Self-Publishing and Collection Development

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INTRODUCTION
The intersection of self-publishing and the library world is still very much a moving target. Here we will examine various platforms and models of support for independent and self-published authors and investigate how libraries are contributing to the writing and self-publishing ecosystems, both locally and online through various digital initiatives.

ADVENTURES IN SELF-PUBLISHING: A PERSONAL JOURNEY
I had never intended to set out along the path of self-publication. My writing efforts began long before e-books were a big thing, when Amazon was still a river in South America and the business model of self-publishing involved printing a large stash of physical copies at one’s own expense and trying to sell them door to door. After writing all throughout my precocious junior and senior high school years, I found myself somewhat overwhelmed by college, then by the real world, such that, when I did come back to complete my first short story in years, I felt somewhat bewildered by the strange new electronic world that had begun to take hold in creative circles.

Full of enthusiasm and several stories’ worth of new material, I briefly considered skipping what I had always thought to be the standard *cursus honorum* for a writer—whereby a short story in a local literary journal translates to a novella somewhere else, then soon requests for an anthology, or perhaps even a book deal for an actual entire novel-length work of fiction—and take my stories directly to the Internet; but, at the time I was
pondering such an alternative course of action, the mechanisms for doing so hadn’t quite taken hold. No, I was resolved to do things the old-fashioned way—query, submit, rinse, and repeat—until I finally found a willing agent for one of my stories and signed my first “traditional” publishing contract.

My writing piqued some editors’ interest; and a couple of times I was even asked for pages from my fantasy novel, which I had at long last completed; but, aside from getting one of my science fiction short stories published in a short-lived literary zine, I found myself getting discouraged by rejection after rejection . . . after rejection. This is, of course, nothing new to an aspiring writer. In fact, almost every successful author cautions would-be wordsmiths that they will likely find themselves staring at rejection slips, letters, and e-mails hundreds if not thousands of times before their big break finally arrives—and that’s assuming that a prospective editor or agent even answers at all.

TOO MANY WRITERS OR A PARADIGM SHIFT WAITING TO HAPPEN?

Getting past the gatekeepers of the traditional publishing world was always envisioned as a protracted siege, but something happened along the way that made this journeyman period seem less and less like a required step on the path toward becoming a professional writer and more and more a completely hopeless prospect. At least, this is what it felt like to me and countless other authors. What was interesting (at least to me) was that this growing frustration and impatience with the traditional path of publication seemed to predate the self-publishing revolution.

Had the personal computing revolution unleashed a surge of young new writers who eschewed the cumbersome technology of typewriters and white-out for their word processors? Had Stephen King unwittingly produced a legion of storytelling acolytes with his seminal book On Writing, which demystified the craft of writing to a generation, much to the delight of many who found Mr. King’s books a welcome antidote for the aspiring nonliterary author . . . as well as arousing the horror of many others who found themselves competing with a fresh crop of writers? Or was it National Novel Writing Month, which loosed a torrent of new manuscripts onto the slush piles of many a publishing house every December following a month-long orgy of unnecessary exposition, bloated word counts, and adverbs—so many adverbs, as far as the eye could see?
THE SLUSH PILE VS. THE LONG TAIL
Whatever it was, I couldn’t help but notice fellow authors begin to lose faith in being able to slip past the gatekeepers as their illustrious predecessors did before them. Authors started posting their stories online for free—be it on their blogs, linked as documents to their own personal Web sites, or what have you. Better to put one’s writing out there and share it with those who might find it enjoyable rather than consign it to a slush pile where it would remain silent and unread for as long as it laid there. This, it seems to me now only in retrospect, was the beginning of the sea change. The atmosphere of vexation at the traditional methods of publication was being stoked by the digital revolution even before the now-established platforms for self-publication had evolved.

