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The publisher in the mirror

With new technology revolutionizing the 'vanity' press, it's easier than ever for writers to see their work in print

BY ELLEN MITCHELL
Ellen Mitchell is a freelance writer.

May 3, 2004

If you would not be forgotten
As soon as you are dead and rotten
Either write things worth reading
Or do things worth writing.

- **Ben Franklin**

"Poor Richard's Almanac"

When Ben Franklin wrote and published those words in his little Philadelphia print shop back in 1733, he introduced self-publishing on this side of the Atlantic. Today, there are about 50,000 self-publishing authors in this country, who, like Franklin, are willing to foot the bill to print their book and then do the legwork to peddle it. Unlike Franklin, most will never produce a bestseller.

Call it self-publishing, vanity, subsidy, or print-on-demand publishing. It's all related, in that the author pays the publisher rather than vice versa, and with the advent of digital technology, it's become big business. Indeed, the country's three largest self-publishing houses hope to see a combined revenue of \$40 million this year as they print thousands of new titles for authors who are either fed up trying to interest traditional publishers in their work or have simply decided to take matters into their own hands.

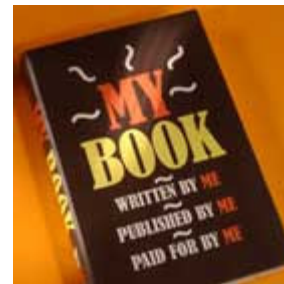
In fact, just this week, Bookends, an independent bookstore in Ridgewood, N.J., became the first place in the nation to offer would-be authors an in-store machine, which literally will put the process into the author's own hands. The writer feeds a manuscript on floppy disk or CD-ROM into a machine provided by equipment manufacturer InstaBook. The machine prints the manuscript on the spot, binds it and sends back the first copy in 10 minutes, all as the author stands watching.

"It's great. I love it. It's quick and easy to do," Bookends assistant manager David Logan said of the process, which has enjoyed some success in Canada. Authors will pay \$150 for the first 10 copies of their work.

If it catches on, the in-store publishing process will mean even more new books each

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"My Book " (Newsday Photo/Tony Jerome)

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year. Already it's estimated by R.R. Bowker's Books in Print, which tracks such statistics, that about 15 percent of the 164,000 new book titles published and registered in the United States by International Standard Book Number (ISBN) in 2003 were self-published.

Most self-publishing authors will spend more than they will ever recoup, and their sales will be lackluster at best. Their manuscript could be anything from a painstakingly researched historical tome to an intimate family memoir. Their reward comes in simply being published and sometimes ... just sometimes ... in catching the eye of a traditional publisher.

"I would say all the [traditional] publishers are alert to the opportunity to pick something up they have not seen before or may have missed," said veteran literary agent Robert J. Markel of Manhattan.

Markel was the agent responsible for bringing author Philip Simmons' book "Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life," which Simmons self-published in 2000, to the attention of Bantam Books, a traditional publisher. Bantam republished the book and Simmons, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease and dealing with mounting medical bills, was able to gain some profit from the critically acclaimed book before his death in 2003, Markel said.

First-time author Patrick Moffett's account of the comedic side of the Vietnam War, entitled "Fortunate Soldier," is another self-published book that appears destined for success. Moffett, 57, of Great Neck, is an executive at Audiovox in Hauppauge. "It's kind of like there's one good book in all of us," said Moffett, who wanted to make fellow veterans smile by retelling such events as the time his squad sent a helicopter on a pizza run in 'Nam. His book, published by Advanced Self-Publishing in Flushing, is now being considered for a movie. Contract talks are under way.

From 'vanity' to 'subsidy'

The lines that separate the various self-publishing methods are ill-defined. Vanity publishing has been around the longest and is the most costly for the author. A vanity publishing house usually controls the production process and prints about 1,000 copies in a first run. The books become the property of the vanity publisher, which then pays to warehouse any unsold copies. In comparison, a traditional publisher may print as many as 5,000 books in an initial run for a previously unknown author.

Vantage Press, probably the best-known "vanity" publisher, was founded in New York in 1949 and still prints more than 300 books a year. However, Vantage now calls itself a "subsidy" publisher.

"We're still kicking," said Vantage vice president Martin Littlefield. He said the company dropped the "vanity" label because it had a "pejorative" meaning. "If you had to pay, how good could it be?" he asked. He considers all self-publishing houses to be "vanity" publishers.

"The author pays. They pay either the whole thing or part of it. I don't quite understand the distinction," Littlefield said.

At Vantage, writers pay a minimum of \$5,000; most spend \$10,000 to \$20,000, but there's "no upper limit," he said. Services include typesetting, book and cover design, editing, copyrighting, obtaining an ISBN number, direct mail advertising, online sales and distribution to wholesalers and reviewers. If the book sells well, Vantage pays to reprint.

