Review Sources of Interest to Librarians for Independently Published Books

Eleanor I. Cook, East Carolina University

INTRODUCTION

With the explosion of independently published (also known as self-published) books, it becomes very difficult for librarians interested in this material to identify the works that have the most appeal and are of the best quality. While public libraries are increasingly embracing self-published books these days, academic librarians still are reluctant to add them except very selectively, due to budgetary restraints, perceived lack of review mechanisms, and a continued impression that such works are inferior to traditionally published books. Self-published books primarily become known to readers through word-of-mouth, Internet sites such as Amazon.com, and social media avenues rather than through traditional review tools (which librarians really focus on). In fact, avid readers of indie books often completely bypass the library for discovery since these books are often readily available free or at a nominal price. Nonetheless, there is a role for libraries to play if they can somehow make order out of the chaos (Davis, 2014). Review options exist that focus on independently published books, and these should become familiar to librarians who want to include these kinds of materials in their collections. The review sources discussed in this chapter are included specifically for the consideration of librarians. The list is not meant to be exhaustive as there are new tools being developed constantly and others that may be too specialized for mention here.
AMAZON.COM REVIEWS (FROM READERS AND OTHER SOURCES)

Most independent authors (referred to in the popular press as “indie” authors) depend on Amazon reviews for building interest in their books because these reviews are readily available to the browsing public. The librarian’s dilemma is that, while these reviews reflect the reading public’s personal opinions of a book, they can be unreliably skewed or biased and, in some cases, completely misleading. An author’s friends and family often weigh in with reviews that are posted to help the author regardless of the quality of the book. Conversely, harsh or unfair reviews may be contributed by individuals with some aversion to the material or with an ax to grind. Amazon designates certain reviewers as “Top Customer Reviewers.” They review on a regular basis and are proven to be reliable and consistent in their reviewing habits (and there are thousands in this category). The usefulness of Amazon reader reviews derives from the convenience of having them right at hand if a prospective reader is about to decide whether to purchase the book. Controversial self-published books such as My Parents Open Carry (as an example) will attract dozens, if not hundreds, of comments and reviews that may be sarcastic or derisive, not to mention downright amusing on occasion.

Amazon also provides reviews from standard sources that librarians know and recognize. These are useful since having them shown at the Amazon site helps readers know that the independently published book has been recognized by the bibliographic press, which adds to the book’s prestige. If a book is part of a specific genre, there will often be reviews available in publications devoted to that subject. Genre publications do a decent job of finding indie published books since they can identify them more easily, and authors who manage their own marketing usually know how to solicit reviews from these sources.

The other logistical dilemma for librarians is that looking for excellent self-published books on Amazon is like looking for needles in a haystack. The universe of independently published books on Amazon is vast. Amazon is best used for researching a specific title or list of titles that need vetting for a particular reason. For example, checking Amazon is a logical first step if a title has been brought to a librarian’s attention by a local user or author and is not likely to be found in other review sources.
READER SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

Reader sites such as Goodreads are very popular and provide avid readers a place to discuss all kinds of books with kindred spirits. Goodreads has a group especially for librarians and also has specialized book groups and supporting features, including reviews. However, when Goodreads was purchased by Amazon in 2013, some authors and readers were dismayed. After this acquisition, changes were made in review policies that fueled controversy (Miller, 2013). There are a number of alternative sites, all of which may provide some utility to librarians seeking reviews of indie books, but again, may be more useful on a case-by-case basis (“Ten Top Alternative Sources,” 2013).

INDIVIDUAL BLOGGERS

Self-published authors often do and probably should when possible reach out to individual bloggers who review indie books and have a following in the author’s topic. There is a site called Indie View that registers and maintains (for free) a list of such bloggers. The list at this writing is not terribly long since identification is a word-of-mouth effort. Bloggers who review books are not necessarily easy for librarians to keep track of, but a collection development librarian who wants exhaustive coverage in a specific subject might want to keep tabs on this type of reviewer.

SITES THAT PROMOTE FREE AND INEXPENSIVE E-BOOKS (INCLUDING INDIE TITLES OF MERIT)

Web sites such as BookBub, BookGorilla, and The Fussy Librarian are e-book alert sites that tailor recommendations to a reader’s designated interests and typically alert users to discounted pricing as well. These sites can be useful to librarians looking specifically for e-book formats but are not as relevant to those seeking print indie books. For an overview of these three sites, see the description on Standoutbooks.com, a support consultancy for indie authors (Hemus, 2013).