Was this simply narcissism on our generation’s part, an *American Idol* sense of entitlement, which fueled our frustration and made us feel that our creative output deserved to be distributed to the public, even if it couldn’t pass the muster of the literary Powers That Be? Perhaps. I’m not afraid to own up to a portion of this charge; but, at the same time, I think the emerging concept of the long tail and the related ability to utilize the Internet to appeal to a smaller and more targeted niche market truly did change the equation for many of us, such that, when Amazon, Smashwords, and other platforms for self-publication became available, there was a critical mass of authors out there who were just disenchanted enough with the traditional publishing scene that taking the self-publishing plunge no longer seemed to be an act of artistic suicide.

KINDLE DIRECT PUBLISHING
So having been unsuccessful in finding an agent interested in my manuscript—a fantasy novel about the coming of age of an itinerant chef—after publishing it chapter by chapter on my own personal blog, I decided to give it one final editorial pass and upload it through the Kindle Direct Publishing portal, where I could offer it for sale as an e-book. The initial publication was something of a dud, with only a few friends buying a copy; but then Amazon came up with a master stroke for its Kindle Direct Publishing platform—the ability to offer free promotions for your e-books for several days during a given period. A successfully managed promotion could enable an author to rocket up into the bestselling lists for e-books, garnering extra attention and hopefully securing
enough favorable reviews so that, when the book did return to its normal price, one would enjoy a healthy sales “bump” afterwards. While the efficacy of these promotions has certainly faltered over time, for many authors this meant the difference between sharing our books with a small circle of family and friends and getting them noticed by a broader circle of readers.

To be sure, there is a certain amount of both showmanship and gamesmanship involved in a successful self-publication career. One must not only take advantage of multiple promotional channels, either via social media or other free or paid advertising methods, but one must also craft one’s literary portfolio in as strategic a manner as possible. For example, self-published authors need to use the right combination of edited content, carefully chosen keywords, at least passable cover art, and description copy to entice their readers; at the same time, for the best possible commercial results, they need to write and publish a steady enough stream of new fiction to keep readers engaged and hungry for more. Too many would-be self-published authors—myself included—will release a book or two and simply wait too long before releasing the next installment in the series, thereby losing a potential second, third, or subsequent sale from a reader who has already moved on to “binge-read” a different author.

The most successful self-published authors swear by their own formulas for targeting fiction markets, producing new content, and releasing it in a manner that is optimized for the best exposure, reviews, and sales. A few of these writers find that, as a result, their sales and greater recognition open doors in the traditional publishing world that had hitherto remained closed or had not even revealed themselves at all—some of these authors will forego self-publishing altogether while others will continue to pursue selling on their own platform or with some blended version of the two modes of publication. Far many more other self-published authors, however, will never enjoy this “breakout” moment through publishing their content online. To be fair, most self-published authors are content with simply making their writing available and accessible to a wider audience and aren’t necessarily trying to make a living through or retire on their self-publishing paycheck. I for one wouldn’t say I don’t occasionally check my statistics at Kindle Direct Publishing and hope that someone decided to single me out as a literary genius and undiscovered talent, but in the meantime I am mindful that hundreds if not thousands of people have read and enjoyed my writing already.
This is particularly the case when writing highly targeted genre fiction. For example, over the past year or two, I have been working on a science fiction anthology featuring libraries and librarians titled “L Is for Librarian.” While I have tried to write these stories in a manner that may appeal to the layperson reader or general science fiction enthusiast, the issues and themes explored in this series are of primary appeal to people who currently work in a library setting or are practitioners of library science. Realistically speaking, what is the largest potential audience for such a genre within a genre—that is, what is the subset of science fiction fans who are also librarians or librarians who are also science fiction fans? While writing for such a limited market may seem at first to be stifling, in fact I have found my experience to be the exact opposite as my efforts to write, edit, publish, and market this series have been met with great enthusiasm and encouragement from my librarian colleagues as well as offers of additional writing opportunities and other collaborative proposals, which have emerged from this effort.

