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E-publisher makes mark with instant books

By DONNA CALLEA (donna.callea@news-jrnl.com)

Staff Writer

EDGEWATER - In a competition that pits such publishing giants as Simon & Schuster, Time Warner and Random House against a small independent publishing house that's based in an actual house in Edgewater, it might seem a sure bet that one of the big guys would win.

But that wasn't the case at last month's Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany - one of the biggest annual events in publishing.

The inaugural "Frankfurt eBook Grand Prize" of \$50,000 for the best electronically produced book went to first-time novelist E. M. Schorb for his mystery "Paradise Square." And the book's proud publisher was not any of the big names in the book industry, although they all submitted entries.

It was Denlinger's Publishers Ltd. of Edgewater.

"We're pretending we're already a big commercial operation," quipped Gus Postreich, senior vice president and executive editor of Denlinger's, on a recent afternoon. He chatted about his company after printing up a copy of the prizewinner on a table-size machine called an InstaBook Maker. The cutting-edge piece of equipment, manufactured by a Gainesville company, spits out a single paperback version in about six minutes.

Complete with handsomely illustrated cover, the bound volume looks as if it would be right at home on the shelves of any brick-and-mortar bookstore.

In fact, someday in the not too distant future, Postreich predicts most major bookstores will have InstaBook machines or similar equipment on their premises. The machines will allow booksellers to print books on demand one at a time, eliminating the need for warehouses, distribution centers and stockpiles of unsold books, many of which end up on remainder tables marked down to a fraction of their original prices.

Neither "Paradise Square" nor any of the other 170 titles Denlinger's publishes owes its existence to paper and ink.

Although Denlinger's began in 1926 as a traditional operation, it has evolved into an electronic publishing house that, for the past 21/2 years, has conducted all its business in a way that some believe the entire industry may eventually adopt.

Denlinger's books are produced on computer, marketed via the Internet, and ultimately read, for the most part, in electronic format on computers and hand-held electronic readers.

The transition has meant that even though the family-owned business still has a base in Centerville, Va., where Postreich's cousin holds the title of president, the nuts and bolts - or more accurately hardware and software - of the operation now can be found in a big room in the ranch-style home where Postreich and his wife, Marcia Buckingham, live, work and publish.

In one basic respect, however, Denlinger's is not much different from other respected, legitimate publishing houses, as opposed to vanity or subsidy presses, which require authors to pay. Denlinger's gets its authors the old-fashioned way. Writers and literary agents submit manuscripts for consideration, the selection process is based on merit and sales potential, and the publisher assumes all the financial risks involved.

"Getting authors is not a problem," said Buckingham, who serves as acquisitions editor.

"We go through thousands of manuscripts," of which, she estimated only about 5 percent are accepted for publication.

At any given time, hundreds are stacked up along one wall of the publishing room. Those manuscripts deemed to have some promise are shipped to professional readers across the country for their input before a decision is made.

Like most of their authors, Schorb, who lives in North Carolina, submitted his manuscript to Denlinger's, along with the required floppy disk, only after his potential prize-winner was rejected just about everywhere else.

The novel, in which Edgar Allan Poe helps solve a murder in Manhattan, has also been placed in contention for the prestigious Edgar Award for mysteries.

The last book Denlinger's published that made headlines was the 1957 bestseller "Mandingo" by Kyle Onstott, and a poster-size blowup of a Newsweek review from that time hangs above the InstaBook machine.

"We're looking for the next Mandingo," Buckingham said.

A New York literary agency, she said, is in the process of selling movie, mass printing and other rights for "Paradise Square." Denlinger's InstaBook machine would not be able to produce enough copies of the book to meet the expected print demand, explained Buckingham. But the Edgewater company is retaining the electronic rights, and the prizewinner is giving Denlinger's a much higher profile in the publishing world.

Meanwhile, Postreich continues to work 40 hours a week at the Kennedy Space Center, where he is an electronic technician for the crew module of the Space Shuttle, in addition to handling Denlinger's electronic publishing operations.

The publishing house had been dormant for many years until he came up with the idea of revitalizing it using new computer technology. His late uncle, who previously owned Denlinger's and was his mentor, was all for the idea before he died two years ago.

"He thought it was a great idea," said Postreich. "It made him feel younger."

Although electronic publishing may still be in its infancy, with big players also jumping on the bandwagon, Denlinger's is finding itself in some heady company.

Random House recently announced that it's planning to offer an online version of 100 classical works. And another major force in the world of books, Barnes & Noble, is planning to collaborate with the electronic publisher MightyWords to sell digitally downloadable and printable electronic books.

Postreich currently sells electronic versions of his company's books online for \$6.95 each through Denlinger's own Web site, www.thebookden.com, as well as through other online booksellers, including Barnes & Noble. Denlinger's paperback editions, printed on the InstaBook, sell for \$16.95 each, although Postreich said he expects the prices to come down as the technology improves.

"Most authors still want to see their books in paper," said Postreich. And most readers still want to turn pages. But there is a "shifting paradigm," said Buckingham.

The couple behind Denlinger's doesn't expect electronic books to change everything, at least not for a while. But there is no reason why old and new technologies can't co-exist, they contend.

"The Gutenberg press didn't replace handwriting," Buckingham pointed out. "This is just another form of communication."

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