By contrast, the writer who chooses the "self-publishing" method is more involved in the entire production and design process, and the books become his or her property.

Advanced Self-Publishing offers marketing plans from \$2,500 to \$20,000-plus. Services such as typesetting, editing and design are similar to vanity publishing except for the author's involvement in production and sales. Authors assist in distributing and promoting their book, according to Larry Leichman, co-owner of Advanced.

"Authors can't sit on their hands," said Leichman, who teaches self-publishing at several area colleges. "The thing is to show up at libraries, churches, synagogues, schools.... You want to put yourself on Amazon .com and Barnesandnoble.com. The Internet is a

Newsday.com
 Bio Auction
 Find of hi- new p local
 Click Pre-
 SH BUY I
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major force in promoting books."

For a fee, most self-publishing houses will place an author's book on the bookselling Web sites as well as with libraries and those retail chains that agree to carry them. With today's sophisticated digital technology, it is difficult for the untrained eye to discern which books are self-published and which are printed by traditional publishers.

Big three in print-on-demand

The newest self-publishing process is "print-on-demand," or POD. It is used by the big three self-publishing houses, Xlibris, iUniverse and AuthorHouse.

According to John Fidler, marketing manager at Xlibris, authors submit a manuscript on a disk and opt for a package of services ranging from \$500 to \$1,600. Xlibris then follows a POD process, which is typical for such publishers.

The manuscript is checked over by Xlibris staffers and laid out in several different formats using a software package. A digital file of the manuscript is created and sent back to the author for possible changes, and a new set of proofs is then created. The cover is designed separately from one of a variety of templates, which the author selects. Once again, the author reviews everything before a final printing file is created.

The actual print machinery used can vary, but the machines, made by such manufacturers as Xerox, will separately but concurrently print the book's interior and cover, then bind and trim the book.

What makes the POD process so efficient and cost-effective is that the digital book file is stored in a database, ready to be reprinted as needed. If three copies are ordered, just three copies can be printed and shipped.

Inspired by rejection slips

AuthorHouse, formerly called 1st Books, was founded in 1997 by Timothy Jacobs, a retired Indiana businessman who wrote a children's book and was stymied by a string of rejection slips. Today the company claims to be the largest in the self-publishing industry with more than 20,000 titles and 18,500 authors in print. They can put a manuscript into book form in 30 days.

"Writing books is, in many ways, like conceiving a child," said Robert McCormack, president of AuthorHouse. "You invest a lot of time, energy, emotion and effort. If you have a manuscript you can't publish, it's like having a child you can't show to friends and family."

Self-published books run the gamut of topics and types. A sampling of recent titles from Vantage Press includes "Puppy's First Book" by Ellen Sinaiko, a book in which to record "firsts" in a dog's life; "How to Buy a Diamond" by Fred Cuellar, president of Diamond Cutters International; and "Tie the Moon to Your Car," a personal chronicle of author Marcia Rolof's battle with cancer.

While self-publishing authors can take on the same endless range of topics as traditionally published writers, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting media reviews in major newspapers. The majority do not review such books.

For instance, Bob Hoover, book critic for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, said the paper's policy is to not review self-published books. A traditional publisher stakes its reputation on what it publishes, Hoover said, ensuring that every book has been subjected to rigorous professional editing and fact-checking, which includes checking for plagiarism and possible legal issues. That is not necessarily true of vanity or self-publishers.

"It's best if we just avoid these things entirely so the newspaper isn't put in the position of being party to a libel suit, and certainly they would come after the newspaper, because it has money, rather than going after the author who doesn't have a cent," Hoover said. "These books are not edited professionally, in most cases. I'm not going to deal with bad grammar, totally absurd plots and the very good chance of plagiarism."

Still, there have been few, if any, libel suits connected with self-publishing, according to the Media Law Resource Center in Manhattan.



"We do read the books before we offer to publish," said Littlefield of Vantage Press. "If we catch something libelous, we don't take the book or we tell the person they have to excise that from the book. We've never had a case of somebody being published where we or the author was sued for libel."

Libel has never been an issue, agreed Larry Leichman of Advanced, although his company does not have books reviewed for legal issues. He likens the freedom and spirit of self-publishing to that of the independent film industry.

There is, however, a recent court ruling involving patent infringement, which, if upheld, could create difficulties and added costs for publishers who use the print-on-demand process. A court in Missouri awarded \$15 million to the patent-holder of a device that digitally stores a manuscript and prints copies as needed. Both Xlibris and AuthorHouse, which use that process, expressed confidence, however, that their businesses would not be adversely effected.

As for the future, AuthorHouse's McCormack believes they have "just scratched the surface" in terms of the author services market.