1,000 TRUE FANS AND SELF-PUBLISHING

The notion of writing for a smaller audience is not an altogether new one. In a 2008 blog post, former Wired editor Kevin Kelly famously declared that an artist only needed “1,000 True Fans” in order to make a living in the new creative world of digital discovery and distribution:

A True Fan is defined as someone who will purchase anything and everything you produce. They will drive 200 miles to see you sing. They will buy the super deluxe re-issued hi-res box set of your stuff even though they have the low-res version. They have a Google Alert set for your name. They bookmark the eBay page where your out-of-print editions show up. They come to your openings. They have you sign their copies. They buy the t-shirt, and the mug, and the hat. They can’t wait till you issue your next work. They are true fans. (http://kk.org/thetechnium/2008/03/1000-true-fans/)

Over the years, Kelly’s provocative thesis has been debated by both struggling artists and wags in the various creative industries; during this time singers, writers, and others have tried to make a living through self-publishing and direct engagement with their fans. Some have become “microcelebrities”
to their established niche markets. One musician and songwriter, Robert Rich, spoke with Kevin Kelly on his blog to describe his own experience with creating music as a microcelebrity:

The sort of artist who survives at the long tail is the sort who would be happy doing nothing else, who willingly sacrifices security and comfort for the chance to communicate something meaningful, hoping to catch the attention of those few in the world who seek what they also find meaningful. It’s a somewhat solitary existence, a bit like a lighthouse keeper throwing a beam out into the darkness, in faith that this action might help someone unseen.

In reality the life of a “microcelebrity” resembles more the fate of Sisyphus, whose boulder rolls back down the mountain every time he reaches the summit. After every tour I feel exhausted but empowered by the thought that a few people really care a lot about this music. Yet, a few months later all is quiet again and CD/download sales slow down again. If I take the time to concentrate for a year on what I hope to be a breakthrough album, that time of silence widens out into a gaping hole and interest seems to fade. When I finally do release something that I feel to be a bold new direction, I manage only to sell it to the same 1,000 True Fans. The boulder sits back at the bottom of the mountain and it’s time to start rolling it up again. (http://kk.org/thetechnium/2008/04/the-reality-of/)

KICKSTARTER AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL PUBLISHING
The fascinating coda to this debate has been the rise of Kickstarter and other online platforms for crowdsourcing the funding of creative endeavors. Whereas the self-published artist would originally need to engage his or her readers/listeners/consumers with direct sales or some kind of subscription model, the Kickstarter movement allowed independent creators instead to seek investors to underwrite their creative ambitions from start to finish, in effect substituting their support for the capital that traditional publishing would outlay on behalf of a newly signed writer. This money would then go in turn to hire editors,
designers, and all of the other pre- and post-production bells and whistles that the artists seeking support felt were necessary for the successful completion of their projects. On their blog, Kickstarter’s founders write:

We started Kickstarter as a new way for creators and audiences to work together to make things. The traditional funding systems are risk-averse and profit-focused, and tons of great ideas never get a chance as a result. We thought Kickstarter could open the door to a much wider variety of ideas and allow everyone to decide what they wanted to see exist in the world. Kickstarter is full of ambitious, innovative, and imaginative ideas that aren’t possible anywhere else. (https://www.kickstarter.com/blog/accountability-on-kickstarter)

What Kickstarter has done is co-opted the notion of 1,000 True Fans and made the relationship between a creator and a fan less discrete and more of a patron or donor model.

