Self-Publishing and Collection Development

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Do Large Academic Libraries Purchase Self-Published Books to Add to Their Collections?

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Self-publishing has always been an option, but it has been a small and mostly ignored part of the publishing world until recently, and then mostly for public libraries. In fact, there has generally been a stigma attached to a self-published book, particularly for academic libraries. They thought it meant that the book had been rejected by traditional publishers. But many well-known writers self-published their first books, such as Mark Twain, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway. There were always a few publishing companies that catered to authors who had written a book and needed a publisher but did not want to go through the usual channels. They were labeled “vanity presses.” There were also authors who only wanted to write one book—a memoir, a collection of essays, a genealogy, a novel, a book of poetry, and so on. They planned to sell it or maybe give it away to friends, family, and their local library. But by 2008 the self-publishing world was exploding. Probably it was in large part due to the proliferation of e-books that let an author publish a book without the costs of printing and binding and to the print-on-demand world where books did not have to be printed in advance of sales. Distribution became easier and less costly. Many e-books were listed by Amazon and other vendors of e-books so they were relatively easy for interested readers to find. By 2014 Bowker reported approximately 460,000 self-published titles, up 17% over 2013.

The way large academic libraries select and acquire materials for their collections is somewhat different from smaller academic libraries. The size of their budgets makes the way they organize and spend their funds
different. All materials cannot be acquired on a title by title basis even if they wanted to proceed that way. So most spend some of their funds through vendors who preselect materials for them in various subject areas. The vendors send the books to the library following the guidelines set by the library. It is understood that the library will accept most or all of the books selected. After having said that, even these larger libraries do some title by title selection. They are always looking to fill in gaps in their collections, to acquire materials on new subject areas, to acquire materials for special collections, and to acquire unique materials that will be of interest to their user community. Depending on the subject area, some subjects produce more self-published materials than others.

**PUBLISHERS AND VENDORS**

New publishing houses have emerged designed to publish books by indie authors. Among them are CreateSpace, Smashwords, Lulu, and Author Solutions. Some were quickly purchased by other publishers. Author Solutions was purchased by Penguin Random House and CreateSpace by Amazon. Apple also has the Apple iStore, which has launched Breakout Books. Simon & Schuster has launched its own self-publishing company in partnership with Archway Publishers, an Author Solutions imprint (Herther, 2013, p. 23). It is obvious from this wave of new publishing houses and then their mergers that traditional publishing wants to capture some of this writing talent for themselves as well as the profits self-publication generates. For example, Smashwords made $22 million in 2013 (Inc., 194).

In 2013, Ingram developed IngramSpark to assist self-publishers and libraries. IngramSpark describes itself as a single platform for authors to publish and distribute their books—either e-books or print. If the authors choose e-books, Ingram will distribute them to Amazon Kindle, iBooks, Kobo, and other distributors. The authors can also choose print copies, and they will be provided through print on demand. Vendors such as Ingram are attempting to vet self-published material since all self-published material is not of the same quality. They are trying to identify titles of interest to libraries and help in the marketing of these titles. They stated that they are trying to build more metadata to increase discoverability. This is a big challenge. Yet to ignore this material means that some titles of interest go unnoticed and are not acquired. Bob Nardini from Ingram Library Services
reported at the 2014 Charleston Conference about their efforts to vet these self-published titles. He said they had identified 380 titles of interest. They sold 12 copies of one book, and 15 copies of that title were listed in OCLC’s WorldCat. Nardini said that publicity does help the sales. He mentioned one title, *Quack This Way*, which is an interview by Bryan A. Garner with David Foster Wallace. This book received a *New Yorker* review, and 33 copies of that title were listed in OCLC’s WorldCat. Baker and Taylor has acquired Bookmasters, which offers similar services for self-publishers.

**REVIEW SOURCES**

When asked about acquiring self-published books, academic librarians often say that they don’t want to buy them because they aren’t reviewed. But this is no longer accurate. Although this was once the case, now many review tools include self-published books. I spoke to the staff of *Choice* where many academic librarians look for reviews. They told me that they will review self-published books if they follow the procedures outlined for submitting books for review. *Publishers Weekly* reviews self-published books on a regular basis. *Library Journal* now has SELF-e, which is a partnership with BiblioBoard. BiblioBoard is a platform for libraries to license and deliver digital content for an unlimited number of simultaneous users. The content includes e-books, articles, documents, and audiovisual materials. Many of its materials are primary source materials of special interest to academic libraries. Academic libraries can also use BiblioBoard to create online exhibits of special collections materials or for faculty to create e-textbooks. A new review source is *BlueInk Review* (www.blueinkreview.com). This fee-based review source uses professionals from the media such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and from major publishing houses to review self-published books. The reviews are well written, and the best books receive starred reviews.

