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Bookstore takes the work out of publishing

E-mail Print

Monday, November 1, 2004

By ED BEESON
HERALD NEWS

As an editor and a publishing consultant, Tim Harper has grim news for aspiring writers. "Very often, the odds are against getting any book published," he says.

That is, until he got involved with publishing.

For \$150, Harper and the staff at Bookends, an independent bookstore in Ridgewood, can whip up 10 copies of a book with your writing in it and your name on the cover.

This started about a year ago when Harper, 54, stumbled upon a Web site advertising InstaBook, a machine that can print and bind a single book in minutes. Familiar with Web services that publish manuscripts by the thousand, Harper found himself intrigued by this little invention that could, like an Easy-Bake Oven with brownies, make one book at a time.

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More intriguing was the fact that the machine could print on small scale and still be a profitable enterprise.

So Harper contacted InstaBook inventor Victor Celorio and Bookends co-owner Walter Boyer, 49, of Ridgewood. A few conversations later, Bookends became the first, and currently the only, store in the country to have its own InstaBook machine. Harper and Boyer, who co-owns the shop with his wife, Pat, christened the new operation BooksByBookends.

Bookends unveiled its self-publishing device in May and, since then, a stream of would-be published authors has submitted their manuscripts. The first was Barbara Hickey, 70, of Hackensack, whose children's novel, "Year of the Spy, 1943," finally saw the light of day a decade after publishers sent her their rejection letters. Others have hailed from places as far away as Alaska, Australia and Malaysia - and as nearby as Paterson. Overall, Bookends has printed about 3,000 books by nearly 90 authors.

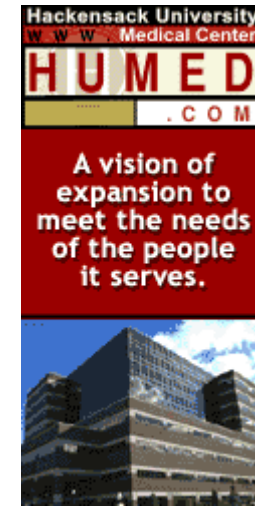
A book is born in the Bookend's basement with the glorious efficiency of the modern age. A few keystrokes at a desktop computer sends streams of recycled paper spitting from a printer, with two pages of text printed on each side. Sheet-by-sheet, each page glides up a slight ramp where a blade quickly slices each in half. The halves then gently fall into two piles stacked on two side-by-side panels.

When the printing finishes, the panels fold like a slowly clapping hand. Once pressed together, the machine dips one sliced edge into a tray of warm glue. After a brief soak, the panels drag the manuscript to another station where a cover folds over the glue-soaked edge. Two flat-edged panels then pinch the spine straight. The book is trimmed by hand on a separate machine, after which it is ready to read, its binding still delightfully warm.

The process is so quick that some people fetch a cup of coffee while they wait for their first book to be published. "By the time your coffee's cold, you have a warm book in your hand," says Boyer.

As simple as the procedure may sound, it is the combination of several patented technologies, "which is one reason why you don't see this in Barnes and Noble and Borders," Harper says.

You may one day. Harper and Boyer contend that "print-on-demand" publishing, which is the essence of the InstaBook technology, will transform the publishing industry because it eliminates the need for warehouses. Just pay your money,



download information into the desktop publisher and, voila, warm book in hand.

In the meantime, Harper and Boyer say they are not competing with the major publishers, but serving a market out of their reach.

Because every book is hand-made, the BooksByBookends operation is geared to people who need only small quantities printed. The minimum order is 10 books for \$150. For every 10 books thereafter, the price drops. "The goal is to do a lot of 20-book orders," Harper said. "We are not a commercial printing operation."

As such, the current crop of books does not look too fancy. Only soft covers are available and the company encourages books to be 200 pages or less. Most books measure 5-1/2 by 8-1/2 inches. Glossy covers and interior color printing are yet to come.

So far, the most frequent customers are families publishing their histories and memoirs, Harper and Boyer say. Others include professors printing their own books for students. "The pet books are plentiful and amusing," Boyer says.