PATREON AND THE PATRON-SUBSCRIPTION MODEL OF SELF-PUBLISHING

The success of such a new funding paradigm for creative endeavors has led to a proliferation of similar platforms; some of them, such as Patreon, are more targeted toward the indie artist community. Patreon represents a blended model between the project-based funding platform of Kickstarter and the direct sales scheme powered by Amazon and other online marketplaces supporting self-publication. Instead of asking for donations toward a single funding campaign (like Kickstarter) or advertising new works for sale, the Patreon author asks backers to pledge their financial support either on a monthly or per-work basis. Independent musicians have flocked to Patreon since the platform’s launch as has the gaming community, which has found itself progressively disenchanted with supporting larger and more ambitious Kickstarter projects in hopes of a getting a playable product for their pledges. Writers are beginning to discover the utility of the Patreon model of self-publication as well:

Cara Ellison always felt like something was missing. Although the Scottish videogame critic was an established writer at multiple websites and magazines about games, she had long tired
of superficial press junkets and canned press releases. She wanted to do the sort of long-form, embedded journalism with game creators that she saw in music and film, to spend days or even weeks with the creators she thought were making fascinating, important games—even if they weren’t big-budget, mainstream titles—and dig into what made those people tick.

The problem was, no one wanted to run it.

“There was just no place for it,” says Ellison. It was the sort of writing that always seemed to slip between the cracks: Most video game websites didn’t have the time or money to fund it, while most mainstream publications with bigger budgets saw it as niche content. Still, she felt that there was at least a boutique audience that was hungry for this sort of reporting—and willing to pay for it, even if editors weren’t. So she turned to a crowdfunding service that she thought would be uniquely helpful for her work: Patreon. (http://www.wired.com/2014/05/patreon/)

LIBRARY PUBLISHING TOOLKIT, WRITING GROUPS, AND LOCAL AUTHOR EVENTS

Libraries can serve a similar role as patrons to self-published authors. In the Library Publishing Toolkit, editor Allison Brown highlights several library systems that have taken an active role in aiding and encouraging local aspiring writers. “I noticed two common denominators when I spoke to libraries about their thriving writing communities: clever use of space and enthusiastic participants. Before talking about publishing print-on-demand titles, acquiring an Espresso Book Machine, or offering e-book publishing courses, libraries should be playing a role in supporting the writing process” (Brown & Oberlander, 2013). The reasons for doing so are not entirely altruistic. By imbricating ourselves into the world of self-publication, Brown argues, libraries can help enforce standards for description and discovery as well as foster some critical and editorial oversight by means of such things as writing circles, local author days, and even workshops taught by members of the writing community.
For example, the Princeton Public Library in Princeton, New Jersey, began supporting self-published authors by offering a quiet space for writers participating in the NaNoWriMo contest every November. The library also offers space to several different writing groups and hosts a Local Authors’ Day featuring both local and independent writers. In Bay City, Michigan, the Wirt Public Library organizes a Writers’ Night, inviting both traditionally published and self-published authors to speak about their own writing and publication processes. The Safety Harbor Public Library in Safety Harbor, Florida, helps support its enclave of local artists with several writers’ circles for poets and other authors as well as offering instruction in how to use the library as a tool for researching, writing, and even publication. Library staff have held informational sessions on how to self-publish books on different platforms, including crowdsourcing support platforms such as Kickstarter.

**A RADICAL PROPOSITION: THE AUTHOR INCUBATOR PROGRAM**

The Douglas County Library System in Colorado aims to take this support to a completely different level of involvement with what it calls its Author Incubator Program. An offshoot of its innovative and successful e-book lending program, the Author Incubator would help provide the broadest range of e-content to their patrons by co-opting these same patrons as part of the content creation process as well as other independent and self-published authors. Douglas County librarians, therefore, would not simply be in the business of instructing the community in their use of the library’s resources in order to assist them in the writing and publishing process but would also help library patrons discover and access this e-content that they helped produce in the first place. Once an author has self-published his or her work on a platform such as Smashwords, the book would then be vetted by a group of volunteer “citizen acquisition editors,” who would follow established guidelines for editing and content to add the book to the library catalog; the book would also be rated and reviewed by a member of the volunteer cataloging committee, which helps make it more discoverable.

