Libraries are an ideal place to write: they often offer quiet spaces, free wi-fi, and research information in convenient and accessible locations along with the added inspiration of being surrounded by books. It’s no surprise that people seek the library as a place to write. They become “regulars,” greeted each day by the library staff. They ask staff to help them find that arcane bit of information that will add depth and authenticity to their book. Eventually some of them even bring in the finished book and suggest that the library put it on the shelf for others to enjoy, but that’s where the author may hit a roadblock with staff.

At the Kent District Library (KDL) in Kent County, Michigan, the first time a self-published book was sent to the collection development department for consideration about adding it to the library’s collection, our initial response was not to add it. The book cover featured a man in what appeared to be a contemporary T-shirt even though the book was set during medieval times. The back cover offered a dense description of the story that did not encourage reading the book itself. This book did not have the kind of appeal that most books we purchased required, and it would have taken a cataloger significant time to create an original record for it to have been able to add the book to our system. The book, however, had a note attached with a plea from branch staff to please add it to the collection because the nice author had spent the past year using their branch as a writing office. We relented, made an exception, and sent the book on for cataloging. While it didn’t circulate much, the author was incredibly happy and grateful for the library’s support.
Whether authors use the library for a space to write and consult with staff, or they are simply patrons using the library to check out books or bring their kids in for story time, they appreciate the library. This is a place they love, and its main purpose is to provide books for people to read. Of course, they immediately think it’s also the perfect place to feature their book—on the shelves or in a program.

Traditionally published authors have the benefits of editors who help make the book more cohesive and typo free, graphic designers who create a beautiful cover, experienced marketing departments to promote the book, and established avenues to gain exposure for the book through professional review sources. Staff who select books for libraries rely on this vetting process. They know what to expect with a book from a traditional publisher and usually have efficient workflows in place to discover and order these titles. These books show up in the electronic carts that vendors send and can be viewed in the vendor’s database with publisher annotations, BISAC information, warehouse quantities, sales demand, book covers, and often reviews. This all helps to inform selection decisions. Once items are selected, it’s then very easy to upload them into an acquisitions system to send and track orders.

On the other hand, self-published books can be full of typos and have confusing storylines or unappealing covers. It’s not always obvious who the audience for the book is either. Should it be shelved in juvenile or teen fiction? With no reviews, staff may have to read the book themselves to determine the appropriate age for the content. Often the library’s usual vendors won’t have the book for sale, which means disrupting an efficient workflow to manually order the title. Most likely the book will also need original cataloging, requiring higher level cataloging staff and a significant amount of time. These factors along with limited staff time can make it difficult to easily add self-published books to the library’s collection. Most libraries also don’t have enough staffing to spend time finding the needle of self-published gems among the rougher manuscripts in the haystack.

When there were just a few local self-published books to consider adding to the collection, it was fairly easy to manage them. Then self-publishing took off in a dramatic way. A recent analysis of U.S. ISBN data by ProQuest affiliate Bowker showed that the number of self-published titles in 2012 jumped to more than 391,000, up 59% over 2011 and 422% over 2007. We were inundated with local authors dropping off their self-published books
Supporting Self-Publishing and Local Authors

for the library to add to the collection or contacting staff asking them to purchase the title. Staff accepted the donated books with the caveat that we couldn’t guarantee that they’d be added to the collection and that they could end up in the book sale. This reaction obviously did not engender happiness in our patrons. We needed a better way to support patrons while acknowledging the limits of library staff time and the collection budget.

A few of our library staff met and brainstormed how we could turn the current negative situation that staff and patrons were experiencing regarding self-published books into something more positive and supportive. Out of this, KDL’s Local Indie collection was created. The collection features books that are either self-published or published by small, independent publishers. It also includes music CDs and DVDs from local musicians and filmmakers. West Michigan authors and artists may submit donated copies of their works with a Local Indie form found at www.kdl.org/localindie. The form gives details on the collection and how to submit items along with requiring the donor’s contact information and details about the items in case the library decides to purchase additional copies. The library does preserve the right to decide not to add an item, although so far we have added all titles received. In order to lessen the impact on staff time, we create brief bibliographic records to catalog the items and classify them all as “local” in the call number rather than assigning a genre or age level.

The Local Indie collections are prominently displayed near the entrances of two of our largest branches. Before developing this collection, we found that self-published titles shelved in the regular collection were often ignored. We have large collections; and, without author name recognition or publisher marketing, these books just did not attract attention from patrons. Now they are identified as local, which draws interest, and occupy prime real estate in the library on display shelves. Staff also post reviews of these items on our blog in order to highlight them.