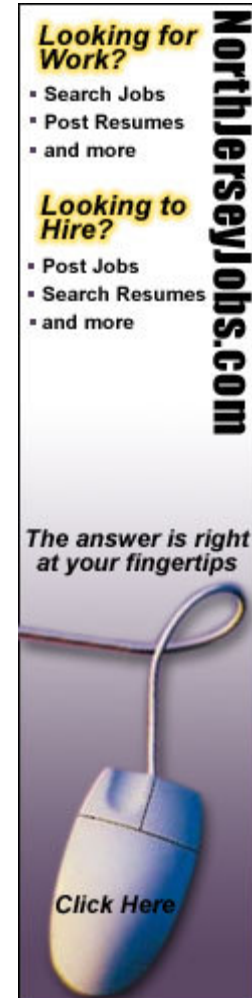
Some are innovative, too. A high school senior ordered books of his poems to accompany his college applications. First-time authors are ordering books, not manuscripts, to send as galleys to potential publishers. A local teacher applied for an education grant after seeing a book Boyer published for his daughter's elementary school poetry class. Recently, the store received an electronic file containing a 500-page book in Vietnamese to be printed.

Other options include printing works in the public domain, which includes classics like "Moby Dick" and "Don Quixote."

"This is a very flexible system. Everyday we're learning new applications," Boyer says.

Of course, there are always authors like Nick Clemente, 38, of East Brunswick. He says his tome on the Jersey "hair metal" band lifestyle (called "How to Not to Make It in the Music Industry") was rejected by 60 publishers before he found Bookends.

The demand for self-publishing has been so strong that Harper says the machine began turning a profit in six months. Now the two want to spread its gospel.



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They have secured a distribution deal with Celorio and expect to sell about a dozen machines across the country next year. Boyer would not be specific about the machine's cost, but said it could be obtained "for less than the price of a mid-sized car."

One Iowa shop owner believes he can make between \$60,000 and \$80,000 per year making books for his small town, they say.

"You know where I see this going into? High schools," Harper predicts.

If anything, on-demand publishing could be the antidote that independent booksellers need to survive in an increasingly consolidated market, says Boyer, who bought Bookends about a year and a half ago.

"As the only independent bookstore in town, we need to diversify our business," says Boyer, who also is a member of the Ridgewood Chamber of Commerce. "If we don't do that, we will continue to feel the crunch of the big box bookstores."

For others, like Hickey, the first author published at Bookends, that little machine in the store's basement means so much more than economics. It has helped a dream come true.

"All I can tell you is it is a thrill to see it in a book form," Hickey says, recalling when she held her first copy of "Year of the Spy 1943" in her hands. "It really was a very emotional moment."

The book is a story steeped in her childhood during World War II. "It was a much freer time for children," she says, noting how every child was taught to see danger and spies everywhere they went.

The book's two protagonists, a brother and a sister, grow suspicious of a German family who moves in next door. At first, their suspicion is like a game they play, but soon their fear grows all too real.

"And it just gets carried away. And that is a trait that children have, as good as they are," Hickey says.

Pretty sophisticated for a children's novel. That is apparently what publishers thought of this 300-page book. "Every publisher said, 'If you would cut it down to 50 pages because kids don't have any attention span.'"



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GUIDES



That was before the epic "Harry Potter" series hit, she notes.

While Hickey hopes that publishers might take a second look at her novel, she says she is content with posterity.

"To heck, I want to do this and preserve it, even if it's just for my kids," she says.

Next off the Bookends press is a story closer to home. "Silk City" is Paterson's nickname and now it is also the title of Brunilda Milán's 50-page novella about a young girl who moves here from the Caribbean.

Milán, who lives in Paterson and teaches English, and English as a second language, at a Bronx high school, leaves her narrator unnamed. "I leave it up to the imagination of the reader," she says.

But the narrator's story is familiar to any immigrant. She faces, and then overcomes, language and cultural barriers to realize the American dream - in her case, to become a teacher.

"At the end of the book, I reveal myself," says Milán, who moved here from Puerto Rico years ago.

The author, who says she is "over 50 and well kept," hopes she has a best seller on her hands when the first 20 copies roll off the press next month. But her priority is to tell a story of herself that is intertwined with the story of the Silk City.

"'Silk City' is like my baby," she says. "I call it my baby."



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