Self-Publishing and Collection Development

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I first learned about the increasing importance of self-publishing not from an article in a library publication or even from a library blog or a discussion list. About three years ago on my way home from work, the woman on National Public Radio was talking about how around 75% of all titles published in the United States were self-published. As a teacher, researcher, and writer on collection development, I was amazed at this figure and wondered why I didn’t know about this important development. Did librarians have their heads in the sand? Indeed they did, with a few exceptions.

Thus, I decided to find out more about this significant, but overlooked, development. My research over the last few years has led to several presentations, a special segment in Against the Grain, and now this book. I believe that it is the first monograph to deal with self-publication and its present and potential impact on libraries. Many librarians consider self-published or indie titles to be nothing other than the current manifestation of vanity press publications—those titles that authors paid to have printed only to sit in their basements or garages since bookstores wouldn’t carry them and libraries turned them down even as gifts. All this has changed with e-books, print on demand, and Amazon and other Internet outlets. In fact, an industry has grown up to support these authors.

Both established authors with commercially published books and newbies have discovered the advantages of self-publication including higher royalties, complete control over content, and the ability to get things into “print” quickly. According to Publishers Weekly, 15 of the top 100 best
sellers last year were indie publications. Some authors have a loyal following with readers who want their libraries to purchase their books.

For libraries, the negatives of many self-published books are real. From the content side, many are poorly written with typos and formatting errors, have abysmal cover art, and are difficult to purchase especially if published only in a proprietary format. Practically, most of these books lack cataloging, don’t receive reviews, aren’t carried by the traditional vendors, and get minimal marketing except for the authors who want the local library to buy the book and/or sponsor a book talk. But beyond these difficulties, self-published books can meet the entertainment and information needs of users, the reason why libraries exist. The chapters that follow will discuss these points and many others. In any case, the sheer volume of these publications makes it impossible for libraries to ignore self-published books forever.

Public libraries are much further along in integrating self-published materials into their collections. Self-published books are more likely to be fiction with a strong emphasis on genre fiction, the type of pleasure reading that many public library users expect to find. Henry Bankhead describes the efforts of the Los Gatos Library to provide such materials and to support local indie authors in his “E-Book Self-Publishing and the Los Gatos Library: A Case Study.” One special feature has been partnering with Smashwords whose headquarters are located in the same city. In “Supporting Self-Publishing and Local Authors: From Challenge to Opportunity,” Melissa DeWild and Morgan Jarema focus on their efforts to make print publications by local indie authors available in the Kent District Library, Michigan. This library shelves indie publications in a separate section to increase their use and also sponsors a Michigan Authors’ Night.

Kay Ann Cassell comes up with a less positive answer in her “Do Large Academic Libraries Purchase Self-Published Books to Add to Their Collections?” She includes cases where academic libraries buy such books, but they do so much less frequently than public libraries for many reasons, including the lack of reviews and vendor support as well as the fewer number of self-published scholarly publications. In “Why Academic Libraries Should Consider Acquiring Self-Published Books,” Robert P. Holley then argues that academic libraries should take more interest in self-published materials because they can serve as primary sources, document popular culture, include research from independent scholars, and provide less expensive
access to textbooks. Donald Beagle with “Digital Authoring, Electronic Scholarship, and Libraries: From Walled Garden to Wilderness” recounts his experiences both with commercial publishers and self-publishing. As an independent scholar, he sees the following advantages to self-publishing his research: the ability to make his findings available when the subject won’t sell enough copies to justify commercial publication and complete control over content including eliminating unwanted publisher changes and providing more supplementary matter since e-books don’t have the same size limitations as print publications.

Bob Nardini, ProQuest Books, and Robin Cutler, Ingram Publishing, deal with different aspects of vendors and self-publishing. Nardini (“Book Vendors and Self-Publishing”) focuses more on selling to academic libraries with statistics that show that such sales occur but with a limited number of copies sold and a higher cost of doing business since such titles have higher handling costs without the support that traditional publishers provide. In her “Ingram and Independent Publishing,” Cutler is more optimistic because IngramSpark, a support service for indie authors, has mechanisms in place to support sales to libraries and bookstores.

Eleanor I. Cook addresses the concern that self-published materials are less likely to be reviewed in “Review Sources of Interest to Librarians for Independently Published Books.” She examines a broad array of reviewing sources in various categories that include Amazon.com, sites designed for readers, and traditional library and bookstore reviewing sources. While the sources that libraries use now contain some reviews, the percentage is much less than for commercially published materials. Robert P. Holley addresses another concern, the lack of cataloging/metadata for self-published materials, in “Self-Publishing and Bibliographic Control,” an important issue since libraries use cataloging to help users find materials and for internal processes. The Library of Congress provides very few cataloging records so that libraries must depend upon vendors and other libraries to provide records or create their own original cataloging, an expensive process.

Self-published authors recount their experiences in the next four chapters. In “Self-Publishing and Libraries: The Slush Pile Is the Platform,” Tom Bruno, tired of rejection letters, turned to self-publishing to make his work available. He also describes several models for self-publishing. AlTonya Washington calls herself “An Indie Author in a Library World.” When a
commercial publisher turned down the next title in her series, her choice was to self-publish. Based upon her experiences, she emphasizes reaching out to readers, including those readers who want to find their favorite authors in libraries. Elizabeth Nelson focuses on the process of getting her novel published in “The Romance of Self-Publishing.” She discusses the options along the way and why she made the decisions she did. “Alacrity House Publishing LLC” is somewhat different because Frankie L. Colton founded her press to take advantage of the structures available to self-published authors. Her press has created several anthologies of local writing and also provides services to authors that wish to self-publish under this imprint.

The volume concludes with “Self-Publishing: A Bibliographic Essay” by Joseph D. Grobelny in which he provides a selective review of the literature on self-publishing. His essay provides access to articles that give additional information on the topics covered in this volume.

Overall, this volume presents the many facets of self-publishing. My hope is that readers will take self-publishing and indie authors more seriously as both an important trend and as a way to provide additional content of interest to their users. With money to be made, I predict that both the established players and creative entrepreneurs will figure out ways to make it easier for libraries of all types to discover, purchase, and make available self-published books.