The collection now boasts about 300 titles. The most popular titles so far include a cookbook, a memoir, an adult fiction title, and a music CD from a popular local band. The title with the most circulation is Tasting and Touring Michigan’s Homegrown Food: A Culinary Roadtrip by Jaye Beeler with photography by Dianne Carroll Burdick. Our next steps with this collection are to consider expanding it to additional branches and to explore ways to offer a digital version of the Local Indie collection.
KDL also occasionally purchases nonlocal self-published books. Print books are shelved with the regular collection, and e-books are available through OverDrive (via Smashwords). Generally the purchase is due to a request for the title from a patron. We consider the requests in light of our general collection policy, so it should be something that has broader appeal than one reader and is a good fit for our popular materials collection. The majority of the requests are for teen and adult genre fiction, especially romance and mystery. Some traditionally published authors such as Jessica Beck and Jennifer Ashley are now publishing new series installments themselves, so we have sought some of these potentially popular titles. For now, relying on patron requests to add nonlocal self-published materials has been the best way for library staff to discover the titles; it also guarantees some demand.

Beyond purchasing their self-published works, KDL has sought more options to support these authors. In 2012, KDL launched a free, full-day Writers Conference (http://www.kdl.org/events/go/writers_conference) that in its second and third years has attracted nearly 200 writers and includes sessions on traditional, independent, and self-publishing. Self-publishing sessions have included marketing, trailers, finding an editor, staying motivated, social media, and e-book publishing.

The growing number of self-published books has also brought an increase in requests to libraries to host local author events. As these can often be more sparsely attended than authors and libraries would like, particularly when figuring staff time invested in promoting and creating promotional materials for a single-author event, KDL is partnering with a locally based independent bookstore to host and cross-promote book signings, readings, and other events involving area authors.

When KDL and Schuler Books & Music met to discuss such a partnership, we learned that bookstores also see lower attendance than they would like for local author events. To address this, Schuler has branded its periodic multiauthor events as “Local Author Nights” and has developed a set of guidelines aimed at boosting attendance and giving new, self-published authors practice marketing their books and their appearances. Kent District Library adopted the bookstore’s guidelines, modifying them slightly to be applicable in the library setting, and has branded a seasonal “Michigan Authors Night” at four branches. Each of the four branches,
which represent the four quadrants of our county-wide service area, will host a Michigan Authors Night on the same third Thursday of the month every year.

While Local Author Nights or variations thereof are commonplace for libraries and bookstores with varying but typically minimal success, our goal is not primarily to boost sales for these authors but to give them experience in self-promotion and personal appearances. It is our hope that the library is seen as a venue that fosters this growth; and, in doing so, sales may follow.

A call for authors to appear is put in our regular eNewsletter and on social media four times a year; we also keep a record of authors who have contacted us via other methods. Those who are interested are asked to fill out a form that includes basic information about their book, provide a high-resolution headshot and book cover image, donate up to four copies of their book (or CD) to KDL’s Local Indie collection, and give us e-mail addresses of up to 25 people from their list of contacts to whom we can send a dedicated promotional piece advertising the event. Up to five authors who provide all requested information in a single response by the designated deadline are invited to be featured on the next Michigan Authors Night. For our first and second Michigan Authors Nights, KDL received more than a dozen inquiries; but only four authors sent in all the requested materials by the deadline, so the concern about having to turn authors away is so far unfounded. What we found instead was that, for whatever reasons, local self-published authors did not seem prepared to provide the marketing materials required for the library to effectively promote their book at the event. Rather than serving to “weed out” the newbies, we believe this experience helps local authors learn what is expected of them as well as how seriously our library system takes helping them publicize their success. In this way, the library also serves as a training ground of sorts for new authors by preparing them for future marketing efforts.

The format of the Michigan Authors Night is casual: each author has up to 30 minutes to introduce themselves, talk about their path to publishing or how they came to write about the subject matter, and do a short reading. Q&A is done at the author’s preference, either at the end of each individual presentation or after all other authors have presented. Authors may sign and sell their books following the presentation. If they are unaware
of Square or other methods of selling their books via credit or debit card using a plug-in device for their smartphones, this is another opportunity for the library to serve as a guide for improving the marketability of our local authors. Prior to the event, authors receive a second set of guidelines, which include recommendations on how to select a pivotal passage from their book—one that would induce readers to purchase a copy, the importance of familiarizing themselves with the presentation space, and a complete list of all promotional avenues KDL will utilize to publicize the event.

KDL also started the Write Michigan Short Story Contest in 2012 in partnership with area libraries and our local independent bookstore. Write Michigan is open to all state residents and allows story submissions in three categories—youth, teen, and adult. In 2012, the contest received 551 stories representing 155 zip codes throughout the state. In 2013, story submissions rose to 888, a 61% increase. All submissions are read by two readers (e.g., librarians, booksellers, and other book lovers) and rated with the top stories selected as semifinalists. The top 10 stories in each category are then judged by celebrity and community judges (mostly published authors). Finally, the public votes on the Write Michigan Web site (www.writemichigan.org), which gives the authors additional exposure and involves the community. Once the winners are selected, they are published in an anthology that is included in the library collection and sold at the local independent bookstore. For most authors, this is their first-time publication.

The rise of self-publishing has certainly been disruptive to traditional publishers but also to libraries. In trying to be responsive to patrons and create a positive, supportive atmosphere for local authors, the Kent District Library has had to rethink policies, collections, and programs. Finding a way not just to accept local self-published authors, but actually to welcome them, invite them into the library, and help them hone their craft and their marketing skills, has resulted in a beneficial experience for the library and our patrons.