So when will this Author Incubator Program make its debut? Douglas County Library System’s James LaRue is confident that they will be able to launch in some capacity in the near future. For other libraries contemplating adopting a similar role with their local writing community, LaRue outlines the following structural prerequisites:
1. Establish a technical infrastructure. There are at least three approaches. First, a library might choose some vendor to host and enable the discovery of local content (Autographics has announced such a project). But do we need a middleman? Second, a library might choose to invest in its own hardware, software, and telecommunications capacity to do that. This is the Douglas County model, which is up and running, and Queens (N.Y.) Public Library is launching its own version of this. Third, libraries might team up to invest in such a setup together. This is what the consortium Marmot has done in Colorado, and Califa has done in California. For libraries that already operate their own servers and networks, this is a significant but not prohibitively expensive task. For libraries starting from scratch, the assistance of state libraries and federal grants may be necessary. In any case, I think this phase is the work of at least a year.

2. Build new systems of publisher relations, acquisitions, and workflow. DCL has contracted for the development of an acquisition system to better integrate the compilation of catalogs from mid-list, independent, and small publishers not currently carried by our distributors. We’re beta testing it. When it’s complete, we hope other libraries will adopt it. We are eager to share all the data we have already harvested or created. But working directly with publishers is different than working through a distributor. It requires the thoughtful reconsideration of many longstanding processes. It’s fair to say that this deconstruction and reconstruction of workflow is worth a year in itself. But some of it may run parallel with the first phase.

3. Manage demand. To date, libraries mostly respond to demand, and that demand is dictated by the advertising budgets of the Big Six. But it seems clear that the annual output of new titles by independent and self-publishers is already at least twice that of mainstream commercial publishing. If libraries want to stay in the game of sampling the intellectual content of our times, we have to find a way to acquire far more than our current budgets allow. I believe what’s likely to work is a combination of the process I outlined above with a broad outreach to the small and independent publishers eager to work with us. (http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/article/wanna-write-good-one-library-publisher)
BIBLIBOARD AND SELF-E

Library Journal recently tossed its hat into the self-publishing ring as well by partnering with the e-content aggregator and vendor BiblioBoard to offer SELF-e, a discovery service that connects self-published authors with library patrons. “Using SELF-e, authors can submit their self-published ebook(s) directly, and LJ will evaluate and select promising works for inclusion in curated collections sorted by genre that participating public libraries can make available to their patrons all over the United States. In addition, authors can opt in to include their ebook(s) in statewide collections with other local authors, whether or not they are selected for LJ’s genre collections” (http://www.slj.com/2014/05/books-media/ebooks/library-journal-launches-self-publishing-partnership-with-biblioboard/).

Self-published authors can participate in SELF-e by submitting their e-book file and granting a nonexclusive license to make their book available to public library patrons via subscribing institutions in the public library market, including subscribing public libraries in the author’s state. Books that pass through the curation process for SELF-e will become discoverable and downloadable content through the platform with authors receiving a promotional badge they can use when advertising their e-books on other retail outlets. Even if an author’s self-published book is not selected by curators for wider distribution by the SELF-e program, it can still be included in that author’s SELF-e (noncurated) state module with other local and self-published authors.