**THE AUTHORS**

Some academic librarians may think that most of the material that is self-published is not written by academics or not written for the academic audience. This is not true at all. A recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* discussed the pros and cons of self-publishing for academics. The article stated that those academics who do not have tenure self-publish at their own risk.
Self-published monographs usually do not count when the work of an academic is considered for tenure. So nontenured faculty tend to try to find a traditional publisher to publish their work. Once the faculty member is tenured, there is more room for exploring alternate publishing routes. For many academics, the traditional publishing route is slow and causes authors to lose control of their material as they are asked to sign away all of their rights including the copyright. For most, there is not much money to be gained from traditional publishing unless the author writes a textbook or a book that can be used as a textbook that is adopted by many universities.

The conservative nature of much of the traditional publishing world sometimes makes self-publishing a better choice. For many, getting their book out to the public is preferable to dealing with the slow pace of traditional publishing that may not produce more income and may not even market the book very well. One can only judge this claim by the number of mid-list authors published by traditional publishers who are forced to do their own marketing. For those who choose the self-publishing route, it means that their work can be made available to everyone for no fee or for a small fee. It can be available much more quickly, and it can be listed with major outlets and platforms such as Amazon. It also means they must market their own work, which many do successfully thanks to social media. They can also create their own Web site that will help people find out more about the author.

Some faculty are now writing online textbooks, which are a new market and can be very successful. Online open-access textbooks have the advantage of making the author’s work available to all at no cost or at a small cost and making revisions possible whenever needed. It can also mean that other faculty using the textbook can be engaged in the process of writing and revision so that the textbook can be a solid cooperative effort. At a recent conference, an academic gathered together some of the other faculty using his open-access textbook so they could offer suggestions as to what revisions and additions were needed. They charted a plan for getting revisions to the person coordinating the textbook so all points of view could be included in the next edition (Glushko, Petras, & Shaw, 2013). For others the self-publishing route gives them a chance to publish something that may be of interest but outside their specialty. They can then decide whether they want to add it to their CV.
Do Large Academic Libraries Purchase Self-Published Books?

LIBRARIES

Self-publishing has two separate meanings in libraries—acquiring self-published books and library involvement in publishing. Do academic libraries acquire self-published materials? The answer is “yes, but . . .” and “it depends.” So maybe academic librarians don’t often go out and look for self-published materials to acquire; but they do, in fact, acquire them on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes they buy them, and sometimes they are gifts. Librarians are now more open to self-published books because they often include content not available elsewhere. The problem is identifying them and finding a way to evaluate them if they have not been reviewed. The most often articulated reason for buying self-published books is that they were written by faculty, employees, or alumni of the institution. In this case, librarians know something about the author so they can judge whether the book is of reasonable quality or whether it should be purchased for political reasons. Librarians seldom refuse books that are local in nature. It is usually a good political and courteous move to accept these books and to add them to the collection. The next category of books that academic libraries often accept are books of local or regional interest. This might mean a book about the university, a book about the history of the area where the university is located, or a book of poetry or work of fiction by a local author. Once again, it makes good sense to have such books in the collection. Many libraries may have a local or regional history special collection and are looking for materials for this collection.

Librarians, as they look for material to add to a particular special collection or subject area, often find that the book that fits their collection is in fact a self-published book. Because some reviews and listings do not make any distinction as to whether the book is self-published, the librarian may have made a preliminary decision before realizing that the book is self-published. A colleague was kind enough to post a question about self-publishing on the listserv of the Literatures in English Section of ACRL. Here are some reasons given by academic librarians for adding self-published books. A library collects books on Barbados and the surrounding Caribbean area. Since there are not many publishers in this region, many books of interest are self-published, and the content is not available elsewhere. In another case, the librarian was looking for a play by John Roman Baker, a well-known contemporary British playwright. The play was available
through Lulu, which distributes self-published material, but not available through any traditional publisher. In this case, the playwright self-published his play in order to make it available. In fact, the playwright has published three collections of his plays through Lulu. In another case, a university librarian in the Chicago area actively collects local zines, poetry chapbooks, and minicomics. Most of these are self-published, so the librarian is using other than traditional listings in order to acquire them. Another librarian said that the publishing scene had changed and that purchases would be considered on a case-by-case basis. As I inquired of other academic librarians as to whether they acquired self-published material, they first said “no”; but, after our conversation, many realized either that they do acquire self-published books from time to time or, if not, they were open to acquiring self-published books in certain subject areas. These areas included history, biography, genealogy, speeches, letters, diaries, essays, fiction, and poetry.

