diminishing, he notes. "I think the growth of iUniverse and small-press publishing is a direct result."

Some industry observers suggest that established authors and novices who aspire to commercial success will

remain a small fraction of the self-publishing industry. At six of its Philadelphia-area stores, Borders has been offering a take-home self-publishing kit for \$19.99 as an experiment. For between \$299 and \$598, customers can have a manuscript converted into a book by Xlibris, be listed on Amazon.com and get shelf space in Borders.

Michael Spinozzi, executive vice president of the Borders Group, notes that the future of self-publishing may be in altogether less commercial forms. "People are looking to come away with 20 copies of something very personal and very important to them: a cookbook with all the recipes they've collected through their lives; capturing a sporting season or a major occasion," he says.

Indeed, someday you may be able to walk into your grocery store and convert your Christmas photos into an instant coffee-table book written in your own deathless prose, Xlibris's Feldcamp predicts. Almost anybody will be able to say, "I published my book last week."

Sarah Glazer last wrote for the Book Review in December about electronic books.