Whether the writer simply wants "10 copies of a family history to give out at Christmas or wants to be the next Tom Clancy ... we can provide the tools and the path," said McCormack. "More and more people are saying, 'I can actually see my book in print now. I have a shot, a chance.'"

AMANDA LYLE-COKE, FREEPORT

Fulfilling her dream

Amanda Lyle-Coke of Freeport has had a desire to be a writer ever since the day when a college professor complimented her writing.

Life, however, intervened with two marriages, five daughters and stepdaughters and a career as a hearing officer in the Hempstead school district. Now, at last, Lyle-Coke, who is "past 50," has fulfilled her dream with the self-publication of her first novel.

"I yearned to write," she said. "But after college I put it on a back burner and then I decided, 'Hey, let me just start to do what I've always wanted to do.'"

The result is "Stubborn as a Mule," the story of a young black woman determined to accomplish her goal of becoming a doctor. First, however, she must grow up and away from a backdrop of what the author describes as an atmosphere of "love, incest, poverty and purpose" in the 1930s rural South. While Lyle-Coke is black and hails from the South, she says the book is not autobiographical.

After writing her manuscript, Lyle-Coke went directly to self-publishing, without ever trying to find a traditional publisher. She read about Vantage Press in a newspaper advertisement

"Being a first-time author, I said to myself, 'Oh, maybe I have a chance.' My daughter thought I should research it more, but I just wanted to get my feet wet."

Lyle-Coke won't say how much she spent to self-publish but she says she has sold more than 100 copies of the \$8.95 soft cover novel. She recently had a book signing at the Westbury Community Center.

- Ellen Mitchell

John Pellicano, FLUSHING

His own best marketer

John Pellicano has been a Civil War buff for 40 of his 53 years. Now retired from the New York City Police Department, the Flushing resident finally put his passion into print with the writing of "Conquer or Die," a painstakingly researched true account of a New York City regiment in the Civil War.

Some 400 pages and a lot of closed doors later, Pellicano was totally discouraged.

"I had looked around for three years to see if anyone would be interested. They said, 'Who are you? Go get an agent.' But, you can't get an agent. It's a Catch-22."

Pellicano had never heard of self-publishing until he took a course at Queens College taught by Larry Leichman of Advanced Self-Publishing. As a result, Pellicano went to Advanced and ordered an initial print- run of 1,000 copies of his book. Since then, he has spent approximately \$8,000 for several printings and has sold about 6,000 copies of his 260-page, \$14.95 paperback.

The former cop, who now does corporate security for Fortunoff, has become his own best marketing manager. He appears as a guest speaker and sells at book shows. Because his book has a Civil War theme, Pellicano was able to get several booksellers in the Gettysburg, Pa., region to feature his book. He also sells it through the bookshops at a number of national parks.

Pellicano is now at work on his second book, another Civil War manuscript.

"I love it. I love to write," said Pellicano. "My former cop colleagues think it's wonderful."

- Ellen Mitchell

JODI BEHREND ADLER, GREAT NECK

'We knew we had a great idea.'

Jodi Behrend Adler, executive director of CLASP Children's Center in Great Neck, is the co-author of "Special Foods for Special Kids," a book that offers solutions and recipes for children with food allergies. Her co-author is Todd Adelman, director of food services for the Bloch Institute in Brooklyn. "We knew we had a great idea, but we were green," Adler said. "So, we took a course at the New School. It gave us advice on what to do, how to find an agent and a publisher, and what they look for.

"We did what we were supposed to do," she said. "We wrote a chapter outline, a sample chapter.... Then we solicited big and little publishing houses. We sent out mailings. It's like looking for a job. We could have sent out more resumes to other houses, but we weren't having much success."

Frustrated but undeterred, Adler, 41, whose maiden name, Jodi Behrend, appears on the book cover, and Adelman decided to research self- publishing.

"The book was something very personal to us. It really wasn't for the money. This was something truly needed," Adler said.

The pair found Robert D. Reed Publishers of San Francisco and agreed on a price, which Adler would not reveal. They had an initial printing of 5,000 copies and a subsequent printing of an additional 2,500 copies of the soft- cover, oversize book with a sale price of \$16.95. Adler said they have recouped their expenditures.

"Special Foods for Special Kids" is available online; the authors also promote the book through colleagues and school contacts. Many schools have bought it to use as a resource guide, Adler said. "We did most of the work ourselves," she said. "We had our own editor and our own graphics person. The cover design and layout had our complete input."

The book was honored with a 2001 nomination for a James Beard Foundation/ KitchenAid Book Award in the organization's "healthy focus" category.

"Every year there are hundreds of entries and they only pick three nominees, so it was a big deal in the food industry," Adler said.

- Ellen Mitchell

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