SELFPUBLISHEDAUTHOR BY BOWKER AND MARKETING TO LIBRARIES

ProQuest affiliate Bowker has also launched its own platform for assisting and supporting independent writers—SelfPublishedAuthor.com is a Web resource for self-publishing by offering how-to guides, advice, and even webinars via a series of a thematic blogs in order to guide authors through the basics of producing their own quality e-content. “Bowker has tracked extraordinary growth in the number of self-published works over the past five years,” said Beat Barblan, Bowker director of identifier services. “There are thousands of authors who need access to advice, guidance and resources. SelfPublishedAuthor.com is designed to be their partner, helping them bring their books to market in the most effective way” (http://www.bowker.com/en-US/aboutus/press_room/2013/pr_05202013.shtml).
One of the topics addressed by this resource is how to get self-published books and e-books into libraries. In a publishing world where brick-and-mortar bookstores are increasingly disappearing from the consumer landscape, libraries continue to represent a viable emerging market for independent and self-published authors. Due to time and budget constraints, however, as well as legacy collection development infrastructures that emphasize the discovery and purchase of traditionally published library materials, librarians are often both ill-equipped and ill-advised to navigate this overwhelming new market, even if the material therein would prove to be more interesting and/or relevant to their local library patrons’ reading or research interests. At a 2014 uPublishU conference for independent and self-published authors in New York City, Ian Singer, vice president and group publisher at Library Journals, announced that a survey of library users revealed that “60 to 70 per cent of patrons want self-published titles to be available in their libraries” (http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/06/industry-news/self-published-authors-learn-to-market-to-libraries/).

BEST LIBRARY PRACTICES FOR SELF-PUBLISHED AUTHORS

Nevertheless, the lack of standards for formatting and describing self-published content also provides a natural roadblock for librarians who would otherwise consider adding independent and self-published authors to their library collections. To address this problem, Laura Carruba, assistant cataloger at the Roanoke County Public Library, offers some practical guidelines for independent and self-published authors who wish to create e-content that is easy for libraries to discover, acquire, and (of course) catalog (http://ideattrash.net/2014/01/how-to-make-life-easy-for-librarians-so.html).

1. Create a title page, both front and back. If your publisher of choice charges by the page or by the gathering (a group of folded sheets sewn or glued into a book’s binding), spend the extra money to add this crucial page. Use the other pages to add an “about the author” page to your book, or endpapers with maps, or advertise other books you’ve self-published.

2. Give the following information on your title page and/or verso:
   - Author name
   - Place of publication
   - Publisher (if you created a publishing LLC, or the author name if you didn’t)
   - Copyright date (and print date if the two dates are different)
3. If you publish under a pseudonym, including your real name on the verso is a big help. Many authors with famous pseudonyms, such as J. D. Robb for Nora Roberts, have cross-references in the LCSH so someone can find all the works by one person using multiple names.

4. If your work is a multi-chapter novel or collection of short stories or poems, consider adding a table of contents. Microsoft Word and Open/LibreOffice include tutorials on how to create them and update them with new content in case you created a ToC with a draft of your work.

5. Number your pages. MS Word and open-source variants include instructions on how to do this as well.

6. Write a back cover blurb that talks about what you wrote, and try not to compare it to other books, movies, TV shows, etc. If you have a press package or pitch letter, chances are you’ve already tried to describe your book. Find a good paragraph from one of those sources and use that.

7. Purchase an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) from Bowker. (They are at https://www.myidentifiers.com/.) From a library viewpoint, an ISBN provides a measure of professionalism. From a cataloger viewpoint, it’s a clue leading to distinct information about the author, the title, and the individual volume of dead tree pulp needing a catalog record. For authors, as Steve says in this blog post, an independent ISBN from Bowker allows an author to sell in multiple online venues.

**CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE SLUSH PILE**

This all-too-brief survey of the various points of contact between self-publishing and the library is no doubt colored by my own personal experiences as a would-be independent author. To be fair, for every experiment in supporting local self-published and independent authors that I have attempted to illuminate in this chapter, there are doubtless myriad other examples of successful and unsuccessful attempts to do the same found elsewhere. My own list was therefore not meant to be exhaustive but as a jumping-off point for one’s own investigations into the world of self-publishing. However, what I do think this survey highlights is that there is still no one dominant paradigm for how the library world will ultimately make sense of the problem of patron-created content. If libraries are still wrestling only with the consequences of a world where the preponderance of library materials are digital, it is incumbent on librarians to begin to think
about how they will collect, curate, and support a future library ecosystem of independent and self-published authors, as this future has already arrived.

**REFERENCE**