I identified a couple titles from Lulu that seemed interesting and perhaps worthy of being acquired by an academic library. One was *King Bridge over Troubled Waters* by Karen Van Etten, a book about the battle for the historic preservation of the King Bowstring Bridge in Newfield, New York. It seemed to be a relevant book for libraries interested in local history. In checking OCLC WorldCat, I found that the Cornell University Library owns it, thus showing their interest in local history even if self-published. The second one I selected was *Howardsville: The Journey of an African-American Community in Loudoun County, Virginia* by Kevin Grigsley. Once again a search of OCLC WorldCat showed at least six libraries that owned it. Although it was not surprising to see public libraries in Virginia owning this title, it was interesting to see that the Princeton University Library owned it as well as the Library of Congress. The third was *He Loved to Carry the Message: The Collected Writings of Douglas Helms* by Douglas Helms. Helms was a historian who was employed at the National Archives and at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This self-published book is owned by Cornell University Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, and the Library of Congress.

An article by Dilevko and Dali (2006) discusses their extensive research on the number of self-published books listed in OCLC. They determined that public libraries were buying more self-published books than academic libraries and that the largest category of self-published books being acquired
Do Large Academic Libraries Purchase Self-Published Books?

by libraries was handbooks and manuals followed by history, biography, and autobiography. This study shows that pre-2006 libraries were already acquiring a great deal of self-published material.

Interestingly, one librarian said that he buys books through individual Web sites and through Kickstarter, which is a way of funding new projects including publishing. Joel Friedlander, a blogger and self-published author, says that “crowdsourcing has shown promise as a funding technique for authors with a compelling story and an ability to tell it well on video” (Herther, 2013, p. 24). Six thousand publishing projects were launched on Kickstarter in 2013 with $22.2 million pledged. Publishing projects have a 32% success rate (Reid, 2014, pp. 8–10). Other popular sources for funding self-published authors are Indiegogo (indiegogo.com) and Author.com (Herther, 2013, p. 24). Librarians give examples of buying self-published material based on recommendations from faculty. In this case, the faculty member knows the author personally or by reputation. Librarians do say that it is harder to decide about self-published material. They often have to buy it and then read it to make a final decision about including it in the collection if they are not familiar with the author’s work.

The second role of self-publishing in libraries is publishing itself. This can be new material written by faculty and others on a university campus. These items may be published as books or as journal articles. Some libraries are involved in republishing their special collections material that is in the public domain. The University of Michigan, for example, is publishing monographs in print and electronic formats. They are reissuing materials from the University of Michigan collections. These materials include Center for Japanese Studies publications and the Michigan Historical Reprints Series. At Cornell University, the publications include an Islamic series. At Purdue, the library and the Purdue University Press worked together to save and reproduce digitally some transportation technical reports (Cook, 2014, p. 70). At SUNY-Geneseo, the library is publishing work from faculty and supporting a SUNY-wide textbook program (Cook, 2014, p. 70).

There is no doubt that libraries’ and librarians’ attitudes toward self-publishing are changing. The availability of more self-published titles makes selection more interesting and fills holes in collections. Well-researched books on relevant new topics are always welcomed by librarians. In sum, self-publishing is bound to have less and less negative effect on whether
libraries acquire these books. This is not to say that there are not some advantages to traditional publishing. One possible reason for not seeing more interest in self-published material is that academic libraries have had decreases in their monograph budget so they are more reluctant to take a chance on what they view as an unknown quantity. Also, they are placing more emphasis on their institutional repositories and on digital materials. Joseph D. Grobelny, while discussing academic libraries in his article in Against the Grain, stated that “while many readers who look at the literature on the relationship between self-publishing and libraries might conclude that libraries will soon be left behind the market, it is worth taking the longer view that libraries will most likely successfully adapt to the changed publishing environment” (Grobelny, 2013, p. 36). Vendors and libraries will need to work together to identify high-quality self-published materials of interest to library users. They also need to encourage review media to review more self-published material. It is encouraging to see the number of review sources increase, which can only help to make new titles more accessible to academic libraries and to library users.

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