While it has become clear that independent authors consider traditional review publications to be less effective for their marketing goals than social media and other, more personal types of outreach to readers, the following are review sites that librarians may find useful.
FOREWORD REVIEWS AND FOREWORD CLARION REVIEWS

These review publications, available since 1998, emphasize reviews for “independent, alternative, university and self-publishing industries” (Web site). If an indie author’s submission does not make the cut for Foreword Reviews, the author can opt to pay to be covered by Clarion. Clarion Reviews is a fee-based service ($305, 6–8 weeks). Foreword has a reputation for covering a large variety of small presses and independent publications, and they have a yearly awards program in which librarians and others in the book industry serve as jury judges (full disclosure: this author has served as a jury judge for these awards).

KIRKUS REVIEWS

Most librarians are familiar with Kirkus as it has been around for a very long time (founded in 1933). It is considered a core library reference resource. In recent times, Kirkus has begun to cater to self-published authors by offering fee-based reviews, which are selectively included in their publication and are designated as such. Kirkus Reviews is a subscription-based product; but, even if a library does not subscribe directly, the content is also indexed full-text in standard aggregator databases. Kirkus Indie Reviews are offered at two levels: Standard (7–9 weeks after submission) for $425.00 or Express (4–6 weeks after submission) for $575.00. For these fees, indie authors are told:

If you choose to publish your review on our website, we will distribute it to our licensees, including Google, BN.com, Ingram, Baker & Taylor and more. On top of that, our editors will consider it for publication in Kirkus Reviews magazine, which is read by librarians, booksellers, publishers, agents, journalists and entertainment executives. Your review may also be selected to be featured in our email newsletter, which is distributed to more than 50,000 industry professionals and consumers. (Web site)

In addition, Kirkus provides authors with editorial and marketing services, also fee-based. There is a free general marketing guide available for download from the Web site. The monthly publication offers “Indie books of the month” and “Indie books of the year” rankings in different categories (fiction, nonfiction, etc.), which may be useful to librarians seeking purchasing guidance.
BlueInk Review has been around for a relatively short period (since 2010). This reviewing service is also fee-based, but its distinction is that it caters exclusively to self-published authors and aspires to be the “gold standard” reviewing source for this type of publication. The prices it charges authors are slightly less than Kirkus ($395 for the review to be completed in 7–9 weeks, or a fast track review, $495 for the review to be completed in 4–5 weeks) (Web site).

As of this writing, the reviews are freely accessible via the Web site, and librarians can sign up for an e-mail alert service for free. The reviews are reposted on other sites as well—for example, Publishing Perspectives features “starred” BlueInk reviews (Web site). The number of books that are featured monthly is manageable, and the reviews are well written. They offer a sort feature by region of the country that could be very useful if it actually worked—their search engine seems a bit clunky and needs refining. They track authors’ home towns and current residences since these are not necessarily the same, although they do not seem to track fictional settings by region (this could also be useful to librarians seeking reviews of regional fiction). The question remains whether BlueInk will be able to maintain and/or increase their eyeball views since the other heavy hitters in the publishing world have entered the self-publishing review scene and may overwhelm this start-up.

Publishers Weekly’s BookLife.com

While an indie author can submit a book to be reviewed by PW for free, these reviews are highly competitive and not guaranteed. The BookLife Web site also offers other types of paid author services. For example:

- First Read: $79—Submit your synopsis and 1st 1500 words of your manuscript; evaluation within 10 days of submission; one-shot; no follow-up; anonymous reviewer.
- Full service manuscript evaluation: Starting at $499; based on word count; evaluation within six weeks; one-shot; no follow-up; anonymous reviewer.
- PW Select: Promotion service: $149.
Every month, Publishers Weekly publishes PW Select, a supplement dedicated to covering the self-publishing industry that features interviews with authors, book announcements and listings, news, features, analysis, book reviews, and more. PW Select is also a marketing resource that provides tools to help you get your book noticed. (Web site)

**LIBRARY JOURNAL’S COLLABORATION WITH BIBLIOBOARD: SELF-E**

This collaboration is a unique effort that is still evolving. According to the SELF-e Web site:

SELF-e is an innovative collaboration between Library Journal and BiblioBoard that enables authors and libraries to work together to expose notable self-published ebooks to voracious readers looking to discover something new. If selected via Library Journal’s SELF-e curation process, the author’s ebooks will become part of a unique discovery platform for participating public libraries across the United States that enables patrons to read ebooks on any device, at any time. This free service is available to all self-published authors, no matter which self-publishing service(s) they use. (Web site)

Several states are working with this product to help promote their local authors. Examples can be found in California, Massachusetts (http://guides.masslibsystem.org/ebooks), Arizona (http://readingarizona.org/), and Ohio (http://www.cuyahogalibrary.org/Events/Writing-Programs/SELF-E.aspx) with others in development (Web site).

**OTHER REVIEW SITES**

Self-Publishing Review

SPR is yet another site offering self-published authors reviews for a fee. The prices are competitive and a bit lower than at the sites already covered above. They also provide additional author services similar to those already described.
IndieReader.com
Another site with similar services and competitive prices even lower than those described above.

Off the Bookshelf.com
Yet another support site for self-published authors—it doesn’t really have a well-developed review mechanism, although it does list “recently added books” on its Web site.

NetGalley
NetGalley “provides digital review copies to professional readers, including booksellers, librarians, media, bloggers, reviewers and educators” (Web site). The books available for review are provided prepublication by a select number of publishers. However, NetGalley also makes indie titles available through a partnership with the Independent Book Publishers Association. Books are available for download to Kindles, Nooks, and a variety of other mobile devices and platforms. The window of opportunity for receiving a newly published book is relatively small, and not every book requested by a reviewer will be delivered. Reviewers are required to keep a profile page on the site so that publishers and authors can match books with reviewers. The site is a good place to get free copies of books you want to read, but there is no guarantee you’ll get what you request; and the site really isn’t geared for the purposes of collection development of self-published books.

WHAT CREDENCE TO GIVE PAID REVIEWS?
Self-published authors have uneven expectations and experiences with fee-based review sources. Independent authors may not have the money to pay for such services or balk at the very idea in principle. There are, however, testimonials from satisfied indie authors evident on many of the review Web sites though anecdotal evidence suggests at best, ambivalence, and at worst, a deep dissatisfaction with such models. And yet, these services, if proven effective, can add value to inexperienced authors’ end products and give them needed visibility.

The offerings for independent publishing reviews are probably peaking, and the market will not be able to sustain all these entries. At some point, the options currently available will either fail or consolidate. As with any new market, there will be casualties.
HOW ARE LIBRARIANS TO DEAL WITH ALL THESE OPTIONS?
Library-related review sites have cautiously started reviewing self-published books. ALA’s *Booklist*, for example, will now consider them, but they only review books that are prepublication (normally 16 weeks before publication). Self-published authors may not be aware of this policy and could miss the opportunity for consideration since they typically publish first and ask for reviews afterward. ACRL’s *Choice*, which focuses exclusively on academic materials, states that they review such materials “very selectively” (Web site).

WHAT ABOUT LIBRARY BOOK VENDORS?
Major library book vendors are watching the scene carefully and are likely to participate once they develop business models that make it worth their while. This too is only a matter of time. Librarians are not demanding these services loudly yet, but they may in the near future. Public libraries in particular are already feeling pressure from local indie authors (hence the SELF-e project). Academic libraries have not shown as much interest.

Approval plans for traditionally published materials have been superseded in many cases by demand-driven acquisition (DDA) plans. Adding critically reviewed indie publications would enhance book vendor approval and DDA services if vendors can get a handle on the landscape well enough to add value. If librarians could depend on their book vendors to do the critical review vetting for them, they might be more willing to add indie published materials to their collections.

CONCLUSION
It’s clear that independent publishing is changing the landscape of book creation, distribution, and reading; and, if libraries want to include these kinds of books in their collections, it will behoove them to demand appropriate review and selection services from their vendors in order to discover relevant and useful content. Finding methods for effectively separating the wheat from the chaff will be key. At this point, vendors have not found useful mechanisms to deal with the deluge; but they are aware that it is an area of growth they could take advantage of in the future.
REFERENCES
